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Malte Sieber and Ronald Freytag, eds.: Kinder des Systems: DDR-Studenten vor, im und nach dem Herbst '89

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Sieber, Malte and Ronald Freytag, eds. *Kinder des Systems: DDR-Studenten vor, im und nach dem Herbst '89*. Berlin: Morgenbuch Verlag, 1993. 306 pp.

As the moment of reunification fades further and further into history and memory, it becomes all the more interesting to preserve an occasional snapshot view of historical events from 1989 to summer 1991. *Kinder des Systems* lies at hand with both information and evaluation.

The authors' motivation is to counter the perception that has taken hold in print and in the public mind: In the events that united Germany, the GDR students slept through the Revolution! Malte Sieber and Ronald Freytag argue that there is no absolute or abstract answer to that contention. Rather, concentrating on the Humboldt University, Berlin, but including reference to the Karl Marx University, Leipzig, they present specific details of the chronology and the roles played by the students, their organizations, and their institutions.

The book as a whole is divided into three parts. A student of German studies in Berlin at that time, Sieber delineates in Part One the ideological and psycho-social context in which students found themselves, and he shows the nature of their individual and group actions as they relate to the changing political systems.

In describing the mechanisms of the socialist system of education and the attendant consequences for the socio-psychological situation of the students, Sieber shows that the university under socialism hardly differed from schooling: both were places of indoctrination and mainstreaming. In the university there was such thorough centralized planning that, from matriculation until job placement, students were left hardly any room for intellectual inquiry or for development of individual identity. Attendance was monitored at lectures such as the Marxism/Leninism course, nearly universally discredited by the students as being a bore and a waste of time; "Rote Woche," which was an inaugural week immediately following the summer vacation, was sometimes compromised by students' extending their vacation, though the institution of Red Week remained intact – in the authors' experience – both in the observance and, more and more, in the breach.

Borrowing a paradigm from the psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman, Sieber views "learned helplessness" as characteristic of the GDR students. In normal experimental conditions, when subjected to disagreeable stimuli, the subject takes an action to evade or ameliorate the circumstance, but, given a circumstance construed in such a way that reaction is not possible, then the subject simply loses the capacity to resist. In the realities of GDR society, Sieber finds that students simply could not envision any other socio-political environment than the one planned by the socialist state.

The *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ) played a particularly important role. It was the one organization designed by party planners to encompass all young people and to school them for life under socialism. In effect it became for young people the only public voice of any kind, so that it both allowed for authentic expression and prevented it at the same time. For young people of student age, the FDJ became inextricably tied to such institutions as the "FDJ-Studienjahr" which was devoted to the political training of students, the "Studentensommer" where students were expected to participate in the world of work, and the distribution of stipendia for various official FDJ positions and functions.

Special significance attaches as well to the "Studentenvertretung" as an attempt to influence the events of the revolution, especially in Leipzig. Theoretically, "Basisdemokratie" had been a buzzword in the socialist system, and some activists in 1989 and thereafter hoped that a broad-based, bottom-up political strategy could work in the interests of all students. But Sieber and Freytag's descriptions of the development of the representative student council and their evaluations of its successes and failures makes for enlightening reading. The picture fades in glory not only because of inadequate preparation in real democratic political participation, but also because of such West German government and education ministry machinations as limiting the weight of student votes in university politics and delaying increases in student stipends to cover increased living and maintenance costs. In the revolution, universities and other schools of post-secondary education in East Germany were subjected not to reform but to unraveling ("Abwicklung").

The co-authors write a ten-page rationale for their "No" answer to the lead question of whether the GDR students slept through the revolution. Their four theses amount to a masterful summary.

Freytag's case study of the Ministry of State Security in relation to the role of students comprises Part Two of *Kinder des Systems*. This brief section offers a summary description of the agency, and it cites texts and documents aptly chosen to show the role of the "Stasi" as it attempted to influence university politics. Freytag presents interesting facsimile reproductions to profile the agency's method and madness until November 1989.

The even briefer third part reproduces a selection of documents of the student movement in these turning years and presents a brief bibliography.

The product of two authors who held leadership positions in the Humboldt University Student Council, *Kinder des Systems* is pervaded by an air of freshness and immediacy that makes for dramatic reading, while maintaining the spare, descriptive objectivity one usually finds in a report of a fact-finding committee. The book provides a compendium of the events and actions, the

BOOK REVIEWS

vocabulary and the reality, the thinking and the problems of the time, and is enriched with the experience of the unification process from a retrospective standpoint.

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Struzyk, Brigitte. *In vollen Zügen. Rück-Sichten.* Berlin: Aufbau, 1994. 167 pp.

In the years since German unification, many East German writers have begun the laborious process of re-mem-bering their GDR pasts, whether in the form of essay, public speech, memoir, or somewhat less frequently, fictional narrative. In virtually all cases this looking back entails grappling with issues of victimization and/or complicity within the GDR. This confrontation is often expressed in the language of blame or self-justification. More often than not, these writers tell their stories against the backdrop of post-unification losses: the loss of hopes, of utopia, and of a clear sense of home.

Struzyk's volume participates in this evolving dia-logue in both expected and unexpected ways. *In vollen Zügen* is at first glance a loosely structured, episodic memoir, obliquely framed by the present, following a generally coherent chronology from the author/narrator's childhood in Weimar, through her coming of age in Leipzig, to her adult life as a writer in Berlin. The text is broken into small sections ranging from one to seven pages, each offering a discrete vignette. Born in 1946, Struzyk grew up with the GDR, and the stories she tells combine to construct a self defined by resistance: resistance to her family's past of quiet collusion with the Nazi regime, resistance to the ideological rigidity she experienced in school and in work, and resistance to the creeping materialism of the Honecker years.

Interwoven in the descriptions of her evolving political awareness are the stages of her personal maturation through various love affairs and the births of four children (a fifth died within a day of delivery). The subject matter ranges from the quotidian (the various typewriters she has owned) to the monumental (her reflections on visiting Buchenwald). At times, this pastiche seems burdened by cliché or contrived word play, as in the dreams that are sprinkled throughout the text, or in a passage describing her father's safe return from the war and prison camp: "Davongekommen zu sein, von gekommen sein. Sein. Mehr nicht? Mehr, von vorn anfangen. Alles anders machen. Verbissen verbessern – Esser sein" (16). This tendency is often rescued by the vividness of Struzyk's concrete images: "Der Geruch von Mandelkleie und nassem Hundefell, das Geräusch von schmirgelndem Bimsstein – wir hatten ein Bad" (15). The common feature that ties many of the various threads together is of a rhetorical rather than a thematic nature: an overwhelming number of the stories foreground ironies and paradoxes of GDR society. Some of these surface in her ruminations upon language as, for example, in her refunctioning of "Verrat," a dirty word in the GDR ("Verrat am Sozialismus"), into an "Akt von Zivilcourage" (78). Existing alongside betrayal as