

Introduction

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Two and a half decades have passed since the collapse of the former German Democratic Republic, the GDR, and its absorption into the Federal Republic of Germany. With the end of the East German state, its historians and traditions of historiography have also reached a critical point where they were removed from the once dominant mainstream discourse and relegated to the periphery of historical reflection. As early as by the mid-1990s, only around forty historians were still in their old posts. Twenty-two had been offered temporary positions within the Wissenschaftlerintegrations-Programm (WiP), a scheme set up to allow them to continue researching and teaching. Less than a handful succeeded to be appointed by universities after their WiP contract had expired. Today, less than a dozen GDR-trained historians are employed by universities or various research institutions, such as the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, the Center for Contemporary History, at Potsdam (Germany).¹ Others established a network of alternative research activities primarily around the Party of Democratic Socialism (now Die Linke), the renewed successor of GDR's old ruling party, the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany).²

A conference entitled “The Transformation of Historical Scholarship in Eastern Germany Since 1990” that was held at the State University of New York at Potsdam (USA) on September 1–2, 2008, sought to understand and assess what has been gained and lost in this process of transformation and dissolution of practically all former GDR historical institutions. The conference was co-organized by Initiative Sozialwissenschaftler Ost, an informal network of East Germans that lobbied on behalf of scholars from the former

GDR.³ The conference participants were keenly aware of the human costs involved in this complex and contradictory process.

Scholars from the former GDR and the United States responded to the call for this conference and delivered papers, while invited West German scholars did not. The conference organizers were very interested in including papers from East German historians who could not attend the symposium and accepted, therefore, delay of publication. Some of the contributors finished their papers despite serious health problems. Several papers are more panoramic in scope, while others offer detailed studies of particular institutions or subdisciplines in the East German historical profession. In addition, our authors vary greatly by age and background. While some historians, like Marcus P. Aurin and Axel Fair-Schulz, came of age after the transition of 1989–1990, others, like Ludwig Elm and Werner Röhr, lived through much of the East German experience and were socialized within its academic culture. Again, other participants, like Georg G. Iggers and Konrad H. Jarausch, have observed East Germany and its historians largely from the outside, while having visited East German institutions and colleagues many times over the decades. Other contributing scholars, like Stefan Bollinger and Mario Kessler, represent the generation of East German historians who came of age during the 1980s. The editors of this book come from two locations that bear the same name: Potsdam (New York), USA, and Potsdam, Germany.

In the following paragraphs, the basic ideas of the different contributions are briefly presented.

Mario Kessler: *A Different Starting Point, a Different End: East and West German Historiography After 1945* gives an overview of historical scholarship in both German states during the beginnings of the Cold War. The impact of Western political culture upon German society after 1945 was substantial. Within West German universities, however, the process of democratization occurred very late. A fundamental de-Nazification was not carried out, and a critical reflection of history's methodological and theoretical traditions did not take place until the late 1960s. The key West German decision makers behind historical scholarship, as in the other disciplines within the humanities, did not make much of an effort to reintegrate the scholars who had been driven into exile since 1933. In East Germany, returnees were welcome, yet they had to adapt to immense pressures of ideological conformity. They were indebted, as some gradually came to realize, to a regime whose practices had little to do with the overly optimistic expectations that those in exile had envisioned for a socialist society.

Georg G. Iggers: *Where Did Historical Studies in the German Democratic Republic Stand at the Eve of Unification?* is devoted to the ideological

patterns under which East German historical scholarship existed. After a brief period of transition until about the mid-1950s, when so-called bourgeois, i.e., non-Marxist, historians coexisted with historians who represented the viewpoint of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the latter, once cadres of professionally trained historians were available, assumed a monopoly in the universities, research institutions, and schools. The ideological guidelines were closely integrated into a system of political control and discipline of the historical profession. But within this highly centralized system of control with its prescribed conceptions of history and society, there nevertheless existed at all times a degree of diversity and broad areas in which independent work was possible, although more so in the last two decades of GDR's existence than in the previous twenty years after the consolidation of power by the SED in the 1950s.

