

1995

Joachim Lucchesi, ed.: Das Verhör in der Oper. Die Debatte um die Aufführung "Das Verhör des Lukullus" von Bertolt Brecht und Paul Dessau

Ian Wallace
University of Bath

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Wallace, Ian (1995) "Joachim Lucchesi, ed.: Das Verhör in der Oper. Die Debatte um die Aufführung "Das Verhör des Lukullus" von Bertolt Brecht und Paul Dessau," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v22i2.1184>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in GDR Bulletin by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

dargestellt. Im 2. Teil ("Sarmatischer Divan") wird das lyrische Werk des Dichters vorgeführt und seine Beziehungen zu anderen Künstlern und Schriftstellern dargelegt. Der 3. Teil ("Meine Leute") ist dem Biographischen gewidmet; er geht auch auf die berufliche Sphäre sowie auf Freunde und Besucher ein. Der 4. Teil ("Erzählen") schließlich gilt dem Erzähler Bobrowski, seiner "sinnlich-gestischen, sich mündlich gebenden Erzählweise" (637), die auf einige DDR-Autoren in hohem Maße anregend gewirkt hat. Im "Nachspiel" wird das Fortwirken Bobrowskis dokumentiert und besonders auf die Kunstwerke von Gerhard Altenbourg zu den Gedichten Bobrowskis verwiesen.

Dieser Marbacher Ausstellungskatalog vermag sowohl dem Kenner der Werke des ostpreußischen Dichters neue Einsichten zu vermitteln als auch dem "Neophyten" den Weg zu ihm zu ebnet. Hier werden nicht nur Materialien und Dokumente festgehalten, sondern es wird versucht, anhand von Beispielen das Werk Bobrowskis für den Leser zu erschließen und ihn zur Lektüre der Texte zu nötigen.

SIGFRID HOEFERT
Waterloo/Ontario

Linke, Dietmar. *"Streicheln bis der Maulkorb fertig ist": Die DDR-Kirche zwischen Kanzel und Konspiration.* Berlin: BasisDruck, 1993. 224 pp. ISBN 3-86163-051-6. DM 24,80.

Since the opening of borders between the two German states, events have probably come a bit too rapidly for either participants or scholars to make very much sense of them without more time for reflection. That, at any rate, must be the reasoning behind many of the books on the former GDR published recently by BasisDruck. The press is run primarily by dissidents from the GDR, who now are trying to come to understand their experiences in confrontation with the state.

These books have an appealing informality, but they can be frustrating for the reader who tries to go through them from start to finish. The best way to approach them is probably in the manner of a magazine, where one turns to one article or another according to inclination. For the scholar, they may be regarded as a sort of archive. The material is

potentially rich, but it needs sorting and interpretation.

The new collection of materials edited by Dietmar Linke on the church in the former GDR is typical. It consists primarily of interviews and informal discussions by people who participated actively in the churches and the independent peace movement. At a time when historical memory is generally very short, the book certainly does an effective job of communicating the texture of normal life for the faithful in the GDR. Perhaps the experience itself is honored more, precisely because the interpretation is minimal.

All of the political tensions are present in this book: the necessity of collaboration with the state and fear of losing autonomy; desire to trust and fear of betrayal by the Stasi; longing to emigrate and solidarity with friends in the GDR; attachment to ideals of the GDR and disenchantment with its reality. In addition, there are questions—also familiar in the West—about the role of the church in a predominantly secular society. But the book does not point to any particular conclusions. These are left almost entirely to the reader.

BORIA SAX
Mercy College

Lucchesi, Joachim, ed. *Das Verhör in der Oper. Die Debatte um die Aufführung "Das Verhör des Lukullus" von Bertolt Brecht und Paul Dessau.* Berlin: BasisDruck, 1993. 443pp. ISBN 3-86163-052-4. DM 32.

