

Wolf Biermann – The last “German”

or

The end of Utopia

Some notes on a poet who got lost

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Cologne (West Germany), 13th November 1976 : Wolf Biermann, poet-composer-singer and citizen of the German Democratic Republic, gives a four-hour concert which is attended by an enthusiastic audience of about 7.000.

Berlin (East Germany), 16th November 1976 : the official news agency AND announces that Biermann, by government decision, has been deprived of his GDR citizenship and that he would not be allowed to return home.

This incident, by which the European intelligentsia was probably more shocked than by any other comparable case in recent years, and which had its repercussions even in remote continents¹⁾, marked the climax, and at the same time the foreseeable end, of the “Biermann case”. Symbolizing, to some extent, the contradictions of the postwar situation in Germany, it re-opened—once again and possibly for the last time—what the general public, throughout the two decades following the Second World War, was in the habit of referring to as the “German Question”.

As a matter of fact, from his very origins up to his expulsion last year from the GDR, Biermann has been living in permanent opposition to time and space. He was born in Hamburg in 1936 as the only child of a docker who (under the then existing circumstances in Germany) was guilty of a double crime : being Jewish *and* communist. For having sabotaged the loading of ships carrying weapons to Spain in support of the Franco rebellion against the Republic, his father was twice arrested, tortured by the Gestapo and finally brought to Auschwitz where, in 1943, he died in Hitler’s gas-chambers.

.....
In Hamburg läuft ein Mann rum

Der brachte meinen Vater fast

Mit einer Kette um

Mein armer Vater, schönes Kind

Hing im Gestapo-Keller

Neun Monate in Ketten fest

Wie ein bemalter Teller

Wie ein bemalter, Teller, den
 Manch einer sich zur Zier
 An seine Wand hängt, so hing da
 Mein Vater bei dem Tier

Mein Vater hing bei diesem Herrn
 An einem Schlachterhaken
 Prolet Prophet Prometheus mit
 Dem ungebrochenen Nacken

Der deutsche Mann von damals lebt
 Jetzt still als Fleischinspektor
 Im Schlachthof von Peymann & Co
 Und singt im Männerchor

Er liefert Rind- und Schweinefleisch
 Das hat sich gut getroffen
 In Zinksärgen wie man sie hat
 Beim Schlachter : oben offen

Doch meiner Mutter schickte er
 Pro Monat, ach das tat er
 Ein dreck- und blutverschmiertes Hemd
 Frei Haus von meinem Vater

Und meine Mutter wusch das Hemd
 Mit Seife und mit Tränen
 Und wartete auf ihren Mann
 Mit Zittern und mit Sehnen

Sie wartete acht Jahre, bis
 Mein Vater mit den Wolken
 Von Auschwitz wieder heimwärts schwamm
 Nach Hamburg…… in den Wolken 2)

Biermann's own first experiences with hostile social environment go back to the period when he was a high school student in Hamburg. Brought up by a communist mother and grandmother (who are still living in that city), he had to realize very soon that his—somewhat vague—ideas about the “world-revolution” were by no means shared by his classmates.

His personal way to resolve that contradiction was logical enough and yet—if we take into consideration the historical context—quite astonishing. At the very moment when thousands of East Germans left their country for the delights of what Biermann sarcastically calls “God's super-garden”³⁾ —he took the opposite direction and, immediately after graduating from high school at the age of 17, went to live in the “better Germany” as he called, and still calls, the GDR.

This first autonomous political step was an outstanding decision indeed. While it is true that a great number of prominent communist or leftist intellectuals, returning immediately after the war from exile in various countries, had deliberately chosen the eastern part of the divided Germany as their new homeland⁴⁾, there are probably few, if any, in West Germany who at that moment (1953) would have been prepared—even for political reasons—to go the way chosen by Biermann.

