



THE WRITERS' STATE

Constructing East German
Literature, 1945–1959

STEPHEN BROCKMANN

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to Claus and Erika Keiper

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the mid-1980s I learned a great deal and remain grateful to Professor Klaus Schuhmann, my university adviser in Leipzig, and also to the now deceased Dieter Ahner, who organized a series of fascinating field trips into the physical and cultural geography of the GDR. It was on one of those field trips that I first heard, from Dieter Ahner himself, the name Wolfgang Harich and learned about the importance of the year 1956 for East German history. In Leipzig I also had the good fortune to meet my dear friend and colleague Adam Bžoch, now Director of the Institute for World Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Professor Bžoch was then and is now an important intellectual companion for me in thinking about the cultures of Central Europe. Michael Markert, Rita Wegner, Thorsten Hinz, and Frank Linke also helped introduce me to the GDR as friends and companions, and I owe a debt of gratitude to all of them.

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Introduction: Reconstructing East German Literature

THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE EMERGENCE of East German literature from 1945–59. The focus on the 1940s and 1950s is relatively unusual, since most studies of East German literature, particularly in the English-speaking world, have addressed primarily later periods, from 1961 onward. That emphasis is understandable, since scholarship on East German literature outside of Germany did not really begin until the 1970s. It was only logical for the scholars who initiated that exploration to focus primarily on more contemporary works—especially since those works also seemed to meet Western standards of literary merit better than some of the more obviously socialist, politicized literature of the 1940s and 1950s.

When scholarship on East German literature began, therefore, many scholars, even in Germany itself, tended to emphasize literary discontinuities between the first decades of GDR literature and later decades. The emphasis on such discontinuities was, as Julia Hell has pointed out, one of the “critical orthodoxies” concerning East German literature in the 1970s and 1980s, and it continues to influence literary criticism to this day.¹ The unconventional, innovative work of authors such as Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Irmtraud Morgner, and Volker Braun in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was seen above all as a critical response to, and break with, the more obviously partisan—and frequently socialist—literature of the 1950s. It was easier to make a claim for the aesthetic value of—to take one prominent example—Wolf’s novel *Kindheitsmuster* (Patterns of Childhood, 1976), which deals in a complex way with a young woman’s coming-of-age in the Nazi period, than for Eduard Claudius’s socialist realist novel *Menschen an unserer Seite* (People on Our Side, 1951), a book that addresses the work lives of laborers in a Berlin factory.² Wolf’s novel satisfied Western literary and aesthetic criteria for modernist literature more easily.³ Similar comparative statements could be made for other pairs of authors as well.

There is much to be said for the narrative of discontinuity between the literature of the 1940s and 1950s and subsequent literature. Writers such as Wolf, Müller, Morgner, and Braun were indeed in many ways responding to the work their predecessors had created, and they also intentionally produced literature that differed from it. There are, however, two fundamental problems with a focus on discontinuity. The first,

as Hell has pointed out, is that such a focus minimizes or even ignores underlying continuities. Even though the East German writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were seeking to distinguish themselves from their predecessors of the 1940s and 1950s, they nevertheless, whether consciously or unconsciously, had more in common with them than has sometimes been supposed. Such commonalities include a basic political commitment to antifascism and socialism, a belief in the social and political efficacy of literature, the rejection of *l'art pour l'art*, an emphasis on particular themes, narratives, or characters (conversion, coming-of-age, generational conflict, the world of work, father or mother figures, and so on), and even particular stylistic or aesthetic devices or strategies. For Hell an underlying commonality prevails at the level of Freudian psychology, specifically a preoccupation in both generations with absent but powerful father figures. Other critics might find other commonalities. Whatever those commonalities may be, however, a critic who sets out to focus primarily on discontinuities is unlikely to notice them.

The second problem with the focus on discontinuity is that it tends, *prima facie*, to ignore the 1940s and 1950s. Hell refers to this problem as "the overt rejection or simple neglect of the GDR's early literature, the 'dark' (and embarrassing) age of socialist realism."⁴ When viewed from the perspective of discontinuity, the entire era before 1961 comes into view not in its own right but primarily as a foil for the subsequent period. The work of the 1940s and 1950s thereby gains interest not because of what it actually is but rather because of what it is not: the work of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Books by an East German writer such as Willi Bredel, for example, are not examined for their own sake, as works with intrinsic historical or aesthetic value; instead they become, as Hell has suggested, "unreadable."⁵ Such work thus serves primarily as a drab and therefore only vaguely understood background against which the heroic tale of the nonconformist writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s can shine even more brightly.

