

Preface

The papers in this volume were all — in their first version at any rate — delivered at the Institute for German, Austrian and Swiss Affairs at the University of Nottingham during a conference organised by Hinrich Siefken and Janet Wharton, with the support of the Goethe Institut Manchester, at the beginning of January 1994. As well as British scholars prominent in the field of GDR studies, the conference brought together academics from both parts of the formerly divided Germany and with widely diverging individual biographies. Although these factors might potentially have created tensions and from time to time frank speaking was the order of the day, the occasion was generally agreed to have been a harmonious and fruitful one.

‘Re-assessing the GDR’ is a mammoth project which a single conference cannot hope to complete. One topic, for example, which was barely touched on is that of the position of women in the former GDR. As is apparent from a glance at the table of contents, the speakers were exclusively male, although the participants were evenly divided between the sexes. In defence it must be pointed out that six months previously, at the same institution, Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton had organised a conference devoted entirely to the topic of ‘Women and the *Wende*’, the papers from which will, by the time the present volume appears, be available in a companion volume of the *German Monitor* series.

The events of 1989-90 appear, as Gerd-Joachim Glaeßner concludes in his paper, to have brought Germany ‘state unity and social division’. The present volume will, it is hoped, contribute to our understanding of how this came about. In a re-assessment of the GDR the 1950s play a crucial role, as is made clear particularly in the contributions by Glaeßner, Rolf Badstübner, Günter Minnerup and Peter Geist. The however starry-eyed attitudes of left-wing German writers and intellectuals to the possibility that a humane society might develop out of the ruins of the Third Reich go a long way to explaining the resentment, documented by Detlef Schubert, at the West German wholesale takeover of the ruling structures in what are euphemistically termed the ‘five new *Länder*’, and the current soul-searching of intellectuals, described by Roger Woods, with regard to their past relationship with the GDR. Just how difficult it is to stand back from Western assumptions is neatly illustrated when, in an otherwise critical account of the wholesale dismissals of academics at East German universities, it is acknowledged that the universities in the former GDR were ‘considerably overstaffed’ in comparison to West German institutions — one might equally

well suggest that West German universities were and are notoriously *understaffed*. And yet, however sympathetic one may be to an idealised vision of the GDR, there is always the fact of the virtually omnipresent *Stasi* to be considered, whose multifarious influence on writers is the topic of Ian Wallace's paper — here the question of the 're-assessment' of the GDR's literature arises. Finally, the relation of the former GDR to 'modernity', however defined, already a central issue in the papers of Badstübner and Glaeßner, is taken up by Peter Geist in respect of the GDR's poetry, in which a specifically GDR identity and achievement can be detected, and where the poets appear to have arrived at a point reached by the politicians only in 1989.

Two further papers published here complement the others. Mike Dennis's account of the response of the British popular press to German unification reveals perhaps more about British hang-ups than about the actual German situation. It nevertheless demonstrates the prejudices and preconceptions which a united Germany must confront on the international stage. And for those who wish to pursue some of the features of the former GDR in greater depth, Janet Wharton introduces a unique archive of press cuttings held by the University of Nottingham.

Warmest thanks are due to the contributors, for their prompt delivery of manuscripts, to the publishers of *The Spectator*, for permission to print the cartoon reproduced on p. 91, to the Goethe Institut Manchester and its director, Dr Gerhard Murjahn, for the generous support provided to the conference, and to Ms. Joan Bradshaw, Office for Industrial and Professional Training, and Ms. Dagmar Allwood, Institute for German, Austrian and Swiss Affairs at Nottingham University, for their help in organising the conference.

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