

Extent of Reform in East Germany's Universities Surprises Even Those Most Directly Involved

But some fear that changes could be disrupted unless the 'revolution' remains peaceful

By TOPPER SHERWOOD

WEST BERLIN

Glancing at the pile of notebooks behind his desk, a foot-and-a-half-tall stack of information about East Germany's universities, Eckhard Kämpfer laughs ruefully.

"I can toss the whole thing out the window," he says. "There are that many changes—more than we can understand at this point."

Mr. Kämpfer, chief of the higher-education section of the West German government's Agency for All-German Affairs, is not alone in his reaction to the pace of change in East Germany over the past few months. Even those most directly involved in the country's education system are astounded by the depth—and spontaneity—of the continuing reforms.

In East Berlin, the current watchword is "autonomy," a term freely used by everyone from education officials and Communist Party regulars to faculty members and students. Most seem eager to erase memories of the heavy-handed bureaucracy that dominated East German higher education for many years, and to replace it with a system that will nourish intellectual freedom.

East Germans also say they hope their "peaceful revolution" will remain so, and many worry that it may not.

"If the educational reforms are to continue, it is important that the process remain peaceful," says Hans Piaza, professor of history at Karl Marx University in Leipzig. "The atmosphere must be one of reason."

Contrast With Stalinist Period

Violence broke out last week in the city of Leipzig, where many peaceful demonstrations have been held since the fall. This time, demonstrators opposed to German reunification scuffled with some who favor it.

But while East Germans may be unsure about what the future holds for them, their uncertainty stands in marked contrast to the worst days of Stalinism—a time when most people here, including university students, knew exactly where they stood.

"You received an airtight course plan that told you what classes to take, in what years you would take them, when you would attend lectures, when you would take tests," recalls Malte Sieber, a linguistics major at East Berlin's Humboldt University.

Several years before graduating, students of that period also were told what their eventual jobs would be.

"The thinking behind the policy was to insure a feeling of security," says Manfred Weissfinger, chief spokesman for East Germany's Education Ministry. "But when you're so certain of your position, there is little incentive to learn. Our workers were subjectively demoralized."



Eckhard Kämpfer of West Germany's Agency for All-German Affairs: The number of academic changes taking place in East Germany is "more than we can understand at this point."



Malte Sieber of East Berlin's Humboldt U.: Under Stalinism, "you received an airtight plan that told you what classes to take, in what years you would take them, when you would attend lectures."

Today, however, signs of academic liberation appear on many fronts, official and unofficial.

This month, in the first such meeting in 24 years, university presidents from both East and West Germany got together in Bonn to consider a broad agenda for their institutions: student and faculty exchange programs, structural reforms, and democratic guidelines for university operations.

On the local level, individual departments in East German universities are replacing pro-forma lecture topics with lively discussions of current issues. Professors

are using textbooks that were once considered ideologically dangerous, and students are finding a new voice in the system.

At Humboldt, Horst Rieder, a history lecturer, says his institution has always been "a place where people could discuss issues more or less openly."

But now, he says, as East Germany wrestles with the consequences of its recent break with Communist domination and of widespread calls for German reunification, "there's a whole new quality" to the academic discussions.

"There's more out on the table," Mr. Rieder explains.

Indeed, in the absence of formal prohibitions—or, for that matter, of any clear government policies on higher education—East German universities are changing on their own initiative. They have abandoned requirements for Marxist-Leninist studies, lifted restrictions on the student press, revised graduation requirements, and begun to reorganize some academic departments.

For its part, the caretaker government of Prime Minister Hans Modrow has announced an end to mandatory military training for male students, and it plans to loosen restrictions on university admission.

Effect of Political Instability

However, with parliamentary elections scheduled for May 6, the current regime's instability is considered to be a threat to academic reform.

The Communist Party remains highly unpopular, despite a massive "house cleaning," and bitterness lingers over the party's four and a half decades of authoritarian rule.

Furthermore, Communists continue to control most major news media and government offices, prompting a growing number of opposition leaders to question whether the elections are likely to be fair.

And attempts by the government to revive the hated national security force have sparked growing protests.

At Humboldt, most Communist Party members continue to oppose calls for the party's dissolution, says Adolf Rüger, head of the history department. But he notes that the university's party chapter recently lost many of its 7,000 members.

"I think it will not be possible to prevent the dissolution of the Communist Party," Mr. Rüger says.

Among students, political activism is developing quickly, with self-organized student organizations taking root and winning recognition from campus officials, at least at major institutions.

At Humboldt, Mr. Sieber quotes Rector Dieter Hass as saying that "no important decisions" will be made without advice

Continued on Following Page

E. German Students Active as Academic Reforms Continue

Continued From Preceding Page
from the university's two-month-old student congress, which has about 600 members in a student body of some 12,000. Members of the congress also have been taking part in discussions of reform within university departments.

"A more general plan of study is called for—not one that tells you exactly when to attend lectures and what courses to take," says Mr. Rieder. "What difference does it make when students attend lectures, as long as they know the material?"

Officials in both East and West Germany, meanwhile, have been trying to make it easier for students to cross the border for higher education. Many from East Berlin, for example, have taken advantage of relatively easy access to academic institutions in West Berlin.

West German authorities, however, want to stem the flow of East German students to the West, where both entrance and graduation requirements are more liberal.

At West Berlin's overcrowded Technological University, Marion Klippel, the chief academic counselor, says about 300 East German students have been seeking admission every week. She says most of the applicants want to retain their East German citizenship, however.

West Germans Show Interest

University officials from both sides of the divided city have been holding informal discussions on cooperative efforts to make East German universities more attractive.

Surprisingly, West German students and faculty members have shown growing interest in studying in the East, perhaps because of the crowded conditions and troubled job market in their own universities.

A Humboldt administrator, Heinz Spangenberg, says the West Germans' interest is substantial, especially in the natural and social sciences and in law.

Mr. Sieber says Humboldt's stu-

dent congress has had many visitors from West Germany.

"Some are interested in studying here," he says. "Others want to learn about our student organizations."

The congress is planning a meeting in February of students from throughout East Germany. The main topic will be a proposed national education act.

A seven-member committee of East German academics and government officials has produced a working paper on which the legislation could be based. The document, which calls for academic autonomy, focuses on reforming university administration, occupational training, instruction, and student affairs.

Other academic groups are expected to prepare a final draft, which would be placed before lawmakers after the May elections.

Mr. Weissfinger, the Education Ministry spokesman, says he is confident that such a law will be enacted by the end of 1990. ■