

Reports

Study in the GDR

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Spending a year as a high school Rotary International exchange student in Austria whet my appetite for overseas studies during my undergraduate work at Stanford University. Curious about life in the German Democratic Republic, I decided that the only way to really learn about it would be to live there. So I did. I hope other American students will do the same once they realize that it is possible.

The one and a half semesters I spent at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig during the 1986/1987 academic year were fascinating as well as challenging. The structure of the university, the course requirements, the numerous foreign students, the student life (actually, the lack thereof), and of course the role of Marxism-Leninism in the State were just a few of the interesting aspects of study in the GDR. For those seeking an extraordinary educational and unique experience in German speaking Europe, as well as an insider's view of what life in a communist country is really like, study in the GDR may be the answer.

The GDR universities are designed more as vocational schools than as centers of academic study. When students apply to a GDR university, they do so for a specific major. Departments which have very competitive admissions include such majors as journalism (a very "red" major, popular among FDJ activists), and Germanistics, which has few openings and is closed to anyone who has had a relative emigrate to the West—legally or otherwise. Students who are rejected by the department of their choice are sometimes offered entrance to the university in another area of study. If they do not accept this, students essentially forgo any opportunity of ever pursuing a university education. However, the alternative of not studying and thus being bound to the non-university educated, lower echelons of society can be even less attractive.

One student I met wanted to study English; she was only offered a place to study Polish and Russian. Another wanted to study Germanistics, but one of his uncles had emigrated (legally) to the West several years before; this student is now

studying Marxism-Leninism. My physical education class was with 19 students studying accounting and statistics. Of the entire group, only one student had initially applied to study accounting and statistics, and the other 18 were less than pleased with their major; all admitted that this created a poor atmosphere for learning.

Since the number of students each department must educate for certain jobs is set through centralized economic planning, the five-year plan frequently takes precedence over an individual's intellectual interests. If in any given year the latest five-year plan were to provide for only 24 spaces in a major (12 at one university, 12 at another), the twenty-fifth student, regardless of interest and talent, would not be considered for admission. With only one, state-run university system, that student would have no other options for university studies, such as a different level of state universities or private colleges.

When accepting a place at a GDR university, students are required to sign a contract which binds them to accept whatever job they are offered by the university, wherever it may be, for the first three years after graduation. Studying at a GDR university is not considered to be a fun, exciting time for learning and personal growth in a young person's life. Rather, it is a time to receive the necessary training for one's future job.

Students are placed into groups (*Seminargruppen*) of 15 to 20 people, with whom students have essentially all of their classes. Studies at the university level in the GDR generally last five years due to required internships (including some during summer "vacations"). The courses are planned for the students by the university for all five years of study, with the exception of a few upper division specialty seminars in some majors. In addition to the requirements in their major field of study, GDR students in all majors are required to take three years of physical education (once a week), three years of Marxism-Leninism, and two years of university-level Russian (which they begin learning—rather unwillingly—in the fifth grade of elementary school). The required

Marxism-Leninism ("M-L") courses include Dialectic and Historical Materialism in the first year, followed by Political Economics of Capitalism and Political Economics of Socialism, and then in the third year, Scientific Socialism, which until October 1986 had always been titled Scientific Communism.

One of the most interesting aspects of my time in the GDR was the opportunity I had to meet students from around the world. Most of the foreign students are from communist countries or countries which have strong communist parties. I met students from such countries as Afghanistan, Angola, China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Greece, Hungary, Laos, Mali, Mexico, Mongolia, Nicaragua, North Korea, Poland, South Africa (members of the African National Congress), various republics of the USSR (no one refers to the USSR as "Russia"), Vietnam, and South Yemen. After completing one year of intensive German language instruction, foreign students spend their undergraduate years in the GDR studying such subjects as medicine, Germanistics, journalism, etc. (In addition, a few Western students spend only one or two semesters in the GDR.)

