

Ann Stamp Miller. *The Cultural Politics of the German Democratic Republic: The Voices of Wolf Biermann, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller.* Boca Raton: Brown Walker Press, 2004. xi + 225 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58112-414-9.



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Authors versus Authority: GDR Writers and the SED

Since the reunification of Germany nearly fifteen years ago, considerable attention has been given to the role of public intellectuals in the former GDR and whether their dissidence was a significant factor in the eventual downfall of the SED and the collapse of the East German socialist state. Ann Stamp Miller's work on the cultural politics of the GDR provides a survey of these authors' influence on the GDR state and culture, and of the SED's considerable influence over their literary production. Drawing from both secondary works and archival research conducted at the Federal Archives and the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin, as well as in the *Staatsbibliothek*, Miller constructs a compact history of GDR cultural policy as it pertained to literary production. Nonetheless, one wonders if more could be done to present new information and new perspectives on this line of historical inquiry. Indeed, most of the information presented in the work has been dealt with more extensively elsewhere, and Miller's book does not add much to the debate about the intellectuals' role both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The impact of these writers is further explored through a brief analysis of some

of the major works of three notable GDR authors: Wolf Biermann, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Miller's overall project assesses the political content of these works in light of these individual authors' experiences under the GDR regime. The interdisciplinary nature of the work stops there, however. Indeed, it is not Miller's intention to provide an in-depth literary analysis of any of these works, as that would go beyond the scope of this primarily historical approach to the subject. Still, Miller's book does elucidate some of the intricate connections between literary production, the personal biography of prominent GDR intellectuals, and the society of control that existed within the GDR.

Although the work is efficiently organized into nine compact chapters, most readers will likely find that there are really only two parts to the book as a whole with a short chapter to conclude the volume. The first four chapters of the book set the stage and provide the author's goals and the necessary background information regarding the GDR state. Following that, the remaining chap-

ters of the book focus on the authors themselves, including their works and biographies seen through the light of the oppressive regime. All of the chapters, however, are relatively short and quite focused on conveying pertinent information in a quick and concise manner.

In the first chapter, Miller lays out the scope of her project, a primarily historical investigation into the problems facing writers in the GDR. At its heart is the question of whether creativity was possible given the strict GDR regime. The dilemma facing GDR authors, however, does not stop with censors. Indeed, as the title of the chapter, "Utopia or Tyranny?" suggests, many of the problems were also self-imposed, stemming from the authors' commitment to socialism. The authors therefore also had to negotiate their own vision of utopia and how this vision fit into the GDR's grand narrative. Indeed, from the very outset, Miller mentions not only Wolf and Miller's run-ins with the Stasi and the Biermann-*Ausbrgerung*, but also the authors' ideals and desires to create a more human socialist state, all of which demonstrate that even among "dissident" writers, resistance fluctuated. One metaphor in particular that forms a central trope Miller uses to describe the authors' relationship to both the East German state and the West, is that of schizophrenia. Miller refers to this schizophrenia as a side-effect of having taken a "Murti-Bing" pill, referencing Czeslaw Milosz's book, *The Captive Mind*. According to Miller, taking the "Murti-Bing" pill induces a state of passivity, yet "a person could never fully rid himself of his former personality and so schizophrenic characteristics surfaced. The Murti Bing metaphor precisely describes the situation for many of the intelligentsia in East Germany (p. 7).

In the second, third, and fourth chapters, Miller describes the setting in which GDR authors operated. Miller confines her concise history of the GDR to the Ulbricht era and ends the discussion at a point just after the Prague Spring in order to demonstrate how a system of control was constructed from the ground up. Miller intends to show that from the beginning, the GDR state's focus was repressive. Still, Miller's purpose here is to show that the authors' early ties to the GDR state came about as a result of anti-fascism and of the desire to build a socialist state. The following chapter, on the purpose of literature in the GDR and the guidelines that demonstrated the state's control over literary production, takes a broader historical approach. Miller's intent is to trace the function of socialist realist literature from the founding of the Ministerium fr Kultur through the Bitterfelder Konferenz and into the Honecker era of "no taboos"–

a slogan Miller shows was not always fulfilled in reality. The historical background is concluded in the fourth chapter entitled "Mass Organizations," although "institutions" might have been a more appropriate description. In this chapter, Miller describes various social institutions and government offices that made up the landscape of GDR cultural policy. This chapter is valuable for showing where institutions fit in the grand scheme. Miller briefly discusses the role of agencies such as the Kulturbund, the Akademie der Knste, the Ministerium fr Kultur, and even the Bro fuer Urheberrechte.

