

Writing in Red:
The East German Writers Union and the Role of Literary Intellectuals in the
German Democratic Republic, 1971-90

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Abstract

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(Under the direction of Konrad H. Jarausch)

Since its creation in 1950 as a subsidiary of the Cultural League, the East German Writers Union embodied a fundamental tension, one that was never resolved during the course of its forty-year existence. The union served two masters – the state and its members – and as such, often found it difficult fulfilling the expectations of both. In this way, the union was an expression of a basic contradiction in the relationship between writers and the state: the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) demanded ideological compliance, yet these writers also claimed to be critical, engaged intellectuals. This dissertation examines how literary intellectuals and SED cultural officials contested and debated the differing and sometimes contradictory functions of the Writers Union and how each utilized it to shape relationships and identities within the literary community and beyond it. The union was a crucial site for constructing a group image for writers, both in terms of external characteristics (values and goals for participation in wider society) and internal characteristics (norms and acceptable behavioral patterns guiding interactions with other union members). In examining the Writers Union, this project speaks to ongoing historical debates about the institutional means through which writers interacted with the dictatorship as well as debates on the nature of the East German dictatorship more generally. Its methods probe two interrelated topics: the significance

of the Writers Union as a professional institution for the lives of its members, and the role of East German writers as public intellectuals under a socialist dictatorship. In the end, there were always powerful disincentives to using occasions provided by the union to articulate criticisms of socialism in East Germany, but by the late 1980s, writers dissatisfied with certain aspects of real existing socialism had found new ways to express their concerns through the union, and in the process expanded the limits of permissible speech under the dictatorship.

For Elizabeth

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inspired me to ask back then. His continued interest in my progress has helped make this process all the more rewarding. Finally, Konrad H. Jarausch guided this project from its beginnings, and it is largely because of his generous support, challenging questions, suggestions for improvement, and scholarly example that this project developed as it did. His influence on the following pages is immeasurable, as is my gratitude for everything he has inspired me to do over these past seven years. It goes without saying that any errors or shortcomings are my responsibility.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
List of Abbreviations	xiii
Introduction	1
The East German Writers Union	5
East German Literature	8
The East German Writers Union in Comparative Perspective	11
Historiography	18
Theory and Methods	29
Organization	43
Chapter 1 The Evolution of German Writers Associations, 1842-1970	48
Early Writers Associations in Imperial Germany, 1842-1909	50
Writers Associations of the Late Imperial and Weimar Period, 1909-1933	55
Writers under Nazism: Gleichschaltung and the Reichsschriftumskammer, 1933-45	75
Cultural Associations in Occupied Germany: From Unity to Division, 1945-49	92
East German Cultural Policy under Ulbricht, 1949-70	113
Conclusions	133
Chapter 2 The Socioeconomic Functions of the Writers Union, 1971-90.....	136

	Membership Issues	140
	Publishing Opportunities	149
	Publicity	165
	Socioeconomic Aid	175
	Travel in the West	192
	Social Recognition	203
	Youth Development Work	212
	Societal Influence	228
	Conclusions	231
Chapter 3	The Era of No Taboos? 1971-75	236
	<i>Ostpolitik</i> and Delimitation	241
	Shaping Real Existing Socialism	251
	Socialism vs. Imperialism	257
	The Seventh Writers Congress, 1973	267
	Remaining Taboos	300
	Conclusions	312
Chapter 4	A Disciplining Instrument, 1976-79	318
	Prelude: The Expulsion of Reiner Kunze, 29 October 1976	324
	The Biermann Affair: The SED Phase, Late 1976	328
	The Biermann Affair: The Union Phase, 1977	358
	Return to Normalcy? The Eighth Writers Congress, 1978	379
	Aftershock: The 1979 Expulsions	392
	Conclusions	405

Chapter 5	Defending Peace, Defining Participation, 1979-89	409
	Crafting an Official Rhetorical Model for Peace	414
	Getting Involved: Local, National, and International Events	420
	Complicating Peace: The Path to the Tenth Writers Congress	456
	Negotiating Change and Continuity after the Tenth Writers Congress	485
	Conclusions	507
Chapter 6	Coming Full Circle during the <i>Wende</i> , 1989-90	512
	Reacting to Mass Flight and Demonstrations, September through Early October 1989	515
	The Reformers Triumphant? Mid-October through Mid- November 1989	523
	From Reform to Reckoning, Late November through December 1989	539
	Spring Awakening? Radical Reform in Early 1990	552
	Crisis and Dissolution, Summer-Winter 1990	573
	Conclusions	591
Conclusion	597
	Generations of Writers	605
	Gendered Experiences in the Schriftstellerverband	611
	The Writers Union as a Professional Interest Organization	616
	The Professional Identity and Role of Writers in Socialism	619
	Compromise and Crisis in the GDR	624
Appendix	Presidium Members, 1969-90	636
Bibliography	639

List of Tables

Table 1	Age Range of Seventh Congress Attendees	289
Table 2	Financial Plan 1990	576

List of Figures

Figure 1	Average and Median Years Born of Presidium Members	607
Figure 2	Average and Median Ages at Start of Presidium Term	607

List of Abbreviations

AdK	Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts)
AJA	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren (Working Group of Young Authors)
BPRS	Bund proletarisch-revolutionäre Schriftsteller (League of Proletarian- Revolutionary Writers)
BV	Bezirksverband (District Association of the Writers Union)
FDGB	Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Free German Labor Union)
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HVVB	Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (Main Administration for Publishing and Booksellers)
KB	Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands (Cultural League for the Democratic Renewal of Germany)
MfK	Ministerium für Kultur (Ministry for Culture)
NDL	Neue deutsche Literature (New German Literature)
RKK	Reichskulturkammer (Imperial Cultural Chamber)
RSK	Reichsschriftumskammer (Imperial Literature Chamber)
SDA	Schutzverband deutscher Autoren (Union for the Protection of German Authors)
SDS	Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller (Union for the Protection of German Writers)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SV	Schriftstellerverband der DDR (Writers Union of the GDR)
VS	Verband deutscher Schriftsteller (Union of German Writers)
ZK	Zentralkomitee (Central Committee of the SED)

Introduction

In June 1979 nine writers were expelled from the Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic (*Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* or SV), effectively ending their literary careers in that state. They were expelled for publishing works and interviews in West Germany that were critical of life and cultural policy in the GDR. These expulsions came at the end of a three-year period of repression against authors who had criticized the regime's November 1976 decision to revoke East German citizenship from dissident poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann. One of the primary means utilized by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland* or SED) for meting out punishment to wayward writers was the official literary professionals' association – the Writers Union. At the 1979 expulsion meeting, several prominent authors used the opportunity to lambaste the nine writers for what was termed reckless and insulting comments against the East German state. One eyewitness described how poorly-disguised Stasi agents stood in the doorways of the meeting hall while many unrecognized faces crowded the supposedly closed-door session. When the expulsion came up for a vote, several dozen voted against the measure, but the vast majority of members confirmed the decision.¹ The Writers Union, as it had done on many prior occasions, had done the state's bidding and curtailed intellectual expression.

¹ Joachim Walther, "Die Amputation," Joachim Walther, Wolf Biermann, Günter de Bruyn, Jürgen Fuchs, et al., *Protokoll eines Tribunals. Die Ausschlüsse aus dem DDR-Schriftstellerverband 1979* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1991), 15-16.

Eight years after this incident, the Writers Union met for its tenth national congress, the second since the expulsions and the first since Mikhail Gorbachev had announced his policies of economic restructuring and political openness (*perestroika* and *glasnost*, respectively) in the Soviet Union, policies the East German government officially distanced itself from. Typically these national congresses featured three days of speeches praising the policies of the SED, expressing solidarity with the government, and discussing how literature might better serve the goals of the state. Yet during the 1987 Congress, the tone was fundamentally different from its predecessors, so much so that at least one playwright recommended changing the order of business to include, among other topics of discussion, “the role of literature in the process of development of new thinking in our country” – a clear reference to Gorbachev’s policies.² Several other delegates seized the opportunity – in front of the Western media – to discuss an array of topics previously considered taboo in East Germany, such as censorship, environmental degradation, and limits on free expression imposed on writers. Environmental Minister Hans Reichelt, speaking to the writers about East German environmental policy (and as usual sowing misinformation on the extent of pollution in the GDR), was so put off by a rowdy crowd of listeners that he stormed away from the podium in a huff.³

In both 1979 and 1987, members of the union justified their actions by making reference to the function of literature and its creators in East Germany as well as the

² Horst Matthies, “Speech,” *X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR: Plenum* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag GmbH: 1988), 15.

³ Dieter Schlenstedt, “Der aus dem Ruder laufende Schriftstellerkongress von 1987,” Robert Atkins and Martin Kane, eds. *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR 1976-1990* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 18-19.

duties and obligations created by the Writers Union. The rationale for the 1979 decision, for instance, was laid out in the expulsion resolution, which claimed:

The member meeting of the district association Berlin of the Writers Union of the GDR has occupied itself, as [...] with the behavior of an array of members who violated their duties as members of the association and have damaged the esteem of the Writers Union [...] The facts laid out in the report of the president of the Writers Union prove that the associational members, vis-à-vis their statute-bound duties to act as active co-designers of the developed socialist society, considered it correct and advisable to act from abroad against our socialist state, the GDR, the cultural policy of Party and government, and against the socialist legal order in defamatory ways.⁴

In 1987 Günter de Bruyn had been one of those authors to speak out against censorship in the GDR. He explained the relevance of the topic to the writers congress thusly: The Writers Union was obligated to attend to the “artistic concerns of its members, and to these absolutely belongs the question of publication approval.”⁵ Who was right? Was it the duty of union members to refrain from criticizing socialism in the GDR, as the resolution had maintained, or was de Bruyn correct in insisting the union was obligated to protect the rights of its members against attempts to censor their literature? Both were technically correct, indicating a fundamental tension between the union’s obligations to serve the interests of its members and those of the SED.

As seen in the events surrounding the 1979 expulsions and the 1987 congress, the East German Writers Union embodied, since its creation in 1950 as a subsidiary of the Cultural League or Kulturbund (the Schriftstellerverband gained “independence” in 1952 as an “autonomous” organization), an inherent and fundamental tension, one that was never resolved during the course of its forty-year existence. The union served two

⁴ Walther et al., 37.

⁵ Günter de Bruyn, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 128-30.

masters – the state and its members – and as such, often found it difficult fulfilling the expectations of both. In this way, the union was an expression of a basic contradiction in the relationship between writers and the state: the SED demanded ideological compliance, yet these writers also claimed to be critical, engaged intellectuals. At times, this contradiction could be ameliorated so that the interests of most authors seemed to converge with those of the Party, but on many occasions this contradiction generated serious conflict within the union and with the state.

During its final twenty years of existence, the East German Writers Union thus served differing and sometimes contradictory functions in the interactions between writers, their state, and wider East German society. This dissertation examines how literary intellectuals⁶ and SED cultural officials contested and debated these functions and how each utilized the Writers Union to shape interactions and identities both within the literary community and beyond it. At stake in these interactions was the general role writers would play in East German society and the particular role writers would play in

⁶ It is helpful to begin with a caveat about East German intellectuals – and about German intellectuals in general: Since the nineteenth century, the German definition of who counts as an “intellectual” has been broader than some more common definitions, although not as wide-ranging as the definitions of some scholars (particularly those subscribing to a Gramscian definition). See Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 3, 8-9. Since the development of a strong middle class or *Bürgertum* in Germany during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, “intellectuals” there were said to include all groups considered professional or bourgeois, meaning groups that received some professional/higher education or training, and can consequently include artists, musicians, writers, engineers, lawyers, or doctors. The origins of this conception stretch back to the advent of the *Bildungsbürgertum* – the educated middle class. This category included officials (such as clergy, schoolteachers, and academics) as well as members of the so-called “free” professions in law, medicine, engineering and the like, and was distinguished from the *Besitzbürgertum*, the property-owning or economic bourgeoisie. David Blackbourn, “The German bourgeoisie: An introduction,” in David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), 4-7. This concept of intellectuals was carried into the GDR, although, in a communist society, the bourgeois connotations were largely dropped and the term “intelligentsia” (*Intelligenz*) became a common label, meaning both cultural intelligentsia as well as the technical intelligentsia and other professional groups. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 77-78.

supporting, critiquing, and improving socialism and the GDR more generally. It focuses on Honecker's tenure as General Secretary of the SED, from 1971-1989, given the important changes to cultural policy he made from his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht, both in terms of relative openness and socioeconomic benefits for creative intellectuals.

In exploring these themes, we must consider a number of guiding questions: First, how did union members, leaders, and SED politicians understand the purpose of the Writers Union, and how and why did these understandings change over time? Second, in what ways did the Writers Union affect the self-understanding and professional identity of its members as public intellectuals and how was this identity in turn contested or accommodated by writers and SED officials? Third, what strategies did union members employ to manipulate the opportunities provided by the union to pursue their own intellectual, social, or professional interests, and with what consequences for intellectual life in the GDR? In short, how did the Writers Union mediate the relationship between writers, as public intellectuals, and the SED and why and how did its role in this process change over time?

The East German Writers Union

The Schriftstellerverband was the only professional organization for promoting the rights and interests of its authors and other literary professionals, including editors, literary critics, and translators, in the German Democratic Republic. In 1973 it featured 724 members; by the time of the union's dissolution in late 1990 it had climbed to over a thousand. These members were scattered across the country in one of fifteen district branches (one per state, plus one for Sorbian authors), although the Berlin branch was

larger than all the others combined, giving the association a geographic focus that some members found aggravating. During the 1970s and 1980s – indeed for its entire history – the vast majority of these members were men, while at most only a quarter of SV members were women. Women were even less well represented in the union’s two main leadership bodies – the executive steering committee (Vorstand, consisting of anywhere between 60 and one hundred writers in total) and the presidium (12-15 authors, typically only one or two of whom were women).

As far as the importance of the union to one’s career as a writer, one could technically publish in East Germany without being a union member (provided one had good political standing), but publishing became much easier once one was admitted into the Schriftstellerverband, making membership a virtual *sine qua non* for having a literary career in the GDR. This meant that unless the author had gotten into serious political trouble with the SED, every major East German author belonged to the SV’s ranks. Therefore the union was a crucial site for constructing a group image for writers, both in terms of external characteristics (values and goals for participation in wider society) and internal characteristics (norms and acceptable behavioral patterns guiding interactions with other members). These values and norms were not static; they were contested and negotiated, although some generally accepted patterns had solidified by the mid-1970s.

The Writers Union also had significance within East Germany because it facilitated the contribution of writers to the state’s ideological mission. From the state’s perspective, the Writers Union was founded with the task of “contributing to the development and expansion [*Herausbildung und Entwicklung*] of national culture” and, in the tradition of revolutionary writers during the Weimar period, “to fight with their

literature against fascism, for peace and social progress.”⁷ The Writers Union was thus charged with helping to found a national culture for the new East German state, one steeped in the fundamental tenets of socialism – the state’s foundational doctrine and the *raison d’être* for its independence from West Germany. In other words, from its inception early in GDR history the primary task assigned to the union and its members was to create legitimacy for the new regime, both in terms of producing quality cultural goods, but more importantly in communicating the regime’s legitimating ideology to the East German people. Writers subsequently assumed profound importance in East Germany, an importance of which many authors were well aware.

To this end, the SED, having given writers the powerful gift of being able to speak publicly about the progress of socialism in a society where free speech was severely restricted, had a vested interest in influencing, through benefits and coercion, what writers said about socialism, both publicly and in their literary works. Many writers saw it as their duty to act as gadflies for real existing socialism, prodding the government to address shortcomings and mistakes while simultaneously celebrating triumphs and the overall superiority of their system vis-à-vis the capitalist West. Indeed if writers were so important to the state, should not these intellectuals have some right to weigh in on the development of a socialist system that they were supposed to support? Many of these writers, genuinely convinced of socialism’s appeal and superiority, nonetheless continued

⁷ Richard Mand, Gerhard Opitz, Carola Schulze, Peter Zinnecker, et al, *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in der DDR: Massenorganisationen, Verbände, Vereinigungen, Gesellschaften, Genossenschaften, Komitees, Ligen* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1985), 144. This idealization of Weimar-era Communist writers exaggerated the degree to which writers actually fought against Nazism but nonetheless helped create a historical image of certain groups of intellectuals throughout German history allying themselves with the workers against class enemies. For more on the SED’s attempts at legitimacy see Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945-1989* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992).

throughout GDR history to point out their country's errors and areas for improvement, not least of which through the institution of the Writers Union, the organization that supposedly catered to improving and solidifying their professional well-being. However, the SED, while paying lip-service to these aspirations, often put pressure on the leaders of the Schriftstellerverband to rein in writers deemed too critical of the system. It was this tension, mediated by the Writers Union, between writers asked to do nothing less important than build a socialist culture in East Germany and the SED needing to legitimate itself, that provided the most important context for the subsequent relationship, often tumultuous, between literary intellectuals and the state.

East German Literature

If East German cultural policy created all of the unions for artistic professionals for similar reasons, embedded in them similar goals, and imposed upon them similar cultural policy constraints, one would expect great homogeneity in intellectuals' experiences in all these associations. While important commonalities characterized the experience of East German artists in general,⁸ among intellectual groups in the GDR writers were distinct in several important ways. Indeed, SED cultural officials often referred to East Germany as a *Lese-Land* (reading nation) or a *Literaturgesellschaft* (literature society) and while these monikers were exaggerations they nonetheless reflected a fundamental truth: East Germans valued their literature very highly and, by extension, the creators of that literature.

⁸ See Chapter One.

At the Fourth Writers Congress of the Schriftstellerverband in 1956, Johannes R. Becher, the newly-minted cultural minister and literary heavyweight, coined the term “Literaturgesellschaft” which aimed to encapsulate the harmony of art and people needed for newly Communist societies like in the GDR. He believed that all social groups – even those that had previously been excluded – needed to participate in the creation of the new culture and by extension to develop a more-inclusive understanding of their role in doing so. Thus Becher articulated an ideal for the GDR to aspire to in which democratic renewal seemed possible through mass participation in the creation of a new, anti-fascist culture, an ideal which appealed to many intellectuals and others for decades to come. SED cultural officials, however, twisted Becher’s ideal, employing his term to describe an allegedly already existing reality, a propaganda tool to tout East Germany’s cultural superiority vis-à-vis its western counterpart. In the process, Becher’s ideal of a democratic community of educated readers was lost, and henceforth readers and writers alike were expected to take their lead from the Party.⁹ The GDR was thus, in the SED’s eyes, already a Literaturgesellschaft.

In truth, East Germans often read voraciously, and writers valued the connections between themselves and their readers. Some 97% of East German communities had a state or communal library, and its reading public utilized this system more frequently than its FRG counterpart.¹⁰ East Germans read more than many of their fellow Soviet

⁹ Simone Barck, Martina Langemann, Siegfried Lokatis, “The German Democratic Republic as a ‘Reading Nation’: Utopia, Planning, Reality, and Ideology,” trans. Michael Latham and Devin Pendas, in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Michael Geyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 89-90.

¹⁰ Simone Barck, Christoph Classen, and Thomas Heinmann, “The Fettered Media: Controlling Public Debate” in Konrad Jarausch, ed. *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, translated by Eve Duffy (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 230.

bloc comrades, and specific books could cause great stirs in GDR society, sparking debates on issues pertinent to the socialist state. Ordinary East Germans wrote many letters providing authors with feedback after excerpts from upcoming works were published in literary magazines or after public readings, suggestions that writers would in some cases incorporate in the final drafts of their forthcoming work. Indeed, by encouraging reader feedback, especially in the form of letters to the editor for literary publications, the SED legitimized a kind of public sphere in which East German subjects could express discontent with the literature, and occasionally with the reality that literature was said to represent. Consequently, by the end of the 1960s, the SED opted to curtail this type of popular expression. This fact coupled with shortages of paper and problems in the distribution system often led to overproduction of ideologically safe works that the public did not care to read and unavailability of those works they did.¹¹

East Germans read eagerly in part because literature was perceived as being able to express the problems of life under socialism in a country in which freedom of expression was severely curtailed and in which the vast majority of East Germans had no public voice at all. Importantly, literature often offered a more realistic assessment of the problems faced in East German society than in the official media, and by the 1970s and 1980s literature increasingly removed its rose-tinted glasses and offered sharper pictures of the shortcomings of real existing socialism. Indeed, those readers deemed “problematic” by cultural authorities were often the most popular amongst East German readers.¹² As the state failed to provide real explanations for difficulties and crises and

¹¹ Barck, Langemann, and Lokatis, “The German Democratic Republic,” 93, 102.

