



**Hunter Bivens.** *Epic and Exile: Novels of the German Popular Front, 1933-1945.* Flash-Points Series. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-3148-4.

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## Popular Front Fiction

With his *Epic and Exile: Novels of the German Popular Front, 1933-1945*, Hunter Bivens gives us a thought-provoking and engaging book that will be of particular use for advanced graduate students and experts in the intersecting fields of German studies and socialist history. The book is theoretically dense and full of detailed analyses, which makes it a stimulating and challenging read.

As the subtitle suggests, Bivens focuses on German novels produced during the Popular Front period between 1933 and 1945. He explicitly states that he does not offer any kind of literary, cultural, or intellectual history of the period. Instead, he examines three novels and one play that were produced between 1933 and 1945. According to Bivens, what ties these four literary artifacts together is that they were written by authors committed to the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). Each had been forced into exile by the Nazi regime and typified Popular Front aesthetics, although each author typified these aesthetics in their own particular way. In addition, all four writers were to survive exile and war and, eventually, become influential cultural figures in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The three novelists discussed are Anna Seghers, Edward Claudius, and Hans Marchwitza, while the author of the stage play is none other than Bertolt Brecht. Readers of *Epic and Exile* are most likely to be familiar with Brecht and his well-known play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941). Next in line of familiarity might be Seghers and her *The Seventh Cross* (1942), arguably one

of her most famous novels. It was even turned into a successful Hollywood movie in 1944, starring Spencer Tracy. While *The Seventh Cross* and *Mother Courage* have long been available in English, Claudius's *Green Olives and Bare Mountains* (1944) and Marchwitza's *The Kumiaks* (1934) are not available in English and may be obscure even to many connoisseurs of German literature. While Bivens provides some background on the authors and their works, more systematic summaries of the plots, especially of *Green Olives* and *The Kumiaks*, would have further enhanced the readability of this intriguing study. The same benefit would apply to the inclusion of brief biographical sketches and overviews of the authors' literary oeuvres. These plot summaries, as well as the biographical sketches, might have been especially useful at the beginning of each chapter, focusing on one of the three novels and the stage play. This would have provided greater orientation and context, especially given that Bivens discusses and analyzes specific episodes and characters from those literary and theatrical works.

Bivens divides his book into six chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. In addition, there are endnotes and a name and subject index. A bibliography might have proven useful. At the very beginning of the book, one finds the customary acknowledgments, including a special thanks to the late Simone Barck and Ursula Heukenkamp, who supported Bivens's project early on. Both were prominent literary scholars in the GDR and were fortunate to be able to continue their careers after German reunification in 1990, while many other East

Germans were pushed out of academia. Bivens situates his work within a broad scholarly literature, including the work of such East German experts as Jürgen Kuczynski, Silvia Schlenstedt, Sigrid Bock, and Werner Mittenzwei. He uses some of their publications from both before and after the dissolution of the East German state and its academic institutions. This is refreshing, as most contemporary scholars simply ignore the output of their East German colleagues. It often seems that having been educated in the former GDR automatically disqualifies someone's efforts, without warranting further scrutiny. Of course, concerns about the formulaic official "Marxism-Leninism" that dominated much of East German scholarship are legitimate, but they should be an impetus to look more deeply into the specific scholarly output of relevant East German experts, rather than legitimizing wholesale and undifferentiated dismissal.

Chapter 1, titled "Epic Forms and Crisis of the Novel," probes into the nexus between aesthetic and political debates between the late 1920s and the early years of the German anti-Fascist emigration in the 1930s. The major markers of this trajectory were the establishment of the Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller or BPRS) in October 1928, the arrival of Georg Lukács in Berlin, the Kharkov Conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW) in 1931, and the official proclamation of socialist realism as the new aesthetic discourse by the 1934 First All-Union Soviet Writers' Congress. Bivens uses the insights of Detlev Peukert, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Krakauer, Georg Simmel, and many others to carve out the features of the debates regarding the KPD's evolving relationship with modern mass culture, during the eras of Third Period sectarianism and the Popular Front later on.