William A. Pelz: *The Revenge of the Krupps? Reflections on the End of GDR Historiography* points out that after unification approximately three-quarters of East German university academics lost their jobs. Between 1994 and 1998, of the 1,878 professors employed in the Eastern states only slightly over a hundred came from the East. Pelz argues that the elimination (or at very least the marginalization) of Marxism, socialism, and any type of critical anticapitalist historical research was a priority. This aim was pushed by right-wing ideologies that attempted to reduce the entire complex experience of the German Democratic Republic to a story of villains and heroes. In this narrative, East German historians become nothing more than jaded pens put to paper to serve the totalitarian state.

Helmut Meier: *"Once Upon a Time . . . :"* *Losses in Scholarly Competence as a Result of German Unification* investigates the closing of the Institute for the History of the German Working-Class Movement at the Academy of Social Sciences, attached to the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. This institute was part of the system of research and political education of the SED and was thus dissolved. However, its most committed scholars were, from the very beginning, aware of the fact that a profound and self-critical probing into the standpoints they had hitherto held was indispensable for all further investigation. They gave up outdated positions, openly admitted errors, as well as the wrong judgments and deficits of their own work, and bravely turned to new ways of coping with the problems. A great number of publications since 1990 attests to this argument.

Stefan Bollinger: *German Unification and the Debate of the West German Social Sciences* points out that dismissed East German experts could have contributed much to historical research and teaching in united Germany, especially in fields that were strong in the GDR, such as Eastern

European, Arab, African, Latin American, and Asian studies. In addition many East German scholars have considerable expertise on the formerly Soviet, Central-Asian region, which remains a hot spot in today's political, economic, and military affairs. Bollinger states that the exclusion of East German scholars went hand in hand with the retirement of more critical West German scholars who belong to the generation of 1968.

Konrad H. Jarausch: *Anticommunist Purge or Democratic Renewal? The Transformation of the Humboldt University, 1985–2000* contrasts two narratives. One view, propagated mostly by dismissed scholars, alleges an “anticommunist purge” of personnel as well as a restoration of “capitalist conditions.” This victimization narrative emphasizes the drastic reduction of the professoriate, which threw a large number of GDR academics out of work. Moreover, the critical version claims that internal reform efforts were shunted aside and Western structures imported instead, which amounted to a kind of academic *Anschluss*, invoking the notorious term for Hitler's conquest of Austria. In contrast, the leading proponents of the transformation tell a success story of a fundamental renewal of Eastern universities. He argues that the transformation during unification sought to apply academic standards of discipline structure, scholarly achievement and personal integrity, since only those who did not fit the new profiles, were unproductive, or had collaborated with the Stasi were to be excluded.

Kurt Pätzold: *Research on Fascism and Antifascism in the GDR: A Retrospective* gives an overview on the substantial research on Nazism and the Holocaust in East Germany. He emphasizes that surviving antifascists, who belonged to the GDR's political leadership and had taken part in intellectual and other conflicts, themselves became the initiators and guardians of a historiography that can be described, in the words of Karl Marx, as “without eyes, without ears or teeth.” For all its undeniable accomplishments, which are substantiated in public research, East Germany's antifascist scholarship served above all to legitimize this group's authority.

Manfred Weissbecker: *Painful Transition and New Research on the History of Political Parties in Germany* writes about his personal experiences during and after 1989, when he was dismissed from his professorship at the University of Jena. He argues against the assertion that the science and scholarship in the GDR was monolithic and uniform. This judgment was, as he writes, particularly misleading with regard to his own topic of research: political parties in the Weimar Republic outside the labor movement. He mentions numerous contemporary debates and also controversies that may show a different picture in the field of research on the Weimar Republic and Nazism—his special fields of expertise.

