Student Participation At Berlin’s Free University

By CARL G. ANTHON
Higher Education Adviser, Berlin Element, HICOG

WHEN THE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN, situated in the Soviet Sector, reopened its doors in February 1946 by unilateral order of the Soviet authorities, it was plain that this distinguished institution would soon fall victim to the process of “democratization” as understood east of the Iron Curtain. For many months German and Allied officials had tried to place the university under the control of the Berlin City Government, where it logically belonged, but the Soviets, for obvious reasons, exercised their veto at every level of quadripartite government to thwart that attempt.

From the first, the Soviets encountered the undisguised resistance of courageous students and professors to efforts to turn the university into a Communist school. The democratic opposition centered mainly around the student paper, Colloquium, and the offices of the democratically elected student government. Dismissals of professors and expulsions of students did not silence the opposition. In March 1947 the Soviet NKWD arrested six student leaders; they have never been heard from since.

A year later, in April 1948, just a few days after the student editors of Colloquium had been expelled from the university, a mass meeting of the democratically-minded students took place at Hotel Esplanade, just inside the British Sector. Protesting against the increasing restrictions against academic freedom, and the repeated and cruel interferences in student government affairs, the students unanimously demanded the establishment of a new, free university in West Berlin at the earliest possible moment.

Following up the students’ initiative, the Berlin City Assembly passed a resolution on May 11, 1948, authorizing the Magistrat (city council) to take appropriate steps to found a Free University. Under the chairmanship of Berlin’s plucky mayor, Ernst Reuter, and art historian Edwin Redslób, a 12-man preparatory committee was formed. Two student leaders were members of this committee, as it was fitting that the students should play an active part in shaping the destiny of their new university.
Graduation of a law student is celebrated at university's club. Building is leased by the students' association.

IT WAS HARDLY a propitious moment for setting up an expensive university. On the very day — June 24, 1948 — that a Free University secretariat was established, the Soviet Military Administration had stopped all rail traffic between West Berlin and West Germany. A blockade, which had been creeping up for several weeks, and which became complete by Aug. 4, threatened to paralyze the life of the whole city. Less than a week later, the Soviets announced they would no longer participate in the work of the Allied Kommandatura, thus putting an end to quadrupartite rule in Berlin.

Nor was it easy to locate university buildings in a city half destroyed and with practically nothing rebuilt.

In view of the political and economic uncertainty created by the blockade, it seemed a miracle when, on Nov. 10, 1948, the Free University opened for business.* Of more than 5,000 qualified applicants only 2,200 were admitted, 40 percent of whom were residents of the Soviet Sector and Soviet Zone. A teaching force of some 100 professors and assistants, organized into three faculties — medicine, law-economics and philosophy — was available.

As a result of careful screening, less than eight percent, the lowest percentage in any German university, had been army officers or had held office in Nazi organizations. Approximately 25 percent of the students were women, representing a tremendous increase over the prewar percentage in German universities.

A collection of 15 buildings, scattered about in the beautiful suburb of Dahlem, was made available to the university. Students and scientific assistants volunteered their time to help repair and furnish the buildings. Despite the scarcity of money, accentuated by the currency reform of June 1948, books, tables and chairs appeared overnight. A grant-in-aid from American Military Government of DM 2,000,000 (at that time equal to $600,000) helped put the university on its feet. Since that time American authorities have financed approximately 25 percent of the university's annual budget, which is in the neighborhood of DM 8,000,000 ($1,904,000).

Messes in wooden buildings scattered over nine areas serve 5,000 meals a day. Needy students are given free meals.

Thus, through the remarkable cooperative effort of students, professors and civic leaders, of Germans and Americans, the Free University was launched, with the motto, "Veritas, Justitia, Libertas" (Truth, Justice, Liberty).

Friedrich Meinecke, Germany's dean of historians, became the first rector or president, but because of his advanced age, Professor Rediob acted as executive rector.

* * *

THE CONSTITUTION OF the Free University reflects the dramatic events of the founding period. In drafting it, the preparatory committee kept in mind two aims: to give the new institution a certain measure of autonomy, and to accord the students an effective voice in the affairs of the university. Government control was limited by the establishment of a board of trustees or Kuratorium. It consists of 12 members, under the chairmanship of Berlin's mayor, and includes the federal minister of finance, three

---

**Organizational Chart Of Student Representation**

**Meeting of Entire Student Body**

**Student Parliament ("Konvent")**

**Student Executive Committee (ASTA)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Officer</th>
<th>Sports Officer</th>
<th>Press Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Officer</td>
<td>Social Officer</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The student body elects one member for each 100 students to the Student Parliament. 2. The "Konvent" (Student Parliament) elects the chairman and vice chairman. 3. The "Konvent" elects the chairman and four officers of ASTA (Student Executive Committee). The other members of ASTA are nominated by the chairman and elected by the "Konvent." Each ASTA officer is charged with certain responsibilities.

---

Announcements regarding courses, classes, cultural events clutter bulletin board in entrance hall of main building.

members of the City Assembly, the rector and deputy rector, a student representative, and three outstanding persons from public life.

