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Lothar Mertens. *Priester der Klio oder Hofchronisten der Partei?: Kollektivbiographische Analysen zur DDR-Historikerschaft.* Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2006. 179 S. EUR 22.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89971-307-7.

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Neither High Priests nor Court Chroniclers

Nearly two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, should we still be interested in the professional historians who taught, published, and supervised research projects in the various universities, party institutes, and academies established by East Germany's erstwhile communist rulers? Certainly it is easy now to dismiss their work as mere propaganda on behalf of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) or as a flawed enterprise that failed to meet the standards of scholarly objectivity and independence achieved in the West. Nonetheless, for at least two reasons, GDR historiography is still relevant today. First, the varied career progression, choice of topic, and published output of East German academics tell us a lot about the complex relationship between history writing and politics in a communist dictatorship. And second, the development of West German historiography since 1945 (in particular, key events like the Fritz Fischer controversy of the 1960s) is only fully comprehensible when placed within a "German-German" context.

For both of these reasons, scholars working on post-1945 German historiography today owe a great debt of

gratitude to Lothar Mertens. His 675-page reference work, *Lexikon der DDR-Historiker*, provides concise biographical information on the more than 1,100 GDR historians who were appointed to chairs or other senior positions in the period before the end of 1989. Each entry contains a brief overview of an individual's career, and details of his or her academic theses, publications, honorary degrees, state prizes, autobiographical writings, *Festschriften* and where relevant, the location of the *NachlaÃ*. Mertens also lists contributions to the main East German historical journal, the *Zeitschrift fÃ¼r Geschichtswissenschaft* (ZfG), and this provides a very useful source for anyone carrying out a bibliographical search on a particular author.

Mertens's follow-up book, *Priester der Klio oder Hofchronisten der Partei?* (actually an extended version of the introduction to the *Lexikon*) in turn contains an array of statistical data and accompanying analysis that help us to form a collective impression of GDR historians, their social backgrounds, institutes and associations, party membership, trips abroad, and so on. Thus we are provided, among other things, with lists of the directors and deputy directors of the various historical institutes housed within the GDR Academy of Sciences; of the editors-in-chief and members of the editorial board of the ZfG and other East German journals; and of the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Deutsche Historiker-Gesellschaft/Historiker-Gesellschaft der DDR, founded after the final break with the West German Verband der Historiker Deutschlands in 1958. We also learn that as many as fifty-six East German history professors had been members of the NSDAP, and are even supplied with the dates on which they joined. Fourteen of them were also admitted into the ranks of the SED, a move that doubtless helped them to cover up their pasts.

On the other hand, twenty-one East German historians had attended an anti-fascist school while in Soviet captivity during and after the Second World War. Some of the latter were clearly conscripts from working-class backgrounds and would probably not otherwise have thought of pursuing an academic career. Others were students or school teachers, and one was a former priest. Together they formed the first wave of a new generation of ideologically motivated, Marxist-Leninist scholars with strong attachments to the Soviet Union and a determination to root out "reactionary" elements. Indeed, by the late 1950s only a handful of non-Marxist or "bourgeois" historians remained in East Germany. The rest either had fled, retired or–in two very tragic cases–committed suicide (pp. 30-32). The shift from the earlier phase of "anti-fascist-democratic transformation" to the later task of "constructing the foundations of socialism" was now complete.

On a more general level, as Mertens rightly reminds us, "Die harsche Ablehnung sozialistischer Geschichtstheorien in Westdeutschland fÃ¼hrte zu einem staats- und parteidoktrinÃ¤ren Deutungsmonopol in der DDR, dessen AbhÃ¤ngigkeitsstrukturen und Verbindungslinien, nicht nur aufgrund fehlender rÃ¤umlicher MobilitÃ¤t ... und allgemein Ã¼blicher Hausberufungen, an Inzucht erinnerte" (pp. 11-12). This process began in the 1950s, and became even more visible in the 1960s, when fewer and fewer contacts were possible with capitalist countries after the building of the Berlin Wall. In 1969 the Sovietization of the East German historical profession was extended even further when the traditional *Habilitation* was abolished in favor of the Russian-style B-Dissertation. Doctoral students or candidates for research assistantships, if they studied abroad, usually did so in the USSR, with Moscow and Leningrad the favored destinations. Even then, the numbers were hardly impressive: only thirty-three participated in study exchanges to the Soviet Union in the subject area of history in the period after 1951, supplemented by two scholars who went to China and one each to Czechoslovakia and North Korea.