The beginning of his new life in Berlin⁵⁾ coincided with the anti-government rebellion of June 17th which was quelled with the help of Soviet tanks⁶⁾. Commenting retrospectively on that event, Biermann qualified it as being a "dangerous Janus head..... It was both a democratic workers' insurrection and a fascist rising....." Asked how he would have reacted in that situation, he quoted his "admired master Brecht", specifying that he would have "greeted those tanks—with tears in my eyes."⁷⁾ But as he says himself, at that moment he did not really understand the question to its full extent and, in any case, this was not his problem: he had just arrived in a country which he had deliberately chosen to live in—so why should he doubt?

In fact, Biermann had good reasons to accept the new state and its exemplary educational system of which he took full advantage: he successively studied political, economy, philosophy and mathematics at Berlin's Humboldt University and for two years worked at the Brecht theatre ("Berliner Ensemble"). Although he never knew Brecht personally⁸⁾ Biermann always considered the "great master" as his teacher in matters of poetry and dialectical thinking, the other "great master" being the composer Hanns Eisler who had set to music a great number of Brecht's works.

The personal contacts Biermann had with Eisler took place at the very beginning of his own productive phase (1960) and—although limited—have probably been decisive for him; for, what characterizes his songs is precisely the contradictory relation between words and music; so, the very important lesson he received from Eisler was that "the music is not just made to serve or even to copy the text but, if possible, to interpret it. So, to some extent, the music has to oppose the text"⁹⁾; or, in a more picturesque expression, that "the music has not just to be a carriage in which the text drives up."¹⁰⁾

In 1962 Biermann made his public debut as a poet and "Liedermacher"¹¹⁾, and the three following years may be considered as a relatively harmonious period in his life: on the one hand, the political leadership of "his" Germany tolerated him to a certain degree (not without difficulties, it is true: for example he was expelled from the country's ruling party¹²⁾), his poems were published in various anthologies, he could—with some restrictions—sing in public and even travel to West Germany without being refused permission to return home; on the other hand, Biermann's own identification with the GDR was strong enough to limit his criticism to pro-

blems of daily life without questioning the system as a whole, and he formulated his sarcasm in a way which left sufficient place for an optimistic expectation for a change. His attitude during these years may be characterized by what Antonio Gramsci called in a very pregnant formula : pessimism of intelligence and optimism of deed.¹³⁾

This period could be illustrated by a song called "Die Ballade von dem Drainage-Leger Fredi Rohsmeisl aus Buckow"¹⁴⁾, which relates the story of a man from Buckow (on the outskirts of Berlin) who got jailed for having danced in a "decadent" way (i. e. separately—dancing without holding one's partner was frowned upon at that time because it was seen as an imitation of US culture). His attitude—which may well be considered as Biermann's own—is summarized in the few lines :

Er ist für den Sozialismus
Und für den neuen Staat
Aber den Staat in Buckow
Den hat er gründlich satt.

(He is for socialism
and for the new state
but as for the state in Buckow
he's fed up to his teeth with it).

However, the poem takes a positive turn towards the end : after a couple of years have passed and after "the tenth sputnik was shot", even the judge by whom Fredi had previously been sentenced takes the liberty of dancing separately..... Biermann stresses that even this kind of change has a sense and the rhetorical question "Aber nützt uns das ?" (Is it of any use for us ?) which, in the previous verses, had always been answered negatively finds, in the last refrain, its affirmation.

The sort of "gentleman's agreement" between the poet and the official authorities which gave the one a relative freedom and the others a relative control found its abrupt end when, in December 1965, Biermann was told that he would not be allowed to make any more public appearances nor to leave the country. A few months before, his first volume of poems and songs had been published by the small West Berlin editor Klaus Wagenbach. This very fact—apart from the critical content of the book itself—was regarded by the GDR officials as a direct attack against the state, which had to be stopped.

