

BOOK REVIEWS

Agde, Günter, ed. *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente*. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991. 392 pp. ISBN 3-7466-0061-8. DM 24,80.

Kahlschlag delineates the causes, course, and consequences of the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, December 16-18, 1965, as presented in a series of papers delivered in June 1990 at a symposium organized by the Academy of Arts in Berlin. The book also provides documentation, much of it not previously published, including material used by the Central Committee to prepare for its meeting, the original text of speeches by Ulbricht and Christa Wolf, and letters of protest from artists written after the plenum.

Events leading up to the plenum, probably the most fateful in the history of the GDR, began with the decision to build the Berlin Wall. In the early sixties there was an acute realization in the higher regions of the government that socialism was not working. The ultimate choices were either to give up or to democratize so that the person in the street would understand, accept, and support socialism, in other words to de-Stalinize. The Wall was meant to provide the necessary security to carry out the latter course of action, which received a name in 1962: The New Economic System. The idea was to give greater responsibility to the scientists and industrial managers as well as the artists. Unfortunately a huge contradiction began to manifest itself. In the attempt to decentralize the economy and the culture, the political scheme of things was left intact by a leadership which saw its own NES as a direct attack on socialism, a leadership which had come to power after years of antifascist activity with its attendant sacrifices and sufferings, a leadership which was not recognized by most of the world's countries, a leadership which was constantly under siege in a very hot Cold War, a leadership which could not, with the best of intentions, shed its scarred skin. The result: side-by-side with the attempt to democratize was the continued irresistible urge to centralize. What ensued was a gradual and piecemeal house-cleaning which became total at the plenum. In the economic sphere the anti-democratic pressures exerted on Erich Apel, the government's strongest advocate of the NES, brought about his suicide shortly after a secret visit to Berlin by Brezhnev a month before the plenum to tell

the East Germans to stop experimenting with democracy or else. In the cultural sphere the sculptor Fritz Cremer, head of the "Sektion Bildende Kunst" of the Academy of Arts, and the poet Stephan Hermlin, head of the "Sektion Dichtkunst," were dismissed from their positions for their courageous efforts to provide a meaningful impulse for the development of fresh young talent.

Although the plenum was equally concerned with economic and cultural matters, most of the material in the present volume is devoted to the sweeping crackdown on the arts. Beat music was castigated as "kapitalistische Unkultur und Unmoral," a corrupter of the young. Plays by the more gifted authors Heiner Müller, Volker Braun, and Peter Hacks were proscribed because they depicted existing socialism as but a transition phase to the real thing—a mortal sin against the political dictum that in socialism there can be no real conflicts (this tenet accounted for the isolated stance of the GDR germanists at the famous Kafka Conference in Liblice, Czechoslovakia in 1963; they insisted that Kafka be treated purely historically in the socialist countries since he can have no relevance for a society which has made alienation impossible—shades of Morgenstern's "That can't be which is not permitted"!). The movie industry was decimated with the outlawing of a dozen films in various stages of production. Television and radio, drowning in oceans of American "Unmoral und Dekadenz" and polluted by tendencies "zur Verabsolutierung der Widersprüche, der Mißachtung der Dialektik der Entwicklung," had their fare reduced to the level of "eine lehrhafte Langeweile."

After the plenum the arts were never the same again. What was stifled or attenuated was the tremendous amount of good will brought to bear by scores of artists who had once equated socialism with reason and who had felt that a critical art could help in the creation of a totally humanized society. It was this conviction which induced Christa Wolf to do the unthinkable at the plenum, to oppose Ulbricht and the *Politbüro* openly by addressing the charge that the Writers' Union was harboring a potentially counter-revolutionary group similar to the so-called Petöcki Club, which helped prepare the way for the Hungarian uprising of 1956. This was an act of *Zivilcourage* the likes of which were not to be witnessed at any subsequent plenum.

The major open question about the plenum is this: what if the NES had been carried out—what would the consequences have been? In all likelihood there would have been a double spring in the late sixties, a Prague spring and a Berlin spring. Some say the combined strength of the two springs would have been a successful foreshadowing of perestroika. Others maintain (and I think they have the better argument) that the Soviets would have done in Berlin what they did in Prague.

In perusing the reams of material provided in *Kahlschlag*, I could not help but be struck by the rigidity, superciliousness and paranoia on the part of those who ran the GDR. I was gradually overpowered by the feeling that if the people in charge had only had a sense of humor things would have been less grim. The one art form spared at the plenum was satire—there were hardly any cabaret texts in existence, so what was there to attack? I had to remind myself that capitalism had many centuries to lay the groundwork for a society stable enough to develop a sense of humor; communism had only decades, and under conditions relentlessly unpleasant.

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Dodds, Dinah and Pam Allen-Thompson, eds. *The Wall in My Backyard: East German Women in Transition*. Interviews and trans. by D. Dodds. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 178 pp. ISBN 0-870-239-325. \$30.

This volume of interviews with East German women following the *Wende* exceeds expectations for such a text, as it is a theoretically sophisticated document. Unlike the East German counterpart on which its format is loosely based, the *Protokoll*, here we find a completely self- and historically-conscious attempt by the editors to provide a variegated and non-ideological context for the understanding and assessment of the experience of the *Wende* by GDR women.

The volume contains 18 interviews with East German women of varying ages and professional backgrounds. As the editors readily admit, the interviewees are almost exclusively well-educated, professional women from Berlin. Each interview is

prefaced with a brief biographical sketch of the interviewee and background pertinent to the interview context. The interviews themselves are presented *Protokoll*-style: questions of the interviewer are left out and each entry reads like a personal narrative. The interviews are then followed by the editors' summation of a follow-up interview in 1992, if one took place. Most of the original interviews took place between late 1990 and early 1991, 4-5 months following official unification.

A highlight of this volume is the attention paid by the editors to material necessary for a non-specialist audience. The 21-page introduction is detailed enough for the novice, yet nuanced enough to delight the GDR specialist. It contains historical information about the events of the *Wende*, historical and critical evaluations of the situation of women in the GDR, and examples of GDR policy and law concerning women. In addition, the appendix contains a useful chronology of the *Wende* and a glossary of terms for those not familiar with GDR parlance. Of special interest is the editors' attempt to critically assess their own work: the recognition of the advantages and disadvantages of documentary material, musings on the difficulties of establishing memory and historical fact, the manipulation of the editing process itself, and the limits of the present sample as an indicator of GDR women's experience of the *Wende*. This particular self-consciousness of the editors lifts the *Protokoll*-genre to a new level of validity as documentary material.

The editing process itself is an art. Here we find 18 interviews wherein the obvious is not constantly reiterated and the typical is portrayed continually from differing perspectives. Central to the editors' work is the following idea: "By challenging the misconception that life in the GDR was monolithic, the book attempts to contribute to an understanding of the complexity of this transition" (3). Correspondingly, the interviews reveal women's lives in the GDR as diverse and multi-dimensional: sometimes exciting, sometimes dull, sometimes painful. Their experiences as they begin to "live" in a united Germany also take on a heterogeneity often missed in attempts to define GDR women's experience. Conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities exist side-by-side and often within one narrative. For example, while one woman claimed that life in unified Germany was less complicated, especially since she now only worked 40 hours per week