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ED.

Erzähler aus der DDR

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The literature of East Germany has been ignored, misjudged, and disdained for a long time: it has been labeled as literature of agitation and propaganda ("agit-prop" literature) and described as tendentious, dictated, boring, and philistine. A collection of East-German stories, sketches, and short narratives, *Erzähler aus der DDR*, that has been published in West Germany by Horst Erdmann in Tübingen, attempts to introduce—or reintroduce—this "new" literature to the readers in non-communist countries and thus help in correcting the distorted picture of East Germany that has been projected by politicians rather than by scholars and literary critics.

In a seventeen-page introduction to the literature of the German Democratic Republic Konrad Franke sheds some light on the rise and development of this literature from the bleak years that followed the Second World War till the present time. It is interesting to notice the similarity in themes, motifs, and subject matter in both zones during the years between 1945 and 1949, between the collapse of the Third Reich and the founding of the two German states. The moral responsibility for the war, the senseless sufferings of the masses, the denouncing of all kinds of dictatorships and militarism, and the sincere hope for a peaceful and democratic atmosphere are the recurring themes of this period.

After 1949 the two countries went their own ways. For the part occupied by the Western armies the most logical thing was to look westwards for help, support, and inspiration. It was therefore understandable to see West-German writers make serious efforts to adapt themselves to Western-European literary schools and artistic movements in order to retrieve the cultural and moral losses of the war.

East-German writers, on the other hand, were directed by their political and military guardians to look at, imitate, and compete with other communist countries and especially with the USSR. Aside from

writers of the older generation, like Brecht, Anna Seghers, and Arnold Zweig, who came to settle in East Germany bringing along their own reservoir of themes, motifs, and subject matter, the young writers adhered to certain literary and political guidelines that were valid in the USSR. "Social Realism" was accepted by them as the only way of depicting reality; the worker and his world were placed at the center of their writing. In this period, which lasted till 1956, publishing firms were nationalized, books that were regarded as "anti-democratic" were removed from public libraries, and strict guidelines for writers and artists were issued on a regular basis. It is this period that gave outside observers enough reasons for labeling the literature of the GDR as unfinished, boring, and philistine.

In spite of the short lived thaw that followed Stalin's death in 1953 the East German Communist Party waited till 1956 before granting the writers some token freedom and permitting them to deal with subjects other than the typical socialist ones like production problems, over-time, industrial sabotage, and work hazards, provided, of course, that they abided by and adhered to communist ideology. Some who dared to grope for the limits of this freedom and test the seriousness of the new guidelines were condemned as "revisionists" and removed from all official posts.

The atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust between writers and party bureaucrats lasted till early in the sixties. It was the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and its symbolic significance which caused considerable change in the attitudes of both writers and bureaucrats. Having the feeling of being "among themselves" the writers realized at last that their political and economic system had nothing in common with other West-European countries and that they could gain more freedom by adapting themselves to the new reality that surrounded them; and the party bureaucrats conceived that more flexibility in their guiding lines and rules was needed so that writers could feel trusted and necessary. And now, after more than ten years of confrontations and modifications, of revisions and adaptations, it seems that a working formula has been reached by both sides.

A close look at the stories and sketches included in *Erzähler aus der DDR* convinces the Western reader and critic that the

East-German writer has reached the freedom he has aspired to, that he is now permitted to try new literary styles and modernistic artistic devices, and that he can now deal with unconventional themes and individualistic subject matter. Most of the thirty-five writers included in this collection were born in the thirties or forties; it is therefore understandable that the war and its effects on Germany appear, if at all, in the far background of their stories. While writers of the older generation still deal with motifs and images of the war, the younger authors show a greater interest in the present and the future of their country. And although some of them deal with and refer to socialism, they are not tendentious or partisan. A few of them even stress the humorous and ironical aspects of the system they live in; and this makes their writings congenial and appealing. *Erzähler aus der DDR* is a valuable collection of different narrative forms and varying themes and motifs; it should be recommended to literary critics and historians as well as students of comparative literature.

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SIEGFRIED MANDEL

Group 47: The Reflected Intellect
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Group 47 "became a legend in its time." "Some have called its existence mythical and its definition impossible." It "is a paradox": "It is one man, Hans Werner Richter, and at the same time an expanding and contracting constellation identifiable by several constant stars." It is (or was) "a loosely-knit association of writers who periodically exhibited their wares . . . engaged in critical debate over socio-literary-aesthetic issues, and assisted in revitalizing all forms of literary expression inside and outside the fluid group. It kept alive because it never hardened into a school of style or inflexible ideology."

Siegfried Mandel's third contribution to the Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques series is an especially welcome volume, for it is

the first detailed treatment in English of the colorful, fascinating, prestigious, but also (as the preceding quotations may illustrate) protean Group 47. Mandel devotes his opening chapter and postscript to the history and nature of the Group; he offers, for instance, particularly informative comments on *Der Ruf* (the "news-leaf" published in Munich between August 1946 and April 1947 and the seedbed from which the Group sprang) and the changing styles of the literature read from the "electric chair" during the regularly scheduled Group meetings between 1947 and 1967. Briefly: after the so-called *Trümmerliteratur* had run its course, during the fifties, the "discovery" of such writers as Joyce, Kafka, and Faulkner encouraged Group members to produce a rich body of literature varying in styles and techniques; "in the sixties, trends became even more diffuse, flowing mainly into two channels: politically active literature, more intense than ever since the end of the war, and avant-gardism"—Mandel's *bête noire*—"which created hybrid forms of literature and aimed a massive assault upon every literary tradition." The 1968 meeting, scheduled to be held near Prague, was canceled because of the military invasion of Czechoslovakia; and as Richter himself informed Mandel, "I then promised the Czech writers that we would not again hold group meetings until it would be possible to do so in Prague." In 1972, however, Richter relented and called a small meeting at his Berlin home, but now Group 47 probably has passed into literary history. "Would it be possible," Richter questions, for members of the new generation "to go along with the ground rules of Group 47? I would hardly think so." As distinguished as the productions of Group members have been, Mandel points to an important "enigma": the "past," that is, the Nazi regime and the catastrophic war, was "not in any significant measure objectified through literature." Of course, the fiction of Günter Grass is the great exception.

Because of the "fluid" nature of the Group itself, it is understandable, I suppose, that the major portion of Mandel's book is a survey of works written by authors who have been at one time or another members of the Group; or, in other words, the book presents an overview of much of the important contemporary literature written in German. Reading Mandel's chapters on fiction, poetry, the radio play, the documentary,