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Rainer Karlsch: Das Chemiedreieck bleibt!

Since its founding on March 1, 1990, under the late East German government, the Treuhandanstalt has been subjected to broad social critique. Established to privatize East Germany's state collectives, it ultimately managed to save just one-third of the millions of jobs entrusted to it, spurring massive unemployment. In 1995, Konrad Jarausch was skeptical of the Treuhand as a "paradoxical mix of state officials and economic companies," and Charles Maier observed in 1999 that the Treuhand had come to symbolize capitalist takeover politics. [1] More recently, Joyce Mushaben blamed the Treuhand in part for the "tragedy... that an extraordinary amount of improvisational skill and organizational talent accumulated by East Germans over the space of four decades was simply pushed aside in the rush to unity." [2]

Yet while public discourse has lamented East German "victimhood" by a Western capitalist campaign to destroy East German state-owned companies, scholars like Wolfgang Seibel have emphasized that the creation of the Treuhand was initiated by the Modrow administration due to its seventeen billion GDR-mark deficit and the westward out-migration of 350,000 citizens (2% of the GDR population) in the last two months of 1989 alone. Rather than a malicious perpetrator of "Western hegemony and crude capitalism," he assesses, "the Treuhandanstalt was just coping with the consequences of the currency union that had been requested by the East Germans themselves." [3] In effect, as Marcus Böick shows in his hefty dissertation, "improvisation by a market-oriented, enterprising, special/exceptional regime in an obvious crisis situation can hardly be understood as a planned or directed experiment in imposing neoliberal structures." Rather, Treuhand officials operated in an unprecedented, chaotic economic environment to work out the viability of thousands of individual state-owned companies in an effort to spare East Germany from a mass exodus of workers. [4]

Since 2018, a wave of literature chiefly tied to the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (IfZ) has essentially corroborated this scholarly consensus through analysis of about twelve kilometers of newly opened files of Bestand B 142 (Treuhandakten) at the Federal Archive in Berlin. In 2022, a collection by IfZ-affiliated scholars analyzed the Treuhand as an ambivalent office environment, whose overworked members negotiated politically challenging deindustrialization, criminal behaviors, good will, and worker protests. [5] In like manner, Norbert Pötzl recently explored leading actors in the Treuhandanstalt to illustrate how the institution fostered positive developments in the former GDR at the same time that it reaped bad press from populist political parties, who bashed the Treuhand as a symbol for every wrong. [6] Keenly probing the interrelationship between trade unions and the Treuhand, Christian Rau has excavated the grayness of actors on both sides, who negotiated (with mixed success) to retain East German industries. [7] Eva Lütkemeyer has applied the new Treuhand files to better understand the extremely difficult privatization of East Germany's harbor and shipping industries. [8] Florian Peters and Eva Schäffler have respectively explored privatization campaigns in Poland and Czechoslovakia and compared them with developments in former East Germany. [9]

Building on decades of research into GDR industrial history, IfZ project participant Rainer Karlsch now applies Treuhand files among other sources to examine privatization in the "chemical triangle" near Halle that included the Leunawerk, Buna-Werk in Schkopau, the Chemie AG Bitterfeld, and Filmfabrik in Wolfen. These industries, Karlsch argues, became "the biggest problem child of the Treuhand" (17). When chancellor Helmut Kohl traveled to Schkopau in May 1991, workers despaired for their jobs and even threw eggs; nonetheless, he stood by his slogan to retain the region's "industrial core" (16). Against all odds, the rundown