By knowing other foreign students, I learned a great deal about other parts of the world and had at least some social life on weekends, which were otherwise rather dead. Most GDR students go home on weekends and social life is not a major aspect of GDR universities. Student dormitories are not on the campus. They are spread throughout the city to ensure that students do not develop elitist attitudes, but rather live—at least in theory—as part of the proletariat. This living arrangement often requires commuting to class (which can begin as early as 7:00 a.m.) and in no way lends itself to university campus-style living as many Americans know it. Almost all of the dormitories are arranged by major, and students of the same *Seminargruppe* are often placed together as roommates for the first year.

The *Seminargruppen* of the foreign students are separate from those of the GDR students due to differences in language capabilities and graduation requirements. However, foreign students are required to complete the three year Marxism-Leninism core. Since I was only spending one year in the GDR, I was considered to be a *Teilstudentin*. I had my own academic advisor and had the good fortune of being able to choose courses with both GDR and other foreign students instead of being tied to the fixed schedule of any

one *Seminargruppe* or, worse yet, being placed into a *Seminargruppe* exclusively for Westerners. However, being American meant that in order to take part in any political science course (i.e., International Relations) I had first to get the permission of the head of the respective department. Fortunately, I received permission for several such courses, something which was not possible for the two American students I knew at the Humboldt University in Berlin (East).

At the Karl Marx University, I concentrated on the three Marxism-Leninism courses required of all full-time students for graduation. The other students had a head start; Marxism-Leninism had been an integral part of their curriculum since preschool. However, my professors were so intrigued I had chosen to take Marxism-Leninism, that they were willing to tutor me after class. None of the other students (except those from Poland) would ever dare to agree with my comments during class; they would only do so in private conversations. Taking these courses taught me the basic ideology of the GDR. I learned that theory is not always compatible with practice, even if *Neues Deutschland* tries to give the impression that it is.

Even though I was expected to take courses only in the department to which I was assigned (Germanistics), I took courses from other departments. The universities provide no yearly catalog of courses, and the task of going from department to department for information can be frustrating and time consuming, but persistence pays off. I strongly encourage other Americans studying in the GDR to do the same. In particular, it is worth exploring the theology departments and seminaries where students will not only find interesting courses, but also meet fascinating students and professors.

In a country as intensely Marxist-Leninist as the GDR, the minority that has the courage to confess openly its Christian faith plays an interesting role in society. As the only institution not directly under the control of the State or Party, the Church offers intellectual freedom far beyond the limits which the State tries to set, as well as an alternative to the official ideology of Marxist-Leninist atheism. Also, the churches provide a forum where GDR authors can hold readings from their own works, especially from those which the State will not publish. Because taking part in church activities is often equated with open resistance to the State, many university students are afraid to learn more about the churches.

Western students enjoy many privileges. Not only are they free to take part in church activities, but they also have access to the *Giftkammer* ("Poison Chamber") of the university library where they can read such "poison" as *Time Magazine*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Der Spiegel*, and other Western news publications. The privilege of a *Giftschein* ("Poison Pass") is regularly only available to a few university professors and graduate students whose field of study (for example, International Relations) involves current affairs.

Choosing the Karl Marx University in Leipzig over the Humboldt University in Berlin was a wise decision, despite the severe air pollution in Leipzig (which was so bad that any attempt to go running resulted in an awful burning sensation in one's lungs plus a headache). Life in Berlin is much different from life in the rest of the GDR. Not only is the standard of living substantially higher in Berlin, but the influx of tourists from West Berlin and better access to Western media via West Berlin provide more of a window onto the Western world than is available to the citizens of the rest of the country. As a Westerner with a multiple entry visa, frequent trips to West Berlin would be too tempting. (Despite what some university officials will tell the Western students, it is possible to get a multiple entry visa.)

The Germanistics Department of the Karl Marx University is one of the only ones which offers a course in *Landeskunde der DDR* with numerous field trips. The course covers the history, culture, and politics of the GDR for foreigners studying Germanistics. Through the course I saw far more of the GDR than I would have seen on my own and also met other foreign students who were studying in Leipzig. The convenient location of Leipzig facilitated field trips to Weimar, Dresden, Zwickau, the Erzgebirge at Christmas time, Berlin, Eisenach, etc. Leipzig itself is large enough to support a symphony, an opera, and a few theaters (for those who like to see plays primarily about factory workers). There are relatively frequent, though not always punctual, train connections from Leipzig to Berlin (a trip of 2 hours and 15 minutes). The Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and the Wilhelm Pieck University in Rostock, although more provincial, would also be worth consideration for students interested in studying in the GDR.

