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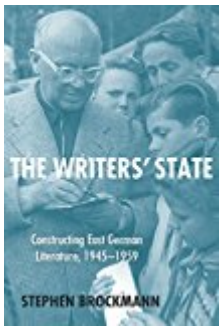
Stephen Brockmann. *The Writers' State: Constructing East German Literature, 1945-1959.* Suffolk: Camden House, 2015. 380 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57113-953-5.



Reviewed by Hunter Bivens

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Stephen Brockmann's literary history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) fills an important lacuna in scholarship on the GDR and twentieth-century German literature. As Brockmann points out, much of the study of GDR literature still follows narratives set down in the 1970s and 1980s, where the story begins with the generation of writers like Christa Wolf who came to prominence in the early to mid-1960s, while dismissing the 1950s as a period of Stalinist oppression and socialist realist kitsch. Brockmann, on the other hand, stresses that the 1950s were in fact a decisive period for the GDR. It was these first years of the Republic that saw not only the formation of institutions and structures of the literary public sphere, but also at times remarkably open literary descriptions and debates on subjects that were often taboo in the Federal Republic. ***The Writers' State*** is one of the few attempts in either German- or English-language scholarship to reconstruct this period ***in toto***, and it is distinguished through its open methodology and capacious source material. This is a book of literary history and literary criticism at once, deploying a remarkable archive of scholarly work, historical documents and periodicals, biography and memoir, and literary works, while moving seamlessly between historical reconstruction and textual interpretation. ***The Writers' State*** is also commendable in its attention to figures who, though now largely forgotten or dismissed, played central roles in the early years of East German literature. We learn here not only of Bertolt Brecht and Anna Seghers, Hans Mayer and Ernst Bloch, but of Eduard Claudius and Willi Bredel, Günther Cwojdrak and Paul Rilla, among countless others. Finally, Brockmann's book begins to connect the GDR to the cultural trends and upheavals in other socialist states at the time, notably Hungary and Poland. The suppression of the cultural legacy of the GDR distorts our understanding of Germany and Europe in the twentieth century, and ***The Writer's State*** is a major and ambitious corrective, adumbrating the East German 1950s in their complexity and conflict.

While careful to avoid the myth of the "Zero Hour," Brockmann's account begins with the Soviet military administration moving quickly to assume control of cultural life. The German population, however, was by no means passive. German communists, many of whom had spent the years of National Socialism in the USSR and were survivors not only of German fascism, but also of the political persecutions of the Soviet 1930s, found themselves faced with the difficult task of convincing "these defeated, unhappy, resentful people ... to greet defeat with joy, to think of it as liberation, to change their political opinions, and to work as hard as possible to turn a ruined Germany into a paradise" (p. 29). Culture, and particularly literature, was charged with the vital and open-ended task of the "ideological reeducation of the German people in an antifascist-democratic spirit" (p. 30). While not always consistent, Soviet policies promoted a Zhdanovist version of socialist realism, a kind of "socialist classicism" (p. 38), which appealed to the German classist heritage. This was a Popular Front policy designed to appeal to noncommunist intellectuals as well as broad masses, while rejecting both artistic modernism and the left-wing avant-garde and proletarian-revolutionary literary movements with which central figures in early East German literature, from Becher and Bredel themselves to Seghers and Brecht, had been associated. At the same time, the Cultural Association for the Democratic Renewal of Germany, or Kulturbund, founded by Johannes R. Becher in 1945 was pivotal in organizing and stimulating cultural life in these early years, and not only in the Soviet Occupation Zone, and maintained a fairly open and inclusive atmosphere. By 1948, the winds had begun to shift, as the Party castigated authors for lagging behind developments in the GDR and called for a literature lauding the heroes rebuilding a new antifascist Germany.

The Writers' State carefully explores the contradictions inherent in the Socialist Unity Party's (SED's) cultural politics. Brockmann identifies a central aporia of East German socialist realist discourse in the simultaneity of a Popular Front appeal to a German national tradition and a promulgation of Zhdanov's "two camps" line (p. 112). This led to an insistence on classical bourgeois aesthetic norms on the one hand and an insistence on working-class themes on the other. The notorious antiformalism campaign launched in March of 1953 can be read as an expression of this contradiction, as the SED demanded that art shift its focus to the thematics of social revolution while in the same breath foreclosing the possibility of aesthetic experimentation. Brockmann clearly articulates a number of other contradictory demands made on authors in the GDR in this period. First, they were asked to portray the past truthfully, but not negatively, which was no easy feat for a socialist author in a country like Germany. Secondly, cultural officials consistently criticized authors for the lack of interesting characters and rich conflicts in their work, while relentlessly excoriating works that deviated from accepted formulas. Finally, the Party's demands for positive heroes and narrow understanding of the socialist realist notion of the depiction of society in its revolutionary development threatened to disable the socially critical function of literature, even as this critique was demanded.

