The Margins of Dictatorship Assent and Dissent in the Work of Guenter Eich and Bertolt Brecht

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von

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Introduction


The discovery in 1993 in a former monastery near Prague of a recording of Günter Eich’s 1940 radio play, Rebellion in der Goldstadt, provoked a predictably intense exchange of views amongst Eich scholars and beyond.\footnote{For contributions to the debate, see Axel Vieregg (ed.), Unsere Sünden sind Maulwürfe: Die Günter-Eich-Debatte (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 109–54.} For some, the discovery of this work, long thought lost, offered an unexpected opportunity to absolve Eich of his involvement in the Nazi propaganda machinery. For others, the discovery only served to confirm the full extent of Eich’s overtly pro-Nazi, racist writing in the Third Reich. As the latest rounds in the long-running Eich-Debatte, neither the treatment of this particular work as a source of some fundamental moral truth about Eich’s guilt or innocence, nor the often vitriolic polemics against an essay published in the same year which dealt with Eich’s writing career under National Socialism could be considered entirely surprising.\footnote{See Axel Vieregg, Der eigenen Fehlbarkeit begegnet: Günter Eichs Realitäten 1933–1945 (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 1993).} Indeed, the fact that much of what opponents found so objection-
able in that essay had already been known for over ten years, and even the admission from one of its harshest critics that he had neglected to read the essay concerned, provokes little more than a sense of weary inevitability. More profoundly disturbing are attempts by that same critic to equate those revealing the true extent of Eich’s literary output under National Socialism with those responsible for the atrocities of the Third Reich.\(^4\) And yet, such are the entrenched binarisms of debates concerning writing within the Third Reich – perpetrator or victim; collaboration or resistance; condemnation or absolution – that it is no longer easy to be shocked even by this kind of fruitless vitriol. Such polarised debates, where equivocation and a measured response have no place, are only too strikingly reminiscent of the immediate post-Wende treatment of a generation of East German writers who, having previously been held up as examples of heroic dissidence, now found themselves condemned as Mitläufer for their continued participation in the public sphere of the GDR.\(^5\) Another writer to be the object of such treatment is Bertolt Brecht, the complexities of his relationship to the SED regime, characterised by both complicity and dissidence, all too often being subsumed under polarised and often politicised judgements. In Manfred Jäger’s words: ‘Je nach der politischen Position des Chronisten wird jeweils eine Seite absolut gesetzt.’\(^6\)

The echoes in the *Eich-Debatte* of the controversies surrounding GDR writers raise a number of methodological questions, not only about approaches to writing which was officially sanctioned in either the Third Reich or the GDR, but also about the comparability of literary output within these two twentieth-century German dictator-

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ships. In both respects, the recent social historiography of the Third Reich and the GDR provides a wealth of theoretical approaches which start to move beyond such polarised positions, but which have yet to be applied systematically to the sphere of literary production. In particular, the historiography of the Third Reich over the last thirty years and that of the GDR since 1990 have developed increasingly sophisticated analyses of the power structures of the German dictatorships and the roles of individuals at an everyday level within them. Within these analyses, fixed binary categories have been substantially eroded, so that the focus has shifted away from concepts of monolithic total control and towards the more fragmentary reality of life under the conditions of dictatorship. Nowhere has this tendency been more apparent than in attempts to reconfigure notions of ‘resistance’, where more nuanced typologies of behaviour have superseded the kind of moralising categorisations, both approving and condemnatory, which have been applied to writers publishing within the dictatorships. These approaches to non-conformist behaviour have also provided some of the most fertile ground for comparative approaches to the German dictatorships, and this comparative perspective is one which has itself proved increasingly viable in the last ten years. Both in terms of comparisons between the Hitler and Stalin regimes and between the Third Reich and the GDR, the comparative method has generated a number of highly productive analyses in diverse areas.


