

1996

J.H. Reid, ed.: German Monitor: Re-assessing the GDR: Papers from a Nottingham Conference

Erlis Glass-Wickersham
Rosemont College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Glass-Wickersham, Erlis (1996) "J.H. Reid, ed.: German Monitor: Re-assessing the GDR: Papers from a Nottingham Conference," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v23i0.1208>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *GDR Bulletin* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Er zählt die Tage bis zum Abitur: zählt die Zeit bis zu seiner Einberufung: dann bis zu jedem Urlaub: bis zur Entlassung sogar die Stunden: später zählt er, wann das Studium endlich beginne: und wartet auf das Ende des Semesters: diese oder jene ganz besondere Prüfung: endlich das Diplom: er zählt nicht lange bis zur eigenen Wohnung: und viel zu lange, bis er endlich die gewünschte Arbeit hat: und das Auto: und und und: und rechnet mit dem Kalender, wann wieder Ferien sind: zählt die Tage (siehe Titel des Gedichts).

All of this does not accord with the stanza of a poem from his earlier days entitled "Geburtstag, der dreißigste":

Wer Themen sucht, soll aufhören.
Ich schreibe, wie ich schießen würde,
auf das was mich prügelt:
Blindlinge. Gut gezielt—

What we get in this volume in both the new and older poems are "Themen." The GDR poet retains his identity. He has not eaten himself into a new one. He remains the craftsman of the message; perhaps not yet long enough in the West to face the predicament to which the editors of *Mikado* referred earlier: the need to find a language "diesseits und jenseits des Vokabulars der Macht und der Anpassung."

What is not reassuring in these poems is precisely what Senocak refers to as "die Existenz einer Geheimsprache, die innerhalb des Deutschen wie ein Immunsystem wirkte, und die Sprache vor der Sprache schützte." Rathenow's poems in this collection echo the preference of so much GDR (and not only GDR) German poetry for themes and missions, for ideas and abstractions and this in a language which was a site—not a home—for the work of Hölderlin, Rilke, Hoffmannsthal, and Celan. It is certainly unfair to expect that former GDR writers, especially those debilitated by so much praise for their missions of dissidence outside of language, would upon entering the more complex arena of western style consumerist hegemony be the locations of linguistic resistance. For those ex-GDR writers like Kunert or Huchel or Hermlin who did manage this transformation, the means to that accomplishment were primarily in their earlier fascination with language itself, with poetry as a

language-centered art, precisely not either a socialist realism or an anti-socialist realism. Some of the younger poets of that middle generation like Ender, Erb or Sarah Kirsch are likewise devotees of language, connoisseurs of words and their fragility, lovers of viruses that evade the immune system that protects so much German from the other, the "pharmakos" as Eric Santner calls it, which has so long frightened and fascinated German culture.

It is unfair to expect this but still one hopes; and hope fuels the criticism of this retrospective volume by a poet who, one hopes, soon will discover the thin ice on which he too is walking and, giving up former reputations and their accompanying linguistic self-protection, will break through with a cautious plunge into a poetry in which language is a more central issue.

DUNCAN SMITH
Brown University

Reid, J. H., ed. *German Monitor: Re-assessing the GDR: Papers from a Nottingham Conference*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 170 pp. ISBN: 90-5183-698-8.

As J. H. Reid explains in the preface to this collection of nine essays in both English and German, "the papers . . . were all . . . delivered at the Institute for German, Austrian and Swiss Affairs at the University of Nottingham during a conference organized by Hinrich Siefkin and Janet Wharton . . . at the beginning of January 1994." (5) Making no claim to inclusiveness ("one topic, for example, which was barely touched on is that of the position of women in the former GDR" (5)), the book first offers five essays of interest to political scientists: "Die DDR im Licht neuer gesellschaftlicher Deutungsmuster" (Rolf Badstübner), "Between Gain in Prosperity and Loss of Competence: Reflections on the Social and Political Situation of the East German People after German Unification" (Detlef Schubert), "Attitudes to the GDR and German Unification" (Gert-Joachim Glaesner), "The Political Opposition in the GDR" (Günter Minnerup), and "Looking on Anxiously: British Reactions to German Unification, 1989–92" (Mike Dennis).

The last-named essay contains some rather raw quotations and examples of singularly crude humor

in the British press: "21 ways by which Germans will beat the English by Herr Flick." (*Daily Star*, 3.7.1990, 5) But the essay reflects with uncompromising accuracy the mood of the time immediately following the fall of the East German government and many of the quoted examples are genuinely amusing, no matter how mordant the humor.

The next three essays are about literary culture: "Public Judgement versus Private Reflection: Critical East German Intellectuals as Interpreters of the Past" (Roger Woods), "Writers and the Stasi" (Ian Wallace), and "Die Schatten werfen ihre Ereignisse voraus: Nachsichtendes zur Lyrik aus der DDR" (Peter Geist). The last essay is "Archive of Newspaper Cuttings Collected by the British Military Government in Berlin: A Research Tool for GDR Specialists" (Janet Wharton). Wharton's article, the only one here by a woman, is specific, useful, informative and clear. The volume ends with brief notes about the contributors.

As Reid also indicates early in his introduction, the conference from which these essays derive "might potentially have created tensions and from time to time frank speaking was the order of the day" (5). Tensions are reflected in essays which display a certain sharpness of tone or emphatic effort at persuasive argument. This feature is both realistic and salutary, particularly in the first five contributions.

The essay by Peter Geist, about the lyric poetry of the DDR, is noteworthy for its copious references to poets who represent various groups still in the process of being defined. The examples cited—and this book is only for readers of German, since no translations are provided—are unusually well-chosen. It is a small quibble that the essay ends with a longish "bösfrohlichen" quotation (150), when the author's own words might have been a preferable closing.

It is certainly too soon to make any definitive evaluation of GDR literature, cultural life or politics, but as documents in their own right and as evidence of a continuing process of sifting, sorting and revelation, these essays demonstrate a high level of responsible scholarship. They should reach a wide readership among specialists in GDR affairs.

ERLIS GLASS-WICKERSHAM
Rosemont College