Even though short summer programs are available, study in the GDR during the regular academic year has many advantages. Most im-

portantly, students have more time to learn about life in the GDR, which is not always easy for Westerners to understand, and meet full-time GDR and foreign students. For study in the GDR during the regular academic year, there are, as far as I know, at least five options. 1) The *Liga für Völkerfreundschaft der DDR* offers several two-semester (ten month) scholarships and will hopefully soon offer several one-semester scholarships. These provide approximately 350M per month, which adequately covers living and book expenses. 2) The universities will accept a limited number of Westerners as *Kommerzstudenten*. The cost is approximately U.S. \$350 per month, and students in the program also receive about 350M *Stipendium* per month. 3) Brown University has a program for one or two semesters of study in Rostock. 4) There are a few Fulbright Scholarships available for study in the GDR. 5) There are two-year positions available for native speakers of English to teach English courses at the universities.

Adventuresome as it may sound, spending five to ten months living and studying in the GDR might cause some students more stress than they are willing to cope with. Westerners in the GDR are confronted constantly with deeply rooted ideological/political differences. Students must also deal with often less than sanitary living conditions (cockroaches, layers of mold in the showers, very dirty dorm kitchens, etc.), standing in a lot of lines, mind-boggling bureaucratic hassles (i.e., trying to change the status of a visa from single-entry to multiple-entry), shockingly unfriendly people in stores and service oriented jobs, a severe lack of fresh produce, "Marx's Revenge," which strikes the stomachs of many Westerners (I also got typhus and had to leave in April because of it), and the weather, which is often cold, grey and dismal, matching many of the buildings.

Working knowledge of German is essential for study in the GDR. Since students are constantly confronted with these ideological and day-to-day difficulties, trying at the same time also to learn the basics of the German language would not only be terribly difficult, but would detract greatly from any student's stay in the GDR. Much of what one can learn in the GDR takes place in casual, private conversations. In addition to my university courses, some of my most invaluable experiences included meeting members of the Evangelical Student Union, visiting families in the GDR, and debating professors on philosophical

issues—all of which required sufficient knowledge of German. I would not recommend the GDR experience to students who do not already have a strong command of the German language.

For most students one semester (five months) would be an ideal length of study in the GDR. Those with very specific academic goals, such as writing a Master's thesis on GDR literature or a Marxist interpretation of a certain period of history, might need two semesters; but in general, one semester is sufficient. In one semester students have time to become assimilated into the university life in the GDR and establish some lasting friendships. Yet, after the first few weeks, when students are still discovering what distinguishes university courses in the GDR from those in the U.S., the classes can become rather boring for American students who expect greater intellectual stimulation from university courses.

Studying in the GDR immersed me in life on the other side of the iron curtain; this would not have been possible in a brief visit. I also had great opportunities to travel in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, and I established some wonderful friendships. Furthermore, Americans living in the Eastern Bloc countries are not merely students, but also teachers. They provide contact with "real, live Americans" and thus exposure to Western life which would otherwise be inaccessible. The sacrifice of a few nerves was well worth all that I learned about the communist bloc, the GDR, and, most importantly, the excep-

tional values and liberties of the West which I had previously taken for granted.

Addresses for Further Information

Scholarship or *Kommerzstudenten* opportunities

Bereich U.S.A.
Liga für Völkerfreundschaft
Otto-Grotewohlstraße 19d
1086 Berlin
GDR/East Germany

Brown University Program in Rostock
Brown University Program in the GDR
Foreign Study Office
2 Stimson Avenue
Providence, RI 02905

Fulbright Scholarships
U.S. Student Programs Division
Fulbright Scholarship Program
Institute of International Education
809 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

Teaching English
Bereich U.S.A.
Liga für Völkerfreundschaft
Otto-Grotewohlstraße 19d
1086 Berlin
GDR/East Germany

Students should request that the Liga forward inquiries to the English Departments of the universities at which they would like to teach.

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