¹² Barck, Classen, and Heinmann, 231.

spoke increasingly in bankrupt platitudes, authors seemed to speak a language of authenticity. At the very least writers could help readers develop the one area of their lives that seemed beyond the grasp of the dictatorship – their internal self.¹³ Yet often they did much more as writers were often the first to discuss critical topics publicly, and events such as public readings of an author's work could and did often create spontaneous opportunities for unsanctioned dialogue about troubling topics.¹⁴

The result of the high value placed on literature was that writers often became important public figures in the GDR. This fact coupled with their crucial propaganda function for the SED meant that authors wielded not only social but also political power. Writers were seen by many East Germans as playing a vital role in ensuring steady improvement in their lives under socialism or at the very least in identifying the problems experienced under real existing socialism in the hope that the government, now informed about those problems, would take actions to remedy them. In a variety of ways, writers sought to articulate their function in East German society, in the process negotiating their views vis-à-vis popular visions as well as government prescriptions about the role they should play in the GDR. And one of the primary means for doing so was through their professional organization – the Writers Union.

The East German Union in Comparative Perspective

¹³ In this way East German literature often tapped into well-established German literary traditions such as Romanticism which also focused on German *Innerlichkeit* (Inwardness). Frank Trommler, "German Intellectuals: Public Roles and the Rise of the Therapeutic," in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Michael Geyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 52-53.

¹⁴ David Bathrik, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 24, 44. David Bathrick, "The End of the Wall Before the End of the Wall," *German Studies Review*, Volume 14 (2), 1991, 304.

East German writers were not only distinguishable from their fellow GDR intellectuals, but there were also key distinctions with other Soviet-bloc literary professionals. To be sure, there were important, even overwhelming commonalities across Eastern Europe stemming from the common Soviet blueprint which all socialist writers unions adapted to their national contexts. These commonalities were further underscored by regular collaboration between these associations which helped articulate common values between them and thus provided the basis for a transnational identity as a socialist writer. Yet distinctions remained which influenced the role played by critical writers in each state, making it possible, while acknowledging a wider experience of writing under socialist dictatorships, to demarcate a particularly East German experience. These distinctions between the GDR and the other socialist states stemmed primarily from historical and geopolitical conditions, namely the fact that Nazism had originated from German soil and that after 1949, only the GDR had a Western counterpart state against which it competed for the right to call itself the “better Germany.”

Because the dictatorships throughout Eastern Europe were based on the USSR’s model, strong similarities emerged between the Soviet exemplar and the East German variant in terms of the national writers associations.¹⁵ The Union of Soviet Writers was founded in 1932 when Stalinism was in full swing. To give aesthetic and ideological

¹⁵ To date, no one has undertaken a comprehensive comparative analysis of cultural policies in East Germany and the Soviet Union, let alone for the two Writers Unions. Other institutions have been the subject of such studies, however. John Connelly, for example, has compared higher education policies in the GDR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia in order to investigate the impact of local and national contexts in producing different developments within a common communist framework. John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Valerie Bunce has argued that the institutional structure of socialism was strikingly similar across the entire Soviet bloc, a fact which helps us understand both the relative stability and sudden collapse of the Soviet bloc. She does not consider cultural institutions in her study, however. Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

coherence to Soviet literature, in 1934 “socialist realism”¹⁶ was enshrined as the only acceptable literary style among communist writers. To ensure a connection between authors and the proletarians about whom they were writing, Stalin declared the need to “unite all writers supporting the platform of Soviet power and aspiring to participate in the building of socialism into one union of Soviet, socialist writers with a communist fraction in it.”¹⁷ The goals, then, of the USW were identical to those of the Schriftstellerverband – to unite all socialist writers in service to the Communist Party and to help instill an understanding and appreciation for socialism in workers. Moreover, as with the later SV, the Union of Soviet Writers could convey a number of privileges and benefits upon its members, including drawing from its own Literary Fund (*Litfund*) to pay for services for writers. Structurally there were also striking similarities as both were headed by a directing body or presidium (mirroring the Politburo’s role vis-à-vis the Communist Party apparatus). Both also utilized periodic writers congresses to discuss and announce policy changes or explore other cultural issues.¹⁸

The East German Writers Union also inherited the Soviet association’s punitive capabilities as well. There were key differences, of course: the Schriftstellerverband, founded only in the 1950s, avoided the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. As far as the Union of Soviet Writers was concerned, perhaps a quarter of its membership were arrested,

¹⁶ For more on socialist realism, see Chapter One.

¹⁷ “On the Reformation of Literary-Artistic Organizations (Decision of the Central Committee, BKP (b), 23 April 1932),” in C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 120.

¹⁸ John and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 32, 50-52, 77, 81-84, 136, 151.

exiled, imprisoned, or executed during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁹ Both regimes made it clear, however, that the writers unions were to adhere closely to the Party line even after Stalin's death. The tools to extract compliance at the USW's disposal, like for the East German Writers Union, included public humiliation, the denial of the right to publish, as well as the refusal of the aforementioned privileges. The ultimate weapon wielded by the Union of Soviet Writers, though, was expulsion from its ranks, relegating prodigal writers to the status of outsiders and pulling their works from bookstores and libraries.²⁰ Finally, it is probably no coincidence that the most prominent East German dissident literary intellectual, Wolf Biermann, was expelled from the GDR a mere two years after the Soviet Union had demonstrated such an approach was acceptable by expatriating its leading dissident writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.²¹

Despite overwhelming similarities in foundational goals, structures, policies, privileges, and punishments, key contextual differences marked the East German Writers Union – and GDR intellectuals more generally – as distinct within the Eastern Bloc countries. Critical intellectuals in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, for example, tended to become more avowedly anti-Communist and 'anti-political'²² by the 1970s and

¹⁹ Vitaly Shentalinsky, *The KGB's Literary Archive*, trans. John Crowfoot (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 259

²⁰ Garrard, 138.

²¹ At the time of his expulsion, a defiant Solzhenitsyn prophetically noted, "The history of literature will some day show an interest in this meeting of ours." Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 675. For Biermann, see Angela Borgwardt. *Im Umgang mit der Macht: Herrschaft und Selbstbehauptung in einem autoritären politischen System* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2003), 409-482.

²² This term from Gale Stokes (originally coined by George Konrad) refers to the activism of intellectual who, believing they could not succeed in reforming the Communist Party from within, instead attempted to revitalize and transform civil society and hence reform their country from below. Gale Stokes. *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23-25.

1980s whereas their GDR counterparts often remained committed socialists until the bitter end. Opposition groups developed relatively late in East Germany compared with other Soviet bloc states, emerging only in the 1980s and in relatively small numbers. Finally, in 1989 most GDR intellectuals, writers prominent among them, clung to a notion of a reformed socialism and a continued independence for East Germany whereas many if not most critical intellectuals in other Eastern European states rejected communism outright in all its permutations.²³ If by 1989 Christa Wolf had become East Germany's most famous writer, her embrace of this "third way" between Stalinism and capitalism as seen at her speech on November 4 at a mass demonstration at Alexanderplatz in Berlin marked a major contrast to Czechoslovakia's opposition leader, absurdist playwright Vaclav Havel, who would go on to lead his country on a clear path toward capitalist democracy. To be clear, there were assuredly many literary intellectuals in the other Soviet bloc states who acted similarly to East German writers, so it is imperative not to overstate the differences in each national context. Yet East Germany was distinct in two crucial ways from its socialist neighbors, and these differences had some impact on the attitudes and ideas of its intellectuals.

The two distinguishing contextual factors in East Germany were its relationship to the Nazi past and its geopolitical position vis-à-vis the Federal Republic. All communist regimes after the Second World War were founded on the basis of anti-fascism –

²³ Konrad Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78.; John Sanford, "The Opposition on the Eve of Revolution," in Margy Gerber and Roger Woods, eds. *The End of the GDR and the Problems of Integration: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth New Hampshire Symposia on the German Democratic Republic* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1993), 22-23; Mike Dennis, "Civil Society, Opposition, and the End of the GDR," in Gerber and Woods, 10. For the role of intellectuals in the ending of Communist rule in Poland, see Stokes, 122-27. For Czechoslovakia, see Aviezar Tucker, et al, "From Republican Virtue to Technology of Political Power: Three Episodes of Czech Nonpolitical Politics," *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 115 (3), 2000, 426-428.

expressed most powerfully in the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany – but in East Germany anti-fascism retained its urgency well after its magnetism had begun to fade in other Eastern European states.²⁴ Beyond a narrow definition meaning opposition to Nazism, communist anti-fascism came to signify a wide-ranging critique of Western Europe, particularly West Germany. The Soviets asserted that fascism was a militant outgrowth of capitalism; it was not a product of racist thinking or anti-Semitism, but rather of the desire of capitalists to safeguard and expand militarily their possessions and wealth. By extension, the only way to become truly anti-fascist was to embrace fascism's opposite, which, according to Marxist analysis, was not surprisingly Marxism itself. In other words, to fully eradicate fascism from one's country necessitated removing capitalism. Therefore, of the two Germanys, the only true anti-fascist German state was the GDR.²⁵ For a generation of writers and intellectuals who had come of age under Nazism and who had, if not directly participated in its crimes, had at least some firsthand awareness of the crimes committed in the name of the German people, and who had themselves suffered during Germany's collapse, communist anti-fascism retained an emotional grip that endured until the end of the GDR.²⁶

The other chief contextual difference between East Germany and the rest of the Soviet bloc was the existence of a "Near Other" in the form of West Germany. The *only*

²⁴ On the appeal of Communism after World War II, see Francois Furet *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 356, 381.

²⁵ Dan Diner, "On the Ideology of Anti-fascism," *New German Critique* 67 (1996): 124-25. See also John C. Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

²⁶ For more on the so-called "Hitler Youth" generation in the GDR, see Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and their Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

factor justifying the separate existence of an East German state distinct from the West Germany was ideology. Only in East Germany was a communist country constantly in direct and existential competition with a Western European state over living standards, athletic achievement, cultural production, industrial output, and a thousand other comparisons. Only in East Germany did critical intellectuals have a large, built-in receptive audience to their works – without translation – on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This fact enabled the SED to expel its most vocal critics easily to the West, forcing those who remained in East Germany to curtail their dissent somewhat lest they, too, face exile. Yet the presence of West German media was also inescapable in the GDR, especially with the advent of television; indeed, unlike in Hungary or Poland, in East Germany one could view West German television without having to overcome cultural or linguistic barriers.²⁷ The images of a more prosperous West German state bleeding through the airwaves could not escape the attention of East Germans, especially those who had grown up only knowing the GDR.

In sum, crucial similarities can be found across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union regarding the role played by critical intellectuals and writers, and these must be kept in mind when assessing the activities and ideas expressed by East German writers as part of a larger pattern of intellectual activity under communism. Yet one can also discern key differences in the East German context, differences that stamped the experience of GDR writers – and hence the activities and role played by their Writers Union – as distinctly East German.

²⁷ Barck, Classen, and Heimann, 220; Torpey, 8.

Historiography

While this dissertation contributes to several scholarly debates, it is particularly relevant to two areas. First is the study of East German writers and their place in the GDR. Second is scholarly literature on the nature of the East German dictatorship.

East German literature has been an exceptionally well-studied field, owing in part to the dynamics of the Cold War and a ready-made German-speaking audience for East German literature beyond the political borders of the GDR. In the popular press and amongst some scholars, the period after reunification witnessed what many have labeled the “*Literaturstreit*” or literary dispute which examined the very worth of a literature produced by writers collaborating with a dictatorship (with many critics rejecting East German literature on these grounds).²⁸ Thankfully, since 1989-90 more dispassionate assessments of East German literature have also emerged, the vast majority of which, written by literary scholars, have focused on more thoughtful ways to explain the connection between state socialism, writers, and the literature produced by the latter. Several of these studies have dealt with a variety of more political themes as well, from

²⁸ The *Literaturstreit* was sparked by the publication of Christa Wolf’s collection of short stories *Was Bleibt* in 1990 whereby the titular story depicted a day in the life of a prominent East German writer (clearly Christa Wolf herself) struggling to come to terms with her responsibilities to help ordinary East Germans through her literature all the while cracking under the strain of Stasi surveillance. The ensuing criticism of what some, Ulrich Greiner and Frank Schirrmacher prominent among them, saw as a pathetic attempt to justify the privileged lives of writers under socialism, degenerated quickly into an argument about the legitimacy of intellectual life under the SED. Opinions tended in two directions: on the one hand toward demonizing writers for supporting and reinforcing a dictatorship and for receiving privileges unavailable to most East Germans, tendencies that took on a shrill tone when it was revealed that several prominent writers – Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, and Sascha Anderson among them – had collaborated with the Stasi; on the other hand toward apologetics justifying intellectual complicity. For more on the *Literaturstreit*, see Günter Erbe, *Die verfeimte Moderne. Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem ‘Modernismus in Kulturpolitik, Literaturwissenschaft und Literatur der DDR* (Opladen: Westdeutscher-Verlag, 1993), Thomas Anz, ed. *“Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf”. Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland* (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991), and Lennart Koch, *Ästhetik der Moral bei Christa Wolf und Monika Maron. Der Literaturstreit von der Wende bis zum Ende der neunziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Fritz Lang, 2001). See also the conclusion to this volume.

expressions of dissent and protest in writing to articulations of feminist, environmental, and more subjective concerns.²⁹

Wolfgang Emmerich's *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (1996) is the standard interpretation of GDR literature, contextualizing literature within social and political developments in East Germany. Emmerich posits three periods of East German literature: pre-modern (or socialist realist), modern (with roots in utopian classicism), and post-modern (associated with dissident groups like the Prenzlauer Berg writers). In Emmerich's interpretation, the breakthrough of modernism was the driving force behind writers' emancipation from the narrow aesthetic and ideological dictates of socialist realism. As "pre-modern" East Germany became a modern industrial nation in the 1960s, artistic modernism emerged within GDR literature, fully breaking through in the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, Emmerich sets up modernism as a "counter-discourse" to pre-modern socialist realism. Utilizing modernism, the best works of literature grew ever more distant from socialist ideology, and instead focused on critiques of civilization (e.g., environmentalist, feminist, pacifist) similar to those of their western counterparts in the Federal Republic.³⁰ Emmerich's contextualization of literature in a social and political environment is a fruitful approach, but Julia Hell has wisely critiqued this model for its overly teleological focus while reminding us to regard socialist realist literature as a

²⁹ See, for example J.H. Reid, *Writing Without Taboos: The New East German Literature* (New York: Oswald Wolff Books, 1990); Kurt Adel, *Die Literatur der DDR: Ein Wintermärchen?* (Vienna: Universitäts Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1992); Thomas C. Fox, *Border Crossings: An Introduction to East German Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Robert Atkins and Martin Kane, eds., *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR 1979-1990* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997); Helmut Fuhrmann, *Vorausgeworfene Schatten: Literatur in der DDR, DDR in der Literatur: Interpretationen* (Würzburg, Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2003); Franz Hubert, ed., *Die Stasi in der deutschen Literatur* (Tübingen: Attempo Verlag, 2003).

³⁰ Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR, 1945-1989*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 2000), esp. 11-29.

valuable source for understanding East German literature more generally.³¹ David Bathrick, discussed in greater detail below, offers the most convincing alternative to Emmerich's conception, especially in complicating the over-simplistic dichotomy of an orthodox socialist discourse and a modernist counter-discourse.³² In all of these studies the primary concern is literature; thus these scholars generally do not deal explicitly with the Writers Union except in its role in promoting or condemning specific works deemed praiseworthy or problematic.

Beyond purely literary approaches, scholars have approached East German writers from a variety of perspectives. Some scholars have adopted the model of literary biography whereby literary works are still privileged but other sources are taken into account as well, including correspondence, interviews, essays, and public speeches of authors in order to probe such issues as dissent, interaction with the Stasi, censorship, and the relationship between literary intellectuals and their society.³³ Out of this type of studies, Angela Borgwardt's *Im Umgang mit der Macht* (2003) is the most promising; beginning with Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym, and Wolf Biermann, she constructs a

³¹ Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

³² Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*.

³³ See, for example Herbert Wiesner, ed. "*Literaturentwicklungsprozesse*": *Der Zensur der Literatur in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993); Colin B. Grant, *Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker's GDR* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995); Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman, eds., *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*; Gail Finney, *Christa Wolf* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999); Sander L. Gilman, *How I Became a German: Jurek Becker's Life in Five Worlds* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1999); Ian Wallace, ed. *Christa Wolf in Perspective* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994); Hajo Drees, *A Comprehensive Interpretation of the Life and Work of Christa Wolf, Twentieth-Century German Writer* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002); David Rock, *Jurek Becker: A Jew Who Became a German?* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2000); Christiane Zehl Romero, *Anna Seghers: eine Biographie 1900-1947* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000); idem, *Anna Seghers: eine Biographie 1947-1983* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2003); Peter Hutchinson, Reinhard K. Zachau, eds., *Stefan Heym: Socialist, Dissident Jew* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003); Peter Hutchinson, *Stefan Heym: The Perpetual Dissident* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), among many others.

typology of intellectual relationships with the state, tracing these writers' careers, works, and relationship with the SED in order to gauge issues of distance from the regime, dissent, and the strategies employed by writers in pursuing their ideological goals in East Germany.³⁴ In addition to biographical approaches, some academics have examined writers during specific time periods; the role of writers during crisis periods, for example, has received much attention, especially from the workers' revolt of 1953 through the dissolution of the GDR in 1989-90.³⁵ These "snapshot" approaches enable analytical depth by limiting the temporal focus, but also run the risk of losing an appreciation for change over time. Finally, other scholars, such as the invaluable contributions of Simone Barck, Martina Langermann, Siegfried Lokatis, and others, have focused on specific dimensions of literary production and intellectual interactions with the state, exploring, for example, the censorship system or anti-fascist discourse during the 1950s and 60s.³⁶ The common denominator in all of these works is literature, a justifiable choice given that literature was the primary medium through which these intellectuals communicated with the wider world.

Literature was not the only medium for doing so, however, even for writers.

Consequently, in all of these works the Writers Union itself has received far less

³⁴ See Borgwardt.

³⁵ See, for example, Siegfried Prokop, *Intellektuelle im Krisenjahr 1953: Enquete über die Lage der Intelligenz der DDR, Analyse und Dokumentation* (Badeweg: Schkeuditzer Buchverlag, 2003); Robert von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; David Rock, ed. *Voices in Times of Change: The Role of Writers, Opposition Movements, and the Churches in the Transformation of East Germany*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); and Robert Grünbaum, *Jenseit des Alltags: Die Schriftsteller der DDR und die Revolution von 1989/90* (Baden-Baden: NOMOS Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002).

³⁶ Simone Barck, Martina Langermann, and Siegfried Lokatis, "Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer": *Zensur-System und literarische Öffentlichkeiten in der DDR bis Ende der sechziger Jahre* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); Simone Barck, *Antifa-Geschichte(n): Eine literarische Spurensuche in der DDR der 1950er und 1960er* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 2003).

attention, a gap this dissertation seeks to address. In fact, beyond the 1950s and 1960s, few scholars have asked how it was, institutionally, that authors were able to create, publish, and speak about their literary works.³⁷ Several reference works contain descriptions of the Writers Union and its functions and studies of East German cultural policy have noted the importance of the Writers Union in complying with or contesting various tenets of East German cultural policy. Yet these works, though of use for background knowledge, typically treat the Schriftstellerverband only briefly or subsume it within a larger discussion of GDR *Kulturpolitik*.³⁸ There has in fact only been one monograph to address the Writers Union as its primary focus: Sabine Pamperrien's *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: Der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistischen Ideologie* (2004). Pamperrien's book, while offering an important overview of the functions of the Writers Union, serves mainly as an introduction to the useful collection of edited documents presented in the last third of the book. She offers a cursory summary of the 1970s and 1980s, providing detail only for the SV's relationship with its West German counterpart and how the SED sought to influence that relationship. By focusing on the role of ideology in understanding the Writers Union, she succeeds in highlighting one of its animating features, but does not sufficiently explore other factors

³⁷ The works of Barck, Langermann, and Lokatis mentioned above are exceptions in that they have an institutional focus. A nuanced approach examining East German historians, including their institutional context in the 1950s and 1960s, is found in Martin Sabrow, *Das Diktat des Konsenses. Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR 1949-1969* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001).

