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The Literature of the German Democratic Republic

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SYLLABI

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The Literature of the German Democratic Republic
Spring 1996

In the Spring Semester 1996 I offered a seminar on "The Literature of the German Democratic Republic" for advanced undergraduates and graduate students at The Pennsylvania State University. A total of 12 students enrolled for the course: 4 undergraduates majoring in German and 8 graduate students at various stages of their graduate study, including several German exchange students. The course is not part of the regular curriculum rotation and was last offered by a guest professor in Spring 1992. Because this was my first opportunity to conduct a seminar in my particular area of interest, I had an overwhelming desire to present a comprehensive overview of GDR literature and culture. In attaining this goal I faced several major obstacles: the mixed nature of the class meant that the students were at various levels linguistically, and because courses on the GDR are not a regular part of the curriculum, students had little background knowledge in this particular area. Thus, I often reverted to a lecture format in order to present pertinent background information and ensure that all students had a basic understanding of the text.

All of the assigned readings were prose texts, four of which are required readings for all majors and graduate students: Wolf (*Nachdenken über Christa T.*), Kunze (*Die wunderbaren Jahre*), Braun (*Unvollendete Geschichte*), and Plenzdorf (*Die neuen Leiden des Jungen W.*). In choosing the additional texts, I wanted a broad historical overview of the GDR's cultural development, and I included texts that had a difficult publication history (Braun) or that had not been published in the GDR (Kunze, Becker, Maron). Thus, the very first class discussion focused on the question "What is/was GDR literature?" In taking this broad approach I hoped that the students would gain insight into the difficulties that writers faced in a totalitarian state.

In order to promote discussion and comparison of the texts, I proposed a general course theme that examined the relationship of the individual to society. As a group, we discussed society's goals versus the individual's personal development. While each text contributed to this overall theme, the individual works also depicted related themes: the workplace (Reimann), the university (Kant), youth and personal relationships (Plenzdorf, Braun, Kunze), women (Wolf, Hein), education (Becker), journalism and the environment (Maron). Students focused on these subtopics for their class presentations and final papers, enabling them to tackle a specific topic in-depth. Because many of the themes also overlap, class discussions centered on the different ways that the various authors presented their themes and criticisms.

After several introductory lectures on the end of World War II, the division of Germany and founding of the GDR, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, the return of writers from exile, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the class worked through the texts chronologically.

My intent in designing a course on GDR literature was to demonstrate to students that GDR history, literature, and culture, remain worthy of scholarly investigation. Acutely aware of the ongoing debates (*Literaturstreit*) about GDR literature, as well as the need to reassess and rehistoricize previous assumptions, I intentionally approached each text in two ways. Initially, discussion focused on the original reception of a given work, thus establishing the text's historical context. Secondly, discussion focused on the changing perception of GDR literature in light of revelations about censorship and the complicity of writers and the *Stasi*. In this way, the class consciously considered Christa Wolf's association with the *Stasi* when discussing not only *Was bleibt* but also *Nachdenken über Christa T.* Class presentations balanced Reiner Kunze's critical collection *Die wunderbaren Jahre* with discussion of the dangers of being a writer critical of the state supported by documentary information collected in *Deckname Lyrik*.

Because of the extensive exchange opportunities available at Penn State, several citizens of the former East Germany were participating in student exchanges. While none of these students officially registered for the course, their periodic class visits added to the overall class discussion. This was particularly apparent on two

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occasions: during the analysis of Hermann Kant's *Die Aula*, an exchange student visited the class to participate in the discussion. This student had read the text in high school and offered an historical perspective on the novel. For the discussion of Reiner Kunze's *Die wunderbaren Jahre*, a former East German related the importance of the book to his particular group of friends; the grandmother of a close friend had smuggled the text into the GDR. This type of perspective helped to enrich my students' understanding of the GDR system and the role that literature played in that system.

Anonymous student evaluations praised the course overall, although many students missed the inclusion of poetry and drama. Positive feedback included the class atmosphere, relaxed (although sometimes heated) discussions, and the choice of works. Several times during the semester I raised the question whether GDR literature should continue to be taught – a question designed to provoke discussion. A final student comment best answers this question: "This class opened up a new avenue of thought for me. There are so many interesting topics to be explored. GDR Lit. is *not* a dead subject! There's much more to look at that we can learn from." In 1996, one graduate student prepared a final Master's paper on Plenzdorf. In 1997, another graduate student from the course completed a Master's Thesis on Reiner Kunze's *Die wunderbaren Jahre*. During the course of research for this project, the student was able to establish correspondence directly with Kunze. I can only conclude that despite debates about canonical literature, GDR literature remains a field worthy of investigation. Indeed, I came away from the course with new questions and possible avenues of research.

Texts:

Becker, Jurek. *Schlaflose Tage*. Suhrkamp, 1980 [1978].
 Braun, Volker. *Unvollendete Geschichte*. Suhrkamp, 1989 [1977].
 Hein, Christoph. *Der fremde Freund*. Aufbau, 1995 [1982].
 Kant, Hermann. *Die Aula*. Aufbau, 1994 [1965].
 Kunze, Reiner. *Die wunderbaren Jahre*. Fischer, 1994 [1976].
 Maron, Monika. *Flugasche*. Fischer, 1995 [1981].
 Plenzdorf, Ulrich. *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* Suhrkamp, 1976 [1973].
 Reimann, Brigitte. *Ankunft im Alltag*. Verlag Neues Leben, 1994 [1961].
 Wolf, Christa. *Nachdenken über Christa T.* dtv, 1994 [1969].
 Wolf, Christa. *Was bleibt*. dtv, 1994 [1990].

Requirements:

The class will take the form of a seminar. Students and the instructor will work together to analyze and interpret the texts. The instructor expects students to have read each of the texts and be prepared to participate actively in discussions.

Each student will prepare two Referate chosen from a list provided by the instructor. Each presentation should take approximately 15 minutes. For each presentation students should provide an overview of the topic, relate the topic to the text under discussion, and provide a starting point for further discussion of the text.

Students have the option of writing one paper (15 pages) or taking a take-home exam at the end of the semester. Students may derive the paper from one of their Referate. Original work and comparative approaches are encouraged.

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Syllabus (by week):

1. Einführung in den Kurs
2. Einführung in die Literatur der DDR
3. Aufbau und Ankunft I
Brigitte Reimann, *Ankunft im Alltag*
4. Aufbau und Ankunft II
Hermann Kant, *Die Aula*
5. Das Individuum und die Gesellschaft I
Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*
6. Das Individuum und die Gesellschaft II
Ulrich Plenzdorf, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*
7. Vortrag über Rezension und Zensur
Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.
8. Das Individuum und die Gesellschaft III
Volker Braun, *Unvollendete Geschichte*
9. Jugend und Politik
Reiner Kunze, *Die wunderbaren Jahre*
10. Pädagogik
Jurek Becker, *Schlaflose Tage*
11. Die Umwelt, die Medien und die Darstellung der Wahrheit
Monika Maron, *Flugasche*
12. Das Individuum und die Gesellschaft IV
Christoph Hein, *Der fremde Freund*
13. Die Schriftsteller und die Stasi
Christa Wolf, *Was bleibt*

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