

Dissent, Conscience and The Wall

The role of Literature in bringing about the Fall of the Berlin Wall



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Historical Framework

Germany, 1945. After the Second World War, the Allies officially divided Germany into four military occupation zones at the Potsdam and Yalta Conferences: France in the South-West, Britain in the North-West, the United States in the South and the Soviet Union in the East. The British and American zones were first combined into the unofficial State of Bizonia and soon afterwards the French zone was included into Trizonia. In 1949, the two German States became internationally known as West Germany and East Germany, or respectively Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and German Democratic Republic (GDR).

1961 was a crucial, turning point for the fate of Germany: on the 13th of August, East Germany's soldiers began to build a wall to physically divide West and East Berlin, shaping the future of a country as well as the one of a multitude of families, people and lives. The *Trennung* only ended 28 years later, in 1989.

Basic assumptions

This work aims at analysing and understanding the role that literature played in bringing about the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1980s, focusing on specific themes and authors that contributed to the end of an era and to the beginning of a new life for the (re)united Germany. To define the meaning of literature is clearly crucial, since it can both be understood and thought in its *stricto sensu* or *lato sensu*. I am here going to embrace the bigger framework and spectrum of literature which includes journalism, poetry and music writing. This choice is based on two firm beliefs. In the first place, I think that literature is indeed to be thought as a variegated world of formal and informal expressions, of course bonded to the written form but also orally spread; moreover, historical circumstances, especially in the GDR, favoured the growth of an informal and unorthodox kind of literature to the detriment of conventional standards.

Literature on both Sides of the Wall

In the years that immediately followed the division of Germany, an intense ideological opposition took over in both sides and literature went along this new boundaries. Under the law of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei (SED), a socialist regime was established in East Germany while Konrad Adenauer, leader of the German Christlich-Demokratische Union (CDU), gained power in the West. The rules that applied to literature and culture in both sides of the Wall allowed the creation of a risky gap as much as freedom of expression, speech, opinion and press were concerned.

In the territories of the German Democratic Republic, the political structure of the State was based on the idea of planning and centralisation. In 1950 the SED ordained that this scheme should be extended to both culture and literature: consequently, the literary system of the GDR was never purely free and neutral as the general guidelines on cultural development were given by politicians and not by academics and authors. Arts were supposed to serve as tools to spread socialistic values and collective behaviours. Still, this role was not chosen by the authors but imposed to them by the government with the result that literature always depended on the Party which imposed its *diktat* to writers, editors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, journalists and also readers.

Writers enjoyed no freedom of expression as they had to be members of the Schriftstellerverein - the Writers Association founded by the SED government in 1950 - whose board and administrative committee were both lead by the Party's officials. Even though the PEN¹ as well as the Akademie der Künste were admitted and recognised as alternative associations, they could not be considered free nor democratic. Those who did not follow the rules of the Party and rebelled were either hushed, censored or sent to exile. The supervision enforced by the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit², was total and concerned not only the literary production but also the writers' private sphere³.

¹ Pen International (known as International PEN until 2010) is a worldwide association of writers that aims at promoting friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers. It was founded in London in 1921 and has autonomous International PEN centers in over 100 countries.

² The Ministerium für Sicherheit is better known as Stasi.

³ After the fall of the Berlin Wall some reports were discovered, revealing how Stasi did actually spy on writers and political activists.

On the other side of the Wall, West Germany certainly secured writers with an acceptable and sufficient freedom of expression. However, despite a constitutional guaranty of freedom stated as per Article 5, censorship was imposed by the Allies on various materials: the media was controlled by the occupying forces and undesired publishing attempts were unilaterally blocked. The most influential regulations limiting freedom of expression, speech and press were related to satire, defamation, incitement of popular hatred, holocaust denial and blasphemy; nevertheless some publications were blocked for being overly critical about the occupational government.

Although some acts of censorship actually occurred, the control exercised in the West was clearly not comparable to the one perpetrated by the East Germany regime. The consequences of this double standard between East and West led many Eastern authors to escape from the GDR and to seek refuge in the FRG.

The Power of Words: Narrative Dissent in East and West Germany

Almost every intellectual in East Germany struggled for freedom of expression. Even if most of them truly believed in the regime ideology and were faithful to socialism, they all agreed on the need of substantial reforms. The literature scenario was basically divided in two categories: some of the most influential authors were supportive of the socialist State separated from the “capitalist” Federal Republic of Germany; yet there was also a circle of writers that felt the desire for German unity, as evidenced by those who firmly supported the idea of the existence of a shared culture between East and West that could not be separated by boundaries nor politics.