³⁸ See Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR, 1945-1990* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik Claus-Peter von Nottbeck, 1995); Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan, Andreas Herbst, Christine Krauss, Daniel Küchenmeister, Detlef Nakath, eds. *Die Parteien und Organisationen der DDR: Ein Handbuch* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2002); Rüdiger Henkel, ed. *Im Dienste der Staatspartei: Über Parteien und Organisationen der DDR* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1994); Günther Rüther, ed., *Literatur in der Diktatur: Schreiben im Nationalsozialismus und DDR-Sozialismus* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997).

impacting life within the union.³⁹ Carsten Gansel's *Parlament des Geistes* (1996) is also worth mentioning here. Gansel's focus is the division of the German literature community after World War II, with particular emphasis on the Soviet zone. The Writers Union and other institutions of culture therefore play large parts in his analysis. His book is irreplaceable background given the differences in time periods between our two studies. With the broad task he sets out for himself, he focuses on elites out of necessity, leaving a gap in our understanding of how the Writers Union functioned as both a place for prominent writers and lesser-known authors to interact.⁴⁰

Hence to date there has not been an academic study of the Writers Union across multiple analytical dimensions and over several decades. When it is mentioned, the Writers Union is often presented as if it were unidimensional – an instrument of control against which more independent-minded writers struggled as they sought to expand the boundaries of free speech. To be sure, the Schriftstellerverband did play such a role; perhaps this was the primary part it played in the SED's cultural apparatus, and certainly at its most basic level this was one of the main roles East German officials expected it to fulfill. Yet, what is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the functions and significance of the Writers Union across a variety of dimensions, not simply as a means to curtail dissent. The Writers Union should be seen as a crucial site of interaction, however asymmetrical, between writers and rulers, one which epitomized the fundamental tension between the two main functions of East German writers as set down

³⁹ Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistischen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004).

⁴⁰ Carsten Gansel, *Parlament des Geistes: Literatur zwischen Hoffnung und Repression, 1945-1961* (Berlin: BasisDruck Verlag GmbH, 1996).

by the SED. Writers were simultaneously restricted in their literary style, subject matter, and mission, yet were empowered to speak about vital socialist issues in a public manner, tasks for which the Schriftstellerverband held central importance. The Writers Union, then, was indeed an instrument of control. Yet it was also a tool for navigating a complex bureaucratic and oppressive system, one that could be used both to one's own benefit but also to challenge the very system to which the association granted access.

More broadly, this dissertation addresses literature concerning the nature of the East German dictatorship. Following reunification in 1990, scholars have attempted to characterize the nature of the East German dictatorship in several ways. Many observers initially drew comparisons between the GDR and the Hitler regime, highlighting the similarities between the two dictatorships through totalitarian theory. In these approaches, the repressive aspects of the regime were privileged and the central SED leadership was seen as the main focus for understanding the broader society.⁴¹ Yet totalitarian approaches, by focusing on institutions and tactics of control and repression, fail to account for the evolution of the GDR beyond Stalinism in the 1960s when relative stability (uncharacteristic of totalitarian regimes) set in and less brutal, more subtle means of control and coercion were introduced along with material goods in exchange for

⁴¹ For example, see Uwe Thaysen, "Rückzug, Verschleierung – und Rückkehr? Das Meisterstück der Regierung Modrow im Transformationsprozeß der DDR," *Recht und Politik* 30 (1994); Eckhard Jesse, "War die DDR totalitär?" in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* B 40, no. 9 (1994): 12-23; Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat: Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949-1990* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998). For an excellent overview of the various post-reunification characterizations of the East German dictatorship, see Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 19-43; Konrad H. Jarausch, "Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch, trans. Eve Duffy (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 3-16; Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 5-17; Axel Fair-Schulz, *Loyal Subversion: East Germany and its Bildungsbürgerlich Marxist Intellectuals* (Berlin: Trafo Verlagsgruppe, 2009), 15-50.

compliance. Moreover, the totalitarian model is not well-suited to taking the agency of ordinary East Germans into account, either in accommodating or resisting the regime, or the SED's delicate and ever-evolving balance between compromise and coercion. In short, totalitarian conceptions of the GDR, while capturing its authoritarian dimensions, cannot adequately explain either the GDR's stability over forty years or the level of participation of the populace in the dictatorship.⁴²

In response to these shortcomings, by the late 1990s other historians shifted beyond totalitarian characterizations to a variety of other approaches. One suggestion by Jürgen Kocka and others has been that of a “modern” dictatorship. These scholars tend to stress the “modern” features of East Germany: its bureaucratic administration, mass party apparatus, and sophisticated methods of surveillance and control.⁴³ Connected with this notion are two ideas advanced by Kocka and Alf Lüdtke, respectively: the GDR as a “*durchherrschte Gesellschaft*” (thoroughly ruled society) and *Eigen-Sinn* (self-directedness, self meanings, or a determination to realize one's own aims).⁴⁴ The concept of a *durchherrschte Gesellschaft* registers the large gap between the state's desire for total control and the limits to actually achieving it. In this sense, the modern dictatorship concept overcomes a crucial difficulty with the totalitarian model. The notion of *Eigen-Sinn* has been especially helpful in analyzing everyday life under the dictatorship and has

⁴² Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise*, 5-8.

⁴³ For example, see Jürgen Kocka, “The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship,” in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 17-28.

⁴⁴ See Jürgen Kocka, “Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaeble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1994), 547-54; Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrung und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlage, 1993); Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

enabled scholars to better capture the complexity of social structures and daily compromises made by East Germans as they navigated the system while trying to lead their own lives. The discrepancy between aspirations for total control and the practical limits to these goals is a fruitful conceptualization for understanding the spaces created within the Writers Union for intellectual autonomy, despite the SED's opposition. At the same time, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* is useful for understanding writers' individual motivations and the ways in which they might affirm or undermine SED policies (or both simultaneously). However, while the GDR was relatively modern vis-à-vis its Soviet bloc neighbors in terms of its relatively developed economy, level of gender equality, and scientific/technological progress, on many of these criteria it was much less modern than states in the West. Moreover, these approaches tend to adhere to a confrontational models pitting the SED against the people and thus downplaying mutual compromises between the two which enabled the system to operate.⁴⁵

The seemingly contradictory nature of the GDR has inspired a third conceptualization: Konrad Jarausch's notion of a "welfare" dictatorship or *Fürsorgediktatur*. This term encapsulates the glaring contradiction between the state's rhetoric of emancipation and equality and its Stalinist practices. It also signifies those aspects of the system that generated widespread tolerance (if not loyalty) for the regime over several decades, yet also offers hints as to the reasons for the state's sudden collapse in 1989-90 due to the crumbling of the tenuous balance between these conflicting elements.⁴⁶ A related concept is Dorothee Wierling's notion of *Erziehungsdiktatur*

⁴⁵ Ross, 30-31; Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise*, 8-9; Fair-Schulz, 21-24.

⁴⁶ Konrad H. Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship," in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 58-64.

(educational dictatorship). By this, Wierling signifies the centrality of education in the GDR, especially from the leadership generation (born before or around World War I) to the Hitler Youth generation (born in the 1920s), with the latter often feeling perpetually inadequate for having been born too late to become that which they most revered – anti-fascist fighters. Under the dictatorship, “education” was not simply in the formal sense of schools and universities, but also political education and self-education: “Thus, the workers’ brigades that were propagated in the late 1950s were not only seen as units of collective work, but also as instruments of proletarian self-education and socialist culture.”⁴⁷ An analysis of the Writers Union supports these approaches of the GDR in several ways. The Schriftstellerverband was a vehicle for repressive cultural policy while also providing benefits to its members, both material and intellectual. Moreover, the group norms established within the union were aimed at educating members about Party discipline and proper professional sensibilities for socialist writers. Thus, this project elaborates on this concept’s implications in terms of cultural policy and intellectual life.

Finally, other scholars have recently adopted what Mary Fulbrook has designated as a “normalization” approach to the GDR. Fulbrook employs the concept of “normalization” to address the tendency of scholars of East Germany to focus on its beginning and ending while skimming its middle decades. She uses the term as an ideal-type analytical category rather than as a descriptive phrase, considering it useful “to explore questions concerning the relative stabilisation of domestic political structures and processes, the degrees of routinisation and predictability of everyday practices, and to

⁴⁷ Dorothee Wierling, “The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR: Insecurities, Ambitions and Dilemmas,” in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 307-324: 318; idem., “Die Jugend als innerer Feind. Konflikte in der Erziehungsdiktatur der sechziger Jahre,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Harmtut Kaelbe, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 404-425.

examine, with an anthropological sensitivity, patterns and variations in widespread conceptions of what is held to be ‘normal.’” As a system becomes more stable, there is an increased chance it becomes routine and hence predictable, all of which encourages individuals to learn the written and unwritten rules of the game and how best to exploit them to one’s personal advantage. In terms of specific applicability to the GDR, the bases for a degree of normalization, Fulbrook argues, were the overcoming of the June 1953 worker uprising, the stabilization of the economy and the settling of the national question after the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the gradual decline in the use of violence by the state in favor of a more subtle means of repression via the Stasi, and the increasing number of citizens who served as functionaries or joined mass organizations, which enabled many people to become part of how the regime operated. In the latter case, local functionaries formed interrelationships between their “constituents” and the middle level of the bureaucracy, and in fact often represented those below them to those above, thus blurring any sharp distinctions between “state” and “society.” This normalization broke down by the late 1980s, however, when economic decline set in and political destabilization occurred as a result.⁴⁸

This project demonstrates the strengths and limits of applying “normalization” as an analytical tool to the Writers Union. After the uncertainty of the 1940s and 1950s, by the 1960s the SV had established a degree of stability, especially after Gerhard Henniger

⁴⁸ Mary Fulbrook, “The Concept of ‘Normalisation’ and the GDR in Comparative Perspective,” in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The ‘Normalisation of Rule’?* ed. idem. (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 1-30: 13. For scholars drawing on the concept of normalization, see the rest of the chapters in this volume as well as Madarász *Conflict and Compromise*; idem, *Working in East Germany: Normality in a Socialist Dictatorship 1961-79* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Andrew I. Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

became First Secretary in 1966 and with Honecker's promise of "no taboos" in 1971. During the 1970s and 1980s, members learned the rules of the game in procuring socioeconomic benefits, advancing personal and ideological interests, and defining their societal mission as public intellectuals. The union also complicated the state-writers dichotomy because in many ways their interests were interlinked. SED agents worked closely with the Writers Union on a number of levels, from local district meetings to consultations between Honecker and union leaders. Moreover, many writers were Party members, including local Party leaders and in a very few cases, members of the Central Committee. The concept cannot be taken too far for the Writers Union, though, because, at least within the union, there were both stable and unstable periods instead of one or the other for a long time. In other words, while members did make compromises and achieve stability in their relationship with the SED, these compromises were never able to become permanent. Moreover, "normalization" as a concept can run the risk of overstating the degree to which the GDR was a "participatory dictatorship."⁴⁹ A great many people did participate in the dictatorship, but the coercive power of the SED meant that individuals or even groups had limited power to force the state to change.

Theory and Methods

In addition to relevant historiography, this project derives its methods from theoretical approaches offered by sociology, political science, and literary studies. In utilizing these varied approaches, it asks two main questions. First, how did the Writers Union as an institution affect the ideas and behavior of its members, and how did these

⁴⁹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 12.

members in turn interact with and shape the institutional structures and policies of the union? Second, how did intellectual life function in the GDR as a communist dictatorship?

In answering the first question, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that “any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of ‘legitimizing discourses,’ which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies.”⁵⁰ Since the nineteenth century, academic sociologists and political scientists have considered institutions to be important subjects for systematic exploration and categorization in order to better understand how societies and political systems function. Whereas “old institutionalism” was concerned primarily with political institutions (the material structures of the state or government), in the 1970s and 1980s a “new institutionalism” developed among political scientists and sociologists wishing to transcend this narrow focus. For example, political scientist B. Guy defines four key features for this expanded understanding of institutions. First, an institution is a structural feature of society or a polity, whether formal (a parliament or government agency) or informal (shared norms or loose networks of interaction). Second, institutions have a measure of stability over time. Third, they must affect individual behavior of members; i.e., members must confer some level of importance to participating in the institution. Finally, institutions must generate a sense of shared values and meaning for members.⁵¹ Importantly, there are actually four or

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 188.

⁵¹ B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The ‘New Institutionalism’* (London: Continuum, 2005), 1-19. Fellow political scientist André Lecours, agreeing with Kathleen Thelen, argues that differences in the definition of institutions are the most important divide among practitioners of the “new

more different strands of “new institutionalism” theory, with each developing independently of one another. Of these, the most widely practiced three are: historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism (sometimes referred to as normative institutionalism).⁵²

With historical institutionalism, political scientists are concerned with organizations and the rules governing them and their members, especially the impact that policy and structural choices taken early on in an institution’s history have on member behavior in the long-term. Scholars falling under this category employ a broad range of conceptions for the relationship between institutions and behavior, but the main distinguishing characteristic of their approach stems from the concept of “path dependency.” By the latter, practitioners mean the tendency of policies, norms, and patterns of behavior, once established within an institution, to become rigid, thus resulting in potential inefficiencies and unintended consequences and creating a significant impediment to institutional change.⁵³

institutionalism,” with some cleaving to the traditional, materialist understanding and others embracing a broader definition based on norms and values. This dissertation adopts this latter, more expansive definition even though, strictly speaking, the Writers Union falls under the traditional sense of the term. See André Lecours, ed., *New Institutionalism: Theory and analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 6-8.

⁵² Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* XLIV (1996): 936-57. B. Guy Peters, in contrast, identifies seven types of new institutionalism – sociological, rational choice, historical, normative, empirical, international, and societal institutionalisms – although Hall and Taylor’s model thus far has been more enduring. See Peters, *Institutional Theory*.

⁵³ Hall and Taylor, “Political Science,” 936-42, 938. See also Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 95-98; Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge, UK, 1994); Paul Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 251-67; Kathleen Thelen, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics,” *Annual Reviews in Political Science* 2 (1999): 369-404; idem., “How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative-Historical Analysis,” in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (New York, 2002), 208-40; Peters, *Institutional Theory*, 71-86.

Rational choice institutionalism, also developed by political scientists, has four main assumptions about the behavior of individuals. First, individual actors will always seek to make the most rational choice of the options they face. Second, politics result from continual “collective action dilemmas” whereby individuals seeking to attain their own goals will, in the absence of institutional guarantees about the behavior of others, tend to create suboptimal outcomes for the whole. Third, an individual is motivated by strategic calculations about how others will behave, relying on institutions to structure these interactions so as to guarantee more favorable group outcomes. Fourth, institutions are founded in order to achieve a certain value realized in the institution’s function. Norms and values of institutions do not guide individual behavior; instead, behavior is influenced by the rules and incentives provided by the institution so as to help members maximize achievement of goals they themselves define.⁵⁴

Sociological institutionalism differs from the others in seeking to accommodate the role of culture in shaping institutional structures rather than narrowly relying on rationality as an explanatory factor. It defines institutions in a much broader way than political scientists, including “not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action.” This expansive definition avoids the tendency of political science to treat structure and culture as distinct from one another within institutions. It views individual behavior as affected by a range of behavioral norms provided by the institution; in this view, institutions affect how the individual interprets the problem at

⁵⁴ Hall and Taylor, “Political Science,” 942-46. See also Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland, eds., *Foundations of Social Choice Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Russell Hardin, *Collective Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982); Peters, *Institutional Theory*, 47-70.

hand and the range of choices under consideration (even if the ultimate decision is based upon purely rational criteria). Following from this assumption, institutions, in their cultural influence, condition how individuals create meaning in their lives and thus shape their identities in powerful ways. Furthermore, by acting in the manner dictated by institutional conventions, individuals have their actions affirmed as legitimate while at the same time reinforcing the conventions by having enacted them. Finally, the origin of institutional forms as well as changes can be understood not as attempts to achieve specific ends more efficiently, but rather to adopt forms and practices which are able to achieve values held in high esteem in their wider cultural environment.⁵⁵

More recently, political scientist Vivien A. Schmidt and others have put forward a fourth model of new institutionalism known as “constructivist” or “discursive institutionalism.” This approach examines the role of ideas and language in shaping institutions and member behavior, and has four main ideas. First, its primary focus is on ideas and discourse, with the latter defined as the content or form of ideas as well as the

⁵⁵ Hall and Taylor, “Political Science,” 946-50: 947. See also James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1989); Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Peters, *Institutional Theory*, 25-46. For a related concept, see Bourdieu’s discussion of *habitus*, which he defines as “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action.” *Habitus*, this system of durable dispositions, equips the individual with practices to help him or her cope with “unforeseen and ever-changing situations.” Thus *habitus* approximates the prescribed behavioral norms generated by institutions, similarly constraining the range of options considered and the likely choice in decision making. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72-95: 72. Similarly, British cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that institutions (defined as “legitimized social grouping(s)”), in order to achieve stability, must first achieve legitimacy, and this latter goal is achieved by grounding the institution in nature and reason. This conferring of legitimacy creates an understanding among members that the institution and the rules, categories of thought, and identities it generates are likewise natural and reasonable, thus lending them an air of sacredness in the process. Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 21-29, 45-53, 111-28: 46.

context and process through which they are communicated. Second, it sees institutions as constraining the actions of individuals while at the same time recognizing that they are created and changeable by individuals. Following from this understanding, practitioners derive a third feature whereby discourse within the institution is understood as something which “enables agents to think, speak, and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, to deliberate about institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them.” In other words, while individuals are subjected to discursive rules and norms framed by the institutional context, they have the ability to consciously reflect on these processes, and can participate in that discourse in order to try to change it. Fourth, it places greater emphasis on dynamism than the other models of new institutionalism. Especially in contrast with historical institutionalism, which tends to explain institutional change as a product of exogenous “great transformations,” discursive institutionalism accommodates evolutionary change within institutions as well.⁵⁶

While not all aspects of these approaches are appropriate to the study of the Writers Union, a number of theoretical considerations are useful in guiding this project’s methods. From historical institutionalism, it probes path-dependent decisions so as to understand the persistence of certain policies or behavioral norms within the organization over time, though one needs to look elsewhere for explanations of change. Rational choice institutionalism will help in this regard; while ill-suited to unpacking cultural values conditioning member behavior, this approach lends an appreciation for the role of human agency in political decisions and outcomes. Sociological institutionalism can

⁵⁶ Vivien A. Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 303-26: 314.

address the previous approach's neglect of culture by explicitly investigating the ways in which institutional cultures circumscribe not only member behavior but even the range of options considered as well as the connection between institutions and their wider context. This approach also suggests how an institution is a space for a group to create a distinct identity, although sociological institutionalism tends to neglect the active role members take in shaping or contesting the established group identity. To overcome this problem, discursive institutionalism provides a model for examining how and why certain ideas are adopted by institutions while others are not, how ideas relate to actions, how language is used to persuade in internal debates, how values and interests are produced and re-produced within the institution, and how and why institutional history and culture change.

Turning to the second guiding question about intellectual life under communist dictatorships, we have already seen the many ways in which historians have explored writers in East Germany. Here we will elaborate on David Bathrick's *The Powers of Speech*, which yields stimulating theoretical insights to the study of the Writers Union.