Ludwig Elm: *Research on Conservatism in Jena: The Beginning and the End of an Inter-disciplinary Research Project* discusses the interdisciplinary “Research Group on Conservatism” that he founded in 1978 at the University of Jena, from which he was dismissed in 1992. The group’s network included mainly historians, philosophers, economists, and legal experts from the universities of Jena, Halle, and Berlin, and also from the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of State and Law at Potsdam-Babelsberg, and the Academy of Social Sciences. Three international conferences were organized in Jena in May 1981, June 1986, and June 1990. The main theoretical issues that were discussed in all of these conferences and workshops included: social and economic foundations of modern conservatism, conservatism and neoliberalism, political and intellectual traditions of conservatism since the eighteenth century in international perspective, and also notions of progress, as well as the concept of humankind in conservative thought.

Jörg Roesler: *The Dissolution of East German Economic History at the Economic University in Berlin-Karlshorst: A Typical Anschluss Procedure* looks first at what happened to a group of economic historians, who taught at the GDR Economic University in Berlin-Karlshorst. Then he makes some comparisons about their fate, which was typical for GDR academics after the *Wende* [turnaround], with other university personnel in different countries and at other times, namely academics who were in similar situations. He discusses the *Abwicklung* [dismantling] of East German scholars in an international and comparative perspective.

Axel Fair-Schulz: *The Dissolution of the Institute for Economic History at the Academy of Sciences* argues that the Institute for Economic History that was very much linked with its founder Jürgen Kuczynski, was one of the most innovative places of research in East Germany. It had a pronounced research profile on a very broad spectrum of topics, including the history of everyday life, everyday life in the agricultural sphere, foreign trade, banking, population demographics, the economic elites, capital exports, the transfer of technologies urban centers, and the development of territorial structures. Research on the history of economic crises, economic booms, as well as ecology and statistics were part and parcel of its areas of special focus. In addition, the Institute for Economic History also researched themes like environmental history, industrial archeology, the history of technological innovations, as well as the social and economic history of industrialization, the social history of the poor and marginalized, the social history of elites, the comparative economic history of East and West Germany, and the economic history of rural areas. All these merits did not prevent the institute from being dissolved in December 1991, and

less than a handful of its former members were able to find new positions in German academia.

Werner Röhr: *Dismantling the GDR's Historical Scholarship: A Case Study of the University of Leipzig* selects the Department of History at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig for three main reasons, in order to illustrate some of the key problems and processes associated with the dismantling of the GDR's historical scholarship after 1990: (1) The university-based historical research institutions in the GDR, the Department of History at the University of Leipzig was the largest, the most productive, and the most innovative; (2) Nowhere else did the transformation of the department structures, its teaching, as well as scholarship programs proceed as far as in Leipzig; (3) The developments in the University of Leipzig's Department of History showcases how the process of self-renewal was ultimately thwarted, when whole subsections were summarily dissolved (on the orders of the new ministries) as the GDR was incorporated into West Germany and its academic structure. After the dismissal of all but three former professors, Röhr concluded that what happened in Leipzig also happened elsewhere in the former GDR, in terms of the mechanisms and procedures that led to a "cleansing" of East German scholars. Röhr's chapter is part of his substantial two-volume study on the *Abwicklung* in East Germany.

Rainer Schnoor: *From "Imperialist Class Enemy" to "Partners in Leadership" in 365 Days? East German American Studies Since 1989* comes to a more positive judgment about the American Studies at the University of Potsdam. He concludes that despite the obvious "you won—we lost" situation, the transformation of East German American Studies after 1991 has had positive results: a long impasse had ended, and ideological fossilization was overcome. Fruitful exchange as well as mutual help and cooperation between the East and West, appeared, on the one hand, while condescension, attempts at domination, and arrogant behavior by the new powers, occurred on the other. Statements like the author's former, now deceased, colleague D.Sch.: "my East German colleagues are incompetent and lazy," have not promoted an atmosphere of collegiality for the academic cause. The price for all the progress, however, was the end of East German American Studies.