Engaging with particular reflections on how the crisis of meaning in capitalist society relates to the crisis of the bourgeois subject and indeed the crisis of the novel as a form of literary representation, Bivens examines Benjamin's "Experience and Poetry" (1905) and "The Storyteller" (1955), and puts them into dialogue with Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1920). Pointing to the growing disconnect between individual experiences and socio-economic as well as cultural forces, Bivens observes: "as many critics of the Weimar period insisted, the bourgeois subject was no longer adequate as a means of framing this contradiction, and the novel as a bourgeois epic seemed equally unsuited to mapping even the limited terrain of individual experience itself" (p. 33).

While Lukács defended the usefulness of the novel as a literary device for modernity, in which all unity of experience and social reality are shattered, Bivens cites the famous Communist reporter Egon Erwin Kisch as typical of those who sought an alternative in a matter-of-fact reportage style. Kisch, known as the *rasende Reporter*, was notorious for perfecting this literary style in his columns. In addition to Kisch, Bivens also uses Walter Ruttmann's famous 1927 silent film, *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and Brecht's methodology of "Epic Theater" in order to illustrate the crisis of traditional literary and aesthetic modes of expression and the quest for a new approach, based on a more detached, "objective," and documentary style. Lukács, of course, famously identified the novel, as it had evolved in the nineteenth century, as the best vehicle to capture the "transcendental homelessness" of the modern experience.[1]

Bivens highlights the importance of the BPRS in this search for a new modernist narrative technique. Having developed out of the Communist International's IURW, the BPRS was designed to provide an organizational network for Communist aesthetic discussions and works, as well as for disseminating Soviet literary and aesthetic debates among German audiences. In addition, Bivens points out, the BPRS merged two otherwise separate currents within Communist literary circles in post-World War I Germany. On the one hand, there was the realm of working-class theater groups and the so-called workers' correspondence movement, composed of blue-collar worker-writers, such as Willi Bredel and Marchwitza. The Communist daily press searched actively for new talent among genuine working-class activists and tried to encourage and help them develop into mature and skillful authors. On the other hand, there was the realm of the left-bourgeois literary intellectuals, like Seghers and Johannes R. Becher, who had been radicalized by the growing crisis of capitalism and the Weimar system.

What connected both groups, Bivens argues, is their political commitment to the KPD as the only political force capable of overcoming a predatory capitalism and building a socialist/communist alternative, and their rejection of the traditional aesthetic norms, as hopelessly antiquated and inadequate in representing the experiences of their time. Bivens draws on Helga Gallas, arguing that both the worker-writers and the radicalized middle-class intellectuals who met at the BPRS sought to replace traditional literary genres. Repelled by conventional aesthetic devices, such as the psychologizing of conflict and the individual protagonist, they looked for

new approaches that reflected socioeconomic and class-based collective experiences (see especially Gallas's classic study, *Marxistische Literaturtheorie: Kontroversen im Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller* [1971]).

Quoting the influential Communist writer and fellow BPRS member F. C. Weiskopf, who in a 1930 radio broadcast with Kurt Hirschfeld discussed the proletarian novel, Bivens summarizes three major themes that came out of this conversation. Firstly, to the members and sympathizers of the BPRS, the "traditional novel was already a genre in dissolution, at best providing a forum for the public decomposition of bourgeois ideology and for the ventilation of social frustrations that could find no political expression." Second, in contrast, the proletarian novel, expressing a far more documentary style, focuses the "collective and collective feelings." Hence, the social dimension overrides the individual realm. Finally, Weiskopf suggested that the proletarian novel must "widen the realm of language" in order to "include the language of the political movement, trade union, factory culture and working-class speech in general" (p. 41). In similar fashion, Becher, another BPRS member—like Weiskopf originally from an upper-middle-class background defined proletarian-revolutionary literature as challenging the aesthetic and ideological norms of the dominant classes, and as reframing social reality from the vantage point of the proletariat. This entails a critique of left-liberal writers and intellectuals, such as Heinrich Mann and Döblin, as well as the sensibility of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). While the members and sympathizers of the BPRS welcomed the overall anti-capitalist politics of left-liberals and the penchant for objectivity and reportage on the part of *Neue Sachlichkeit* adherents, they ultimately argued that art and literature could be neither neutral nor disinterested. Another member of the BPRS, the writer and physician Friedrich Wolf, pointed out, in his 1928 *Manifesto Art Is a Weapon*, that art and literature must not only be rooted in working-class life and struggle but also be part of those struggles, be available to the masses, and be consciously political. For the producers of proletarian novels, writing is not only an aesthetic act but also an imminently social and political one.