Applying theorists such as Michel Foucault, Dominick LaCapra, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, and Jürgen Habermas to East German writers is German literary scholar David Bathrick in *The Powers of Speech* (1995). Bathrick seeks to understand writers "[a]s spokespeople and representatives for a struggle to enlarge and enhance the freedoms of speech," and how "their very existence was enabled by, indebted to, and an expression of power." Bathrick is thus interested in writers who both participated in the official socialist public sphere (created and controlled by the SED) and worked to alter it. Even if one wanted to critique the system, one could do so only by partaking in it. Further

elaborating on this point, Bathrick explains how the official discourse on socialism was premised on a series of either-or binaries, and any equivocation was consequently viewed as suspect by the SED. Yet many authors with no aspiration to challenge fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles unintentionally subverted this “monomsemic” official discourse, transforming it into a “polysemic” mode of address because of the “multiplicity of meanings” they created. Thus by rewriting key “master codes” of the SED’s official discourse, such as adopting “modernist” literary techniques (e.g., the use of allegorical references, folklore, or mythology) which increasingly destabilized the established socialist realist style of literature, writers problematized that discourse. The key point is that these actions were neither purely subversive nor purely affirmative of the official discourse; they were a mix of both. This blurring of a monosemic public space in East Germany was furthered by the SED’s rapprochement with the Protestant Church in the 1970s as civil rights movements developed within their quasi-protected spaces in the 1980s around issues of peace, environmentalism, feminism, and freedom of speech. Thus an alternative public sphere emerged to challenge the one created by the SED, complementing the efforts by writers to destabilize the monosemic discourse on socialism from within.⁵⁷ Bathrick thus presents writers who, by participating in the official discourse on socialism, succeeded in pluralizing its meaning and thus ultimately destabilized the linguistic power system from which the SED drew its legitimacy.

Crucial to Bathrick’s arguments is his delineation of three public spheres [Öffentlichkeiten] in East Germany: 1) the official public sphere controlled by the SED, 2) information provided by West German media, and 3) “unofficial public enclaves or

⁵⁷ Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, 1-24, 129-51, 168-69.

counterofficial voices” seeking to create dialogue with official voices. Literature, or what Bathrick calls the “literary public sphere,” fell within the first category. It was this literary public sphere, he argues, where many of the open demands for solutions to the GDR’s most pressing problems were first articulated. Because literature and art were so important to legitimating the state and socializing East Germans, the critical discourse which developed in these spaces had an important impact within the country. But what does Bathrick mean by the “socialist public sphere”? He is careful to distinguish his concept from the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, which Bathrick describes as “a realm of social life in which public opinion and a public body can be formed.”⁵⁸ This sphere, where rational and critical dialogue about all aspects of public life could occur, required freedom of assembly, association, and speech, all of which were lacking in the GDR. It is therefore unsurprising that opposition groups emerged in the 1980s outside of the official public sphere since the latter was controlled by the SED. Yet at the same time, the SED, in a desperate bid to recoup legitimacy, itself dissolved the binary structures undergirding the cultural policy system by incorporating almost every German cultural heritage into the East German tradition, including figures previously deemed “reactionary” such as Frederick the Great, Nietzsche, or Martin Luther. With the usual boundary markers for acceptable discourse no longer in place, writers increasingly invented their own standards and stood up to censors, leading to a spate of novels openly defying previous content norms. In other words, by the late 1980s these authors had

⁵⁸ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

succeeded in opening up the socialist public sphere to become more akin to a Habermasian critical public sphere.⁵⁹

Bathrick's approach is not without problems in terms of its application to this project. Though employing a nuanced understanding of their role within East Germany, Bathrick's use of the term "literary opposition" to describe those authors engaged in reinscribing various "master plots" of official discourse remains problematic in the sense that many of the artists he labels as such would never have used the term to describe themselves. At least here, Axel Fair-Schulz's idea of "loyal subversion" is more appropriate, meaning that they were not dissidents but they were critical, unintentionally destabilizing the system they merely sought to reform.⁶⁰ As a literary scholar, Bathrick understandably focuses primarily on elite- and theoretical-level discussions of literary texts and their reception rather than adopting a broader approach which takes under consideration both "average" writers and the social background supporting their literary activities. More importantly, Bathrick barely mentions the Writers Union as a crucial site mediating writers' participation in the socialist public sphere. With these concerns aside, however, *The Powers of Speech* provides an apt model for exploring the place of writers in official socialist public sphere via the Schriftstellerverband, especially in allowing a nuanced exploration of writers' roles as public intellectuals within socialism. His model thus helps us investigate both writers' engagement with the regime and the complications of official discourse on socialism that they helped create.

⁵⁹ Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, 27-56.

⁶⁰ See Fair-Schulz.

In view of this theoretical grounding, this project utilizes a variety of sources to explore the two focal points identified above, namely the significance of the Writers Union as a professional institution for the lives of its members, and the role of East German writers as public intellectuals under a socialist dictatorship. In order to scrutinize the way the Writers Union operated as an institution, it has been necessary to consider documents about the organization's functioning. Here three categories of documents were considered. First are sources on socioeconomic benefits and privileges (such as the ability to travel to the West or receive low-interest loans) conferred upon members by dint of belonging to the union. These also include correspondence between the SV's leadership and writers haggling or complaining about these measures. Second are reports for meetings within the association at both the central and local levels so as to examine how the union functioned in the lives of its members, how decisions were made, or how behavior at these meetings was impacted by institutional norms and values. Third are documents related to the planning, execution, and reflection upon the national congresses of the Writers Union (held every four to five years), including press coverage as well as instructions and appraisals by the SED. These latter sources elucidate the extent to which congresses were coordinated and orchestrated by the SV and the SED.

Many of these same categories of sources can be utilized to analyze intellectual life under the East German dictatorship, but three additional categories were also consulted. First are documents produced by or intended for the SED, especially in the form of reports and correspondence about the union's activities. These allow an exploration of the degree of oversight or repression enacted by the SED over the union's activities as well as the compromises and conflict between the regime and the SV

members. Second are reports of meetings or correspondence between the Writers Union and other organizations inside East Germany as well as beyond its borders. These records illustrate authors participating in a larger intellectual community, using the union to provide the opportunity to do so. In meeting summaries, in correspondence, in memos to the SED about these activities, and in Stasi reports monitoring international exchanges, one can grasp the truly intra- and international reach of the Writers Union, probing how well its activities fit into its overall sense of purpose and agenda. Third are those works of literature which aroused the greatest discussion (both in terms of praise and censure) within the SV and its literary magazine, *Neue deutsche Literatur* (New German Literature). These books enable an analysis not only of the beliefs espoused by the authors of said texts regarding socialism and the GDR, but also an examination of the ways in which the Writers Union enabled and policed artistic expression more generally. While this dissertation does not focus primarily on the literary works, literature was nonetheless where most writers expressed their ideas about socialism, and indeed one major function of the Writers Union, at least as far as its members were concerned, was to ensure that members had every opportunity to publish their work in East Germany.

This dissertation is based primarily on sources from four archival repositories. The Archives of the Academy of the Arts (*Akademie der Künste*), housing most internal Writers Union documents along with correspondence between the union and other government bodies and societal organizations; the Archives of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the German Federal Archives (*Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv*), featuring files generated by and for the SED, publishers, and other organizations such as the FDGB; the State Archives of

Berlin (*Landesarchiv Berlin*), holding files on the Writers Union's Berlin district branch; and the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (*Bundesbeauftragte für die Stasi-Unterlagen*), containing files of the Ministry for State Security. Beyond these documents, many published materials and periodicals were also utilized, including *Neues Deutschland* (New Germany - the main East German daily paper), *Neue deutsche Literatur* and other literary magazines, West German periodicals, collections of edited SED cultural policy documents, and published transcripts of SV national congresses. In addition to printed material, I conducted four interviews with former Writers Union members which have helped the conceptualization of this project immensely.⁶¹

It is perhaps also a wise idea to explain briefly what this dissertation does not intend to address in the succeeding chapters. The most conspicuous omission has been files from the Stasi (Staatssicherheitsdienst or State Security Service), the East German secret police. It is perhaps true that no analysis of the Writers Union as a site of interaction between writers and state can be complete without examining the impact of this most sinister of the SED's tools to coerce and harass writers to tow the Party line;

⁶¹ Interviews were conducted in June 2007 with Rainer Kirsch, Joachim Walther, John Erpenbeck, and Waldtraut Lewin. These four offer differing perspectives on the Writers Union: none had unproblematic relationships with the SED and all ran into some difficulty with the association in the 1970s. Yet from the early 1980s Erpenbeck was involved in important leadership bodies and after 1987 he and Lewin were members of the SV's Presidium. Kirsch, sanctioned by the state for controversial works during the 1970s, became the final president of the Schriftstellerverband after the 1989 upheaval and Walther, after spending most of the 1980s in internal exile, returned in 1989 to try to force the SV to confront its history of oppressive actions vis-à-vis troublesome writers. Each interviewee was asked about their relationship with the Writers Union, how important the association was for their intellectual and social life in East Germany, and their opinions of the leadership of the Schriftstellerverband. They were also asked about controversial periods in SV history (including the post-Biermann expulsions) and about their involvement in major Writers Union initiatives such as the 1980s peace campaign. Finally, they were asked about the SV during the 1989-1990 East German revolution and the efforts (or lack thereof) of the institution to come to terms with its own past and the failed attempt to democratize itself in a newly reunified Germany. Such interviews shed light as to whether writers consciously used the SV to consent to or challenge government policies while also probing the place their activities in the union had within the larger range of their actions within the GDR.

indeed, it is significant that many of the leading figures in the Writers Union were at one time or another either *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IMs or unofficial collaborators) with the Stasi or victims of surveillance (several were both).⁶² The files of the Stasi have been only selectively examined for this dissertation, drawing on published collections of documents and also on files relating to public readings and reactions to writers congresses within the framework of the Writers Union.⁶³ There exists some secondary work on the Stasi's involvement in the East German literary scene which I rely upon in the chapters to follow.⁶⁴ However, the primary focus of this dissertation is on public statements by East German authors, statements that while possibly influenced by either Stasi harassment or tainted by Stasi complicity, nonetheless on occasion challenged official discursive constraints and helped to expand public discussion of key issues relating to socialism. What is of greatest interest is not the motivation behind such statements per se, but the content therein, and while the Stasi and other governmental pressures undoubtedly influenced that content in perceptible and imperceptible ways, it is less important *why* these statements were articulated than the ways in which they participated in and reproduced the official discourse on socialism, either reinforcing official limits on speech or challenging them, or in some cases both.

⁶² For example, Hermann Kant (President of the SV 1978-1989), Gerhard Henniger (longtime First Secretary), and Karla Dyck (a key member in the SV Secretariat for many years) were all active as IMs for lengthy periods.

⁶³ See, for example, Karl Corino, ed., *Die Akte Kant: IM "Martin", die Stasi und die Literatur in Ost und West* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1995) for a selection of Hermann Kant's files and also Pamperien, which contains, among other published sources, some Stasi files relating to the international activities of the Schriftstellerverband.

⁶⁴ Most important is Joachim Walther, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur: Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1996). Walther himself was a victim of Stasi surveillance and spent several years in the 1980s in "internal exile", moving to the countryside away from his registered SV branch in Berlin. See also Corino.

Organization

The first chapter looks at a variety of attempts to organize German authors into a professional association from the Wilhelmine period through the end of Ulbricht's reign in East Germany. In doing so, it explores the various lessons German writers learned over the course of a century in terms of how they should organize themselves, including the willingness to draw on state power to restrict the free market for books and to embrace authoritarian ideologies.

The second chapter is thematic, exploring the socioeconomic functions of the Writers Union from 1971 through 1990. Members requested and received a wide variety of goods and services from the Writers Union, including aid in disputes with publishers, organizing publicity events, facilitating foreign travel, assisting with the acquisition of cars or housing, and even aid in legal disputes having nothing to do with the author's literary career. In analyzing the benefits offered by the Writers Union as well as the requests and complaints by its members about what they did or did not receive, one observes that while the state, through the Writers Union, ultimately failed to establish widespread enthusiasm for the dictatorship or even satisfaction with the status quo, it did generate a general dependence among many writers upon the state as the primary means of securing their careers, livelihood, and prestige.

Beginning with the third chapter, the dissertation shifts its focus back to chronology. To this end, it scrutinizes the Schriftstellerverband during the first five years of Erich Honecker's tenure as SED leader, 1971-75. It was in this period when, promised by Honecker that there would be "no taboos" in literature, many writers began

to speak more openly through their literature and the Writers Union about reforming current governmental policies. By mid-decade the limits of the SED's tolerance were becoming apparent, and several authors simultaneously grew disenchanted with what they viewed yet another failed attempt at reform.

The fourth chapter traces the period of the most serious and open conflict within the East German literary community since the founding of the GDR. From 1976 through 1979 the regime utilized the Writers Union and key writers such as Hermann Kant to chastise, ban from publication, and revoke the membership of writers whose comments about the regime or real existing socialism were deemed too critical or were articulated in forums considered hostile to the East German state (e.g., in the West German press). Starting with the expulsion of Wolf Biermann from the country in 1976, dozens of writers expressed grave concerns with their government's practices and many of them were reprimanded by the SED and Writers Union, culminating in 1979 with the expulsions of Stefan Heym and eight other writers. The leaders of the Writers Union claimed that disagreements were still welcome and encouraged; however, these disagreements needed to be expressed *within* the Schriftstellerverband and not outside it. Those who transgressed these norms were barred from participating in the conversation.

Chapter Five explores the period 1980 through 1989 when, encouraged by the SED, the Writers Union took an active lead in the coordination and promotion of the peace movement (directed against the deployment of American nuclear missiles in West Germany) within the GDR and internationally among other socialist writers unions. In doing so, the SV enabled authors to reassert their critical voices publicly around an uncontroversial but vital issue only a short time after their ability to comment on

socialism had been seriously restricted. The Writers Union thus shifted its focus from repressing dissenting voices to allowing its members to express themselves within prescribed discursive boundaries. However, now that writers could discuss the threat of world destruction through (Western) nuclear weapons, it was a short leap to raising concerns about the threat of world destruction through environmental degradation, patriarchy, and human rights abuses, all of which implicated East Germany. These trends, begun in the early 1980s, broke through after Gorbachev's policies inspired a new openness regarding problems in communist countries.

The final chapter follows the new-found activism of writers into and beyond the 1989-90 East German revolution that saw a brief flickering of hope for a reformed socialism but culminated with German unification and the embitterment of many writers. While many writers were active in the 1989 revolution, as a whole the Writers Union restricted its actions to press declarations. With unprecedented openness in GDR society, the SV could no longer exercise its gatekeeper function. As such, the association became little more than a bankrupt professional organization in this period, an irreversible trend that made continuing the union infeasible after German unification occurred in 1990.

This study therefore sheds light on the Writers Union as a major locus of interaction between writers (as a grouping of public intellectuals) and the SED who wished to control the content of the speech and works of those intellectuals. Though the Schriftstellerverband was created as an institution of control, and though this dimension remained primary for the remainder of its existence, the association nonetheless also provided writers with numerous opportunities to speak publicly about the regime and its socialist policies. There were always powerful disincentives to use these occasions to

articulate criticisms, meaning that the Writers Union served as a filter to most outright dissent among those writers who wished to continue to receive the benefits of association membership. Many writers became adept at working within the system, though, using the rhetoric of the regime and of the leadership of the Writers Union itself to insulate their carefully-worded critiques from state reprisal. Nonetheless, these more critical authors remained a minority within the union as the majority of members, regardless of political beliefs, opted not to rock the boat

By the late 1980s, however, writers dissatisfied with certain aspects of real existing socialism had found new ways to express their concerns. Knowing the consequences of airing their grievances in the Western press, writers spoke out through their union. To be sure, these literary intellectuals were not the only reason for the expansion of acceptable public discourse on socialism. The push for greater intellectual freedom came from many intellectual groups in the GDR and the general climate of growing openness within communism must be credited primarily to the efforts of Soviet leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev and dissident intellectuals in the wider Eastern bloc, such as Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia or Adam Michnik in Poland. Nonetheless, given the importance of writers as public intellectuals in the GDR both as spokespeople for their voiceless readers and as internationally recognized participants in the European peace movement, the significance of East German literati in expanding the limits of public discourse on socialism should not be underestimated. And while many writers saw their literature as the principal method for engaging and contributing to a public discourse on socialism, a crucial component of their ability to publish was their membership in the Writers Union, membership which also afforded them numerous

opportunities to speak or write about their views in an otherwise closed society. The Writers Union therefore enables us to better understand the complex roles that writers, as critical intellectuals, played in East German society and how those roles were determined and contested in the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter One

The Evolution of German Writers Associations, 1842-1970

Before the East German Writers Union, there were many other attempts to organize literary professionals in order to advance their collective economic and professional interests. Others had also tried to organize authors along ideological lines and to deploy them towards achieving societal change. Indeed, by the time it was founded in 1950 as a branch of the East German *Kulturbund* (Cultural League), East German authors could and did draw on examples from earlier German attempts to found writers associations from the Imperial period, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi years, and the four-year interregnum between the end of World War II and the founding of the German Democratic Republic as an independent state. In particular, much of the SV's inspiration (although not its membership) was drawn from the Weimar-era *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (Union for the Protection of German Writers), the Nazi *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Imperial Literature Chamber), as well as from the Soviet Union of Writers (discussed in the introduction), founded in 1934 under Stalin.

The final shape of the East German Writers Union, however, was not a foregone conclusion in 1945, let alone 1949; it was the result of a contentious and ongoing process between writers of various political beliefs and social interests as well as various factions within the ruling Socialist Unity Party itself. Moreover, even after its foundation as an arm of East Germany's propaganda apparatus, the Writers Union was not a mere receptor

of the SED's *Kulturpolitik*. During key periods in the GDR's first two decades, the Writers Union played a variety of roles and emerged as an important factor, at least culturally, during pivotal moments such as the 1953 worker uprising, the *Bitterfelder Weg* movement in 1959, and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Throughout these years, the SED's cultural policy oscillated between increasing ideological dogmatism and greater liberalization, and the actions of the SED leaders and writers within the Schriftstellerverband served as a barometer of these fluctuations. In the end, the results of these contentious decades were ambivalent; on the one hand, by the late 1960s the SED had largely (if tenuously) taken control of the Writers Union and could more effectively than ever before deploy it as an agent to enforce official cultural policy. Yet at the same time, several individual members of the SV who remained critical of the regime were not effectively silenced or made obsequious; it was these voices who would return to haunt the SED in the 1970s, utilizing the Writers Union to bolster their challenges to the regime to broaden the limits of acceptable speech. Imagine the surprise of the writers when a new SED leader emerged claiming that there would be "no taboos" in literature!

In exploring these many developments, this chapter focuses on four broad time periods: Wilhelmine Germany and the Weimar Republic; the Third Reich; the Soviet occupation zone; and the German Democratic Republic under Ulbricht. In doing so, it asks two questions. First, what were the successes and failures of German writers' attempts to organize professionally since the nineteenth century? Second, which lessons learned from these experiences did the founders of the East German Writers Union carry with them into the new organization? As we will see, the SV drew inspiration from a

number of past examples, and not always ones which lined up ideologically with its members' political beliefs.

Early Writers Associations in Imperial Germany, 1842-1909

Professional associations became a hallmark of bourgeois life in Germany before World War I, and creative intellectuals were no exception. By the second half of the nineteenth century, key professions in Germany began seeking to organize themselves independently of the state in order to protect and advance their economic and professional interests. By organizing themselves, groups such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and engineers sought to create more uniform criteria for admission to their profession (primarily through *wissenschaftlich* or “scientific” university training as well as state examination/certification) so as to control the supply of labor. By monopolizing access to an occupation, members of that professional group attempted to reduce competition and ensure themselves sufficient or increased livelihood, commensurate social prestige, and improving professional ethics.¹ At the same time, many professionals were wary of the perils of the free market as well as increased access to their ranks, and as a result sought what has been described as “neocorporatist” solutions. To this end, many professionals wanted the state to secure their financial and social position but rebuffed its control over their organizations and professional practices.² Hence by the early twentieth-century and especially in the Weimar Republic, most

¹ Charles E. McClelland, *The German Experience of Professionalization: Modern Learned Professions and their Organizations from the Early Nineteenth Century to the Hitler Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 232; Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers, and Engineers, 1900-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5-24, 219-23.

² Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions*, 22-24.

professional groups in Germany had at least attempted to organize themselves, and within these groups there emerged a foreboding tendency toward statist solutions to allay their economic and social insecurities, although these proposed solutions stopped short of state control of professional life.

While sharing many of these same goals, members of creative *Berufsstände* (occupations) encountered greater difficulties in organizing themselves than other professional groups. One reason for this difficulty stemmed from the fact that the barriers to entry for creative professions were difficult to control or standardize. One did not need training in higher education, for example, to become a successful writer or artist, and thus some scholars have referred to these creative groups as “nonprofessionalizing” or “late professionalizing” occupations.³ An additional difficulty arose from the self-conception of artistic occupations. Specifically in the case of literature, many writers viewed efforts to create professionalization as beneath their stature as purveyors of high cultural traditions. In this traditional self-understanding of authors, true works of literature were seen as invaluable, incapable of having a price affixed to them. The job of a writer was to articulate the highest values of his (or her) people, and hence authors of a more classical mindset tended to view the narrow economic interests of professional organizations as beneath them. To this end, the classic ideal of writer as *Dichter* (literally “poet” but suggesting a creator of literature that embodies the *Geist* or spirit⁴ of a nation)

³ McClelland, 10.

⁴ The term *Geist* is a difficult to define concept; Germanists Richard Dove and Stephen Lamb define it as human spirituality and the ability for analytic reflection; they also rely on Heinrich Mann’s definition of ‘Geist’ as the main source of key liberal values including justice, equality, and freedom. Mann believed that intellectuals had a moral duty to struggle against those authorities that violated these values. Richard Dove and Stephen Lamb, “Introduction: Commitment and the Illusion of Power,” in Richard Dove and Stephen Lamb, eds., *German Writers and Politics 1918-39* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), 1.

gave rise to elitist aspirations among many would-be writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, creating a group of authors who were hostile to attempts at professionalization altogether.⁵

Nevertheless, several factors, especially the expansion and concentration of the book trade, spurred on attempts at forming writers organizations. While reliable estimates are hard to come by, whereas in 1875 the book-trade amounted to perhaps a 55-million-Mark industry, by 1913 this figure had skyrocketed to around 500 million. This exponential increase in the profitability of book sales led many authors to conclude that writing had legitimately become a profession (*Berufsschriftsteller*), and this period thus witnessed a substantial increase in the number of those seeking to make their livelihood in this manner and no real means to keep any newcomers out. With more would-be authors seeking to ply their literary craft, however, some writers decried what they viewed as a “proletarianization” of the writing profession, a trend which they felt damaged the general quality of the literature being produced while also limiting their own economic opportunities. Moreover, the growing clout of large publishing houses also stimulated attempts to create professional organizations representing the writers’ interests. The general tendency toward cartelization in German industry in the late nineteenth century was strong in the book industry: by 1913 publishing cartels controlled 90% of the market. Under these circumstances, writers vociferously complained about the fact that publishing giants raked in huge profits but continued to pay relatively low prices to writers for manuscripts. Moreover, the increasing importance and size of labor unions in Germany served as examples for writers to emulate in their struggle against

⁵ Ernst Fischer, “Der ‘Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller,’ 1909-1933,” in *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 21 (Feb. 1980), 11-15.

publishers.⁶ Finally, professional associations would offer writers (and all creative intellectuals) an increased chance of influencing the government, specialized job counseling, social welfare provisions, and legal representation.⁷ All of these factors drove literary practitioners to the conclusion that professional cooperation was needed in order to improve their economic position and social prestige.

Despite the difficulties in professionalizing writing, there were several attempts to do so over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although for the most part these organizations proved relatively ineffective in advancing the interests of members. The *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (SDS, Union for the Protection of German Writers) proved to be by far the most successful of these attempts, but before its founding in 1909 there were other attempts, stretching back to the period before German unification. In 1842, for example, the *Leipziger Literatenverein* (Leipzig Association of Literati) was founded to represent professional writers' interests (mainly in regard to censorship and copyrights violations). After the 1848 revolutions, however, the Literatenverein quickly lost importance. It would be thirty years until another writers association was attempted when once again in Leipzig the conservative-nationalist *Allgemeiner Deutscher Schriftsteller-Verband* (General Union of German Writers) was founded, an organization likewise geared to protecting and advancing the economic

⁶ Ibid., 17-22, 26-28; Russell A. Berman, "Writing for the Book Industry: The Writer under Organized Capitalism," *New German Critique* 29 (Spring-Summer 1983), 45-47, 51-53.

⁷ Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 8.

interests of its members. Although it continued to exist until 1934, the Union failed to establish itself as an overarching interest organization for literary professionals.⁸

In the twenty five years following the establishment of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schriftsteller-Verband, several other regional and supra-regional writers associations were founded although none ultimately could claim decisive influences over writers' concerns. For example, 1885 saw the foundation of the *Deutscher Schriftsteller-Verein* (German Writers Association); in 1887 came the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband* (German Writers Union); 1887 also witnessed the creation of the *Schutzverein deutscher Schriftsteller* (Association for the Protection of German Writers); in 1888 came the *Deutscher Schriftstellerbund* (German Writers League); and in 1901 emerged the *Allgemeiner Schriftstellerverein* (General Association of Writers), an organization that also existed until 1934.⁹ Other organizations emerging in the later 19th and early 20th century sought to represent either larger groups of creative intellectuals or specific groups of authors: in 1895 the umbrella organization *Verband deutscher Journalisten- und Schriftstellervereine* (Union of German Journalist and Writers Associations) was founded in Heidelberg, comprising 31 associations with approximately 3,000 members although these associations were mainly localized and unable to affect national practices; in 1902 the *Kartell lyrischer Autoren* (Cartel of Lyric Authors) was founded which, despite its narrow genre focus, achieved some economic success for its members; and in 1908 the *Verband deutscher Bühnenschriftsteller* (Union of German Stage Writers) came into existence which also achieved some success after World War I for its members but was

⁸ Wolfgang Beutin, Klaus Ehlert, Helmut Hoffacker Volker Meid, and Wolfgang Emmerich, *A History of German Literature: From the Beginnings to the Present Day* (Routledge: 1993), 377; Bermann, 55.

⁹ Beutin et al., 377; Fischer, 22-23.

similarly limited to authors of a specific genre.¹⁰ No one group was able establish its dominance among all varieties of German writers, however, due to the divergent focal points for each organization. In this regard, not only did these associations have difficulty achieving representation of all genres of writers on a national scale, but there was considerable disagreement among writers as to whether the associations should merely protect their economic interests or seek real political influence.¹¹ The time was ripe for an organization that could transcend these regional and professional differences.

Writers Associations of the Late Imperial and Weimar Period, 1909-1933

The late Wilhelmine as well as the Weimar period saw unprecedented successes in attempts to organize writers, but these years also presented grave challenges to such organizations. The twin perils facing writers in the Weimar Republic were economic hardship and political polarization. The main organization emerging to advocate for writers' professional and financial well-being was the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller (SDS), founded in 1909. The SDS achieved broad representation of writers and enjoyed some limited successes in improving their socioeconomic status. Yet, in part because of the SDS's official non-partisan stance, many ideologically motivated authors sought other vehicles for collective action as the Republic's political center began disintegrating. To this end, 1928 witnessed the founding of the Communist *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (BPRS, League of Proletarian-Revolutionary

¹⁰ Fischer, 23-24.

¹¹ Beutin et al., 377. Interestingly, some groups such as the *Deutscher Schriftsteller-Verband* were criticized precisely because they maintained strong connections with the Hohenzollern dynasty; in particular, younger authors tended to view such organizations with open contempt, especially those who were sympathetic toward socialism. Fischer, 24-25.

Writers) and the nominally independent but in reality Nazi-affiliated *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* (Fighting League for German Culture), groups that were both anti-democratic. The grave problems writers faced in the Weimar year, then, spurred an expansion of efforts to organize writers and other artists into professional associations, although tensions still remained between groups dedicated primarily to economic representation and those with partisan goals. We will first explore the economic challenges of these years before proceeding to political developments among writers.

Writers associations enjoyed greater freedoms under the democratic government than under the Kaiser, yet the economic crises of the Weimar years added a sense of urgency to protect writers' unstable economic and social position. The revolutionary atmosphere as well as the devastating hyper-inflation of the early 1920s combined to diminish the opportunities available to authors and other artists. The middle classes, hard hit by the inflation, were no longer able to patronize the arts as before. The central as well as state and local governments were also forced to cut back on support for the arts when faced with the costs of the new welfare provisions inaugurated under the Weimar Republic. Moreover, given the instability of the German currency, publishing activity was scaled back in the early 1920s.¹² The mid-1920s saw an amelioration of conditions: with economic stability returning, an increasing readership, improvements in literacy, and the proliferation of book clubs created larger markets for literature and writers experienced improving economic fortunes.¹³ Whatever gains had been made in these

¹² Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 8-9.

¹³ Karl Leydecker, "Introduction," in Karl Leydecker ed., *German Novelists of the Weimar Republic: Intersections of Literature and Politics* (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), 12-13.

years, however, were erased by the Great Depression, a catastrophe which hit writers particularly hard. In response to the turbulent conditions of Weimar, many artists and writers called for greater cooperation both within and across their artistic discipline. However, a lack of political clout, disagreements over strategies and priorities, and, especially in the late 1920s and into the Great Depression, ideological conflict produced only limited results for these efforts at professional solidarity.

The most important and successful professional writers association to be founded in the Wilhelmine period was the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller (SDS), created in Berlin in 1909 as an association for all German *Berufsschriftsteller* and lasting until the Third Reich period when it was dissolved. The SDS boasted almost all of Germany's most important writers as members (including future West German president Theodor Heuss and literary heavyweights Thomas Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, Bertolt Brecht, and Kurt Tucholsky)¹⁴ and aimed to protect and advance its members' economic, social, and intellectual interests. The key focus of the SDS from the outset was the economic well-being of its members, as seen in the first point of its founding statute: "The Protective Union of German Writers aims to achieve the protection of the common interests of German-language writers." Welcome to join were both male and female writers (a fifth of the members were women) of any political leaning, and the requirement that they merely write in German meant that from its inception, the SDS was a fairly inclusive organization and hence succeeded where other organizations had failed in overcoming regional boundaries to become a truly national and representative association.¹⁵

¹⁴ Prominent authors who were eligible for membership but declined to join included Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and Herman Hesse.

¹⁵ Fischer, 46, 127-32.

The initial impulse for the SDS was born out of strong dissatisfaction at the perceived poor treatment of writers by publishers and editors. In response, a group of writers in Berlin began meeting regularly in the fall of 1909 to discuss the problem and how best to respond to the situation. After a series of informal meetings at the “Café Austria,” the Schutzverband was officially registered in early 1910 with Georg Hermann, an author with a broad readership, as its first chairman. As a whole, the founding members of the SDS were relatively young: Hans Landberg, perhaps the main driving force behind the organization’s foundation, was 34; Theodor Heuss, elected as third chairman of the SDS, was a mere 25; first chairman Hermann was practically a senior citizen at 38. Moreover, a relatively high percentage of the founding members were of Jewish descent; many of the earlier attempts to organize writers into professional associations had produced organizations that were conservative and nationalistic if not openly anti-Semitic. The founders of the SDS thus very consciously sought to create a more inclusive organization than its predecessors and rivals. In addition, many if not most of the SDS members tended towards left-liberal and social-democratic political ideologies. This is not to say that the SDS was a partisan organization, however; writers of very diverse political persuasions were members of the association. In fact, during the First World War the leadership of the organization made a point of strongly expressing the SDS’s political neutrality, an emphasis that would lead some writers to seek alternative organizations in the 1920s. Nevertheless, the relative openness of the SDS was a major factor in its success vis-à-vis other attempted writers organizations. This is not to say that anyone could join; many of the founding members were strongly opposed to admitting “*Dilettanten*,” those amateurs who dabbled in writing but did not derive their

livelihood from literature. Still, whereas the SDS could boast only 250 members in 1911, by 1914 this had grown to 804 and by 1932 counted 2404 members.¹⁶

The activities of the SDS were manifold. One primary target in the early years was official censorship, lobbying government officials to alter policies in this regard, supporting authors' legal appeals against censorship decisions, and organizing publicity for egregious cases of censorship. The SDS also provided various degrees of material support to its members. For example, the association was instrumental in the establishment of the Heinrich von Kleist *Stiftung* in 1912, awarded by an independent committee to relatively unknown young authors to encourage their further development and reward promising work. Likewise, during World War I the SDS helped its members find new jobs (since publishing was greatly restricted) and discreetly provided loans of between 5 and 500 Marks to suddenly destitute members, distributing some 200,000 Marks in total throughout the war.¹⁷ During the 1920s the SDS provided financial support to impoverished writers as well, often drawing on contributions from wealthy members in doing so.¹⁸

Despite efforts to the contrary, by the mid-1920s it soon became clear that government help was not forthcoming for impoverished writers, forcing the SDS and several other writers associations to practice the art of self help to a much higher degree than before. In 1927 the SDS succeeded in forging an alliance with the previously mentioned Verband deutscher Bühnenschriftsteller and Kartell lyrischer Autoren, along

¹⁶ Ibid., 31-35, 42, 44-45, 124-26, 169-71, 243.

¹⁷ Ibid., 111-13, 117-21, 181-84.

¹⁸ In Munich, for example, the SDS provided firewood and spearheaded efforts to procure bread and milk for poor writers from the local welfare agency. In Weimar, the local SDS branch set up tables to distribute food to writers. Ibid., 492-93.

with the *Verband deutscher Erzähler* (Union of German Storytellers), together forming a *Reichsverband des deutschen Schrifttums* (Reich Union of German Literature). The Reichsverband was designed to represent the economic interests of all writers publicly, especially to appropriate government agencies and local and national legislatures, but met with limited success. Still, at the behest of the SDS, the Reichsverband sought to create a fund to provide aid to destitute writers, a measure finding greater success: in 1927, for example, the Reichsverband distributed some 50,000 Marks to impoverished authors. Another sign of their lack of influence was evidenced in their unsuccessful efforts to procure an annual 250,000 Mark subsidy from the Reichstag to augment relief fund efforts for writers, however.¹⁹

The Great Depression sparked a crisis for writers in Germany as it did for many professional groups. During the economic disaster, artists were drastically affected as state and local governments slashed expenditure on the arts and the population as a whole had significantly less disposable income to spend on culture. As a result, unemployment among artists of all stripes spiked in these years but, fragmented as most creative professionals were, these culture-producers generally lacked the political clout to help ameliorate the situation.²⁰ In the specific case of the writers, the Depression was nothing short of catastrophic. Already one of the more vulnerable groups to the economic ebbs and flows of the 1920s,²¹ by the early 1930s writers as a whole had reached their lowest

¹⁹ Ibid., 234-35, 345-47, 491-92, 496.

²⁰ Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 14.

²¹ Writers, for example, often complained to the SDS about difficulties procuring health and old-age insurance or even enough heating material during the winter. By 1928 the SDS leadership began issuing alarming statements noting the great many writers abandoning their craft to pursue more stable occupations. Fischer, 491-93.

economic point yet. Newspapers and literary magazines began cutting back on the number of opportunities for writers to publish and reduced the honoraria paid to those authors who were published. The SDS also reported that book markets were increasingly favoring only literature that dealt with the most pressing issues of the day, leaving most authors in the lurch.²²

Within all creative professions, the perils of the Great Depression sparked a desire to re-structure how each type of artist was organized. The free market and the fragmentation of the artists, so the argument ran, had produced economic pandemonium and therefore what was needed was a stark de-liberalization of markets for cultural goods and restrictions on access to the artistic professions, trends mirrored in other creative groups as well as in the more traditional “free” professions. This demand often resulted in calls for neocorporatist solutions, meaning the erection of self-regulating groups each comprising the practitioners of the same profession or occupation. By this scheme, each estate (*Stand*) would maintain its own entrance qualifications for that profession while exerting control over the market so as to protect the economic standing of its members. Ominously, however, one of the political parties that most actively argued on behalf of neocorporatism for the arts was the NSDAP, a stance that won them several converts and many more sympathizers by the early 1930s.²³

Writers possessed one advantage over their fellow artists, however: they had a relatively representative organization to fight for their economic interests. To this end, the SDS tried a number of schemes to help those writers suffering under the Great

²² Ibid., 493-94.

²³ For the crisis of liberal professionalism in the Great Depression, see Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions*, 78-111; Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 17-20.

Depression. To combat the effect of the Depression on individual writers, the SDS organized an “Umlage für notleidende Kollegen” (Contribution for Needy Colleagues) which gave out one-time payments of 10 Marks to applicants. They also strove to work with local government and welfare agencies to provide unemployment benefits to out-of-work writers; in Berlin, for example, the local government agreed to distribute one-time allotments of between 150 and 350 Marks, totaling some 12,500 Marks in outlays to 300 authors. The SDS also set up its own loan association, distributing 3,230 Marks to its members in 1931. The SDS, prodded by the government, also led efforts at this time to forge a *Notgemeinschaft des Deutschen Schrifttums* (Emergency Society of German Literature), chartered in 1930 between the aforementioned Reichsverband des Deutschen Schrifttums and the *Reichsgemeinschaft der Geldwerbenden Stiftungen Deutschlands* (Reich Society of Monetary Endowments), thus creating a central institution charged with overseeing the welfare of all writers in Germany. The organization served to consolidate all public and private funds to aid destitute writers, providing, among other things, temporary rent help, one-time monetary allocations, loans, travel stipends, and recovery assistance for those authors who had fallen ill. In this capacity, the Notgemeinschaft provided individual writers with coupons, footwear, hats, cheap or free meals, and even low-cost dental care. In sum, in 1931 the Notgemeinschaft distributed approximately 25,000 Marks (60% of which went to SDS members), a much larger sum than the SDS alone could have generated.²⁴ Still, the SDS could do little overall to stem the tide of the Depression’s effects on the literary profession, and many writers continued to languish in poverty and to look for alternative solutions to their plight.

²⁴ Evidence of the important role played by the SDS in these efforts is seen in the fact that Arthur Eloesser, first chairperson of the SDS, was also elected first chairperson of the Notgemeinschaft. Fischer, 493-504.

Economic woes were not the only factor driving writers to organize in the Weimar period, however. Even if it meant diminished opportunities to promote common professional interests, many writers in these years felt compelled to organize themselves to advance not their socioeconomic interests, but their political agenda. Many creative intellectuals on the far left and right would have agreed with Communist writer Friederich Wolf when in 1928 he declared “Art *today* is a floodlight and a weapon!”²⁵ Art of all types was increasingly politicized in the 1920s; not only was art utilized to represent tenets of various ideologies (including but not limited to propaganda), it was in many cases difficult for artists to escape being labeled as part of one political grouping or another, especially with the decline of moderate liberalism and the growing support for parties hostile to the Republic.²⁶ From the onset of the Weimar years, writers and other intellectuals, hoping to forge a new society out of the ashes of World War I, became directly involved in politics like never before. Novelist Heinrich Mann, for example, sought a unity of *Geist und Tat* (intellect and action), believing it to be the moral imperative of intellectuals to enlighten voters so as to prevent a resurgence of political reactionaries. To this end he accepted Independent Socialist Kurt Eisner’s offer to serve

²⁵ Friederich Wolf, “Art is a Weapon!” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 231.

