

**The GDR and its history: Rückblick und Revision
Die DDR im Spiegel der Enquete-Kommissionen**

Konferenz des Centre for East German Studies, University of Reading, UK
am 17. bis 18. September 1999

Ten years have now passed since the political changes in the GDR which led to unification. A central feature of the past decade has been the discussion concerning the process of historical evaluation of the GDR's 40-year existence. This conference took as its main focus the official process of 'Geschichtsaufarbeitung', as represented by the two Commissions set up by the Bundestag, which completed their work in 1994 and 1998 respectively. The conference, organised with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, was opened by Mary Fulbrook from University College, London who examined certain methodological problems associated with historical approaches to the GDR. In particular, she pointed to the particular problems associated with the different categories of writing on the GDR, highlighting in particular the problems of so-called 'betroffene Literatur'. Dorothee Wilms (CDU), the last Minister for All-German Affairs and a leading member of the first Commission, then considered the origins of the first 'Enquete-Kommission' in 1991 and 1992 and discussed its development. Udo Baron, who worked as a 'wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter' for the Greens on both Commissions, then looked at the various other independent initiatives in the area of 'Geschichtsaufarbeitung', and assessed their importance for the continuing process of coming-to-terms with GDR history. This initial stage of the conference was then completed by Bernd Faulenbach from the Historical Commission of the SPD who looked at the role of the Commissions in the context of the overall 'Geschichtsdebatte' in relation to the GDR. The final two sessions on the first day were concerned with the PDS: Peter Barker from the University of Reading considered the sceptical and critical attitude of the PDS to the two Commissions, while stressing the importance of the PDS's involvement in the process of 'Geschichtsaufarbeitung' for its own development. Peter Thompson from the University of Sheffield emphasised in his paper the way in which Marxist ideas had been deformed in the GDR and stressed that it was important for the PDS not to throw out all socialist ideas in this process of coming-to-terms with its SED past.

The second day was opened by Bill Niven from Nottingham Trent University who looked at the changes in the way in which Buchenwald was presented to the public after unification. Henry Krisch from the University of Connecticut, USA, revisited the subject of his doctoral thesis, the merger of the KPD and SPD in 1946. He examined the new perspectives on the 'Zwangsvereinigung'- which had emerged as a result of the opening of the SED and other archives. Markus Meckel MdB (SPD), the original proposer of the Commissions in the Bundestag who had played a leading part in both Commissions, looked back at the relevance of this official process of 'Geschichtsaufarbeitung' and then looked forward to the tasks of the future in this area, in particular to the role of the new 'Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur', of which he is 'Vorstandsvorsitzender'. Roswitha Wisniewski (CDU), a member of both commissions, considered the role of education in the GDR and the way in which it had been treated in the work of the commissions.

In the final part of the conference Stephen Brown from the World Council of Churches in Geneva examined the rather controversial way in which the Churches had been treated in the work of the first Commission which led to the dissenting report by the SPD members. Jonathan Grix from the Institute for German Studies at the University of Birmingham discussed the problems of the lack of a civil society in the GDR which had affected the development of a new political culture in the post-unification period. Finally, Robert Halsall from the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen considered the architectural legacy of the GDR and discussed some of the continuing problems such as the 'Sanierung' of the 'Palast der Republik'. The final plenary session revealed the continuing strongly held and diverging views in relation to the legacy of the GDR, thus emphasising the inconclusive nature of the debate while at the same time underlining the importance of it taking place.

The papers are due to be published next year as a special issue of 'German Monitor' by Rodopi in Amsterdam .

Peter Barker
University of Reading