



Dieter Schiller. *Der verweigerte Dialog: Zum Verhältnis von Parteiführung der SED und Schriftstellern im Krisenjahr 1956.* Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin, 2001. 270 S. EUR 14.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-320-02022-4.



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Cultural and political events in the GDR have fascinated literary scholars and historians alike. In the forty-year history of the GDR, the expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976 serves as one of the most prominent examples of the ways in which the GDR's totalitarian regime manipulated the cultural elite's access to the public sphere. Because this singular event occurred at a time when GDR writers and literature were gaining legitimacy (particularly in the United States), it is no surprise that this incident and its aftermath have garnered considerable attention in the ensuing years. In the fifteen years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, scholars have gained access to a variety of sources ranging from the official SED party documents, through records held by the Writers' Union, Academy of Arts and the Stasi that have proven useful to an understanding of the SED's handling of and relationship to writers in the GDR.[1] Our efforts to understand events such as the Biermann affair have taught us to process the broader cultural-political contexts, of which such reactions are a natural outgrowth. Interpretations of critical periods such as 1965 and 1956 therefore are essential for conceptualizing the very real power struggles between the party and the cultural elite that dominated GDR history.[2] Dieter Schiller's study of the alternating periods of repression and thaw during 1956 and 1957 fits precisely into just such a framework.

The biography of Dieter Schiller, who was born in 1933, ideally is suited to his interest in the pivotal cultural-political events in the late 1950s, for they correspond to his own political coming of age. Setting out to investigate the significance of the *Kulturkonferenz der SED* from October 1957, Schiller's research reveals that this singular event cannot be interpreted in isolation, but rather has to be placed into the larger context of the aftermath of the XX. Party Congress of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. For most of the Communist East, the year 1956 represented a defining moment for the further entrenchment of socialism. Whereas many had hoped the revelations of Stalin's atrocities would lead to a relaxation and further democratization of the East Bloc, the GDR chose to take this opportunity to tighten control even further. In the intellectual community, a tug of war between writers and Party officials, regarding the appropriate means to come to terms with the Soviet revelations, erupted. Schiller concludes that the Party's staunch stance, which Ulbricht in particular maintained, is an indication of its unwillingness to enter into dialogue with the cultural elite.

To reach this conclusion, Schiller analyzes ten specific discussions, beginning with the public controversy between Walter Ulbricht and Stefan Heym at the Writers' Congress in 1956. In April of that year, Willi Bredel

proposed to the *Vorstand* that the Writers' Union members could not resolve ideological problems within their own closed circle, but instead should seek a dialogue with leading politicians and scholars. Because the revelations about Stalin took place in February, however, this was the dominant topic of conversation. The preoccupation of many members of the Writers' Union with prospects for liberalization and democratization was greeted with apprehension among high-ranking party officials. Hans Mayer's plenary speech at the *Arbeitstagung des Ministeriums für Kultur* (May 31 to June 8, 1956) aroused suspicions even further, and the tensions between the political leaders and cultural circles worsened by the time the *Kongress junger Künstler* took place at the end of June.

It was also during this period that the Party sought to stifle outspoken critics. Schiller suggests the arrests of Wolfgang Harich and Walter Janka fueled the paranoia of the Party elite, resulting in their targeting individuals who participated in the *Donnerstagkreis*, a group that met in the restaurant of the *Club der Kulturschaffenden*, to ponder the future possibility of a socialist renewal. Viewed by political authorities as an East German manifestation of the Budapest *Petöfi-Klub*, this group aroused considerable suspicion. Following the show trials of Harich and Janka, authorities tightened the stranglehold on writers, resulting even in Johannes R. Becher stepping aside as Cultural Minister. By the time of the *Kulturkonferenz* in October 1957, Ulbricht and his leaders had succeeded in establishing socialist realism as *the* aesthetic norm.

In addition to his thorough analysis, Schiller appends excerpts from relevant documents to his study, allowing for more intense scrutiny of a number of important points. His cogently argued presentation is an asset to the growing body of scholarship on the relationship between the cultural elite and the ruling authorities. By clearly delineating the intricacies of cultural negotiation at this time period in GDR cultural history, Schiller lays the groundwork for more nuanced interpretations of cultural policy in the ensuing years, particularly such events as the VI. SED Party Congress in January 1963 where Ulbricht took measures to again tighten controls on writers.

Notes

[1]. A sampling of secondary texts should include: Dietmar Keller und Matthias Kirchner, eds., *Biermann und kein Ende. Eine Dokumentation zur DDR-Kulturpolitik* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991); Roland Berbig, Arne Born, and Jörg Judersleben, eds., *In Sachen Biermann. Protokolle, Berichte und Briefe zu den Folgen einer Ausbürgerung* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1994); and Joachim Walther, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur. Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1996).

[2]. For documentation of the 11th Plenum in 1965 see Günter Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000).

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