Chapter 2 analyzes Marchwitza's *The Kumiaks*. Given how little-known Marchwitza and his oeuvre are in the English-speaking world (or in contemporary Germany, for that matter), a more systematic introduction of Marchwitza and his novel at the beginning of the chapter might have made this otherwise very insightful segment more accessible to nonspecialists. *The Kumiaks* was orig-

inally conceptualized as a two-volume project and came out as a published novel in 1934. An earlier draft was already completed in March 1933 but had to be substantially reworked. Like many other members of the KPD, the author believed that the Nazi regime would be overthrown quickly by a working-class uprising in Germany. When it became clear that this uprising would not take place, Marchwitza addressed this absence of a Communist revolution by literary means. *The Kumiaks* explores this conundrum through the lens of a family history that chronicles the daily lives of working-class people, especially miners plagued by economic hardship and unemployment, some of whom were eventually ensnared by Nazi agitation. Bivens notes that Marchwitza sought to showcase the "structures of feeling" of the German workers' movement in light of the 1933 catastrophe, "highlighting the 'mistakes, failings, and illusionary expectations'" (p. 53).

While *The Kumiaks* focuses on the years between 1918 and 1923, Marchwitza wrote two subsequent volumes (*The Homecoming of the Kumiaks* [1952] and *The Kumiaks and Their Children* [1959]). Yet Bivens's overall emphasis on the Popular Front period precludes those two sequels from his analysis. Bivens justifies starting his four-case study of Popular Front aesthetics with Marchwitza's *The Kumiaks* by putting author and novel into a grand historical and philosophical context. *The Kumiaks* focuses "on the crisis year of 1923, which marked the turning point of the post-World War I revolutionary tide in Europe, the beginning of the Stalinization of the USSR, and the rise of fascism. Marchwitza's novel thus has its place alongside the work of Wilhelm Reich, particularly *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) and Ernst Bloch's 1935 *Heritage of These Times* as an attempt to understand recent German history in terms of the mutual determination of social and psychological structures" (p. 54). Connecting Marchwitza with Reich and Bloch, in terms of subject matter, is legitimate but should perhaps be nuanced by some additional observation regarding the differences in the aesthetic and analytical qualities between those authors. Marchwitza, while being showered with official literary honors by the East German state after the end of Nazism and World War II, did not have much of a literary reputation outside East Germany. Even the main newspaper of the Polish Communist Party, *Trybuna Ludu*, opined in its review of the Polish translation of the sequel to *The Kumiaks* that this book was far too boring for anybody to read in its entirety and that its intellectual content was truly embarrassing. Marchwitza never made a secret of his difficulties with issues of grammar, syntax,

and style. The notoriously polemic literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki may have overstated things when he argued in his essay on Marchwitza that the author of *The Kumiaks* continued to wrestle with the most elementary rules of writing into old age and kept producing books, supported by a range of secretaries and editors, “that nobody wanted to read and nobody wanted to review.”[2]