In the following twelve years until his final expulsion, Biermann lived the life of what he called "a publicly recognized state enemy"¹⁵⁾. Supervised by the authorities, but without being bothered too much, he continued to live and work in his flat right in the center of Berlin where he wrote his poems and music—and produced his records¹⁶⁾. As his books and songs made him gradually more and more popular among intellectuals in the West, he received many friends and visitors from West

*Die Ballade vom Drainageleger Fredi
Rohrmeier aus Bückow*

Das ist die Ballade von Fredi Rohrmeier - mit Drainageleger - der Arbeiter
[Gitarre]

der Susi und ich hab' bei ihm Susi der, sein Häuschen links am
Fischer-See

Tanz, er hat auseinanderge - tanzt mit seiner Geliebten das vom roten, Ha
drain

Früher ich hab' Menschen unter Wasser sehen.

Früher das war wunderbar mit mehr schön ABER (gesprochen...)

(5 Stunden) S:

ABER UNS DAS?
bedeutet NICHT! (gesprochen)

Germany and from abroad and gave an endless number of interviews to Western newspapers. And in spite of the official interdiction, his works continued to circulate secretly inside the GDR in the form of "home-made" tapes and type-written manuscripts.

Although Biermann enjoyed relatively liberal treatment (compared to that of dissident authors in other socialist countries) it is perhaps not astonishing that his complete isolation from public life in the GDR during these years made his criticism harsher and more bitter, and in spite of his repeated statement that the country of his choice was the "better Germany" which he would not leave for anything in the world, the distinction between what he claimed to be "critical solidarity" with the political system and its representatives and a complete rejection did not always appear very clearly. In his one-man-fight against "Stalinist bureaucracy" and for a "better socialism" he quite obviously must have become more and more obsessed by the idea that he was being surrounded only by enemies and that attitude made him even decline official offers in the early seventies for reconciliation talks, for he pretended that "the collective is wrong and has isolated itself from me."¹⁷ Mere

obstruction of an arrogant individual or sincere hope of a suffering poet—it became more and more clear that the GDR government had to react in one way or another to put an end to that confrontation.

x x x

Wolf Biermann—the indefatigable bard against “Stalinism”, “bureaucracy” and “anti-democratic socialism” in the GDR? He usually is characterized by such terms. And yet, there is an aspect in his works as well as in his very existence which, I think, has always been more or less neglected and which I would call the “German dimension”. Other dissident writers in socialist societies direct their attack against real or alleged grievances caused by the political system (or make the very system responsible for those grievances); Biermann, however, sings not only the dream of what he calls a “better socialism” (that which is “revolutionary”, “authentic”, “libertarian”, “anti-authoritarian”, “red”¹⁸) etc.) but also, at the same time, deals in a very powerful way with the national question, i.e. the tragedy of the “torn fatherland”.

He certainly was not concerned about this matter when he first moved to East Germany nor during the following years. The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, however, seems to have set off a new way of considering the German problem and the famous landmark will become in his future poems an often quoted item.

When Biermann talks about the Wall it is always in a melancholy, almost tender and, occasionally, ironical tone, so for example in his “Ballade auf den Dichter François Villon” where he makes his “great brother” play the harp by using as strings the barbed wire on the top of the Wall¹⁹); but there is never an outbreak of hatred against this stone monument and if he complains against those who try to get through it, it is not because of the risks they might incur (for example to be shot) but because, by going to the West, they will think themselves to be *outside* the Wall while, in reality, they will be *inside*.²⁰

There is an obvious relation between the growing difficulties Biermann met inside his own country and his gradual turning away from specific GDR themes to general German themes. While in his first volume he talks nearly exclusively about matters concerning his existence and its contradictions in East Germany, his subsequent publications reveal more and more how much he feels as a German poet who is living in the better half of Germany (because capitalist exploitation of men has been abolished and a return to Nazism is excluded) and who suffers the more (because socialism here is not developing in the way he would like).