Even a towering figure like Anna Seghers therefore becomes, in Hell's words, a "borderline case of respectability" and comes into focus primarily because she influenced Christa Wolf or provided material for some of Heiner Müller's plays, not because what she wrote might have value in and of itself.⁶ The work of other writers of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Bredel, is now largely forgotten and unread. The existence of a largely forgotten body of work from a now long-gone country, however, should prompt critics to pose two questions. First, is there anything that might, for whatever reason, be of value in that vanished body of work? One should not simply assume that the answer will be negative. Not everything that is overlooked *deserves* to be overlooked. Second, is it possible that there is more at stake than simple "overlooking" or neglect in the relative disappearance of early East German literature? Might there be more systematic reasons for the neglect?

Bertolt Brecht, doubtless the most famous East German writer of the 1950s, belongs in a separate category. His work has not been forgotten. It is very much present. But what *has* been largely forgotten or overlooked is the extent to which Brecht indeed was an East German writer—the precursor, in fact, of many of the nonconformist GDR writers of later periods, as Stephen Parker has astutely noted.⁷ Until relatively recently, however, Brecht's continuing status as the preeminent German—or indeed world—playwright of the twentieth century seemed to depend to a large extent on separating him from his East German context. One can recall the furious reaction to John Fuegi's 1994 biography, *Brecht and Company*, a book that, for all its faults, nevertheless insisted on naming, even if inadequately, some of Brecht's East German and socialist commitments.⁸ Even Brecht's last play, *Turandot oder Der Kongreß der Weißwäscher* ('Turandot or the Whitewashers' Congress), which Brecht wrote in the late summer of 1953, after the East German workers' uprising of 17 June, has frequently been viewed outside its specific GDR context, as primarily a parable about fascism or capitalism.⁹ The tendency to ignore Brecht's embeddedness in a GDR context is paradoxical, however, because it was precisely Brecht's work with the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin that cemented his national and international reputation. Somewhat more pointedly: without the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the GDR government, there would have been no Berliner Ensemble and no postwar triumph of Brechtian theater throughout Europe and the Americas. All this was sponsored by East German socialists. And yet one wonders how many theater practitioners are aware of this—or, for that matter, of the specific East German socialist context for Brecht's successor Heiner Müller as well.

Over the course of the last few decades, in the study of both literature and film from post-1945 West Germany there has been a growing emphasis on the immediate postwar period as more complex and also more productive than had hitherto been assumed. Correspondingly, some myths about the development of postwar culture have been reexamined. In the literary sphere, the concept of a "Zero Hour" has been deconstructed, and the belief that the West German writers who called themselves Gruppe 47 were a purely oppositional literary faction untouched by commitments to pre-1945 German culture has been called into question.¹⁰ In film, the long-held notion that 1950s cinema was essentially arid, uninteresting, and unworthy of study has also been cast in doubt, and the claims of 1960s and 1970s filmmakers to a completely new start in opposition to "Papap Kino"—that is, pre-1962 cinema—have been reexamined.¹¹

In both literature and film, the fundamental narratives about one generation triumphing over the other and thus, after a long period of heroic struggle, forcing the breakthrough to a more democratic and open German culture are strikingly similar. That similarity suggests the

presence of an underlying structure in postwar (West) German culture—a structure determined by the nation's need to distance itself culturally, ethically, and psychologically from the Nazi catastrophe. This structure of distanciation has usually expressed itself in generational terms, since the post-1945 younger generation in both literature and film could be perceived by others—and could paint itself—as untouched and unblemished by Nazi crimes. Thus in literature we have Gruppe 47, and in cinema Young German Film. West German postwar culture presented itself above all as a successful generational response to the Nazi catastrophe. Germany, says one character to another in a 1988 novel from Serbia, is a good place to be young after the Second World War: there “they’ll be looking for younger people, who bear no responsibility for the defeat; the generation of fathers has lost the game there; there it’s your generation’s move.”¹² Or so, at least, the myth goes.

