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## NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

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KLAUS MEHNERT, 1906–1984

To the profound sorrow of his many friends and admirers, the professional world in Slavic studies, and a vast international reading public, Klaus Mehnert passed away at age 77 on January 2, 1984. His death is a tremendous loss to all of us who were devoted to him and looked forward to several more of his scholarly, lively, and incisive books exploring the world of international affairs and particularly the three countries of greatest concern to him: the Soviet Union, China, and his native Germany. Unfortunately, Mehnert's eloquent voice was stilled shortly after the publication of *Über die Russen heute*. He fought his fatal disease heroically and continued to work up to the time of his death.

Born in Moscow of German parents, Mehnert spent his childhood in Russia; hence his fundamental understanding of the Russian people, language, and culture. His family returned to Germany in 1914, and his father was a casualty of World War I. With many other German children he was evacuated to Sweden and spent several years in Scandinavia. He subsequently studied at German universities and received a doctorate from the University of Berlin as well as an exchange fellowship to the United States. He wrote fascinatingly about his time at both the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University. In the 1930s he became editor of *Osteuropa* and did an outstanding job in this capacity; under his editorial leadership *Osteuropa* became one of the foremost German periodicals in the field of Slavic studies.

Mehnert also helped to initiate three related publications, *Osteuropa-Recht*, *Osteuropa-Wirtschaft*, and *Osteuropa-Naturwissenschaft*, and was editor of all four publications for more than ten years. In a thoughtful eulogy in the February 1984 issue of *Osteuropa*, his colleagues paid him special tribute for the founding, under generally adverse circumstances, of the three periodicals, which certainly helped to broaden the scope of East European research both in Germany and in the United States. Mehnert was a thoughtful and extremely knowledgeable editor; his linguistic genius served him particularly well in this capacity.

During World War II Mehnert returned to Berkeley to teach, left again to be a guest professor at the University of Hawaii, and departed for China just before Pearl Harbor. He spent five years in China, editing a multi-language periodical. After the war he returned to Germany and was active both as editor of *Christ und Welt* and as the prolific author of major books dealing with *Youth in Soviet Russia* (1932), *Soviet Man and His World* (1958), *Peking and Moscow* (1962), and with Maoism and the People's Republic of China in more general terms. He also became a noted radio and TV commentator and gained political influence, accompanying, for example, the late Chancellor Adenauer to Moscow on a significant and pathbreaking trip. In subsequent years he returned to his earlier avocation of college teaching, having been appointed professor of political science at the Technical University of Aachen, where he spent eleven happy years (Mehnert liked to refer to this period as "meine goldenen Aachener Jahre"), lecturing to overflowing audiences on his favorite subject, international politics.

In the meantime he also ardently pursued his other major interest, global travel and especially visits to the Soviet Union. His last book, *The Russians and Their Favorite Books* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1983; original title: *Über die Russen heute, was sie lesen, wie sie sind*), was the result of several trips to the USSR. After retirement from Aachen he settled down in his beloved Black Forest region of West Germany, busy with writing and TV lectures until his death. He will be remembered by his many friends throughout the world as an incredibly energetic, hard-working and brilliant colleague, whose prolific writings in the fields of Soviet, Chinese, and East European research

contributed immensely to a better understanding of such diverse subjects as Maoism, Soviet professional literature, the Sino-Soviet dispute, and East-West relations in general.

This brief biography of Klaus Mehnert is also a summary of his autobiography, *Ein Deutscher in der Welt: Erinnerungen 1906–1980*. The book contains moving passages about Mehnert's parents (particularly his mother), his two brothers, both of whom died as soldiers in World War II, and his California-born wife who died tragically in 1955. It is a fascinating, detailed account of a full life that was motivated by lively personal ambitions.

Probably the most painful and controversial wartime development for Mehnert was the fate of his article on "Problem XIX" for the United States fleet maneuver at Pearl Harbor. In his manuscript he went into great geopolitical detail concerning the weakness and vulnerability of the American fleet stationed in Hawaii. The article was promptly published in General Haushofer's Munich-based "*Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*" and read by hundreds of American subscribers. Mehnert was generally accused of being a "Nazi spy" and the inventor of Pearl Harbor for the Japanese. In his *Erinnerungen* he dealt with this problem lucidly, admitting that publishing the article was probably a mistake (especially in such a nationalistic and pro-Nazi publication as *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*) but citing the names of U.S. officers with whom he cleared the article in advance. He stressed that he was never a spy for anyone and that the article represented merely an objective assessment of the situation. At any rate, he left Hawaii rather hurriedly and journeyed to China, then occupied by Japan, where he spent the next five years. Unfortunately the article followed him everywhere as long as World War II lasted. The autobiographical volume sheds light on this episode, which could have become most damaging to him. With the collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945, the immediacy of Pearl Harbor also disappeared, and Mehnert's article ceased to be a "timely" story.

His other recent book, *The Russians and Their Favorite Books*, is the end result and brief summary of Mehnert's assiduous search for the twenty-four best-known and most widely read contemporary Soviet authors, with annotated bibliographies and Mehnert's detailed comments on each of their major works. As such, it belongs more in the field of Slavic literature than of Soviet (or world communist) studies. It is full of interesting detail and offers a fascinating profile of the Russian people as Mehnert saw and encountered them. I was particularly impressed by the last, long chapter of "Final Conclusions," which presents his personal views of the lasting impact of World War II on Soviet literature, the outskirts of Moscow (and of other large Russian cities), the sudden and unexpected growth of Siberia, Soviet authorities, people in general (love and sex included), women and children, and other diverse topics. In a sense it is fitting that these conclusions form the last chapter of Mehnert's last book, since they represent the distilled essence of sixty years of close observation of the Soviet Union and the Russian people, always from the viewpoint of a patriotic German.

Klaus Mehnert will be sorely missed by his friends. His passing left a gap in our lives and studies which will be impossible to fill.

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