8 See, for instance, Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds), Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); Wolfgang Emmerich and Carl Wege (eds), Der Technikdiskurs in der Hitler-Stalin-Ara (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Jürgen Kocka (ed.), Historische DDR-Forschung: Aufsätze und Studien
This study takes as its starting-point these apparently contradictory tendencies — on the one hand the persistence of unreflected, moralising approaches to writing in the Third Reich and the GDR, on the other the consistent move away from such analyses in the social historiography of the two periods. In particular, it seeks to identify an approach which is better able to cope with writing which, while not unequivocally supportive of the regime, was nonetheless officially sanctioned through its publication, cultural output which occupied the margins of dictatorship, as it were. Such output occupies a profoundly ambiguous position in relation to the regime concerned and, as such, invites the kind of polarised and contradictory interpretations outlined above. Through the approach developed in this study, it is hoped to facilitate a more objective and measured assessment of the relationship between writers and their texts and the regimes of the Third Reich and the GDR, above all in terms of the assent or dissent which was expressed through these texts. To this end, an explicitly comparative method will be employed, understood in the terms outlined by Haupt and Kocka above. This method seeks not to elide differences between writing under National Socialism and the GDR, but rather to locate initial points of contact against which can be set the substantial contrasts which existed between the conditions of literary practice under the two regimes. It is in the first half of the study that this theoretical and methodological framework for analysing literary production within the German dictatorships will be elaborated. This framework will be constructed around three central terms — ‘totalitarianism’, ‘ideology’, and ‘resistance’ — which will act as headings and as broad analytical categories for the first three chapters of the study. As objects of lengthy and involved historiographical debate, these terms are ideally suited to act as crystallisation points for a comparative analysis of the two dictatorships which stretches from the broader socio-political sphere, down to the cultural-political domain, and on to cultural production itself.

(Berlin: Akademie, 1993); Ludger Kühnhardt, Gerd Leutenecker, Martin Rupps (eds), Die doppelte Diktaturerfahrung: Drittes Reich und DDR — ein historisch-politikwissenschaftlicher Vergleich (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1996).
In the second part, the work of Günter Eich under National Socialism and Bertolt Brecht within the GDR will act as case studies in an empirical analysis conducted within the framework elaborated in part one.

In chapter one, analysis will centre on one of the most problematic of comparative categories, namely ‘totalitarianism’, under which the regimes of the Third Reich and the GDR have often been pushed into a relatively superficial equivalence. While acknowledging important organisational and aesthetic similarities and highlighting the central point of contact between the two regimes, that is, the ‘total claim’ made on society, the fundamentally divergent structures and dynamics which influenced cultural politics and cultural practice within the two societies will be explored. The notion of ‘totalitarianism’ will neither be accepted in an unreflected manner, nor rejected out of hand. Instead it is hoped to employ the term as a tool to describe and explain both convergent and divergent elements in the organisation and dynamics of cultural policy in the Third Reich and the GDR. In chapter two, this comparative method is reversed, insofar as ‘ideology’ is a heading under which National Socialism and the SED are conventionally pushed apart, or even deemed non-comparable. The aim in this chapter will be to make progress towards a comparative paradigm of ideology, stressing convergent structural elements in the official ideologies on behalf of which the total claim was made. This in turn will facilitate a comparative, or contrastive, analysis highlighting the divergent elements in the two ideologies. This process will help to construct a more differentiated model of ideology capable of configuring the notions of literary assent and dissent which will emerge from the discussion in chapter three surrounding the problematic concept of ‘resistance’. This term too has acted as a significant site for contested interpretations of the Third Reich, and the shift in the historiography of the Third Reich away from *Widerstand* towards *Resistenz*, that is away from fundamental acts of resistance and towards more everyday obstructions of the total claim of the regime, opens up the analysis of precisely that literary output whose oppositional function is ambiguous or partial.
in nature. The common total claim of the Nazi and SED regimes, elaborated in chapter one, also generates comparable patterns of politicised dissenting behaviour in the two dictatorships, so that a comparative method is particularly applicable in this area. Hence, by synthesising existing attempts to classify this range of non-conformist behaviour, by establishing criteria to measure both the effect and intention of an action, and by constructing a mirror scale of assenting behaviour, it will be possible to arrive at a novel and methodologically rewarding means of conceptualising the nature of literary output in the two German dictatorships.