What about East Germany? Was it a good place to be young after 1945? Are its literature and film governed by the same structure of generational differentiation that one can observe in West German culture? To a remarkable extent they are. What Hell calls the “critical orthodoxies” of literary scholarship on East Germany constitute a narrative that is strikingly similar to the one that prevails in the historiography of West German literature and film: the triumph of a younger, more innovative generation over more politically compromised elders. This similarity suggests that the fundamental structure of postwar German cultural life was not determined exclusively by the Iron Curtain. The similarity in the narrative also implies that in spite of all the differences between east and west there were more similarities than has hitherto been acknowledged. If this is true, however, then East German culture, even in the 1940s and 1950s—when it was most obviously different from its West German counterpart—must be seen as a fundamental part of postwar German culture more generally. It should not be written off simply as “unreadable.”

Unfortunately, however, the Iron Curtain, the Cold War, and some of the basic preconceptions of literary scholarship about postwar Germany have generally prevented critics from exploring such underlying similarities. This is true in the field of history as well, where, as Andrew I. Port has persuasively argued, various versions of the theory of totalitarianism “have become the banalities of East German historiography—history as comfort food” for historians interested more “in moralistic posturing” than in actually getting closer to the truth. As Port has argued, historical examinations of East Germany have to a large extent “tended toward the provincial,” with “little effort to relate . . . findings to developments outside of East Germany or to issues of greater historical and historiographical importance.”¹³ Port’s assertions about the field of historiography also, unfortunately, apply to literary scholarship. Indeed, the investigation of postwar East German literary culture, particularly the culture of

the 1940s and 1950s—to the extent that it has occurred at all—has been based primarily on the examination of differences, not similarities. But the emphasis on differences separates East Germany from any broader context in which it might be situated. Scholars of literature and culture, like their colleagues in the field of historiography, have generally not made an attempt to relate their examinations of East Germany to other states, even West Germany, and they have, for the most part, not viewed East German film or literature as posing questions “of greater historical”—or one might add, literary—importance.

This is how one 2003 analysis of Cold War culture in Germany explains the development of postwar East and West German culture after the 1960s: “The rigid assumptions of Cold War culture in the Federal Republic, cultivated by the generation of the Nazi era, were yielding to self-scrutiny and the damning criticism of the young. But no such development was allowed in the German Democratic Republic under Walter Ulbricht, Erich Honecker, and the Stasi.”¹⁴ There are two discontinuities on display in this account. First, there is a break between “the generation of the Nazi era” and the “self-scrutiny and the damning criticism of the young.” This is the familiar heroic story of one generation’s triumph over its Nazi-encumbered predecessors. Second, and just as important, the generational break is operationalized in geographical terms determined by the Cold War narrative: the younger generation, with its “self-scrutiny and . . . damning criticism,” is located to the west of the Iron Curtain, while the stodgier, more conservative “generation of the Nazi era” is located in the east. This account also assumes, more or less as an afterthought, that the political leaders of the GDR, “Walter Ulbricht, Erich Honecker, and the Stasi,” somehow had the power to “allow” or not “allow” cultural developments such as “self-scrutiny and . . . damning criticism.” The account, in other words, is governed by the theory of totalitarianism, with no consideration given to the possibility that, as Port has pointed out, “power relations” in East Germany “were far more complex than the simple ‘state vs. society’—‘regime vs. masses’—‘rulers vs. ruled’ dichotomies have suggested.”¹⁵ It is of course quite possible that Walter Ulbricht, Erich Honecker, “and the Stasi” may have wished that they had total power to “allow” or not “allow” particular kinds of culture in the GDR, and the historical record shows that East German leaders often made great efforts to discourage writers and other artists from “self-scrutiny and . . . damning criticism.” The record also shows, however, that they consistently failed.

I cite these lines not to criticize any particular scholar—on the contrary, there is a great deal in the book from which I just quoted that I genuinely admire—but because they demonstrate clearly some of the assumptions that still underlie too many examinations of Cold War culture. These assumptions include first, the idea of an all-powerful

and unified socialist government capable of completely suppressing unwanted cultural developments at will; second, a generational narrative in which more liberal young people rebel against their more conservative elders, who are members of the Nazi generation; and third, the geographical Cold War operationalization of the generational divide, such that the cultural innovators are in the west and the proponents of conventionality are in the east. The Iron Curtain, in other words, becomes not just a geographical, political, and military divide. It is also an insuperable cultural barrier, dividing the free culture of the West from the unfree culture of the East. This, of course, is an analysis that dates back to the Cold War itself and the foundation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in West Berlin in 1950—an event that plays a significant role in this book. It is disheartening to note that such rigid dichotomies still hold sway even in much academic scholarship well over half a century later. One wonders whether rumors of the end of the Cold War have not been greatly exaggerated.