industrial core around Bitterfeld and Wolfen were restored, even though as Karlsch shows in the first part of his book, general neglect in the late GDR had led to degraded facilities, high wage costs, extreme energy costs, and uncompetitive products.
The heart of Karlsch's book examines painstaking, often painful interventions in the oil, pharmaceutical, cosmetics, household chemical, and fertilizer industries through the year 2000: well after the Treuhand was replaced by the Bundesanstalt für vereinigungsbedingte Sonderaufgaben (BvS) in 1995. Over and over, Karlsch shows how some of the least likely candidates survived, and ultimately over 1/5 of German oil refinement happened in former East Germany, perhaps proving "a success story for state industrial policies" (644). Leuna even became the prototype for a centrally administered Chemical Park, pursued after 1998 in West Germany too. The most expensive Treuhand campaign, saving the Olefinverbund in Schkopau through privatization in Dow Chemical, also extended to Böhlen near Leipzig. Meanwhile, Karlsch shows how an October 1990 contract between the Treuhand and BASF AG for the Synthesewerk Schwarzheide GmbH went from exception to rule: henceforth the Treuhand took on the "Altlasten" of extreme industrial pollution, making brown lands attractive again for Western investors who never would have come just because of "a national sense of responsibility" (641).
For all the Treuhand's achievements, Karlsch concludes in keeping with preceding scholarship: it was simply overwhelmed, and its personnel lacked the specialized competencies to understand what was needed to push West German chemical companies to invest in East Germany. Everyday layoffs, some of them unnecessary, also blighted the Treuhand's legacy. 85% of positions in the cosmetic industry were cut, Karlsch argues, not because the products were poor, but because they were poorly marketed for Western buyers (651-2).
Karlsch's deep data on the structural transformation of East Germany's chemical triangle comes highly recommended to all experts interested in the Wende that swept Eastern Europe after 1989. His extensive examples both underpin the findings of recent nonpartisan scholarly analysis and combat the myths that fuel simplified historical narratives. Unfortunately, the ongoing popularity of nostalgic and polarizing narratives shows that scholarly findings, like those from IfZ participants, have not penetrated public consciousness. Terse synthesis is needed that delivers a deftly argued proof that the Treuhand was a consequence of East German economic collapse, not West German capitalist invasion: an overburdened and chaotic institution that nonetheless saved much that unfettered capitalist forces left to rot in other global contexts (like Detroit). Future scholarship needs to break into these mainstream debates, lest the Treuhand myth continue to serve tragic narratives that glorify resentment and division.

Notes :
[1] Konrad Jarausch: Die unverhoffte Einheit, 1989-1990, Frankfurt/Main 1995, 276-306; Charles Maier: Das Verschwinden der DDR und der Untergang des Kommunismus, Frankfurt/Main 1999.
[2] Joyce Mushaben: What Remains? The Dialectical Identities of Eastern Germans, Cham 2023, 153.
[3] Wolfgang Seibel: "Institutional Coping: The Treuhandanstalt and the Collapse of the East German Economy, 1989-1990," in United Germany: Debating Processes and Prospects, ed. Konrad Jarausch, New York 2013, 83-103; 86, 101.
[4] Marcus Böick: Die Treuhand: Idee - Praxis - Erfahrung, 1990-1994, Göttingen 2018, 720, 726-727.
[5] Dierk Hoffmann (Hg.): Die umkämpfte Einheit. Die Treuhandanstalt und die deutsche Gesellschaft, Berlin 2022.
[6] Norbert Pötzl: Der Treuhand-Komplex. Legenden. Fakten. Emotionen, Bonn 2021.

[7] Christian Rau: Die verhandelte "Wende". Die Gewerkschaften, die Treuhand und der Beginn der Berliner Republik, Berlin 2022.
[8] Eva Lütkemeyer: Wendemanöver. Die Transformation der ostdeutschen Werftindustrie 1989/90-1994, Berlin 2024.
[9] Florian Peters: Von Solidarność zur Schocktherapie, Berlin 2023; Eva Schäffler: Der Weg in die Marktwirtschaft. Tschechien und die Privatisierung in den 1990er Jahren, Berlin 2023. For the role of foreign investors in the Treuhand, especially from Austria, the UK, and the United States, see Keith Allen: Investing foreigners in Eastern Germany, Berlin 2023.