

CONFERENCES

NINTH GDR INTERNATIONAL NEW HAMPSHIRE SYMPOSIUM ON THE GDR (June 17-24, 1983)

For the ninth time GDR specialists came together in June at the World Fellowship Center in Conway, New Hampshire, for the week of paper-presentation, discussion, and people-meeting that has become an annual affair for many. The well-known collegiality of the Symposium "old-timers" this year was extended to welcome numerous American "first-timers," as well as three participants from West Berlin (Peter Wensierski and Wolfgang Büscher of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für kirchliche Publistik and Günter Erbe of the Freie Universität) and four participants from the GDR (Edith Anderson, author of Blitz aus heiterm Himmel; Heidrun Schorcht, Jena University and exchange teacher at Colby College; Elisabeth Adler, Evangelische Akademie Berlin; and Pastor Johannes Modrow of Greifswald). In addition to showing of the GDR film "Solo Sonny" (K. Wolf, 1980) and an informal presentation (V. Gransow) of musical examples of political culture, thirty-four papers were presented in the course of the week. Most of the presentations concerned GDR literature and culture: lyric poetry (D. Smith, F. König), relatively unknown GDR writers (G. Erbe, D. Rosenberg, B. Fischer), developments in linguistics (J. Copeland), travel literature (C. Zorach, H. Schorcht), theater and drama (G. Tracy, L. Romero, J. Holmes), recent GDR literary developments (U. Brandes, C. Cosentino, N. Lauckner, J. Knowlton, E. Toegel, C. Romero, D. Sevin, S. Johnson), sexist problems in publishing (E. Anderson), fictional images of teachers (M. Krueger, C. Poore), and English translations (M. Gerber). Other Symposium emphases concerned socio-political relations in the GDR. As P. Wensierski pointed out, developments in ecology, peace, women's movement, literature, etc. taken together mean great changes are underway in the GDR, from both the top down and bottom up. Thanks to a certain economic-political stability experiments can come from the SED and from local initiatives. Thus the peace efforts, for instance, while not constituting a "movement," are the efforts of individual church, cultural, or private groups of concerned citizens. In addition to Wensierski's discussion of those peace efforts, other papers focussed on the GDR's poets and peace (W. Müller), celebration of the Lutherjubiläum (W. Büscher), and the issue of Luther's anti-Semitism raised by Stephan Heym in Ahasver (C. Schmauch).

Additional papers dealt with political theory, i.e., "New New Left" perspectives of Marxism (A. Arato, V. Gransow), a report on the new Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe (C. Pletsch), and an assessment of the GDR response to Western "revivals" of Nietzsche (D. Sweet). Other social science presentations took up the GDR's economic situation (H. Shaffer), the effect of post-industrialism on elite attitudes (J. Rader), socialist child rearing (I. Winter), and GDR "Heftreihenliteratur" as a channel of political socialization (A. Mallinckrodt). Selections from these 1983 papers will be published, as in the past three years, in a volume to be edited by Margy Gerber and available by the next Symposium.

The above overview of the Symposium's content suggests both its strengths and weaknesses. For first-timers (including this writer), the breadth of the literary interests was impressive, as was the egalitarianism between male/female scholars in the field (not always found in other disciplines). And if one was accustomed, for instance, to FRG conferences, the number of Conway participants having personal contacts in the GDR, rather than doing their research from afar, was astonishing -- and encouraging, for the relatively greater accessibility to GDR sources may have been a factor in the above-average balance and moderation of the papers (as contrasted to the tone of other disciplinary conferences). On the less positive side was the

relatively small number of social science contributions to the Symposium. Greater participation of historians, political scientists, and sociologists, for instance, could be fruitful, especially since social scientists (at least in the FRG) are showing increasing interest in using GDR literary texts to analyze images of working conditions, historical events, progress in women's emancipation, etc. in that country. Another obvious lack at Conway, both among the Germanists and the social scientists but also between them, was the absence of information-sharing about the theories and methodologies with which they had worked. The "how" of the specialists' research could have been just as impressive and useful as the "what" referred to above.

However, a conference obviously is more than papers and the information they contain. It is an interrelating of people, an atmosphere. And in this respect the GDR Symposium excels. Within the context of the World Fellowship Center and its history as a stimulus to progressive thought and practiced humanism, the GDR Symposium becomes just that. From the director to the kitchen staff, from the participants to guest observers, the spontaneity of the week-long Symposium is infectious. One simply enjoys the people and the modest setting. That learning and exchanging ideas about the GDR then flows as openly as it does is "selbstverständlich," and yet remarkable.

Anita M. Mallinckrodt
Washington, D.C.

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Published three times a year. Correspondence should be addressed to: Robert Leventhal, Editor, Dept. of Germanic Languages and Literatures, Box 1104, Washington University, St. Louis, MO 63130
or to

Book Reviews: Anna Barker, Gisela Berger, Christine Brantner, Angelika Czekay, Friederike Eigler, Deborah Lund, Doris Mosler, Tineke Ritmeester, Priscilla Hayden

Journal Notes: Robert Leventhal

Bibliography: Rob Freeman, Priscilla Hayden, Hildegard Pietsch, Karen Thompson, Istvan Varkonyi

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Visiting Lectures: Robert Leventhal

Research in Progress: Christine Brantner

Travel and Exchange: Friederike Eigler, Robert Leventhal

Conferences: Tineke Ritmeester

All of the above can be contacted through Box 1104, Washington University.