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Review of "The Wall in My Backyard: East German Women in Transition" by Dinah Dodds; Pam Allen-Thompson

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Loyalty, 1970). The Friedensgebete (peace prayers) of October 9, which might have been a bloody confrontation between demonstrators and the regime, became instead the turning point of the revolution. The SED went on the defensive and never recovered the initiative.

Joppke shows how the revolution moved rapidly past the idea of reforming the GDR to embrace the idea of unity, leaving the dissidents behind. His book is a useful corrective to Dirk Phillipsen’s We Were the People (1993), which tends to accept rather uncritically the dissident position that the revolution was betrayed.

Joppke’s book is political sociology at its best. Informed but never overwhelmed by theory, and based on archival work, interviews with many of the participants, and a command of relevant printed sources, Joppke’s work offers a thoughtful, important examination of dissent and revolution in the GDR.

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The editors of this volume present eighteen interviews with women from eastern Germany, most of whom are professionals. These interviews offer interesting insights into the lives of women in the former German Democratic Republic as well as during the transition years immediately after unification.

In their introduction, Dodds and Allen-Thompson refer to the tradition of an “interview genre” in the literature of the former GDR. The context of earlier collections differed, of course, significantly from the present volume because the pre-1989 interviews conducted in the GDR were primarily read by an audience intimately familiar with the complexities of east German society. The interviews in this anthology are accompanied by an introduction that refers briefly to some of the policies and changes affecting women’s lives, but this information is not sufficiently linked to what the women describe in their interviews. Readers unfamiliar with GDR society may have some difficulty placing the women’s accounts in an understandable context. At the end of their introduction, the editors conclude that women negotiating the “obstacles of the transition” demonstrate the “resourcefulness and integrity that have constituted women’s strength for centuries” (20). But invoking such universal factors must be complemented by historically specific information.

It is the East German women themselves who refer to the social structures, traditions, and values that have had an impact on their lives when they reflect on educational and work institutions and their implications for economic independence, on the work collective and the meaning of work in their lives, on social policies that...
made single parenthood possible and the consequences of single parenthood for work and personal life, on the party and the complex relations of intellectuals to the SED, and on the Autonomous Women’s Association and its relation to women at the grass roots level. A comprehensive understanding of these issues is important for assessing the years immediately after unification (1990-1992), the period during which these interviews were conducted.

There is a respectable body of analytical work on eastern Germany both before and after unification. At the end of this book the editors list much of this work. Readers interested in understanding the enormity of the changes that have taken place in eastern Germany should add broader analytical material cited. Together with more specific analyses of the changing institutional context, the intelligent personal reflections given in these vivid interviews permit a real understanding of the conditions that affected (and affect) East German women.

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Franz Fühmann appears to have been spared the neglect that has threatened some other GDR writers as their editions go out of print and interest by literary scholars diminishes. In 1993 Hinstorff Verlag reprinted its Fühmann Werkausgabe. Aufbau Verlag had launched a series of Fühmann’s work in 1991, which includes a paperback anthology of later prose, titled Der Mund des propheten. Dennis Tate’s expansive and detailed study is thus a very timely and welcome addition to Fühmann scholarship. His research joins Hans Richter’s 1992 monograph to solidify the position Fühmann’s work will continue to occupy in serious investigations of postwar German literature.

The structure of this study suggests that in planning his book, Tate worked backward from Fühmann’s later prose and speeches in order to assemble an illuminating chronology of biographical material and literary-critical analysis. The result is a thoughtful construction composed of tightly fitting pieces of information and interpretation. Tate begins his study with a vivid account of Fühmann’s early years and the author’s harrowing experiences in World War II. In a later chapter Fühmann’s 1982 acceptance speech for the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis is cited, which includes references to the author’s wartime military service (201). The judicious inclusiveness of Tate’s research, as well as his fluid but concise writing style, allow the reader to recall and retrieve from the initial chapter those parts of Fühmann’s background which give vivid meaning to the autobiographical statements.