The first volume of *The Kumiaks* is arguably among Marchwitza’s strongest works, but he is clearly not on the same analytical level as Bloch or Reich. Nor is he on the same level as Brecht or Seghers. All four, of course, had the advantage of a middle- to upper-middle-class upbringing, with the commensurate educational and cultural opportunities attached, while Marchwitza came from a working-class family. He worked as a coal miner, with little formal schooling. Yet, despite Marchwitza’s indefatigable efforts to overcome his educational disadvantages and his dogged determination to make himself into a writer, he never possessed the natural talent of a Bredel, who—just like Marchwitza—came from a blue-collar background and yet produced works of higher literary quality and on similar themes that Marchwitza explored, such as the attempt to capture an entire epoch by literary means in hybrid novel form, drawing on the earlier format of the proletarian autobiography and the epic concentration and social mediations of the historical novel, as Lukács called for. Bivens astutely notes that *The Kumiaks* reflects the “aesthetic and historical debates of the German anti-Fascist emigration within its narrative structures,” and indeed the collective search of German Communists after 1933 to account for the triumph of Nazism (p. 53). His case for *The Kumiaks* as an ideologically layered and unexpectedly ambivalent book (given Marchwitza’s Stalinist leanings) is convincing. The Kumiak family members are exploited workers but are not socialist heroes of any sort. In fact, the overall absence of positive Communist characters, as well as the KPD as an institution, in the novel is interesting. The family never develops any form of proletarian class consciousness, remaining politically naïve and tragic figures who ultimately fall victim to Nazi rhetoric. Marchwitza highlights the socioeconomic conditions the family is forced to live under as “dull, stupefying,” and deadening to body and soul (p. 56). Bivens draws similarities in the depiction of this kind of pre-proletarian and subaltern “plebeian” milieu between Marchwitza’s *The Kumiaks* and Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) and Gerhard Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* (1892).

Bivens might blur the qualitative literary distinctions between Marchwitza, on the one side, and Hauptmann

and Zola, on the other, a little too much by stating that *The Kumiaks* showcased the mundane aspects of everyday proletarian life “in a manner equal to ... *The Weavers* ... or the earlier-mentioned *Germinal*” (p. 56). While it is doubtful that Bivens would consider Marchwitza truly equal to Zola and Hauptmann, not only in subject matter and methodology but also in literary-aesthetic terms, one might wish for greater clarity here. East Germany’s official literary establishment bombastically claimed that Marchwitza stood on the tradition of the most innovative and expressive German writers, including Jacob von Grimmshausen, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Gottfried Keller, but “continuing their tradition on a higher, socialist foundation.”[3] Such overblown praise could only distract from Marchwitza’s actual and very real contributions.

Bivens draws skillfully on the East German literary scholar Dieter Schlenstedt’s insight that, much like *Mother Courage* in Brecht’s play, Peter Kumiak is “not an example of a hero that learns but rather a hero from whose depiction one can learn” (p. 56). What Marchwitza wants his readers to develop is in effect a Brechtian critical distance, not an empathetic identification with the protagonists of his Kumiak family. They have not learned, just as millions of Germans from similar backgrounds had not learned, and thus made the Nazi victory possible in 1933.

Among the most engaging parts of this chapter (and by extension of the chapters on *The Seventh Cross*, *Green Olives and Bare Mountains*, and especially *Mother Courage and Her Children*) is Bivens’s use of Bloch’s concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, which he translates as non-synchronism, as well as the uneven political and economic development that made it possible for modern and premodern ideologies and modes of production to coexist in an uneasy and indeed volatile mix. To Bivens, Bloch’s notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* provided a compelling explanatory frame for the Kumiak family, and for millions of people like them, who could not really develop any kind of revolutionary class consciousness. They were still partially stuck in a premodern peasant world, despite having left their peasant home in Silesia, where Peter Kumiak was an agricultural day laborer, having moved to the coal fields of the Ruhr Valley. Bivens observes correctly: “These declining remnants of anachronistic but incomplete historical stages project the motives, desires, and needs of the past into the present, where they stand in contradiction to the logic of capital but not in productive contradiction that might lead to revolution” (p. 60).