Part two of the study moves away from these theoretical and methodological considerations, seeking to test out the framework developed in part one through two detailed case studies. In chapter four, forms of literary assent and dissent under National Socialism are given concrete form in the writing of Günter Eich. The methodology of this study generates a measured and objective consideration of that output, free of the exaggerated judgements characteristic of the controversies outlined above. In this respect, the aim is not to defend Eich’s reputation, nor to expose the extent of his involvement in the cultural policies of the Third Reich. Both have already been attempted at length. Instead, the careful examination of both textual and contextual evidence within the framework of assent and dissent will offer a fresh insight into the nature of Eich’s output in the Third Reich and his relationship to the National Socialist regime. What were the relative levels of assent and dissent expressed by Eich through the texts written in this period? What were the mechanisms by which that assent and dissent were expressed and what was the motivational background behind it? Likewise in chapter five, the same questions will be posed of Bertolt Brecht’s cultural activities in the GDR. Even more so than with Eich, making an assessment of the relative weighting of Brecht’s assent and dissent in the GDR requires the careful sifting of a vast array of primary and secondary material. In this sense, the primary value of the analysis lies not in the presentation of unknown sources, but in its capacity to examine existing, well-documented material from a novel perspective.
The outcomes of this empirical study are twofold. Firstly, fresh light will be shed on the cultural output of Günter Eich under National Socialism and that of Bertolt Brecht in the GDR in and of themselves. Making an assessment of the assenting and/or dissenting function of a text will involve a judgement as to both the effect of that text and, as far as possible, the intention behind it. In this respect, the analysis will go to the heart of issues relating to both the reception of the texts produced by Eich and Brecht during these two periods and the motivating factors, aesthetic or political, personal or professional, which influenced their production in the first place. Secondly, the specific examples of Günter Eich and Bertolt Brecht start to be of a more generalised applicability, both specifically in terms of writing within the Third Reich and within the GDR, and comparatively in terms of writing under the conditions of dictatorship. Here again, the comparative method will search for both convergent and divergent strands, considering how far the nature of the assent and dissent expressed by Brecht and Eich was a product of their individual circumstances, how far it was shaped by the particular structures and dynamics of the Third Reich and GDR respectively, and how far by the common experience of dictatorship. Perhaps paradoxically given the overt socio-political approach of the first part of the study, at least as important as identifying parallels in the nature of literary production tied to the political conditions of the twentieth-century German dictatorships will be uncovering those determining factors in the output of these writers which have validity outside dictatorship. Eich’s writing under National Socialism and Brecht’s within the GDR were clearly not solely products of the conditions of dictatorship within which the two writers found themselves. This cultural output was also a product of individual continuities in professional, aesthetic, and political development which extend beyond the margins of dictatorship which restrict so many existing approaches. While Eich experienced dictatorship as a young, virtually unknown writer, Brecht returned to the Soviet occupied zone as one of the best known and most respected writers of his time. Hence, the common conditions of dictatorship, such as they exist, do not play
the sole, or even necessarily the most significant, determining role in shaping the literary production of these two figures. Too many fundamental differences exist in terms of both the individual regimes and individual writers concerned. Where the shared conditions of dictatorship may adopt a far more telling role is in their capacity to shape critical reactions to these texts, both at the time when they were written and thereafter. This study seeks to make a claim for the comparability of the writing experiences of Günter Eich under National Socialism and Bertolt Brecht in the GDR. It does not aim to make a case for equivalence or identity.