During the uprising of 1953, prominent intellectuals such as Bertolt Brecht and Johannes Becher remained loyal even if critical to the regime because they fundamentally agreed with the anti-fascist legitimization of the GDR that, together with the fear of the capitalist model implemented by the FRG and of the scary possibility of a new German nationalism, was the main appeal to support the Eastern government even if it meant denying

freedom and human rights. Later on, Heiner Müller, Wolf Biermann and Stefan Heym were publicly denounced because they openly criticised the regime – even though they did not question it from an ideological point of view. Their critics were not limited to the political apparatus but they were extended to the economic and social issues of the GDR. These writers among others sustained the necessity of being able to confront themselves with the everyday issues in the GDR and hazarded a new, sometimes stinging, literary style⁴.

Cases of strong dissent and desire of unity grew in the late 1950s, expressed by authors such as Wolfgang Harich, Robert Havemann and Reiner Kunze as well as through the reaction among East German intellectuals to the Prague Spring. During the late 60s and the 70s, a politic of *rapprochement* with the West brought Eastern and Western authors closer, partially thanks to the relative freedom of expression in East Germany where Honecker abolished some of the taboos related to literature. However, this era of *détente* ended in 1980 because of larger geostrategic tensions. Both East and West German writers showed major support for the peace movement with tendencies to a new nationalisation of culture. Many intellectuals such as Heinrich Böll and Walter Jens marched in antinuclear demonstrations and took part in acts of civil disobedience. The peace movement encouraged a focus on the German *Kulturation* and on a role for writers that should have transcended the borders of the GDR and the FRG. In this new scenario, the 1981 and 1983 all-German writers' Conferences in East and West Berlin represented a symbol of the desire of reunification: the debate mainly focused on the theme “*Berlin encounters for the furtherance of peace*” and a strong sense of belonging together alongside with an opposition to the status quo emerged from the discussions⁵. Following the evolution of this new background and the first mass protests, film director Werner Herzog stated that “[...] it is only culture and language that really hold us together” and that in the long run only writers “can save Germany”.

Although many intellectuals sustained that literature didn't have borders, it was clear that some differences between East and West Germany existed in the way of approaching fundamental issues such as regime critic and reunification.

⁴ TORPEY J., *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995

⁵ BROCKMANN S., *Literature and German Reunification*, 1999

As far as East Germany is concerned, one of the most influential author was Reiner Kunze. Born in Oelsnitz in 1933, he studied and later taught Philosophy and Journalism in Leipzig. He begun his compulsory career in the SED but he soon left the Party after having strongly criticised the State ideology. Because of his critics, the Politbüro labelled him as “undesired person”: he was forced to quit his job and to leave University as well. Despite the persecution, Reiner Kunze continued to write against the regime and in favour of the reunification of Germany. Very few of his works were published in the GDR while most of them were sent to West Germany and released there; nonetheless his writings were read and discussed in the *Kulturopposition's* circles and in the students movements in East Germany, influencing that portion of socially and politically active citizens. His most known work, “Die Wunderbaren Jahre”, deals with the situation of young people in the GDR, strongly criticising the regime's social and economical policies.

Another author involved in political activism and committed to the cause of reunification was Helmut Flieg, better known as Stefan Heym. Born to a Jewish family in 1913, he was an antifascist from an early age. Expelled by the Nazis from the Gymnasium in his home town in 1931, he lived in the United States before coming back to East Germany. In the 1950s, Heym strongly supported the regime through socialist novels and other works; however, conflict with the GDR government started in 1956 - when he was rejected a publication from the Writers Association - and grew deeper during the following years until he was convicted of breaching the exchange control regulations. Stefan Heym already expressed strong support for German reunification in 1982 and he supported the civil rights movement in the GDR all along the 1980s. In his work “Schwarzenberg”, dated 1984, he wrote about his utopia of a free, unified and socialist Germany.

Another influential even if controversial figure was Christa Wolf. Born in Landsberg an der Warthe in 1929, she was a literary critic, novelist and essayist. She joined the SED in 1949 and left it in June 1989, six months before the Communist regime collapsed. Her ability to link personal with political issues was astonishing and she has been one of the greatest links between East and West German: in a society without open public spheres for debate about politics, Christa Wolf strongly opposed censorship and provided a forum for discussion and debates through her books, stories, articles and public readings. Despite her loyalty to the Party, during the Cold War she strongly criticised the leadership of the GDR and pushed for

substantial reforms. Even though she did not support the reunification process, I believe that her role, as well as the role of other authors that shared her ideas, has been indirectly crucial in tearing down the Wall. Their critics, protests and ability to cross borders have brought people to self-consciousness, to critic thinking and then to street demonstrations. If the GDR government would have been able to reform itself long before 1989, maybe history would have followed a different path. The inability of the East Germany regime to reform its structures and the widespread unhappiness sparked the protests that in the end led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and caused the political death of the German Democratic Republic.

In West Germany as well as in East Germany, intellectuals and writers did not share a unique point of view on the issue of reunification. However, with respect to the GDR, the debate was intense and requests for reunification were easier to spread since little censorship was imposed on this kind of discourse.