Ulrich van der Heyden: *Handling GDR Colonial Historiography* investigates East German historiography on the "Third World" and mainly Africa. After the *Wende*, some West German scholars have not simply refused to consider fairly the analyses of East German scholars of colonial and Africa studies but have quite often ignored them entirely, he writes. This colonial-like suppression of the East German historians and other scholars seems to be based on the assumption that all GDR scholars of the humanities *per*

se would have clung to Marxist ideology, being by definition incapable of serious scholarly work. Such sweeping claims are still being routinely made despite substantial evidence to the contrary. Although more recent publications on German colonial history have quietly incorporated research findings from GDR historians, the almost entire eradication of GDR colonial historiography after the *Wende* is still justified, more or less directly, by dismissing it wholesale as dogmatically Marxist.

Marcus P. Aurin: *Obscuring East Germany: The Phantom Menace of East Germany to Social Scientific Understanding of Post-Reunified Germany* interprets that the exclusion of East Germans—and a specifically East German experience of reunification—from mainstream social scientific discourse, and can be interpreted as a rejection of the quintessentially German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft* [Intellectual Science]. This tradition is, according to the author, grounded in a rigorous methodological emphasis on subjective experience and knowledge, systematically informing scientific understanding. Social scientific understanding is explicitly placed in a dialectical relationship with society and is grounded in *Bildung* [the education of mind and sensibility]. It is understood as a form of insight into society, based on the cultivated, self-conscious, and social empathy derived from lived experience, or *Erleben*. According to this methodological approach, *Geisteswissenschaft* plays an important formative role in modern society, where, as the sociologist Karl Mannheim puts it, “theorizing is a prerequisite of [social] cohesion.” Ironically, as Aurin writes, the failure of East German Transformation Studies seems to demonstrate Mannheim’s dictum in reverse: theories of transformation premised on the disappearance of East Germany presuppose a fundamental lack of social cohesion within reunified Germany.

The contributors’ different backgrounds and generational experiences account for significant latitude of methodological and political sensibilities. Yet what ties all pieces together is a willingness to think critically and self-critically about the achievements and failures of GDR historiography as well as its fate after German unification.

This book also documents an appeal, undersigned by several scholars with an outstanding international reputation. This appeal, at first published on November 9, 2002, in the German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*, called for a more even-handed evaluation and treatment of East German scholars, based on professional criteria instead of pure political and ideological maneuvering. All scholars who undersigned this appeal had been expelled from their countries of origin (Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia) after the Nazi seizure of power. Not one of them had been an apologist of the former official East German understanding of history, but they all were keenly aware of the necessity to be nuanced, discerning, and mindful of the

conditions, restraints, and complexities of historical research and teaching in East Germany.

While the editors must be responsible for the shortcomings that readers may find in this book, they did not make any attempt to influence any author's position that was expressed in the submitted manuscripts. Every contributor is solely responsible for the views that he presented. With this volume, the authors and editors intend to provide material for further study and discussion, particularly among English-speaking readers.



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Notes

1. See the biographies of East German historians in Lothar Mertens's massive though partly biased *Lexikon der DDR-Historiker: Biographien und Bibliographien zu den Geschichtswissenschaftlern aus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Munich, 2006). See also the Internet reviews by Mario Kessler on *H-Soz-u-Kult*, August 14, 2007 (<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2007-3-115>) and Matthew Stibbe on *H-German*, July 2008 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14779>).

2. See Stefan Berger, “Former GDR Historians in Reunified Germany: An Alternative Historical Culture and Its Attempts to Come to Terms with the GDR Past,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38 (2003), 1:63–83, and Marcus P. Aurin’s contribution to this volume.

3. See the material in: Stefan Bollinger, Mario Kessler, and Ulrich van der Heyden (eds.), *Ausgrenzung oder Integration? Ostdeutsche Sozialwissenschaftler zwischen Isolierung und Selbstbehauptung* (Berlin, 2004).