The late 1940s and early 1950s are often portrayed as a period of Stalinization in East German politics and cultural life, and here, as elsewhere, *The Writers' State* is a useful corrective in its careful and thorough reconstruction of the debates in the press during this period, where the aesthetics of socialist realism served both as a disciplinary discourse to mark out the bounds of the East German public sphere and to cajole and condemn writers, but also at the same time as the ground for a complex contestation of what socialist art and literature could and should be in a postfascist society. An exemplary case is the reception of Brecht's 1949 production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* in Berlin, which Brockmann describes as "the first major literary debate

in the Soviet Zone, one that had a significant impact on the nascent GDR, and helped shape the East German literary sphere" (p. 81), which prefigured decades of cultural conflicts to come by establishing a kind of orthodoxy based on a simplified reception of Soviet critics and the work of Georg Lukács as well as a Brechtian counter-position that continued to provide sporadic cover for a different understanding of socialist art in the GDR. Brockmann also devotes attention to the important debate about the lag of the East German ***Zeitroman***, or novel of present, which was a flashpoint for struggles over the relationship of socialist realism to the realities of postfascism and socialist construction as well as for the relationship between more established re-émigré authors and the younger generation. Ironically, perhaps the most successful East German ***Zeitroman***, Uwe Johnson's ***Speculations About Jakob*** (1959), could only be published in the FRG. The period around the June 17th uprising saw increasing pushback by writers, although from a socialist perspective, demanding increasing latitude for a politically committed art and working through the Academy of Art (AdK) and the newly founded Ministry of Culture. Although Brecht, Becher, and Hans Mayer were leading figures of this brief cultural thaw, many younger intellectuals--for example, Erich Loest, Günther Cwojdrak, and Wolfgang Harich--publicly condemned the rigidity of East German cultural life. It was largely these younger figures who were subject to direct state repression, as opposed to the more indirect stifling of older reform-oriented figures like Seghers and Becher, during the "ideological counter-offensive" that followed the events of Hungary 1956, which the SED eagerly seized on as an excuse to crack down on the literary intelligentsia, including many friends and supporters of Georg Lukács, who had been involved in the short-lived Nagy government. Indeed, as Brockmann points out, although the SED was able to outmaneuver these intellectuals in 1956 and 1957, "the rebellion of younger intellectuals, and of their allies in the older generation ... exerted a growing influence on GDR literature and culture in the years that followed" (p. 322).

The Writers' State ends on an ambiguous note. 1956 was the last chance for an open socialist public sphere until 1989, and marked the breaking off of the utopian aspirations of many committed communists and the failed arrival of a new generation of East German intellectuals. On the other hand, Brockmann argues, East German intellectuals and writers continued to draw on the literary and political resources of the 1950s, and eventually it was the "'soft power' of writers and critics such as Johnson, Lukács, Mayer, Bloch, Seghers, Wolf, and Janka that carried the day" as the writers outlasted their state. This begs the question of the book's title, of the larger question of the relationship between East German state power, on the one hand, and the socialist project on the other. In other words, if the literature of the 1950s is to be read as propaganda for the regional dictatorship of a particular political party, that is, the SED, then perhaps it is rightly regarded as "wastepaper," to quote Wolfgang Emmerich (quoted, p. 8), as the ephemera of a state that is itself, as Hans-Ulrich Wehler has it, a "historical footnote" (quoted, p. 7). If on the other hand, we can regard this corpus as a socialist literature concerned with recalibrating public perception of history, everyday life, and futurity within the context of a fundamental transformation of social relations, then perhaps we might endorse Johannes R. Becher's lament on the socialist tragedy, poignantly quoted by Brockmann, "which expresses itself in the fact that people who want the same thing, who have the same desires, are caught up in a contradiction so lethal that the tragic end of one, and perhaps of both, is unavoidable" (quoted, p. 252) and add to it Samuel Beckett's famous injunction: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

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