Martin Walser, born in Wasserburg in 1927, was a writer and a political activist that firmly supported and encouraged the dream of unity. Even though he did not take part in the 1980s protest movements, his activism was significant: he abandoned his leftist orientation towards a nationalistic tendency that was mainly aimed at raising conscience about the question of reunification. In 1988, Walser delivered his “Speech about our Country” at the Kammerspiele Theater in Munich emphasising that, despite the political discourse of many Western and Eastern intellectuals that stated how the FRG and the GDR had in time become two different States, Germany was still basically one, united Nation and reunification was the only possible path to follow⁶. Answering back to those who argued that a reunification could represent a risk for peace in Europe, Walser asserted that a unified Germany could not possibly be more dangerous than a two divided, armed and unstable countries that reflected the ideological and military division of the world. His ideas were expressed in his novel “No Man's Land”, published in 1988, that summed up his view of the issues related to the internal and external conflicts that both Germany and Europe were facing, revealing the hypocrisy of ideological dogmatism⁷.

⁶ KOVAC T. A., *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity*, 2008

⁷ PILIPP F., *New Critical Perspectives on Martin Walser*, 1997

Beside Martin Walser, another intellectual shared those ideals of a free, united Germany. Karl Heinz Bohrer, born in Cologne in 1932, was a publisher and Professor of Literature in Bielefeld University. In his essay “Why we are not a Nation – And why we should become one” he strongly condemned those writers who sentimentally affirmed that the reunification would mean losing the leftist, socialist utopia of the German Democratic Republic. On the contrary, he argued that it would have been dangerous to suffocate the voice of the majority of Germans - those who truly aimed at becoming part of a united country once again - merely on the ground of an irrational and irresponsible attachment to that utopia which in reality never came true⁸.

An alternative Fight: Writers and Protests

The late 1970s and the 1980s also were years of protests and mass demonstrations. In addition to the 1989 uprising, I would like to discuss about two specific events that mobilised both East and West Germans, pushing them to exercise their “voice” option: the expatriation of singer Wolf Biermann in 1976 and the 1980s peace movement and anti-nuclear protests.

Wolf Biermann, born in Hamburg in 1936, is a German singer, songwriter and former GDR dissident. At the age of 17, Biermann decided to emigrate from West to East Germany where he thought he could live his Communist ideals. In 1960 he began writing poetry and songs but his nonconformist views soon alarmed the East German regime. After having both performed and published in the West, the Central Committee of the SED denounced him as a class traitor and placed him onto the blacklist before depriving him of his citizenship in 1976 while he was on an authorised tour in West Germany: his case fuelled protests by leading East German intellectuals, including novelist Christa Wolf, and his personality became known both in West and East Germany. Biermann continued his musical career in the West and was able to perform again in East Germany only in December 1989 - when the Communist regime was basically extinct. In 1998, Biermann received the German national prize for his symbolic role during the division era.

⁸ JAMES H., STONE M., *When the Wall came down: Reactions to German Unification*, 1993

The role of intellectuals and writers was also crucial in the pacifist, anti-nuclear demonstrations that sparkled in both West and East Germany since the mid 1970s. The ability to take advantage of the shared rejection of militarisation caused a substantial cohesion between Eastern and Western Germans and led to a close cooperation between their regional peace movements. Because the Eastern regime refused any official contact with the representatives of the opposition movement, the West German Green Party and other peace movements developed into central partners for the Eastern opposition. One of the most important psychological factors that contributed to this collaboration was the common fear of Germans that they would be the first target and probably the battle ground for an increasingly likely conventional or nuclear war⁹. Both Western and Eastern intellectuals who marched in the streets, promoting and struggling for both pacifist and anti-nuclear requests, contributed to spread the idea of a unique *Kulturnation*: among them Heinrich Böll and Walter Jens, Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf, Robert Havemann and Christoph Hein.

Reconciliation: Literature after 1989

History is often described as a mere string of events, an endless list of dates and places, a frozen temporal space. I personally believe that history is definitely something more and it is constantly reshaping its terms of reference on the basis of different interpretations of what happened, what is happening and what is supposed to happen. I would like to ask a provoking question. Some of you may consider it simple, some others may think it is tricky. Still, it is crucial. When did the Berlin Wall *really* fall? If we consider the Fall of the Berlin Wall from a strictly material point of view, of course it happened in 1989. Still, as far as conscience is concerned, I truly believe that 1989 was a symbolic date in a process that aimed at wrecking the psychological and social walls that had forced Germans to live as prisoners in the previous decades. I do also believe that literature played a remarkable role in trying to build a national, political and social conscience with the (sometimes implicit) purpose of tearing down those boundaries that kept on existing after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

⁹ VOSSE W., *The German Peace Movement and Its Influence on German Politics and Political Culture in the 1970s and 1980s*, in Haba, Kumiko (ed.), *The End of the Cold War and Regional Integration in Europe and Asia*, Toyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, pp. 275-302