Student representatives participate in all levels of the Free University's administration — the Kuratorium, the University Senate and in the individual faculties. The Free University is the only university in the world where students have such far-reaching rights and responsibilities. To realize the full significance of this situation, one should try to imagine students of an American college or university, sitting — with full voting powers — with the board of trustees or in faculty meetings, determining the hiring and firing of professors.

Nor have the students abused that privilege. After all, the main impetus for founding the university came from the students. They know from experience the evils of totalitarian education, and they are determined to keep their university clear from a resurgence of political tyranny of any kind or color.

The organs of student government are the Konvent or student parliament and the student council, generally known as "ASTA" (Allgemeiner Studentenausschuss). Both of these are elected annually by the entire student body.

At store owned by three students merchandise is sold at discount. Students' social agencies get part of profits.

tance to the universities of West Berlin and western Germany.

Through its close contacts with East zone students, the Free University's Office for All-German Questions is in a position to obtain valuable information on educational developments in the Soviet Zone. They are also able to extend assistance and advice to their oppressed fellow students behind the Iron Curtain.

Of considerable importance is the Student Social Welfare Office. It has charge of administering the stipends or scholarships, and other social aids of more than 2,700 students — half the student body! Most of the Soviet Zone students, who constitute more than 35 percent of the 5,800 students enrolled in the Free University in 1951, receive a so-called currency-exchange stipend of DM 80 a month to compensate for the low value of the East mark, which is worth one-fifth of the West German or Deutsche mark.

Once a month the city turns over to this students' office some DM 200,000, which is paid out by six tellers to the scholarship recipients. By virtue of the powers delegated to him by the student parliament, the student in charge of this office exercises considerable influence in screen-

THE ACTIVITIES AND responsibilities of the student council are unusually extensive, because of the special problems obtaining in a four-sector city, surrounded by inaccessible and hostile Soviet-controlled territory. Various functions are assigned to the different offices of the student council. Of special significance is the Office for All-German Questions (Referat fuer Gesamtdeutsche Fragen) whose job it is to screen Soviet Zone applicants for admission to the Free University. Numerous students — and professors — seek refuge in West Berlin as Communist pressure mounts at East zone universities. Even in "neutral" fields such as philology, theology and natural sciences, objective study is no longer possible.

Only those students who can prove that their life is endangered by political persecution are granted official refugee status in West Berlin. As such they are entitled to financial assistance and are helped in gaining admitt-

Paul G. Hofman (left), chairman of Ford Foundation, and Henry Ford II were snapped in Frankfurt en route to Berlin for conferences which resulted in foundation's big grant.

OCTOBER 1951

19

INFORMATION BULLETIN
VARIous OTHER STUDENT organizations conduct programs designed to meet the social and academic problems of students. Those who desire part-time employment register with the Heinzelmaennchen organization, which has found odd jobs for more than 1,400 students during the current year. Another student organization, the nationwide Studentenwerk, operates student social and welfare facilities, such as the students' dining hall, clubhouse, co-op store, health unit and loan office.

Another very important students' responsibility, connected with the admission of new students, should not go unmentioned. To screen the great number of applicants — often five times as many as can be accommodated — three-member admission committees have been set up in all university departments. Each committee consists of one professor, one student and one representative of the public. The work of the committees is not easy, for in one brief 15-minute interview it is necessary to ascertain the candidate's academic qualifications, his personality and his political history.

In the case of applicants from the Soviet Zone, where the whole educational system has been revamped and where academic documents can hardly be considered reliable, such evaluation is particularly difficult. There is always the danger that among a host of bona fide refugees, Communist spies try to infiltrate the student body.

The most pressing problem of the Free University continues to be the lack of physical facilities. However, the Free University plans not only to build up its physical plant. It recognizes at the same time that it must use its youth to full advantage and institute progressive academic changes which will distinguish it from the tradition-bound universities of western Germany. A special curriculum committee is at work to draw up an academic program designed to overcome the isolation of the individual university departments and the excessive specialization which threatens to transform university education into mere vocational or professional training. Among other things, it is planned to introduce more general education courses and study groups which will transcend the limits of the individual disciplines.

What impressed the representatives of the Ford Foundation who recently visited the Berlin institution to which they presented a grant of DM 5,502,125 ($1,309,500), was the fighting spirit which inspired the students and teachers of this youngest university of the world. It is the same militant spirit which inspired Berliners in 1948-49 to defy the Soviet-imposed blockade. The student leaders of the Free University are imbued with a sense of mission. They are constantly on the alert against the danger of totalitarian aggression and infiltration, and do their utmost to enlighten their West German colleagues about the meaning of this.

The Free University students are equally alert to the danger of a revival of rightist reaction. While, for example, nationalistic student corporations have reappeared everywhere in western Germany, with all their old-fashioned trappings, including dueling, the students of the Free University not only have persistently prevented their re-emergence in Berlin, but are constantly combating their baleful influence in western Germany. Similarly, they have successfully warded off any attempts to organize reactionary political groups at the Free University, such as the Deutsche Partei (DP) or the Sozialistische Reichspartei (SRP) of General Remer.

Chemistry Building (left), partially destroyed during the war, is one of several such bomb-scarred structures again in service. Below, needy students are paid subsistence ranging from DM 30 to DM 100 per month depending upon financial status. Students supervise payments.