Es senkt das deutsche Dunkel

Sich über mein Gemüt

Es dunkelt übermächtig

In meinem Lied

Das kommt, weil ich mein Deutschland
 So tief zerrissen seh
 Ich lieg in der bessren Hälfte
 Und habe doppelt Weh 21)

The lyrical intonation of these few lines brings to mind another poet whose political poetry occupies an outstanding place in German literature and whom Biermann considers as his "insolent cousin"²²⁾—Heinrich Heine who, because of his love for Germany, exiled himself to its "better half" (i. e. France) suffering the more from homesickness.

Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland
 Der Eichenbaum
 Wuchs dort so hoch, die Veilchen nickten sanft.
 Es war ein Traum.

Das küßte mich auf deutsch, und sprach auf deutsch
 (Man glaubt es kaum
 Wie gut es klang) das Wort: "ich liebe dich!"
 Es war ein Traum.²³⁾

With the theme of the "suffering from Germany" (or better, from the German "state of affairs") Biermann joins a long humanist tradition in German literature which started with Schiller and Hölderlin²⁴⁾ and had its most significant representatives in Heinrich Heine and Thomas Mann. What all these poets have in common, is their deep and unhappy love for a utopian Germany where the spirit is no longer trampled down by Prussian army boots or by Nazi barbarism and where the century-long division of the German people into a "Kulturnation" and a "Staatsnation" will no longer exist.

Just as Heine, in his "Wintermärchen", sings the revolutionary patriotism of the German republic which is completely liberated from feudalism, Biermann, in his own version, adopting Heine's form, style and even title, dreams of a "reunified red Germany" where the reactionaries of both halves (i. e. capitalists and bureaucratic socialists) will have disappeared. But here again, Biermann lives in contradiction with the historical moment. Heine expressed the most advanced position of the class whose historical task was precisely to accomplish the bourgeois revolution in Germany and to unify the German principalities to form a republican national state, and Brecht, by opposing the revanchist ambitions of the West German Adenauer administration, claimed that any future reunification of Germany could only be achieved by peaceful means²⁵⁾. Biermann, on the other hand, wants this unification to be accomplished in a historical context where nobody—in either East or West—thinks of it any more, where the internationally recognized co-existence of two entirely different German republics has become a fait accompli and where

any plan to reverse this situation would be considered dangerous.

Therefore, if Biermann's expulsion from the GDR has put an end to an individual case, it could also signify the end of the "German literature", in the sense that he was probably the last cultural and political representative of "Germany" as a historically and geographically defined entity which, on the state level, has already ceased to exist. And what has become a reality for the political evolution in the two German states will henceforward also be a fact for their respective literatures.

[*I should like to express my gratitude to those responsible for the publication of this Bulletin for resisting a determined attempt to suppress this article.*]

Notes

Bibliography

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2. Mit Marx-und Engelszungen. Gedichte Balladen Lieder, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, West Berlin 1968 (quoted as: MEZ)
3. Für meine Genossen. Hetzlieder Gedichte Balladen, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, West Berlin 1972 (quoted as: FmG)
4. Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, West Berlin 1972 (quoted as: DW)
5. 野村修訳 ヴォルフ・ビーアマン詩集 晶文社 東京 1972年 (quoted as: ビーアマン)
6. 野村修訳 ドイツ一ひとつの冬物語 訳者私家版 京都 1974年 (quoted as: ドイツ)

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1. Arnold, H.L. (Hrsg.), Wolf Biermann, edition text+kritik, München 1975 (quoted as: t+k)
 2. Rothschild, Thomas (Hrsg.) Wolf Biermann, Liedermacher und Sozialist Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1976 (quoted as: L+S)
 3. Roos, Peter (Hrsg.) Exil, Die Ausbürgerung Wolf Biermanns aus der DDR, Eine Dokumentation, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 1977 (quoted as: Exil)
- 1) As for a Japanese commentary the reader may refer to: 野村修 プロイセンのイカロス——ヴォルフ・ビーアマンの公民権剥奪=追放をめぐるの中間報告—— 京都薬科大学 人文報告 1977年
 - 2) DW, pp.16-17. ドイツ pp.9-31. As for English translations of Biermann poems, to our knowledge there is only one volume which has been published so far: The Wire Harp. Ballads, Poems, Songs, Translated by Eric Bentley (A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book) (Paperback = A Harvest Book HB 141) New York/USA (Harcourt, Brace and World) 1968
 - 3) DW, p.14. ドイツ p.26.
 - 4) Among others: Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, Paul Dessau, Anna Seghers, Ernst Bloch

and Hans Mayer (the latter pair later returned to West Germany)