Within East Germany itself, most scholars remained at the same university or academy for their entire careers and transfers to other institutions were comparatively rare. This system militated against cross-fertilization through the appointment of outsiders while encouraging a climate of "in-breeding" and almost "feudal" relations of patronage and dependency among academics themselves (p. 90). Even so, more open views could be developed in some spaces, such as the Academy of Sciences (AdW) in Berlin, where certain research groups, such as those housed within the Zentralinstitut fÃ¼r Alte Geschichte und ArchÃ¤ologie or the Institut fÃ¼r Wirtschaftsgeschichte, were subject to less overt party interference. The latter was founded and initially led by JÃ¼rgen Kuczynski, a self-styled "linientreuer Dissident" who had almost been expelled from the party in the late 1950s but went on to become one of the most highly decorated, internationally acclaimed historians in the GDR.[1] Whether he and other critical Marxist intellectuals were really able to move away from Stalinist modes of thought after 1956 remains an open question, but certainly they did not see their function as historians as being merely the "stilistische Verfeinerung und permanente Reproduktion der bestehenden grundlegenden

Dogmen der Parteiideologie" (p. 12). Kuczynski in particular saw no real contradiction between socialist party allegiance and universal standards of scientific objectivity. Both ultimately would serve the cause of progress, so long as the former was not crudely pursued at the expense of the latter. [2]

At the other extreme were the out-and-out apparatchiks, scholars who really did see the task of historiography narrowly as the service of the party's current political interests. They were to be found mostly (but not exclusively) in the Institut fÃ¼r Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK (IML) and other SED-directed centers of research, such as the Institut fÃ¼r Gesellschaftswissenschaften (IfG) or the Parteihochschule 'Karl Marx.' Almost one-quarter of East German Ph.D. dissertations in the late 1950s and early 1960s were completed at one or other of these institutes. Many of the candidates originally came from working-class or peasant backgrounds and a fair number were expellees from eastern territories lost by Germany in 1945. Because the party had ensured their improved material circumstances and enhanced career prospects, they in turn were unlikely to put academic independence before their political loyalties.

Within the AdW and the history departments of the East German universities, political oversight was ensured through regular meetings of communist cell organizations and the requirement placed on some research groups to work in tandem with the IML or the IfG. On top of this, SED leaders, including not only Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, but also Wilhelm Pieck, Anton Ackermann, Alexander Abusch, and above all Kurt Hager, kept a close watch on historians' work and–in the case of Ulbricht–even laid down their own theses on key historical events, which were then taken up enthusiastically by other ZK members. Contemporary history and especially the history of the KPD and SED were the sub-disciplines most heavily subject to such direct political interference, although scholars working on the First World War were given slightly more latitude than their counterparts working on the 1939-45 conflict.[3] The most visible sign of the party's control, however, lay in the fact that over fifty historical dissertations were determined to contain secret or politically inconvenient material at a level sufficient to warrant restricted public access, the last such categorization taking place as late as November 8,1989.

One final contribution that Mertens makes is an overview of what happened to GDR historians after 1989. Here the figures are quite striking. Only forty-two historians were still in their old posts by the mid-1990s (mostly at the Humboldt UniversitÃ¤t in Berlin) and only twenty-two had been offered places within the Wissenschaftlerintegrations-Programm (WiP), a scheme set up to allow a limited number of East German academics continued employment on a temporary basis. For the jobless majority, especially for those who still believed in some form of socialism, the only other alternative was to take part in the formation of an academic "counter-culture" through the establishment of the Marxistische Forum and other bodies linked to the PDS, the successor party to the SED. One or two ex-GDR historians have indeed risen to quite senior positions within the PDS, serving as elected deputies in the Bundestag or in various provincial parliaments, while others work for the party's historical commission, whose remit is to issue carefully-worded statements on historical events of contemporary relevance to socialism. In reality, though, a large number of older GDR professors were due to be pensioned off in the 1990s anyway and most simply disappeared into quiet obscurity. Many have since died. So far, twenty-three have been exposed as IMs, or Stasi informers. Following further retirements, it is likely that fewer than ten GDR-trained historians were still teaching in German universities in 2006, a remarkable illustration of the deep-seated changes brought about since 1990.

Even so, Mertens's contention that the failure of former GDR historians to establish any kind of academic foothold in the reunited Germany can be put down mainly to their collective old age and "fachlichen Begrenztheit" (p. 147) is worth challenging, particularly in view of the very hurried, politically motivated closures of so many East German institutes, research groups, and university courses in the early 1990s. A more differentiated approach has been offered by Stefan Berger, who notes that in addition to other factors, it is also "difficult to avoid the conclusion that West German historians wanted to ban from university curricula those subjects and areas which they disliked most."[4]

This point aside, however, Mertens's two reference works are a hugely beneficial addition to knowledge and will hopefully assist in keeping alive the important issue of GDR historiography for many years to come. One might add that a *Lexikon der BRD-Historiker* for the period 1945 to 1990 would be equally useful to today's scholars, although undoubtedly such a project would be even bigger and more ambitious to manage.

Notes

[1]. JÃ¼rgen Kuczynski, *"Ein linientreuer Dissident":*

Memoiren 1945-1989, 2nd ed. (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1992).

[2]. Kuczynski, "Parteilichkeit und ObjektivitÃ¤t in Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung," *Zeitschrift fÃ¼r Geschichtswissenschaft* 4 (1956): 873-888. For a broader discussion see also Heiko Feldner, "History in the Academy: Objectivity and Partisanship in the Marxist Historiography of the German Democratic Republic," in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945-71*, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 262-277.

[3]. See Fritz Klein, *Drinnen und Draussen: Ein Historiker in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2000), 223-224.

[4]. Stefan Berger, "Former GDR Historians in the Reunified Germany: An Alternative Historical Culture and its Attempts to Come to Terms with the GDR Past," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38 (2003): 63-83 (here 68-69).

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