Remaining chapters of the book explore the writers' roles and, more importantly, their motivations for resisting the GDR state. Chapter 5, entitled simply "The Writers," provides a general background applicable to individual authors discussed in the later chapters, focusing on the differences in the ideology of socialism as espoused by the authors and by the SED. After the war, the authors were drawn to the GDR as part of their anti-fascist philosophy, but also because they saw a chance to create a humane socialist state. Each of the next three chapters discusses the work and philosophy of the three authors of the title. Miller begins with Wolf Biermann, a GDR citizen by choice whose commitment to the GDR was very much in line with the state. He remained a committed socialist even as his writings became more critical, a point proven by reference to a few of Biermann's songs. Nonetheless, the most important point in the chapter, and perhaps in the book as a whole, is Biermann's expatriation, arguably the greatest failure in the history of GDR culture as it pitted authors against the state, causing rifts within the literary community. Christa Wolf receives similar treatment in the next chapter, as Miller portrays her as the picture of a humane socialist. As with Biermann, personal biography figures into Wolf's literary production and Miller specifically mentions two works that inspired particular controversy. Miller begins with the description of Wolf's novel, *Nachdenken ueber Christa T.*, censored for its critical content, as an example of a critical work that found an audience in the West, but also demonstrated Wolf's ideal of subjective writing. Miller continues by describing the situation of another important novel in Wolf's career, *Was bleibt*. Miller takes the time to name the individual critics of this work which appeared only in 1989 despite being written earlier. She provides examples of the harshness of their criticism of Wolf, demonstrating that of the former GDR authors, Christa Wolf fared the worst. Miller paints the picture of a writer destroyed, stating that "Christa Wolf emerged from the *Wende* as a broken and pitiful figure" (p. 125).

The final author Miller discusses is Heiner Müller, an author “essentially discovered by the West” (p. 3). Though some may see this as an overstatement, Miller explains that much of his work met with disapproval from the Ministerium für Kultur. Personal biography and personal politics play a role in Müller’s decision to remain in the GDR, just as in the cases of Wolf and Biermann. It is interesting, however, that there is no mention of *Mauser*, one of Müller’s most important works, in Miller’s review, although Miller is understandably more interested in presenting works that met with controversy. As for the censorship that Müller faced, particularly in terms of the works that Miller presents, such as *Die Umsiedlerin*, it becomes clear that the GDR wished to retain Müller for his international acclaim, although the SED could easily have done without his work, most of which was declared indecent, obscene, and pornographic by the regime. Like Wolf, Müller’s work shifts towards using more classic material in works like *Philoktet*, in part because this material was deemed more acceptable by cultural authorities in the GDR, even as Müller couched his critique of the state in the speeches made by his classic characters. Following the collapse of the GDR, Müller met with a criticism similar to Christa Wolf, yet he seems to have fared much better.

In her final chapter, Miller attempts to answer the question of whether the works of these authors contributed to the downfall of the GDR. In essence, the authors appear to have been out of touch with political reality, per Miller, but nonetheless they should not be judged too harshly. In this, Miller contributes her voice to the statements in defense of GDR authors by Günter Grass and the late Susan Zantrop. Miller’s volume is, ultimately, of mixed use. Individual sections of the book, particularly the chapter on mass organizations, are compact and allow easy reference to institutions in the GDR. Indeed, the book as a whole is quite readable, despite some unelaborated points and a number of distracting typographical errors. Those with little familiarity with the GDR and its culture will find the book a good introduction, but scholars will note that little new information is presented and that Miller’s volume lacks a theoretical sophistication that one finds in works such as David Bathrick’s *The Powers of Speech* (1995), an important work that Miller does not cite. Nonetheless, Miller’s volume is suited towards a lay audience and may be particularly welcomed by students in a survey course of modern German culture, as the subject matter leads to many topics worthy of further consideration and discussion.

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