The controversy which broke out in 1951 around the opera *Das Verhör des Lukullus* represents a milestone in the history of conflict between Party and creative artists in the GDR. Joachim Lucchesi's comprehensive documentation, which embraces a wealth of previously unpublished material, sheds fresh light on what was the first major test of GDR cultural policy. The book falls into three parts, the first of which consists of chronologically arranged letters, protocols, and reports, and includes 15 pages of photographs. The second contains revealing excerpts from letters and previously unpublished diary extracts by the indomitable Arnold Zweig, who sought to mobilize resistance against "die Ausschreitungen unserer Hineinpfuscher in

Kunstangelegenheiten" (309), and the third assembles press reviews of the two 1951 productions and of the West German premiere in 1952. In addition to Lucchesi's helpful introduction and footnotes, the volume is rounded off by short biographies of some of the main participants in the affair, a list of sources, and an index of names.

The first two years of the Soviet Zone of Occupation in Germany were marked by a notably liberal approach to the arts. By January 1948, however, Zhdanov was already warning against the danger of so-called formalism in Soviet music, by which he meant a rejection of the classical heritage and of a realistic art which saw itself as serving the people in favor of an elitist art directed exclusively at a small group of aesthetes. Such formalism, he added, could also be called decadent because it derived from the modern bourgeois art of Europe and America. The threat implicit in such remarks was made worse by the vagueness of the terms in which it was couched, and this undoubtedly allowed cultural functionaries in the GDR considerable latitude and a degree of arbitrariness when, at Soviet insistence, their own formalism campaign got under way in the early 1950s.

The premiere of Orff's *Antigonae* in January 1950—described by Dessau as "für mich ein Durchbruch für ein neues fruchtbares Musiktheater" (30)—had already attracted the charge of formalism, but it was the appearance of a damning review in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, the Soviet Military Administration's own newspaper, which marked the start of the anti-formalism campaign. Signed by N. Orlow (a pseudonym frequently used to give a report the status of an official bulletin) and published on 19 November 1950, the review lambasted the Deutsche Staatsoper's production of Glinka's *Ruslan und Ludmilla* as "kunst- und volksfremd," as an imitation of what it termed "moderne amerikanisierte Barbarei," and even as anti-Russian. In unmistakable terms it called on the GDR authorities to put the Staatsoper's house in order: "Es muß Schluß gemacht werden mit der hoffnungslosen Rückständigkeit, die aus den meisten ihrer Inszenierungen spricht" (49).

These sharp skirmishes were the prelude to the outbreak of the behind-the-scenes debate which was to envelop *Das Verhör des Lukullus*. Without Brecht's determined resistance the whole affair might never have blown up, for Dessau had given in to pressure to withdraw the work before his more combative partner dug in his heels and insisted that

the rehearsals should continue until such time as an informed judgement on the opera's qualities was possible. Fearing the worst, Brecht wrote to Ulbricht directly on 12 March 1951 asking him to intervene, but on that very day the Central Committee decided that the opera was not to be allowed a public performance and that, after the following day's rehearsal, a confidential discussion should take place at the Staatsoper with all those directly involved. At that discussion, involving a select group of about 100 to 150 party members, functionaries, and representatives of the arts, the critics of the opera objected to its perceived weaknesses (its failure to appeal to the taste of working people and of the young, its lack of optimism, its failure to contribute to the preservation of peace, etc.), all of which allowed the minister responsible, Paul Wandel, to suggest that it would be wrong to promote such a divisive debate in public by allowing the premiere to go ahead.

On 17 March 1951, in what was planned as a significant set-piece speech at the 5th conference of the Central Committee of the SED, Hans Lauter, Secretary for Cultural Questions, spoke at exhaustive length on the dangers of formalism. In agreeing with Johannes R. Becher's statement that the arts in the GDR had hitherto fallen far short of the demands of the day, Lauter sought to identify reasons for this: "Die Hauptursache für die Zurückgebliebenheit liegt . . . im Vorhandensein und in der Herrschaft des Formalismus in der Kunst, was zu dem ernstesten Zurückbleiben der künstlerischen Leistungen hinter den Aufgaben des Volkes führt" (134). Moreover, formalism turned its back on the ordinary people the arts were supposed to serve. It also meant neglect of the national cultural heritage, leading to the uprooting of national culture, the destruction of national consciousness, and the promotion of cosmopolitanism.