- 5) In non-communist countries the name "Berlin" usually stands for "West Berlin" and not for the capital of the GDR which is referred to as "East Berlin". The terminological confusion is but one aspect of the difficulties foreigners often have in understanding the German question.....
- 6) Having no "real" national holiday to celebrate, the Adenauer administration ordered this event to be commemorated as West Germany's "Day of the German Unity".
- 7) Biermann during his Cologne concert, cf. *Exil*, pp.204-5 Brecht himself, at that moment, had expressed his solidarity with the ruling party but, at the same time, called for an open general discussion in order to correct the "mistakes which have been made by both sides" (i.e. the workers *and* the government). As a result of this attitude, the West German theatres cancelled all performances of Brecht plays for a while.
- 8) Brecht died in 1956, i.e. one year before Biermann joined the "Berliner Ensemble".
- 9) cf. t+k, p.25
- 10) *ibid.*, p.69
- 11) This term which can hardly be translated into English (literally: "song-maker") is nowadays used by an entire category of—primarily political—singers in West and East Germany. To our knowledge, it was first created by Biermann and it expresses very clearly the act of *doing* something—here the producing of a song (i.e. words and music). So the song of a "Liedermacher" is thought of as being the result of a creative activity, just as the shoe is the product of the very concrete activity of the shoe-maker. Brecht created a similar term by describing himself as a "Stückschreiber" (literally: "play-writer").
- 12) SED=Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (United Socialist Party of Germany), a fusion of the former Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD) on Marxist-Leninist principles.
- 13) Biermann in an interview with the West German newspaper "Frankfurter Rundschau" in December 1972, cf. t+k, p.101.
- 14) *DH*, pp.11-13.
- 15) "Ich bin ein staatlich anerkannter Staatsfeind" is the title of his most recently published book (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 1977)
- 16) As he was not allowed to use any technical installations inside the GDR he transformed his flat into a recording studio where he made the tapes which were smuggled through the border by visiting friends from West Germany and West Berlin (and occasionally by his mother) and then published as records by Wagenbach. The title of one of these "clandestine" records is just "Chausseestraße 131" the address where he lived.
- 17) e.g. in "Rücksichtslose Schimpferei", *DH*, p.69.
- 18) A very common metaphor in his poems is the "previously red flag which has become pink", i.e. the betrayal of the revolution by those who brought the now existing socialism to power. e.g. *DW*, p.57. ドイツ p.109.
- 19) *DH*, pp.31-36. ビーアマン pp.26-36. The same image supplies the title of this volume.
- 20) e.g. in "Enfant perdu", *FmG*, pp.83-85.
- 21) *MEZ*, p.77. ビーアマン p.146.

- 22) DW, p.5. ドイツ p.8. No doubt, Biermann's literary family is quite considerable and beside the already quoted "members" we should mention the almost forgotten father of the French political chanson, Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857).
- 23) from "Neue Gedichte" (1844)
- 24) cf. his "Hölderlin-Lied", FmG, p.19
"In diesem Land leben wir
wie Fremdlinge im eigenen Haus....."
- 25) It is often forgotten that the Federal Republic of Germany was first established within the three Western zones of occupation (US, UK, France) and that the constitution of the GDR on the territory of the former Soviet occupation zone followed only as a consequence. In spite of these facts the GDR administrations have always been accused by the West of being the dividers of Germany.