²⁶ A.F. Bance contends in the preface to his edited volume on German authors’ relationship to politics in the Weimar period, that in addition to a politicization of art, the Weimar years also witnessed a “dangerous aestheticizing of politics by some artists,” pointing especially at writers associated with Expressionism on the one hand (celebrating the spirit and cultural redemption) and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) on the other (calling attention to the grim social realities of life in Weimar). Expressionism, he asserts, was “one notorious bridge [...] from art to aestheticized politics of National Socialism,” while adherents of *Neue Sachlichkeit* often found themselves in dire economic straits and hence often looked toward Communism to ameliorate their condition. A.F. Bance, ed. *Weimar Germany: Writers and Politics* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982), vi-vii. In the same volume, see in particular H. Ridley, “Irrationalism, Art and Violence: Ernst Jünger and Gottfried Benn” and “Walter Benjamin – Towards a new Marxist Aesthetic”; J. White, “The Cult of ‘Functional Poetry’ during the Weimar Period”; J.M. Ritchie, and “Johst’s *Schlageter* and the End of the Weimar Republic.”

as chair of the short-lived Political Council of Intellectual Workers in Munich where he worked to transform Germans into republicans.²⁷ In the equally short-lived revolutionary Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919, several authors, such as the dramatist Ernst Toller and writer Gustav Landauer, accepted positions of power.²⁸ The crushing of the attempted revolution by paramilitary *Freikorps* did not deter many writers and artists from joining political parties across the spectrum, although many other writers, despite an active engagement in political life, declined to join a party.²⁹

Despite mixed results in advancing the material well-being of its members, the greatest strength of the SDS in its quest to appeal to as many writers as possible was its official non-partisan stance. This is not to say that partisan politics did not enter into the ranks of the Schutzverband. Alfred Döblin, for example, holding the position of first chairman in 1924, complained vociferously about the political debates within the SDS, believing it should be a neutral body dedicated to the economic and intellectual interests of writers. The leadership was not immune from political engagement either: Theodor Heuss, first chairman 1925-6, simultaneously served as a Reichstag delegate for the center-liberal *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* (German Democratic Party), a position that many SDS members no doubt hoped would help them procure state aid. At the same time as Heuss's chairmanship, the 2nd chair was held by Fedor von Zobelitz, a political

²⁷ Karin V. Gunnemann, "Heinrich Mann and the Struggle for Democracy," in Leydecker, 20, 26-27.

²⁸ The writers' lack of political experience soon became apparent, however. As a result of his involvement in the Republic, Toller was sentenced to 5 years in prison. For more on the involvement of writers in the Bavarian Socialist Republic, see Richard Sheppard, "Artists, Intellectuals and the German Independent Socialist Party: some Preliminary Reflection"; Margaret Rogister, "Rene Schickele and the 1918 Revolution"; Ian King, "Kurt Tucholsky's Analysis of the 1918-19 Revolution"; and Frant Trommler, "Ernst Toller: the Redemptive Power of the Failed Revolutionary," in Dove and Lamb.

²⁹ Dove and Lamb, 1-2.

conservative. Neither man, however, pushed for an explicit politicization of the SDS in favor of their party of choice. Arnold Zweig reiterated similar comments in 1930, antagonizing the growing number Communists in the association by arguing that the Schutzverband must not be politicized in one direction or another.³⁰ Steering a course of political neutrality enabled the SDS and other artistic associations of the Weimar period to appeal to as many writers as possible as well as to prevent their association from disintegrating into political factions which would alienate many members and diminish what influence it did have on the government's cultural policy.³¹

Precisely because of its official position of non-partisanship, however, many writers grew frustrated at the lack of political engagement on behalf of the association. Moreover, the fact that so many chairmen of the SDS had to make public statements condemning partisanship within the Schutzverband speaks to the continued tensions within the organization between various political factions seeking to bend the organization to their ideological agenda. The 1920s saw the emergence of three ideologically-driven writers associations that took the expressly political tract that the leaders of the SDS so vigorously avoided. First, in 1921 the German branch of the International PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) Club was founded. The International PEN Club emerged shortly after the end of World War I in several countries and, in reaction to the war, the organization was strongly influenced by the growing pacifist movement and hence was dedicated to promoting world peace. The members of the German PEN Club often had dual membership in the SDS, utilizing the latter to promote

³⁰ Ironically, a year later Zweig would himself become a Communist. Fischer, 251, 254.

³¹ Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 28.

their economic interests and the former to advance their political concerns.³² Yet whereas the PEN Club's members tended to be politically liberal, the two most important ideologically-driven writers associations came from parties hostile to the Weimar Republic: The Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller and the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur. The writers who joined these organizations evinced a lack of commitment to German democracy as it existed and a willingness to embrace more radical regimes, or at least less democratic ones, in the name of an ideological agenda. Indeed, the growth of these two associations in the late 1920s mirrored the rise in their respective parties' electoral success.

Frustrated by the SDS's proclamations of political neutrality, by 1928 many communist and socialist members sought to create a writers organization of an expressly more political nature. At the First International Conference of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers (organized by the Soviet Union) a year earlier, consultations with Soviet literary authorities resulted in the decision to found a German proletarian literary association.³³ After a year's preparation, in October 1928, several well-known authors joined the nascent Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller (BPRS, League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers), including Johannes R. Becher (who served as the organization's chairman), Anna Seghers, Erich Weinert, and Hans Marchwitza. The main press organ of the BPRS was *Die Linkskurve* (Left Turn), appearing from 1929-1932 and later described by East German author Otto Gotschke as "the first collective organizer,

³² Beutin et al, 378.

³³ David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 29, 32.

propagandist, and guidepost of the German socialist literature movement.”³⁴ The main goal of the BPRS was to foster “proletarian” literature by bringing together in one organization writers who produced literature geared toward the concerns of workers. The League’s members intended that such literature would also help to develop Marxist literary theory by promoting “realistic” portrayals of workers, all this at a time before Socialist Realism was firmly established as the only acceptable literary style among Communist writers. The BPRS leaders also believed that it was necessary to differentiate between “proletarian” and “bourgeois” literature so as to diminish the influence of the latter.³⁵ Closely tied to a political party, then, the League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers promoted the ideological agenda of German Communists in advancing a specific view of acceptable literature. In doing so, it helped forge a new sense of identity among writers inclined toward Communism; these authors now saw themselves increasingly as “proletarian” writers, and this self-identification with the working class would exert a powerful claim in Germany after World War II.

A good demonstration of the intended goals of the BPRS can be seen in Johannes R. Becher’s 1928 article “Unser Bund” (Our League) which spelled out the tasks of the new organization. In this article, Becher declared, “Our league is above all the practical statement, the living proof that there exists a proletarian-revolutionary literature.” Moreover, Becher continued, one cannot simply expect “literature from below” [*Literatur von unten*] to develop on its own; rather, “it must be stimulated and carefully cultivated”

³⁴ Gotschke also claimed that the ideas behind the Bitterfelder Weg movement (begun in 1959 and discussed below) drew much inspiration from articles published in *Die Linkskurve*. Otto Gotschke, “Vorwort,” Dieter Kliche and Gerhard Seidel, eds., *Die Linkskurve: Berlin, 1929-1932* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1972), 5, 10.

³⁵ Ibid., 14-20; Alfred Klein and Thomas Rietzschel, eds. *Zur Tradition der deutschen sozialistischen Literatur: Eine Auswahl von Dokumenten, 1926-1935* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1979), 27-33.

while encouraging a “strong younger generation of writers” [*kräftigen literarischen Nachwuchs*] to learn from the mistakes of the older generation. But how was this to be done? A primary task, Becher noted was differentiation: “It goes without saying that our league must take up the struggle against every type of bourgeois literature and also against a certain kind of so-called “worker writing.” And in order to separate genuine proletarian literature from bourgeois imitations, investigations of that bourgeois literature were necessary. Yet the main task of the proletarian writer, Becher asserted, was to join the worker’s struggle: “Go with the proletariat!” he exhorted, “Become part of the class struggle! Struggle with them in everything great and small! Use your art as weapons! Declare war on war!” Finally, the League should “create a connection between us and the masses.” The BPRS should promote the connection between writers and Communism: “the League should bind us still more strongly to the cause we serve, to the great cause of the social revolution, which is the best cause in the world.”³⁶

The BPRS was particularly critical of the Schutzverband, despite dual membership by several writers. In fact, it seems that precisely because there was an overlap the BPRS leadership targeted the “fascist” and “corrupt” practices of the SDS leadership while touting their own Communist “opposition” within the Schutzverband. For example, the official publication of the SDS, the “Schriftsteller,” was taken to task in a May 1930 article in *Linkskurve* for being “strictly apolitical” and for the fact that it failed to take note of the arrest, torture, and execution of a Balkan writer (presumably a Communist) yet also reprinted a grievance by a “counter-revolutionary” Russian writer against the USSR. Identifying the BPRS members as the “opposition” in the general

³⁶ Johannes R. Becher, “Unser Bund,” in Klein and Rietzschel, 112-17.

meeting of the SDS, the same article assailed the SDS leadership as “Berliner Mussolinis” and accused the business management of the SDS of being a “finance dictatorship.”³⁷ Another article from March 1931 accused the SDS leaders of corruption and of making “egomaniacal, clandestine, and non-transparent” (*selbstherrlich, geheim und undurchsichtig*) decisions that affected all of the association’s two-thousand members. This “illegal cabinet,” continued the article, had been under the leadership of “social democratic warmongers and Communist-haters.”³⁸ Six months later an article criticized the SDS leadership for supporting “Brüning-Severing fascism”³⁹ and in April 1932 accused the SDS leaders of taking a 3,000 Mark bribe from President Hindenburg two weeks before the 1932 presidential election, a scandal that “stinks to high heaven.”⁴⁰

In addition to hostility towards the SDS and other “fascist” groups, the BPRS also had a tempestuous relationship with its own party, the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD or Communist Party of Germany) as well as with Soviet literary authorities. Most of the controversy seemed to swirl around the issue of how active an engagement the BPRS should have with sympathetic bourgeois writers.⁴¹ Initially more

³⁷ L., “Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller,” *Die Linkskurve* 2 (May 1930): 26-27.

³⁸ “Verwaltungskorruption im SDS: Von der Generalversammlung des Schutzverbandes Deutscher Schriftsteller,” *Die Linkskurve* 3 (March 1931).

³⁹ “Der SDS für Faschismus und die Folgen,” *Die Linkskurve* 3 (September 1931): 9.

⁴⁰ “Der skandalöse SDS,” *Die Linkskurve* 4 (April 1932): 38.

⁴¹ This debate had a short but intense pre-history in the Soviet Union, where in the period before Stalin’s first Five Year Plan (1928) a flourishing literary scene emerged with several literary groups making claims to what proper Communist literature should be. One of the main factions, associated with critic Aleksandr Voronskij (an ally of Trotsky), published the works of many “fellow travelers” in his journal *Red Virgin Soil*. The other main faction (supported by Bukharin) dubbed itself “October” and consisted of proletarian writers who categorically rejected the inclusion of “bourgeois” writers in Communist literary life. At stake was a tradeoff between literary quality and political utility. The “October” group evolved into “On Guardists,” calling for the state to support proletarian control over literature. In 1925, the Party, evincing Stalin’s power play, sided with the “On Guardists” and declared that class warfare was very much a part of

radical in certain respects than its counterpart, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP),⁴² the BPRS was intensely hostile toward authors who were “fellow travelers” (Communist sympathizers), a list which included Alfred Döblin, Kurt Tucholsky, and Ernst Toller. In 1930, however, the KPD published an article in *Die Linkskurve* condemning this hostility, instead advocating a more tolerant policy toward those writers moving from the “bourgeois camp” to the proletarian one. Events at the Second World Congress of Revolutionary Literature, held in November 1930 in Kharkov, confirmed the KPD’s stance, although no unambiguous guidelines for working with fellow travelers were decided upon; the conference resolution suggested both that the greatest threat to creating proletarian literature was entrusting this task to “petty bourgeois intelligentsia” and that fellow travelers should not be dismissed out of hand as partners. These contradictory messages unsurprisingly produced uncertainty in BPRS policies toward sympathetic writers.⁴³

literary life, though they still paid lip service to the usefulness of courting “fellow traveler” writers. Out of the “On Guardist” movement grew the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP; in 1928 it was renamed the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers or RAPP) which in 1928, coinciding with Stalin’s break with Bukharin and the inauguration of the First Five Year Plan, was granted a monopoly on Soviet literary policy. In the process, tolerance for “bourgeois” literature, however sympathetic the authors were, declined. At the same time, the Soviets sought to create a “literary international” analogous to the Comintern (an organization which dictated policy to national Communist parties). To this end at the First International Conference of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers, meeting in Moscow in 1927, the International Office of Revolutionary Literature (MBRL; in 1931 it was renamed the International League of Revolutionary Writers or MORP) was founded. This organization favored cooperation with formerly bourgeois writers who had cut ties with their class over an exclusive focus on working-class authors. It was at this conference that the decision was reached to create a German proletarian literary organization. Pike, *Exile*, 25-29.

⁴² RAPP defined “proletarian” writers as those who espoused Marxism whereas Andre Gábor of the BPRS defined them as only those writers who came from working-class origins. Also, RAPP, while not advocating veneration of past art, did allow for studying it; the BPRS in contrast asserted that nothing was to be gained from studying “classic” bourgeois literature. Still, with increased contacts with Soviet literary officials, the BPRS eventually tempered its stance, ironically, though, just as RAPP was becoming much less tolerant of fellow travelers. Ibid., 32-33.

⁴³ Ibid., 34-38.

In this ambiguous environment, in 1931 a leftist wing tried to wrest control of the BPRS from its leadership, but the timely arrival in Berlin of Hungarian expatriate Georg Lukács (soon to become the doyen of “socialist realism”) that summer enabled the KPD to stamp out this literary insurrection.⁴⁴ Lukács also solidified a more conciliatory position toward non-Communist leftist writers, a move reflecting developments in the Soviet Union whereby RAPP was liquidated in 1932 and a relative liberalization of policy toward fellow travelers in the West ensued. The result was a new call in December 1932 to create a broad literary front among Communist and non-Communist authors, particularly to oppose the growing threat of fascism. However, in the minds of the Soviets as well as the BPRS-KPD, to support this front was to align oneself with the Soviet Union, and hence the real goal of these appeals was to finesse Western fellow travelers into pro-Soviet positions by co-opting them in opposition to easily agreeable targets such as “fascism.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately for the BPRS, however, Hitler’s ascension to power a month later marked the beginning of a full-blown campaign against communism, a wave of persecutions that sent hundreds of writers into exile.

Finally, the 1920s also saw the rise of writers associations bent towards *völkisch* or racist ideologies. For example, the *Nationalverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (National Association of German Writers) housed several writers who belonged to the Nazi party while the *Wartburger Kreis deutscher Dichter* (Wartburg Circle of German

⁴⁴ Lukács was also appointed head of the KPD’s faction in the SDS and became the vice chairman of the SDS’s Berlin branch upon his arrival in Germany in 1931. One cannot overestimate Lukács’s impact on Communist literary theory, especially in the 1930s, as his ideas formed perfect tools to employ in popular front literary politics. David Pike thus argues, “Here no Soviet or other Marxist literary critic could ever have taken Lukács’s place. He was the right man at the right time. Had there been no Lukács in 1933 to 1939, he would have to have been invented.” Ibid., 306.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40-42, 46-49, 51-52.

Poets) was equally committed to promoting racialist beliefs.⁴⁶ The most important of these far right organizations in the 1920s was the Kampfbund für deutscher Kultur (Fighting League for German Culture), founded in 1928 by Alfred Rosenberg and closely (if informally) tied to the Nazi Party. Among the prominent members of the Kampfbund was also Hanns Johst, an author who would go on to become president of the Reichsschrifttumskammer from 1935 until the end of World War II. The primary aim of the Kampfbund was to promote the Nazi party to the educated middle class although the League claimed nominal independence from the Nazis. This formal separation was viewed by the Nazi party as a way to attract cultural figures not yet ready to join the NSDAP to an organization that would ideally prepare them to accept membership down the road. The broader aim of the Kampfbund, however, was to “defend the value of the German character” from the cultural decadence of Jews, cultural modernists, Communists, feminists, and promoters of American jazz music. The Kampfbund sought to accomplish this task through lectures and publications extolling “true” German culture while attacking corrosive, un-German influences.⁴⁷

The Kampfbund engaged in numerous activities, all designed to garner support or sympathy, primarily among the *Bildungsbürgertum*, for Nazism. Arguably its most important and numerous activities were its public lectures, facilitated by the low cost and ease of organization for these events. One of the association’s leaders, economist Othmar Spann, gave the first of these lectures in February 1929. Garnering wide interest in the press and public, the lecture focused on the need to replace Weimar democracy with

⁴⁶ Beutin et al, 378.

⁴⁷ Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 23-24, 28.

authoritarian leadership. In April, Rosenberg delivered the first of several lectures for the Kampfbund, lambasting the growing and perverse influence of Africa, the United States, and the Soviet Union on German culture. His condemnation of African or black influence, particularly in music, became a running theme of the Kampfbund. So, too, did attacks on female emancipation; in this regard a frequent target was the United States, where he asserted that, in becoming liberated, American women had emasculated their men, reducing them to mere breadwinners and sexual slaves. Local chapters also had their own initiatives: for example, in December 1929 the Bonn Kampfbund created a display of nationalist books for local bookstores, conveniently merging them with Christmas-time promotions. In 1930, the Düsseldorf Kampfbund fought to prevent the building of a monument to the city's native son, lyric poet (and Jew) Heinrich Heine.⁴⁸

Yet during the Weimar period and indeed even during the Nazi years, the Kampfbund never achieved broad influence over German cultural intellectuals, let alone writers. By January 1932 it could boast just 2,100 members nation-wide, only 15% of whom were artists, writers, and intellectuals. Still, its influence was not negligible; in 1932, for example, Berlin *Gauleiter* (district head) Joseph Goebbels ordered all culture-producers who were also NSDAP members to join the Kampfbund, thus formalizing the relationship between the Nazi Party and the League. This move not only increased membership in the organization threefold, but it bolstered Goebbels' claims to decisive influence over cultural life in Germany – at the expense of his rival and the nominal head of the Kampfbund, Alfred Rosenberg – a development which would prove consequential during the Third Reich. At the same time, the League stepped up its propaganda,

⁴⁸ Alan E. Steinweis, "Weimar Culture and the Rise of National Socialism: The *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur*," *Central European History*, No. 24 (1991): 408-11.

emphasizing not only the need to cleanse German culture of corrupting elements, but also the desire to address economic problems facing the world of art and literature. In recognizing the economic plight of Weimar Germany's artists, the Kampfbund advanced a neocorporatist solution whereby the fragmented arts professions could be unified in harmonious estates. These ideas found great resonance with artists and writers suffering in the Great Depression; insidiously, many cultural intellectuals found the call to better regulate and organize their professions attractive, especially the Nazi call to purge these fields of unwelcome competition from Jews, Communists, and the like.⁴⁹

Thus in the chaotic climate of the Weimar period there emerged writers organizations dedicated to either economic promotion or ideological advancement, but no one organization could claim the mantle on both. The two types of organizations seemed incapable of merging their functions and goals, and the best that could be hoped for was dual membership in the SDS and one of the politically oriented writers associations. Yet the increasing attention given to economic concerns by the Kampfbund signaled a new trajectory in German writers associations; appealing to writers seeking to overcome both economic hardships and non-partisanship, the Nazis had stumbled onto a formula that would leave an enduring legacy for all future attempts to organize writers on German soil, one that spoke to the yearning of destitute but politically engaged literary professionals. All writers groups found themselves besieged with calls to do more to help writers during the Great Depression as consumption of literature declined and political extremism became more prominent, and it became increasingly clear that

⁴⁹ The Nazis' appeal to neocorporatism was not merely an expedient measure adopted in the 1930s; Point 25 of the NSDAP's 1920 platform asserted the need to form corporations according to occupation and estate. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 23-28.

authors wanted organizations that could address all of these various concerns. It was during the fatal crisis of the Weimar Republic, then, that the authoritarian proclivities of many writers first came to the forefront, utilizing writers associations to urge de-liberalization of book markets and the guarantee of social support from the state.

