

# Obituary: Professor Hermann Weber

## (1928-2014)

**H**ermann Weber, the Mannheim University-based doyen of communist studies, died on 29 December 2014; he was 86 years of age. Weber's impact on the study of communism was given a special significance by the country's cold-war division on Europe's front line between East and West; and his work had the insights of a former communist 'insider' who had broken with a system he soon recognised to be a dictatorship over the party and society. He was also one of the few academics whose work covered the entire 'short' twentieth century, which began with the cataclysm of the First World War and the Russian Revolution and ended with the collapse of the East bloc and the Soviet Union in 1989/91. After a period of being a leftist outsider in Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Federal Republic during the 1950s, Hermann Weber found a new political home in the Social Democratic Party, as a local activist and senior historical advisor as well making an extensive scholarly contribution to the study of the party's affiliated trade-union movement in the 1980s.

As a mature student in the German university system he rose exceptionally rapidly: between 1962 and 1968, he graduated, gained a doctorate and then the German *Habilitation* – or higher doctorate which integrates scholars into the academic community. He was given a personal chair in 1973, which he held until retirement in 1993. Then, as Professor Emeritus, he set up Germany's leading communist studies journal, the *Jahrbuch Historische Kommunismusforschung* (Yearbook of Historical Communist Studies). When *Twentieth Century Communism* was founded 2009 he was the obvious German expert to call on as an editorial advisor, and the journal's first issues carried an interview with him.

## Communism and Hermann Weber

Born in 1928 into a working class family, just before the Weimar Republic's period of relative stability was shaken by the Great Depression, Hermann Weber could take pride in his father membership of the mass-based German Communist Party (KPD). He was clearly – and rightly – proud of his father's anti-fascism under the Third Reich, which led to several arrests. After the Second World War, he took up his father's political flag and, until the mid-1950s, was a member of the KPD's successor party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). He met his wife, Gerda – who was born in the regions which became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – when they were both students at the Party University in Klein Machnow near Berlin from 1947 until 1949. In 1950, the couple – now married – were fortunate enough to be able to travel to the West together – not least as first-hand experience of the Stalinisation of SED had produced growing political doubts. Yet, initially, both held positions of significance in the communist movement. He worked for the SED's communist youth newspaper in the West, at times taking the role of editor-in-chief; she was head of the Communist League of Women. Their residual commitment to communism led to terms of imprisonment; but, already called 'Comrade Curious' in East Berlin, the SED leadership ensured the couples expulsion in the autumn of 1954. As prominent former Communists, it was not easy to make a living. However, freelance journalism and teaching in adult education in the 1950s paved the way to academia in the 1960s.

## Hermann Weber and Communism

These first-hand political experiences were the perfect platform and driving motivation for a life-long engagement with the study of communism. He was a regular contemporary commentator in the media – including the London-based BBC – as well as an historian. In 1964, Weber published *Ulbricht fälscht Geschichte* (Ulbricht Falsifies History), which anatomised – and exposed – the SED's instrumentalisation of communist history under the direct aegis of party boss Walter Ulbricht. His *magnum opus* was *Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus* (The

Transformation of German Communism); published in 1969 it had gained him a *Habilitation* the previous year. In this study – which included hundreds of biographical sketches of party officials – Weber developed a compelling explanation for the Stalinisation of the KPD, the largest communist party outside Soviet Russia. The model's rigour and value for assessing the development of world communism led the founding authors of this journal to have Weber's reflection on his thesis after the opening of the archives translated as the opening chapter in a collection of essays which all engaged with his Stalinisation thesis. At this time, Weber also began to further develop his interest in the 'other' Germany. His *Von SBZ zur DDR, 1945-68* (From Soviet Zone of Occupation to German Democratic Republic) was also first published in 1969 and has been revised, updated and reprinted into the twenty-first century. As the arrival of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union made possible archival research, he turned his attention to how German Communists who sought refuge in Soviet Russia in the 1930s ended up as victims in Stalin's 'Great Terror'. This too had a German-German context: as the Soviet Union acknowledged Stalin's 'Great Terror', in East Germany these former Communists – he identified 242 of them – remained 'blank spots in history' (*Weißer Flecken in der Geschichte*) – as the title of his book termed those lives the SED dictatorship did not want to be remembered.

### **Herman Weber after Communism**

After the fall of communism, Hermann Weber campaigned for the preservation of the archives of the German communist movement. He was successful. Indeed, the 'archival revolution' that gave a vast documentary-basis to communist studies is reflected in the title of the journal he founded in 1993 – *historical communist studies*, beyond the Kremlinology of the cold-war era. Hermann and Gerda Weber also drew on archival research to write two volumes of memoirs together with his wife, which covered their time together at the SED Party University and beyond.

We would like to end with two personal reminiscences of Professor Weber. I (Norry LaPorte) first came in contact with Professor Weber soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a postgraduate student at the

University of Stirling, I asked his advice on sources for research on the KPD. The letter – in those ancient, pre-internet days – was answered within the week; the reply was clear: you must get to Pieckstraße near the Alexanderplatz where the former Institute of Marxism-Leninism had thrown open its doors to researchers. As one of the foot-soldiers in this archival revolution, he too consulted these new sources in Berlin and Moscow, and used them to inform new research as well as reengaging with his previous publications. No study remains unchallenged, but for the study of the KPD, he rightly asserted that he had – by and large – called it correctly. That is also the view of most of the new generation of KPD researchers. And many of them have told me how Hermann Weber was enthusiastic in his help for their research. For some he was able to provide funding through a Foundation he and his wife set up, for others he gave access to his personal library and archive and for all he was keen to discuss communist studies. I also found him to have remained an idealistic and vibrant individual when he invited me to join the ‘International Advisory Board’ (*Beirat*) of the *Jahrbuch*. His last publication was in the *Jahrbuch* was in 2013 – written despite having a condition that made reading difficult – and the last time he spoke in public was at a local SPD event in early November 2014, shortly before his death. It was a life led ‘according to the principles of the left’ as well as its scholarly study, as his memoirs underlined.

I (Ulrich Mählert) last saw Hermann Weber on 27 December 2014 in hospital in Mannheim; his wife, Gerda, was there too. There were signs that he could perhaps yet recover from the serious operation, which a fall six weeks earlier had made necessary. Hermann had great difficulty coming out of an artificial coma. But he did recognise Gerda’s hand squeezing his, which he could softly respond to, her voice and even just her presence. And perhaps he could once again sense my presence too, if I understood his reaction correctly. At any rate, the nurse was optimistic. We were to get him headphones, which I ordered on Amazon before leaving the hospital. But two days later I learned from Gerda that Hermann had passed away peacefully. It was the same day as the headphones arrived in the letterbox. In Hermann Weber, I have lost my academic mentor, who gave me as a student in their first semester at university a position as an assistant in his department. Until 1998, I was

his undergraduate student, then his doctoral student and finally a member of the academic staff working with him. When I moved to Berlin in 1998, my mentor became a friend who I visited in Mannheim frequently. In recent years, a week did not go by in which we swaps stories of work and life on the telephone. I miss Hermann Weber as someone could offer me professional advice and as a friend, so it is all the more important to me as lead editor of the *Jahrbuch* to pursue the topics that he worked on. So too is it important to me to stand by his wife, Gerda, who has become a good friend. *Salut* Hermann – here's to you, I miss you! But you remain in my memory and there is also your work!

*Ulrich Mählert (Berlin) and Norry LaPorte (South Wales),  
September 2015*