Already in his introduction, Bivens articulates how a variety of thinkers, foremost Karl Marx and Heinrich Heine, have contributed to an understanding of a “subaltern plebeian habitus, born of social immiseration and military drill,” as something that must “not to be understood in regard to Germany’s backwardness but rather in regard to Germany’s embodiment of the combined and uneven development of capitalist modernity” (p. 20). Using the insights and analytical contributions of Marx, Heine, and Bloch regarding how these three novels and the play reflect the Popular Front aesthetic, as well as the German Communist exile experience, was a very fruitful choice on the part of Bivens. Yet it is peculiar that one particular thinker who, perhaps more than anybody else, is associated with the concept of “combined and uneven development” is strangely absent from the entire book. That person is, of course, Leon Trotsky. Bivens does, however, draw on some scholars who have identified with the Trotskyist tradition in one way or another, such as Pierre Broué and Michael Löwy.

*Epic and Exile* would have benefited from Bivens integrating insights from one of Löwy’s classic books, incidentally titled *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (1981). In this book, Löwy traces the development of this conceptual approach from Marx on, highlighting the central contributions of Trotsky. In addition, Trotsky provided what is arguably one of the earliest and most coherent Marxist analyses of fascism, as well as critiques of the Third Period sectarianism of the Stalinist parties. Given how much the Stalinist bureaucracies vilified Trotsky and his various followers, his presence (or enforced absence) did have an effect on the thought processes of intellectuals, artists, and writers, even inside the KPD, and he thus cannot be written out of any discourse of the time. Because Bivens focuses on the Popular Front aesthetic within the orbit of the KPD in exile, his book should also have acknowledged the existence of non-Stalinist and anti-Stalinist currents within the German Communist resistance to Adolf Hitler. He is keenly aware of how Stalinization destroyed the revolutionary hopes of 1917: “defeated in the USSR no less than in Germany, Italy, Austria, and Spain, the working-class organizations that entered into the Popular Front may have generated a great deal of enthusiasm but were no longer in the position to stage social revolutions” (p. 231). Dating the beginnings of Stalinism to as early as 1923 echoes

Trotsky’s iconic study of Stalinism in *The Worker’s State, Thermidor, and Bonapartism* (1935). A similar case, regarding the relevance of Trotsky, could be made vis-à-vis Bivens’s use of Alain Badiou in the opening paragraph of the introduction to *Epic and Exile*. Quoting Badiou, he looks at Nazi and Stalinist terror crashing the hopes of revolution everywhere: “in this short century, the 1930s is the switching between the epic and the tragic, the moment where the Soviet century becomes indistinguishable from the totalitarian century as the emancipatory claims of the revolution find themselves at an impasse” (p. 3).

Theodor Bergmann and Mario Kessler’s essay, “The Resistance of Small Socialist Groups against Fascism,” examines several of those anti-Stalinist Communist groups and small parties, like the KPD-Opposition of Heinrich Brandler and August Thalheimer, Left Opposition, International Socialist Fighters’ League, New Beginning, and the Socialist Workers’ Party, among others.[4] In addition, there is Marcel Bois’s comprehensive study of the entire left-wing opposition within the KPD, aptly titled *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin* (2014) (*Communists against Hitler and Stalin*). These works should at least have been cited in a bibliography. Finally, there are some very minor errors of spelling. For example, on page 62, it should read vogelfrei as opposed to Vögelfrei, and on page 280, Olaf Baale’s book title *Abbau Ost: Lügen, Vorurteile und sozialistische Schulden* has a typo. But all in all, Bivens’s *Epic and Exile* is a significant contribution to the fields of German studies, exile literature, and socialist history. While not recommended as an introductory text, as previously noted, this book will engage more advanced graduate students and experts in those fields.

#### Notes

[1]. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (1920; repr, Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 41.

[2]. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, “Die Legende vom Dichter Marchwitza,” *Die Zeit* (October 30, 1964).

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Theodor Bergmann and Mario Kessler, “The Resistance of Small Socialist Groups against Fascism,” in *On Anti-Semitism and Socialism: Selected Essays*, ed. Mario Kessler (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2005), 117-134.

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