Writers under Nazism: Gleichschaltung and the Reichsschriftumskammer, 1933-45

Adolf Hitler considered himself an artist. Recalling his youthful days in Linz and Vienna, art, architecture, literature, and music came to assume a place of great importance in Nazi ideology. Frequently invoking the notion of “Aryan” culture and the need to preserve and promote it, art assumed a political importance in the Third Reich unprecedented in German history. As expressions of the “Aryan” race, art needed to be rescued from decadence and “degenerate” foreign influences, and the state and Party had a central role to play in this rescue mission. To this end, the Nazi state took an active role in shaping cultural life in the Third Reich, doing so primarily through the *Reichskulturkammer* (RKK, Imperial Cultural Chamber).⁵⁰ Regarding literature, Hitler and other top NSDAP officials sought not only to create a new body of *völkisch* literature but to reshape the experience of reading literature as well, one aimed toward the

⁵⁰ The ideal of a *Kammer* or chamber as a means of organizing professional groups predated the Third Reich and hence its purported adoption by the Nazi state indicated an attempt to exploit the neocorporatist ambitions of key professional groups in Germany and hasten the process of *Gleichschaltung*. According to Konrad Jarausch, “The ideal of a successful profession was therefore a chamber system of self-government for credentialed university graduates, enjoying a legal market monopoly and invested with quasi-public authority over its members, regardless of employment. A late liberal compromise, this *Kammer* strategy sought to establish autonomy from government, client, or university dominance, while protecting the experts against the dangerous consequences of ‘free field’ competition with neotraditional state intervention, which was typical of ‘organized capitalism.’ In reality, of course, re-professionalization under the Nazis proved illusory.” Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions*, 24, 115-42, 219-23.

collective and communal.⁵¹ There were many tools at their disposal for this task including implementing censorship, controlling publishing houses, barring the works of certain authors, or even arresting writers deemed troublesome.

The Nazis also sought more benign means of control, namely the creation of a writers association that in theory would fulfill the professional and economic aspirations of Germany's authors while insisting on ideologically compliant works of literature. The Nazi solution was the Reichsschrifttumskammer (RSK, Reich Literature Chamber), one of several "chambers" in Goebbels's Kulturkammer, founded in 1934. The principle goal of the RSK was the purification of German literature from undesirable or unreliable influences.⁵² The process of "coordinating" the various heretofore independent writers associations, however, was far from smooth. Moreover, despite a centralized writers organization in the form of the Schrifttumskammer, the coordination of a uniform literary policy proved extremely difficult for the Nazi state, and in the end the gains made by the Literature Chamber for its members fell far short of its promises. The imposition of total war in the 1940s caused Hitler to eventually scale down cultural production to a minimum, and German writers as a whole saw their economic situation rapidly deteriorate. Nevertheless, the Schrifttumskammer proved to be an important precedent for postwar attempts to organize German writers; if anything, the Literature Chamber demonstrated to German authors that the state needed to do *more*, not less, to help them.

⁵¹ Frank Trommler, "A Command Performance? The Many Faces of Literature under Nazism," in Jonathan Huener and Franci R. Nicosia, eds., *The Arts in Nazi Germany: Continuity, Conformity, Change* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 112-13. For the importance of art in Nazi ideology, see Steinweis, *Art, Politics, and Ideology*.

⁵² Uwe Julius Faustmann, *Die Reichskulturkammer: Aufbau, Funktion und rechtliche Grundlagen einer Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts im nationalsozialistischen Regime* (Aachen: Verlag Shaker, 1995), 203.

Indicative of the attitude of the new Nazi state toward literature were the 10 May 1933 book burnings by university students all over Germany, destroying books by writers, both German and foreign, who were deemed decadent, degenerate, and above all, un-German. The book burnings, described by Frank Trommler as “a kind of intellectual pogrom,” highlighted the fact that books and their authors were, to the Nazis and their supporters, a potent political symbol. A “symbolic death warrant against the Weimar Republic,” the book burnings signified a willingness for the Nazis to purge German culture of its impurities and parasites. German culture needed renewal, and, in rejecting the experimental literature of the Weimar period, the Nazis signaled a redefinition of literature as high art (*Dichtung*). This move was designed especially to appeal to the educated elite but also to promote a style of reception among the wider public that connoted awe and reverence for these powerful expressions of German *Geist* and for the *Dichter* who created them. Readers were supposed to view themselves as but one part of a wider *lesende Volksgemeinschaft* (reading racial community).⁵³

With its ideal conception of the author as *Dichter* in place, the Nazis set about bringing existing writers associations under control. Between 1933 and 1935, the National Socialists “coordinated” all cultural life in Germany, doing so with initiatives from above such as laws and the creation of new organizations, and from below with local initiatives anticipating the desires of those Nazi officials above them. The Law for the Reestablishment of the Professional Civil Service, enacted 7 April 1933, was one of the earliest laws affecting the artistic world. Not only did the state now demand the

⁵³ Trommler, 116-17.

expulsion of certain undesirable members (notably Jews) from art academies and the cultural bureaucracy, but an entire range of professions was brought under Nazi jurisdiction including art teachers, museum employees, librarians, theater directors, and even the Prussian Academy of the Arts (whose members were not civil servants). A further law in May destroyed the press organs and publishing houses of the KPD and SPD, thus ensuring the absence of opportunities for opposition authors and journalists to make their views public.⁵⁴

The Gleichschaltung of writers meant taking over three key literary institutions: the Literary Section of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, the German section of the PEN Club, and, most important of all, the SDS. The Nazis moved against the Literary Section of the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences first. Founded in 1926, the Literary Section experienced surprisingly little interference from the Prussian government and became home to activist novelists such as Alfred Döblin and Heinrich Mann, the latter of whom became president of the Literary Section in 1931. In 1932 Mann and others (including Albert Einstein) had signed a proclamation calling for a coalition between the SPD and KPD as an attempt to forestall a Nazi dictatorship. Posted around Berlin on 30 January 1933, the Nazi press inaugurated a savage attack on Mann; the anger emerging from this incident prompted Mann's expulsion from the Academy by February, and he fled the country less than a week later.⁵⁵ Replacing him was Nazi playwright Hanns Johst, head of the "Literature Group" of the Kampfbund, and he surrounded himself with other Nazi writers as well as Nazi sympathizers. Aiding the acquiescence of the

⁵⁴ Jan-Pieter Barbian, "Literary Policy in the Third Reich," in Glenn R. Cuomo, ed., *National Socialist Cultural Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 160.

⁵⁵ Gunnemann, 37-39.

remaining members was the fact that the Section was dependent upon the Prussian Cultural Ministry for its finances, and since February 1933 the Prussian Minister of Culture was the Nazi Bernhard Rust. In March, Section member and Nazi sympathizer Gottfried Benn (an essayist, poet, and novelist), led the effort to have those remaining members sign a declaration obligating signatories “to loyal collaboration in the spirit of the altered historical situation on the national cultural tasks incumbent upon the Academy according to its statutes.” Eventually, 18 of 27 section members signed the declaration although the Section, renamed the *Deutsche Akademie für Dichtung* (German Academy for Poetry), quickly lost importance in the Nazi cultural plan.⁵⁶

The German section of the PEN Club met a similar fate as the Literature Section. Initially the Nazis envisaged this organization as a tool to serve their foreign policy goals, but the outspoken opposition of the PEN Club’s English leadership short-circuited these endeavors. In November 1933, for example, the PEN leadership in England passed a resolution condemning the suppression of German writers who voiced opposition to the Nazis. In protest, the German delegate to the central PEN Club, Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, resigned Germany from the organization and a counter-organization was set up in the *Union nationaler Schriftsteller* (Union of National Writers) in March 1934, although this association quickly failed.⁵⁷

The next organization to fall victim to the Nazis was the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller. In March 1933 poet Hanns Heinz Ewers, one of the original founders of the SDS, stormed into a meeting of the SDS leadership with several nationalist writers in

⁵⁶ Quoted in Barbican, 160-61.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 162.

tow, demanding the resignation of most of the executive committee. The demand was met, and the chairperson of the SDS became Götz Otto, a nationalist journalist and a card-carrying Nazi since 1932. The SDS was subsequently consolidated, along with the Association of German Prose Authors (*Verband Deutscher Erzähler*), the Cartel of Lyric Authors, and the Deutscher Schriftstellerverein, into the *Reichsverband Deutscher Schriftsteller* (RDS or Reich Association of German Authors) on 9 June 1933. Membership in the new organization no longer depended on literary ability; now prospective members needed to demonstrate racial and political reliability, meaning that Jewish writers and authors belonging to opposition political parties were excluded. The RDS now became the only legal writers association and membership was declared compulsory by Nazi officials.⁵⁸

In all of this restructuring of literary organizations, the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur played a large role. On the verge of bankruptcy in 1932, in 1933-34 the Kampfbund, and especially the director of the Berlin branch, Hans Hinkel, inserted itself vigorously into the coordination of cultural life. Hinkel attempted to guide the installation of new personnel in the writers associations and in several cases leaders of cultural institutions actually sought out Kampfbund guidance. Yet as dramatic as its rise to importance had been, its fall was equally rapid. Still lacking official recognition from the NSDAP, the Kampfbund operated without an official mandate. To make matters worse, a falling out between Hinkel and Rosenberg hampered the Kampfbund's effectiveness, allowing Rosenberg's rival, Joseph Goebbels, to come forward with a proposal for a national-level cultural organization as the most effective tool for

⁵⁸ Ibid., 162-63.

implementing the political directives of the regime in artistic life. Goebbels, Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda since March 1933, founded the Reichskulturkammer later that year. The foundation of this organization was also in part a response to the attempts by the *Deutsche Arbeiterfront* (DAF, German Labor Front), the Nazi labor organization, to treat culture-producers as any other group of workers. With a sense of urgency, then, Goebbels successfully won over Hitler and on 22 September 1933 the Chamber of Culture was founded, encompassing chambers for press, radio, music, film, theater, visual arts, and literature. Membership in these chambers was made mandatory for those involved in the cultural world by a 1 November 1933 law. The directors of each chamber had the ability to admit or reject applicants based on their political reliability and racial heritage and could also enact policies for licensing and the direction of businesses pertaining to that field. They also retained the ability to sanction their members and even to initiate police involvement.⁵⁹

The same 1 November law rechristened the Reichsverband der deutschen Schriftsteller the Reichsschrifttumskammer or Reich Literature Chamber. The writer Hans Friedrich Blunk served as its first president with Dr. Heinz Wismann, a member of Goebbel's propaganda ministry and eventual head of the Ministry's Literature Department, as the vice-president. This vice-presidential appointment was, of course, no accident, designed to ensure strict implementation of Goebbels's directives for writers, although in practice this relationship never operated as smoothly as hoped. Indeed, the consolidation of the several writers associations into the RSK proved a slow process, and the former functionaries of these organizations still lobbied on behalf of their members'

⁵⁹ Ibid., 165-66.

interests, all of which frequently led to conflict with Goebbels's ministry. Eventually, Goebbels's solution was to restructure the jurisdictions of the chambers, limiting them to their "corporate" tasks, namely aiding contract negotiations with publishers. Cultural policy was to be left to the propaganda ministry. Despite these frictions, however, what began as a modest organization by the end of the 1930s had ballooned into a massive bureaucracy, controlling important aspects of writers' professional lives.⁶⁰

The Propaganda Ministry's Literature Department did not enjoy unrestrained control over literary policy, however. It is not surprising that the Byzantine structure of Nazi Germany's bureaucracy, riddled with overlapping jurisdictions and contravening missions, infected the regulation of literary issues as well. Nominally Heinz Wismann, head of the Literature Department, was in charge of literary policy, but other NSDAP leaders wrested control of certain aspects of this policy, or at least attempted to assert their influence over it. Bernhard Rust's Ministry for Science, Education, and Popular Instruction, for example, gained control over libraries and schoolbooks in May 1934. The RSK, too, became an organization where Reich leaders jockeyed for influence. For instance, Max Amann, director of the Party's Eher Verlag and national leader for the Nazi press, helped guide book trade policy. More ominously, Hanns Johst, president of the Schrifttumskammer after Hanns Friedrich Blunck resigned under political pressure in 1935, aided Heinrich Himmler's efforts to install five SD (*Sicherheitsdienst* or Security Service) men into the chamber's administration. Martin Bormann, head of the Party Chancellery since May 1941, also intervened frequently in cultural policy decisions.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid., 166-68.

⁶¹ Ibid., 168-69.

Finally, Alfred Rosenberg, Goebbels's frequent antagonist, headed his own Führer's Commissioner for the Entire Spiritual and Ideological Schooling and Education of the NSDAP, an agency which included a Reich Office for the Cultivation of Literature (*Amt Schrifttumspflege*). While unable to influence cultural policy as much as the RSK, Rosenberg's literature office could make life difficult for the state's literary association by not allowing specific writers to give public readings in the DAF's leisure and educational institutions. It could also persuade the Gestapo or SD to move against authors suspected of harboring oppositional beliefs. The challenge offered by Rosenberg's office underscored the tension between state and Party agencies so that the state organizations – the Schrifttumskammer and the Propaganda Ministry's Literature Department – were forced to deal with a litany of Party agencies. This friction would continue throughout the 1930s and into the beginning of World War II. It was not until 1941-42 that Goebbels, needed more than ever by Hitler, reasserted the dominance over literary policy that he had wielded in the early months of the Third Reich.⁶² These overlapping bureaucracies and competing agendas prevented a full Nazification of German literature; in the confusion, spaces were created whereby writers could maintain degrees of creative autonomy and dissidents could resist the Nazi incursion into cultural life in Germany.⁶³

As far as Nazi literary policy is concerned, the political goals of the various state and Party bureaucracies often clashed with concerns about writers' socioeconomic conditions. One's livelihood as a writer depended first and foremost upon membership in

⁶² Ibid., 170-72.

⁶³ Trommler, 129.

the RSK, and membership depended first and foremost upon one's political and racial background as well as one's prior publications and income. Letters of recommendation were to be submitted from two sources to affirm the writer's professional suitability and moral characteristics. Eventually, membership also required a certificate of good political conduct from the local Nazi district office. If doubts arose, additional evaluations were solicited from the Gestapo, and it was not uncommon to place authors under surveillance by local SD and Gestapo authorities. Those deemed unreliable could be expelled from the chamber and have their works banned and even in some cases end up in prison or a concentration camp. Interestingly, however, Jews were not excluded from RSK membership at first. Because no "Aryan Paragraph" had been inserted into the law creating the Reichskulturkammer in 1933, Jewish authors were still allowed to join the RSK. By 1935, though, Goebbels declared Jews should be expelled from the various chambers and thus by the end of 1935 all "non-Aryan" writers found themselves expelled from the organization.⁶⁴ Former communists were not necessarily expelled either; Ernst Glaeser, Walter Bauer, and Gerhard Pohl, for example, who had all been members of the BPRS and whose earlier works were banned, were allowed to remain as RSK members. Censorship of all literature was also widely practiced, although these practices were wildly inconsistent as state and Party officials often disagreed on how strict censorship should be. Indeed, several authors had individual books banned but were not expelled

⁶⁴ Those Jewish artists and writers who remained in Germany were in 1935 organized into a *Reichsverband der jüdischen Kulturbünde* (Reich Association of Jewish Cultural Leagues), an umbrella organization that was dissolved and replaced by a streamlined *Jüdischer Kulturbund* (Jewish Cultural League) in 1939. The Jewish Kulturbund provided economic relief and employment as best it could to Jewish creative professionals but perversely facilitated the isolation of Jews from the rest of German society and culture. Thus as Jews were increasingly removed from social and economic relationships with other Germans, the Jewish Kulturbund amounted to a "ghettoization" of Jewish cultural life. With the deportation of the remaining German Jews to Poland's ghettos, the association was dissolved in September 1941. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology & Economy in Nazi Germany*, 120-26.

from the RSK, although the ability to ban books and the involvement of the Gestapo and Reich security forces in these decisions created what Jan-Pieter Barbian has described as a “climate of latent insecurity.”⁶⁵

Still, those authors considered loyal to the state were put to work aiding the regime’s propaganda goals. Public lectures by carefully selected authors became commonplace after 1934, sometimes with the state footing the bill for travel costs and honoraria.⁶⁶ An even narrower group of writers were selected to pursue Nazi propaganda goals abroad, as evidenced by the *Europäische Dichtervereinigung* (EDV, European Writers Association), founded in 1941. Led by the conservative writer Hans Carossa and paid for by the Propaganda Ministry, the association attempted to bring authors from across occupied Europe together. Those thirty odd authors who attended the association’s meetings, however, found little in common and overall the EDV was a failure. Still, through this organization the Nazis did find fellow travelers in occupied Europe, among them Knut Hamsun of Norway whose support for the Nazi regime was only the latest manifestation of his lifelong admiration for Germany.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the Nazis never succeeded in creating a large body of genuine “Nazi” novels and the public hardly seemed interested in them. The average reader in Nazi Germany preferred escapist literature, not books saturated with political messages. To this end books on humorous topics, science-fiction literature, and foreign novels were the most popular, especially during the Second World War.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Barbian, 172-73, 177; see also Faustmann, 203.

⁶⁶ Barbian 173-74.

⁶⁷ Trommler, 125.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127-28.

The RSK was not simply a passive vessel for implementing state directives, however. Since its creation, the Schrifttumskammer presented the regime with demands to improve the social and economic situations of its members, issues which in many cases were taken directly from the SDS. The RSK was able to achieve a standardized publishing contract, implemented in June 1935 although no similar agreement was achieved in the field of copyright protection.⁶⁹ Individual authors could profit a great deal from the regime, often benefiting from pre-Nazi works depicting nationalist or *völkisch* themes. Hanns Johst and Hans Friedrich Blunck, for example, used their position as presidents of the RSK to increase the sale of their books.⁷⁰ The Nazi government also offered various incentives to produce ideologically acceptable literature, including literary prizes, publicity, and highly coveted paper allocation in the midst of wartime shortages. Goebbels also built up the reputations of reliable writers, organizing literary meetings in Weimar (called the *Weimarer Dichtertreffen* or Weimar writers' meetings) beginning in 1938 which aimed to present to the public writers considered the best representatives of German culture, the successors to Goethe and Schiller.⁷¹ Individual Nazi leaders also patronized certain writers even when another might have disapproved. Goebbels permitted Werner Bergengruen to continue publishing, for example, despite Rosenberg's disapproval of his first novel. Reinhold Schneider was

⁶⁹ Faustmann, 214-16.

⁷⁰ Barbian, 174-75.

⁷¹ Trommler, 125.

also tolerated despite disseminating copies of his poems illegally, largely because Goebbel's approved of his 1938 novel *Las Casas and Charles V*.⁷²

Yet the ambitions of the Schrifttumskammer greatly outdistanced their results in terms of improving members' economic situation. For example, the RSK was unable to achieve a substantial raise in writers' incomes. Most members earned just a living wage and their economic status remained largely what it had been under the Weimar Republic. The socioeconomic situation deteriorated during World War II as it had in World War I and the Great Depression, with paper shortages, the destruction and closing of publishing houses, and the reduction of personnel overseeing these operations. Some relief to writers was provided by the *Deutsche Schillerstiftung* (German Schiller Foundation), but the organization suffered from budget constraints, especially during World War II.⁷³ To this end, despite arguments that writers were needed on the home front to shore up morale, the RSK cancelled the draft exemptions held by a large number of writers – thus sending them off to the military or armaments industry – in order to reduce the financial stress on the organization. Plans for old age pensions also fell through despite official support from Goebbels; until the end of the war the plans remained merely theoretical.⁷⁴

Some authors who were originally sympathetic to the Nazis, such as Hans Fallada and Gottfried Benn, fell out favor over the course of the 1930s. Benn, for example, had rather opportunistically declared his support for the National Socialist dictatorship in its early years, but regime officials soon declared his work alien to Nazi cultural ideals and

⁷² Lisa Pine, *Hitler's 'National Community': Society and Culture in Nazi Germany* (London: Hodder Arnold: 2007), 223.

⁷³ See Jere H. Link, "Guardians of culture: the Deutsche Schillerstiftung and German writers, 1859-1917" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1988).

