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RESEARCH ON GDR CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES: A LOOK BACK AND SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE

I must start by limiting the term GDR culture, for the spectrum of research in the United States is not that broad: research on GDR art and music, for example, is quite rare, and scholarly studies on GDR theater, film, television, or the print media are only slightly more common. Moreover, research on these aspects of GDR culture is frequently carried out not by experts specifically trained in these fields but rather by literary scholars who are looking over the fence into related disciplines. Research on GDR culture conducted in the United States is primarily research on GDR literature.

Literature published in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and the GDR was to some (very small) extent an object of research already in the 1950s and 1960s. However, no one spoke of GDR research: the authors treated – Johannes Bobrowski, Peter Huchel, and Anna Seghers, for example – were considered simply German writers; the fact that they lived in the East was of no particular significance. The terms GDR literature and GDR research – like the name of the country itself – came into use in the 1970s, as an offshoot of détente and the new interest in alternative socio-political systems which was characteristic of the time – the spirit of 1968 – among young people, including the up-and-coming generation of Germanists. From the mid-1970s on, GDR research grew to become a significant branch of American Germanistik.

However, here too a caveat is needed to prevent any misunderstandings: research on GDR literature in the United States – and this is true for the social sciences as well – is conducted by a small group of specialists; and the number of those who read the research results is scarcely larger. GDR research has never played a role in public life in the United States, and its impact in cultural circles is minimal as well: GDR literature and – with some few exceptions – German literature in general are only scantily present in the consciousness of the American population. One cannot presuppose that even educated Americans will have heard of Christa Wolf or Heiner Müller.

Before discussing the present situation and making some prognoses about the future of American research on GDR literature, I want briefly to
describe the different research approaches that developed in the approximately fifteen years (1975-1990) up to the Wende, for both the present and the future of this field of Germanistik are determined not only by the new political situation but also by the tendencies of past research.

One can differentiate four interest groups or approaches in American research on GDR literature up to the Wende, although they cannot of course be surgically separated from each other and are in effect tendencies, not set groups or "eingetragene Vereine."

1) The first group comprises those Germanists who – with or without knowledge of Marxist aesthetic theory – conceived of literature as a reflection of society and believed that, in order to interpret GDR literature, springing as it did from a different societal system, it was necessary to study the society as well, and that not to do so would result in approaching these cultural products too naively – with Western sensibilities. The first conference on GDR literature in the United States, which was held at Washington University in St. Louis in 1974, took place under this star. In the introduction to their first collection of articles on GDR literature, Literatur und Literaturtheorie in der DDR, which contains papers from this conference, Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminghouse wrote: "Die Literatur der DDR läßt sich nicht... immanent abhandeln." This socio-literary approach implied the (sometimes politically motivated) rejection of New Criticism, which was dominant at the time in the United States. Instead of applying the form-conscious, work-oriented methodology of the established generation of literary scholars, these young Germanists considered the historical contextuality of the work. Relatively little concerned with traditional aesthetic criteria and the tools of the literary scholar’s trade, they studied second- and third-rate authors as well as "big names," and popular literary forms as well as works of lasting value. GDR literature was read with an eye to its function as ersatz forum for political and social questions. Many of these same literary scholars taught courses on the GDR itself, as German departments across the country broke with the tradition of offering only language and literature courses and introduced culture courses and Landeskunde into the curriculum. The general attitude of this (most numerous) group of American GDR-Germanists vis-à-vis the GDR was critical but, at the same time, relatively tolerant, a tolerance stemming sometimes from Marxist convictions, but more commonly from an interest in peaceful co-existence and increased international understanding.

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1. Literatur und Literaturtheorie in der DDR, eds. Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminghouse (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 8.