It was against this bleak background that, on the very same day, *Das Verhör des Lukullus* was performed before a select audience. 200 tickets had been allocated to Brecht, Dessau and their supporters, but the remaining 1,100 were distributed by the authorities to "gute und bewußte Genossen und Freunde, von denen man eine gesunde Einstellung zu dieser formalistischen Musik erwarten konnte" (243). In spite of the apparent success of the performance—the conductor, Hermann Scherchen, reportedly regarded it as "ein triumphaler Erfolg" (200)—no further performances were to be permitted of the

opera, at least in its original form. Instead, Wilhelm Pieck summoned Brecht and Dessau to a meeting on 24 March 1951 with himself and other leading political figures, as a result of which the two of them agreed to produce a modified version of the opera which would then be performed in the autumn and also be made available to theaters outside of the GDR. For their part, Brecht and Dessau were prepared to compromise by revising the opera in ways which would make it easier to understand and therefore more acceptable to the Party, including changing the title from *Das Verhör des Lukullus* to the more explicit *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* as well as inserting new arias "positiven Inhalts" (206) and a clearly optimistic ending. The first public performance of the revised version took place at the Staatsoper in October 1951, quickly followed by the West German premiere in Frankfurt a.M. in January 1952. If any of the creative artists involved were tempted to regard this as anything more than a temporary victory over what Arnold Zweig had termed "den amüsichen Bürokratiens" (306), however, they were soon to be disabused. Only two years later a similarly destructive controversy was to be ignited by Hanns Eisler's opera *Johann Faustus*.

IAN WALLACE
University of Bath, England

McKnight, Phillip. *Understanding Christoph Hein.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995. xvi + 199 pp. ISBN 1-570-03015-4. \$39.95.

This monograph comprises one volume in the series *Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature* under the general editorship of James Hardin. It is a series intended as a guide for undergraduate and graduate students and non-academic readers, and it emphasizes the sociological and historical background of a specific author's work. This is an approach that is particularly appropriate for a writer like Christoph Hein because of the strong influence exerted on his writing by Walter Benjamin's work in historical materialism. As McKnight clearly demonstrates, Hein frequently follows Benjamin's principles of *Montage* and often writes about how ordinary lives are touched by larger historical events. On several occasions, McKnight talks in terms of Hein writing "social biography."

What the author is ultimately attempting to achieve is to keep the past alive for the present, for, as McKnight concludes in reference to Hein's *Horns Ende*, "to extinguish memory is to extinguish humanity."

The book begins with a chronology of Hein's life; an introductory chapter then provides the reader with more biographical information and background material on writing in the GDR. The next four chapters individually treat Hein's longer prose works: *Der Fremde Freund* (1982), *Horns Ende* (1985), *Der Tangospieler* (1989), and *Das Napoleon-Spiel* (1993). Additional chapters deal separately with the author's dramatic works, short prose, and critical essays. There are some concluding remarks, followed by a bibliography which includes selected critical works.

McKnight's analysis is clearly written and avails itself of secondary sources but not excessively.

The study gains particularly through the author's personal conversations with Hein over a period of seven summers McKnight spent in the GDR. As universal as Hein's themes may be, McKnight is especially good at providing the GDR and/or general German context which ultimately served as the point of departure for Hein's writing. Examples of this are the role of *Öffentlichkeit* or the *Neues Ökonomisches System* in the GDR, or of the *Historikerstreit* in West Germany.

A very significant strength of McKnight's study is the 45-page and thus extensive treatment of *Horns Ende*, no doubt the most thorough analysis of this novel to date. This is all the more warranted as *Horns Ende* most closely reflects Hein's views on history as briefly discussed above. What is also fascinating is McKnight's presentation of the circumstances surrounding the publication and reception of the novel. According to a letter from Hein to McKnight, *Horns Ende* was the only belletristic work ever to appear in the GDR without being officially authorized. McKnight himself played a key role in the reception of the novel in the GDR since it was his review in *Sinn und Form* (March/April 1987) which broke the East German review ban on the novel, a point certainly worth incorporating into the main body of the study's text instead of modestly relegating it to a footnote.

A further strength of the study lies in the interpretation McKnight offers of *Das Napoleon-Spiel*, an interpretation that is as lucid as it can be of