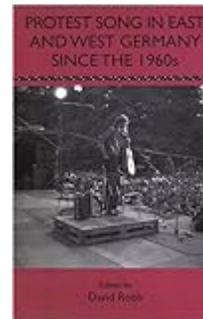




**David Robb, ed.** *Protest Song in East and West Germany since the 1960s*. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. vii + 320 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-281-9.



**Reviewed by** Michael L. Hughes (Wake Forest University)

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### Lift Every Voice and Sing

David Robb and his co-authors seek to clarify the nature of protest song in Germany since the 1950s, its increasing and then diminishing popularity, and its broader historical influence. Robb and Eckard Holler were participants in the East and West German song movements, respectively, and their co-authors Annette Blöhdorn and Peter Thompson are academics.

A major theme for Robb is “the creative appropriation of revolutionary song heritage” (p. 6) by German protest singers, so he begins with the songs of the 1848 era and political songs by Erich Mühsam, Hanns Eisler, and Bertolt Brecht. The failure of the Revolutions of 1848 provoked a move from songs of utopian hopes to songs of dashed expectations, a move Robb sees repeated in the FRG after 1968 and in the GDR after the 1960s, when utopian hopes proved unattainable. He also notes a long history of debates about the appropriate focus for these songs: musicians, critics, and listeners disagreed, often vehemently, as to whether musical sophistication or propagandistic effectiveness was more important, and indeed whether they were compatible. He also notes the early use of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, partic-

ularly in Brecht (for example, “Legenden des toten Soldaten”), which would also prove popular during and after the 1960s, especially in the GDR. Moreover, he explores the ways Hanns Eisler used musical effects to provoke the kind of alienation effects that Brecht sought. He repeats at several moments in the book this attempt to analyze the political content and effectiveness not only of lyrics but of the music as well.

Eckard Holler presents the important Burg Waldeck festivals as contested from the start, as tensions flared between those who emphasized folk music and those who favored political songs. Early on, some participants argued that the festival should emphasize the chanson, which they defined as a solo song that could not be sung by a chorus and was hence democratic, in contrast to the Nazis’ collective singing. By the fourth festival in 1967, calls among student activists for politically engaged songs and demands that performers answer four questions about the quality, content, and effectiveness of such songs led to criticism by some performers that the event was becoming unduly or inappropriately politicized. A group of politicized students sought to take control of

the 1968 festival, which took place shortly after the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke and during the May Days in Paris. Holler himself helped draft and read from the stage a manifesto asserting that, with revolution imminent, only political songs were permissible and demanding that the big performances be replaced by teach-ins. Holler acknowledges having been criticized for this intervention, even by friends, then and since. Some singers cooperated with these demands, though it is not clear how successful the activists were in controlling the program, especially as the biggest performances (by three visiting American protest-song stars) went on.

Holler's discussion of political song in the FRG in the 1970s and 1980s often has the quality of a list of performers and songs, which can be a problem in some of the other chapters. His discussion of his own experience as an organizer of festivals in Tübingen, through his role in the leadership of Club Voltaire, illuminates the organizational and financial pressures that plagued the protest-song movement. He believes that the song movement played a conciliatory role among the fractured leftist groups and was a democratizing force, but he does not detail political disagreements that the movement is seen as surmounting. He discusses some of the tensions between the leftist song movement and the state's establishment and eventual acceptance and financing of the festivals, but he does not fully analyze these developments.

Blahdorn and Thompson offer chapters on Konstantin Wecker and Wolf Biermann respectively. Blahdorn focuses on Wecker's personal views, describing him as an anarchist committed to individual self-determination who is suspicious of cold reason. She also offers three definitions of political song, an attempt the others avoid. Thompson emphasizes Biermann's search for a *Heimat* (in Ernst Bloch's sense of a realm of freedom), his commitment to dialectic and change (which got him into trouble with the SED), and his eventual rejection of utopianism as inherently totalitarian.

Robb's discussion of the "cat-and-mouse game with censorship" (p. 227) in the GDR is thoughtful and illuminating. He rejects the "undialectical image" (p. 227) of the song scene as consisting of either dissidents or sell-outs. Rather, he argues, many singers sought to find a middle path, where they incorporated subtle but often sharp critiques of the SED and the GDR while avoiding confrontation or performance bans. He focuses on the methods of groups such as Karls Enkel, who either revived songs of the 1848ers as implicit critiques of GDR circumstances or used performance techniques (such as clown personae or facial expressions) to subvert appar-

ently pro-system or anodyne lyrics.

Robb closes with a chapter on the political song's 1990s decline and the appearance of politically critical forms of techno. Unification eliminated the traditional bases for political song in the former GDR and undercut the self-confidence of singers in the former West Germany. Decreasing interest in folk music further eroded the audience for political songs. Meanwhile, the rise of techno, which seldom had lyrics, filled the musical space with a style based on "apolitical hedonism" (p. 266) that seemed to lack a necessary prerequisite for political critique. He argues, though, that some techno performers rejected Love Parade-style commercialization of the genre and the aesthetic fascism of its harmony. They self-consciously used dissonances to counter mass conformity and saw sampling as emancipatory and parallel to 1920s German visions of montage.

Robb includes in his final chapter a brief section on cultural theory. He also refers periodically to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Other contributors make occasional references to theoretical issues as well. Neither the book nor the individual chapters, though, include any systematic use of theory. The absence of a thorough discussion of just what constitutes a political or protest song is a particular weakness. Robb would have done well to locate his discussion of various forms of resistance in the GDR song movement within the substantial literature that has come out over the last decade and a half discussing the limits of the government's and party's power in the GDR and the nature and implications of East Germans' retreats into niches.

The authors make reference to the broader impact of the song movement, but seldom. Drawing any concrete conclusions about such impacts would of course be difficult. Nonetheless, the failure to attempt some systematic assessment leaves the impression that the book is about ultimately uninfluential niches within the societies.

All the quotations in the text, including song lyrics, are in German, which is useful for German speakers but problematic for other readers. Some song lyrics are in various dialects, rather than in High German.

This book offers a valuable entry into the world of German protest song. The scholarly authors among the contributors could have situated their discussions more thoroughly, theoretically and historiographically. Nonetheless, its authors bring a range of illuminating perspectives to their subject.

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