I wish to throw away the “compass” of Cold War presuppositions in this book and re-explore the territory with none of the usual assumptions. Instead, I will treat the Cold War as over, even as I examine the traces of its literary culture. Above all, I wish to let the cultural artifacts speak for themselves. I am not so naive as to believe that I can achieve complete objectivity or some sort of Rankean ideal of the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it actually was). My work is no doubt governed as much by preconceived notions and unspoken assumptions as anyone else’s. But that is precisely why I want to foreground the material itself. If I am wrong in my analysis of it, others can, and hopefully will, correct me. What I hope to show, however, is that East German Cold War culture was more nuanced, sophisticated, and interesting than is commonly supposed, and that the 1940s and 1950s, contrary to their unflattering reputation, were a time of lively debate and cultural ferment, even or especially on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. In fact this period was arguably more interesting than the better-known 1970s and 1980s, when East German culture, in many ways, came to seem more familiar to Western observers, and to be accepted as a legitimate object of study. “Back then there were still open discussions,” says no less an authority than Heiner Müller, one of the “heroic” writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, even “in the party.”¹⁶ In this book I want to take Müller at his word and look at some of those “open discussions.” One of my key contentions is that literary culture—novels, essays, short stories, poems, literary criticism, and the various organizations connected to them—was one of the primary venues for such open discussions, what the socialist writer Johannes R. Becher, who became the GDR’s first Culture Minister in 1954, called “the most highly developed organ of a nation for understanding and coming to consciousness of itself.”¹⁷ In other words, in East Germany literature was

never “just” literature. It was always also about collective identity and the path toward a better future—however imaginary or illusive that future may have been.

One might reasonably ask what harm there is in ignoring the 1940s and 1950s, especially in East Germany, a state that, at least in one historian’s estimation, was merely a footnote in history.¹⁸ In the realm of literature or art one might strengthen the question further by asking: If the GDR itself was just a historical footnote, then is not the literature or art of that bygone state akin to that scholarly absurdity, the footnote to the footnote? After all, literature and art are not “real” in the way that Politburo meetings or Erich Honecker’s 1971 assumption of the East German leadership were “real.” The fiction writings of authors like Eduard Claudius, Anna Seghers, or Bertolt Brecht were unreal artifacts that various literary intellectuals concocted in connection to a state that no longer exists. One could, of course, say the same about almost any fictional literature, including Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. But at least contemporary Russia and Italy understand themselves as existing in a historical continuity, respectively, with the states inhabited by Tolstoy and Dante. Today’s Federal Republic of Germany, by contrast, does not understand itself as existing in a historical continuity with the German Democratic Republic and, in fact, it has developed its identity to a large extent precisely in contrast to, and in rejection of, the GDR.

If one rejects the state, however, is there any justification for addressing or even remembering its literature? Moreover, can one reasonably compare Dante and Tolstoy to Brecht and Seghers? Or, more pointedly, to a second- or third-tier writer like Eduard Claudius? Historians, after all, need no justification for dealing with footnotes. Addressing the past and the “footnotes” it creates is what historians do. But art and literature are not just about the past; they are also about the present and future. And in all art, questions of aesthetic quality are inevitable. That is why Hell writes that “to work on Socialist Realism still is equivalent to having a ‘leprous nose’”: any art or literature connected to the propagation of socialism is explicitly or implicitly assumed to be of poor quality and therefore not worth studying.¹⁹

Wolfgang Emmerich, one of the foremost Western experts on East German literature, confirms this evaluation of early GDR literature. He argues that the function of such literature was “to continue writing the official socialist discourse via aesthetic means, to decorate it and make it more attractive for the people . . . to affirm it.”²⁰ Emmerich admits that it might be a worthy scholarly goal—even if only for methodological, not for substantive reasons—to reexamine such literature from a post-unification perspective, but he also notes that the results of such a hypothetical reexamination would be a foregone conclusion, since they would merely serve