⁷⁴ Barbican, 175.

expelled him from the RSK in March 1938 while also placing a writing ban on him.⁷⁵ Other authors who had been nationalistic-conservative in their orientation before the Nazi ascendancy, now found themselves disillusioned with the Third Reich such as Ernst Jünger, Hans Carossa, August Winnig, Hans Grimm, and Ernst Wiechert.⁷⁶ Of these authors, opposition might lead to prison or concentration camp time as was the case with Wiechert. Wiechert, who can be described as extolling reactionary values, was initially courted by the Nazi state but beginning in 1935 he began openly defying the regime by publicly supporting the incarcerated pastor Martin Niemöller. In 1938 Wiechert himself was arrested and spent several months in Buchenwald although when he was released he was still able to publish books, both new and old. Other authors were not as fortunate. Rudolf Ditzen, better known as Hans Fallada, penned the novel *Altes Herz geht auf die Reise* (Old Heart Goes on a Journey), a thinly-disguised critique of Nazism, in 1935 and was immediately declared an “undesirable author,” prompting a nervous breakdown. As a result, Fallada moved in a safer direction, writing children’s books, light fiction, film scripts, and translations.⁷⁷ Friedrich Percyval Reck-Malleczewen, critical of Nazi authorities in his writings, in December 1944 was sent to the Dachau concentration camp where he died in February 1945.⁷⁸

Many authors also withdrew into inner immigration, ceasing to play an active role in public life, a list including Ernst Jünger, Oskar Loerke, Theodor Haecker, and Frank

⁷⁵ Pine, 223.

⁷⁶ Barbian, 175-76.

⁷⁷ Jenny Williams, “Hans Fallada’s Literary Breathrough: *Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben* and *Kleiner Mann – was nun?*” in Leydecker, 255.

⁷⁸ Pine, 223-24; Barbian, 175-76.

Thiess. These authors remained distant from the regime but did not write anything overtly oppositional. Some authors, like Werner Bergengruen, Reinhold Schneider, and Jochen Klepper, kept away from the Nazi state out of religious convictions. Jünger, one of the best known writers in Germany thanks to his novels such as *Storm of Steel* (1920), *The Adventurous Heart* (1929), and *Total Mobilization* (1931), was initially celebrated by the Nazis for his novels depicting *Fronterlebnis* (“front experience”) that served to extol the virtues of front-line soldiers and nationalistic values. In 1939, however, Jünger’s novel *Auf dem Marmorklippen* (On the Marble Cliffs) could be read as an allegory of the Nazi state with a latent criticism of its rule by terror. Jünger, however, was not subjected to professional bans, due in part to his prior status but also due to the complexity of his language, which masked subversive messages and made it difficult to prove his seditious intent. In any event, the Nazi leadership did not consider his works dangerous.⁷⁹

Generally, authors of the inner immigration frequently guided their readers to identify double meanings and analogs to the present situation in Germany. In doing so, these authors subverted the official ideal of reading as a communal activity, often creating a starkly isolating tone in their works.⁸⁰ Many of these authors of inner immigration thus continued to publish and saw large sales of their books, a fact which led to much acrimony after the war, especially among those writers who had gone into external exile.

The Nazi war effort soon affected all writers in Germany, regardless of their closeness to the regime. The strain of the Second World War increased the demand in Germany for escapist literature, yet after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 writers

⁷⁹ Pine, 224-25; Barbican, 176.

⁸⁰ Trommler, 126.

saw their professional opportunities sharply diminish as resources were reallocated to the war effort. Not only did paper shortages emerge, but the personnel from the publishing and book trades were increasingly transferred to armaments industries. Still, at least until 1944 the regime continued to place an emphasis on maintaining morale at home and so continued to allot some resources to cultural life. These demands, however, proved difficult for the RSK to manage. The regime's publishers, increasingly victims of Allied bombing raids, turned more and more to the RSK for financial support in order to meet the increased demand. By 1944 the regime began shutting down book production plants, drastically cutting back staff from the book trade, and closing libraries. Finally, in October 1944 Goebbels issued a directive to the RSK declaring that at that point in the war, art was no longer necessary. The sole duty, Goebbels continued, of German artists was "to work directly for the achievement of final victory, either as a soldier or an aid in the fortification, in the maintenance of our Reich's defensive capability."⁸¹ The literary careers of Germany's writers thus came to an abrupt if temporary halt as they entered a period of utter poverty in defeated and devastated Germany.

The Nazi influence on writers and writers associations did not result in a literary *Stunde Null*. The enthusiastic Nazi embrace of high cultural ideals, in literature and other art forms, produced a long-term impact in both German states and Austria in terms of the continued veneration of culture in those countries as well as concrete policies aimed at appeasing writers' demands for protection against the free market. To be sure, many countries de-liberalized their book markets in the 1930s and various attempts at

⁸¹ Quoted in Barbian, 182-83.

neocorporatist and organizational solutions of one scheme or another existed in other industrially advanced countries including the United States. Nevertheless, the impact of Nazism's restructuring of the cultural world cannot be underestimated in its impact on subsequent German cultural life. Under the Nazis, the state assumed an unprecedented role in structuring cultural activities, instantly overcoming the barriers faced by more regional attempts at organization that characterized the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods by operating on a national level and making membership compulsory. This modernization of cultural life exerted a decisive influence over postwar sponsorship and structuring of culture in both Germanys; culture had, in Frank Trommler's summation, become "an element of the welfare state," and attempts in both Germanys, especially in the GDR, to organize writers and other creative professionals into organizations that both promoted ideological goals and promised the state's financial, legal, and social support drew on the Nazi example.⁸² What's more, the writers of East Germany, having learned to be anti-fascists, failed to learn to be wary of submitting to a writers association under the control of a dictatorship. Indeed, the principal lesson among many intellectuals was that turning a blind eye to politics had opened the door for manipulation of intellectuals by Nazis; writers and other creative intellectuals, especially in the Soviet zone, thus increasingly turned to political participation in a place where one ideological perspective soon dominated all others. Indeed, Communism, so the KPD came to assert, was uniquely capable of bringing about a renewal of Germany with its rhetorical emphasis on anti-fascism and democracy, an assertion to which many writers would soon listen.⁸³

⁸² Trommler, 129-31.

⁸³ David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 76, 80.

Cultural Associations in Occupied Germany: From Unity to Division, 1945-49

The end of World War II witnessed a German literary profession in disarray; several prominent authors were still in exile abroad and many of the writers who stayed behind were tainted by complicity with the Nazis. Like all Germans, literary professionals faced very real material crises in the years after the defeat and in many ways a protective organization seemed like a natural, even urgent idea. Complicating matters, however, was the quadripartite division of Germany between France, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Especially in the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone* or SBZ), the occupying authorities along with the German Communist Party (KPD) and its 1946 successor the Socialist Unity Party (SED) at the outset sought some degree of influence over cultural life in their domain. Still, from the war's end through the foundation of the two German states in 1949, cultural policy in the Soviet zone was relatively, if tenuously, liberal. A uniform policy from above was lacking, resulting in creative latitude among artists as well as the foundation of multiple cultural and writers organizations, the most important being the *Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands* (Cultural League for the Democratic Renewal of Germany) and the *Schutzverband deutscher Autoren* (Union for the Protection of German Authors), both founded in 1945. Each of these organizations claimed some degree of authority over the literary profession, but not simply in the Soviet zone. By and large, in each organization a *gesamtdeutsch* or "all-German" mentality prevailed, if only as lip-service, whereby the organization sought to unite writers from *all* occupation zones. However, by the time two independent German states were founded in 1949, the

SED was moving increasingly (though not inevitably) toward exerting control over these organizations in service to the new communist state.

Before considering the Soviet zone, we need to consider those authors who had lived in exile during the Nazi years. Some writers were unable or chose not to join the Reichsschriftumskammer, opting or being forced instead into external emigration. The former tended to include artists and writers who were initially sympathetic to the Nazis but grew disenchanted over time. The latter consisted mainly of those deemed state enemies, especially (but not exclusively) communists and Jews. Those writers in external exile scattered in all directions: Britain, France, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Denmark, Mexico, the United States, and the Soviet Union were all destinations of German asylum-seekers. All exiles shared a common opposition to the Nazi regime, but ideological differences prevented the formation of a common idea of how to oppose Nazism or what exactly the “other Germany” meant.⁸⁴ Moreover, even after the defeat of Germany in 1945, the sheer scale of the devastation coupled with the fact of occupation deterred writers from returning to Germany. Indeed, with few exceptions, most of the writers who left Germany in 1933 never returned to their country of birth on a permanent basis.⁸⁵ Hitler’s brutal suppression of artistic modernism prompted a mass exodus of writers, including Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Anna Seghers, Bertolt Brecht, Lion Feuchtwanger, Erich Maria Remarque, Alfred Döblin, and Ernst Toller.⁸⁶ According to

⁸⁴ Dove and Lamb, 6. See also Thomas Koebner, “‘Militant Humanism’: a Concept of the Third Way in Exile 1933-45,” in the same volume, 121-48.

⁸⁵ “Introduction,” John M. Spalek and Robert F. Bell, eds. *Exile: The Writer’s Experience* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), xi-xii.

⁸⁶ Dove and Lamb, 5.

one estimate, approximately 2,500 writers left Germany either of their own free will or under pressure.⁸⁷ While abroad, attempts at organizing were made difficult by the sheer geographic spread of the German cultural Diaspora, although in the three most common destinations – France (until 1940), the Soviet Union, and the United States – there were efforts made to continue some of the pre-Nazi writers associations, but in all cases these endeavors ultimately failed in the face of stark ideological differences.

Of the groups in exile, the communists made the most concerted effort to maintain organizational structures for writers although this produced only mixed results. After the Reichstag fire in February 1933, Hitler outlawed the KPD and initiated a wave of arrests that sent Communist writers scrambling. While the majority of the Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller leadership and many of its members were able to flee Germany (often with expressed orders from Moscow),⁸⁸ a small group of writers stayed behind who continued the BPRS's work clandestinely inside of Germany. Publishing and distributing leaflets and an underground magazine entitled, as well as smuggling out reports to their colleagues abroad, the group drew Gestapo interest before long. In October 1935 many of the group members were arrested and sentenced to between one and five years in prison. For those communist writers choosing western immigration, a nucleus developed in Paris around which to try to continue the League's activities in exile. In August 1933 Johannes R. Becher, chair of the BPRS, initiated a meeting of the so-called "*Pariser Gruppe*" of the BPRS. At that meeting the authors present opted to

⁸⁷ Pine, 221.

⁸⁸ For example, the KPD, operating now from Moscow, ordered Lukács and Willi Bredel to leave Germany. Trude Richter, conducting clandestine work for the BPRS in Germany, in 1934 drew Gestapo attention, prompting Soviet authorities to procure a visa for her to travel to the USSR. Many writers, though, did not receive such instructions and fled on their own or begged their colleagues already in Moscow to intervene on their behalf to procure a coveted Soviet visa. Pike, *Exile*, 59-61.

reestablish the Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller, defying Hitler's coordination of the organization in Germany. Although non-communist writers were encouraged to join and the organization was officially politically neutral (save its opposition to fascism), the steering committee of the revamped organization was dominated by BPRS members, meaning that many of the SDS's subsequent events were prepared beforehand by the League. As for the BPRS itself, their main activities in the Paris years were twofold: to provide money and support for the opposition writers in Germany and to try to win over other writers and intellectuals for anti-fascist activities.⁸⁹

In order to accomplish the latter goal, the BPRS (through the SDS) organized an International Writers' Congress for the Defense of Culture, held in Paris on 21-25 June 1935. The conference program was designed to attract a broad array of writers from various political perspectives, discussing seemingly innocuous topics like the role of writers in society, the defense of culture (anti-fascism), and cultural heritage. The Soviet writers present as well as their German counterparts thus refrained from demanding support for the USSR at the meeting. Certain delegates of course spoke favorably of the Soviet Union and drew connections between anti-fascism and support for the USSR. Conveniently, many of these delegates were non-communist writers (among them André Gide and Heinrich Mann), meaning that Party members could let the fellow travelers unwittingly carry out the communists' propaganda objectives while still claiming the congress was "neutral." In his report back to Moscow, Becher could justifiably rate the conference a rousing success in generating support for a communist-led popular front of

⁸⁹ For the activities of the BPRS in Paris and Berlin, see Dieter Schiller, "Stimme aus Deutschland: Der Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller in Berlin und Paris 1933-1935," *Pankower Vorträge* Heft 72 (2005). For the SDS in Paris see Pike, *Exile*, 94-95.

writers, although this cooperation disintegrated relatively quickly in the face of the communists' aggressive assertion of leadership in the movement as well as the beginnings of the Moscow show trials in August 1936.⁹⁰

Efforts to establish independent writers associations in the two other common destinations for literary exiles – the Soviet Union and United States – met with less success. In June 1933 the BPRS founded a “Moscow local branch,” although in December 1935 when the Soviets restructured their international organization for writers, the BPRS was dissolved and re-imagined as the German Section of the Union of Soviet Writers (the latter had been founded in 1934). While in Soviet exile, however, long-simmering tensions among BPRS members erupted between Lukács, Bertolt Brecht (who subsequently left the USSR for California), Willi Bredel, and Ernst Ottwalt, resulting in the formation of cliques. The German Section was thus quickly mired in intrigues, arguments, and conspiracies, and when the Stalinist purges began to take aim at German émigrés in late 1936, these internal divisions led to major political confrontations with very real consequences in terms of arrests, prison sentences, and executions.⁹¹

In the United States, the most concerted effort to form an organization for émigré writers was connected with a manifesto issued by the Free Germany Committee of the Soviet Union. In August 1943 the authors Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht,

⁹⁰ Pike, *Exile*, 107-21. On Heinrich Mann's role at the conference, see Gunnemann, 40-41.

⁹¹ Pike, *Exile*, 126, 136-37, 154-55. On Brecht's contentious relationship with other German exiles in the Soviet Union as well as his connections to several Russian purge victims, see John B. Fuegi, “The Exile's Choice: Brecht and the Soviet Union,” in Spalek and Bell, 119-132. Pike gives a detailed account of the purge of Germans in the Soviet Union, estimating that of the approximately 130 Germans in the cultural sphere of the émigrés, some 70 percent were arrested. Among those German writers who fell victim to the purges were Karl Schmückle (disappeared), Werner Hirsch (ten year prison sentence), Trude Richter (five years hard labor), Hans Günther (five years hard labor but died after two), and Ernst Ottwalt (five years prison sentence). Lukács and Becher apparently lived in constant fear that they would be liquidated, especially after the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939. Becher, though not arrested, attempted suicide while Lukács was arrested in 1941 only to be released several months later. See Pike, *Exile*, 307-57.

Lion Feuchtwanger, Berthold Viertel, Bruno Frank met with the critic Ludwig Marcuse and philosophy professor Hans Reichenbach in California and drafted a statement pledging support for the manifesto which urged Germans to rise up against the Nazis and fight to establish a democracy there. Thomas Mann, however, soon changed his mind and withdrew his signature, wary of the Soviet Union's ulterior motives. Further attempts to found a Free Germany Committee in the United States met with State Department disapproval, and Mann, the natural leader of such a group, declined to participate. Mann's actions sparked discord among many German expatriates, especially Brecht, whose old antagonism toward Mann (whom he considered bourgeois), remained present despite their shared exile in America.⁹² In both the United States and Soviet Union, then, internal divisions among German authors prevented the formation of any noteworthy writers association.

Culture was from the outset regarded as a critically important area by the authorities in the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland* or SMAD). The Soviets regarded the establishment of a cultural structure along the lines of that of the USSR as a key component to reeducating the Germans. Yet the occupiers faced a difficult task in winning over Germany's cultural elites, many of whom were skeptical about Soviet intentions and their claims to cultural superiority. For its part, The German KPD struggled initially to win over intellectuals as well, and the Soviets chastised the German communists for failing to take questions of culture more seriously. To overcome these

⁹² Herbert Lehnert, "Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and the 'Free Germany' Movement," in Spalek and Bell, 186-188, 193-200.

obstacles and implement their cultural vision for Germany, the Soviet officials launched a broad but unevenly applied program to exert control over the culture produced in the Soviet zone. To this end, not only did the Soviets create institutions which joined the professional and economic interests of writers and other creative intellectuals to positive assessments of the Soviet Union, but they assumed control of admissions to universities and academies as well as institutions of public culture such as libraries, theaters, and opera houses, while also imposing censorship and control over publishing houses.⁹³ These efforts to win over intellectuals who could popularize the communists' message required creating the façade that the Soviet zone cultural organizations were in fact nonpartisan, not strongly influenced by occupation authorities or the KPD.⁹⁴ In reality, of course, the organizations were never *überparteilich* and continued skepticism about these claims kept many intellectuals aloof, but it remained the case that, lacking a clear cultural policy from above, the members and leaders of these organizations often pursued courses that ran into conflict with the SMAD and KPD.

No cultural figure dominated the immediate postwar period more than the enigmatic Johannes R. Becher. Born as Hans Robert Becher in 1891 (he assumed the *nom de plume* as a reference to John the Baptist), Becher's was a man beset by grave insecurities (resulting in multiple suicide attempts) as well as inspired if unsteady leadership for German communist writers from the 1920s through the 1950s.⁹⁵ While in

⁹³ Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 398-400, 464.

⁹⁴ Pike, *Politics*, 71-74, 80-83, 177-78, 320-30.

⁹⁵ Becher died in 1958. See Jens-Fietje Dwars, "'Ich habe zu funktionieren...': Der Wandel Johannes R. Becher vom expressionistischen Cafehaus-Dichter zum Vorsitzenden des 'Bundes Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller,'" in Wolfgang Bialas and Georg G. Iggers, eds. *Intellektuelle in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1996), 391-412.

Soviet exile during World War II, Becher gained prominence for his strong efforts to get Germans to admit collective guilt for Nazism and to create a new Germany after the war, calling in 1944 for the “reeducation of the German people toward freedom.”⁹⁶ Along these lines, Becher spoke frequently in religious terms, advocating a “spiritual rebirth” (*geistige Neugeburt*), a “German renaissance,” and even a Reformation (*Reformationswerk*) of German culture.⁹⁷ In Moscow, he worked with many of the KPD leaders (including Walter Ulbricht) and was generally well-regarded by influential German communists. Upon his return to Germany in June 1945, Becher seemed the obvious choice to lead the efforts at cultural renewal and forging an alliance of intellectuals around the notion of anti-fascism and the reeducation of a collectively guilty German people, and, when nominated to be head of the Kulturbund when it was created by the Soviets and the KPD on 3 July 1945, he was easily accepted.⁹⁸ His KPD membership drew suspicion from some of the new organization’s founding members, to be sure, but Becher’s artistic reputation seems to have allayed fears that he would put his party obligations ahead of his obligations as a creative intellectual.⁹⁹ Although he never achieved decisive influence within the KPD and later SED, Becher nonetheless took an active role as a leader in multiple post-war writers and cultural organizations.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Pike, *Politics*, 72.

⁹⁷ Dietrich, 532.

⁹⁸ Naimark, 400-1. Pike, *Politics*, 72-73.

⁹⁹ Pike, *Politics*, 83-84.

Most cultural activity was managed through the Kulturbund,¹⁰⁰ whose organizational reach spread to all occupation zones (at least until 1947 when it was banned outside of the SBZ) and whose membership, 1,500 strong in 1945, and leadership included many intellectuals who were not members of the KPD; in fact, half of the members of the Kulturbund's board of directors were without party affiliations altogether.¹⁰¹ Instead, the organization stressed an *überparteilich* or non-partisan ethos reminiscent of the popular front pursued by communists in the 1930s, and the Kulturbund's registration application in 1945 insisted that it was created not on a socialist basis but on an "anti-fascist" and "democratic" foundation.¹⁰² The stated goals of the Kulturbund were an eradication of Nazism, creating a "united front" of creative intellectual workers, and helping forge a "militantly" democratic attitude among Germans. Becher asserted that a broad basis was needed to realize the Kulturbund's goals of reeducating the German people, necessitating appeals to intellectuals of different ideological positions who would in turn use art as a pedagogical weapon to eradicate the

¹⁰⁰ The Kulturbund was actually preceded by a professional association formed in Berlin called the *Kammer der Kulturschaffenden* (Chamber of Cultural Producers), operating from June 20, 1945 with KPD member Fritz Erpenbeck on its executive board (along with Erich Otto, Michael Bohnen, Eduard von Winterstein, and chair Paul Wegener). The Kammer was organized into sections for music, literature, graphic arts, dance, film, and crafts. It is unclear why both the Kulturbund and Kammer emerged around the same time, considering both had similar missions, but within a year the Kulturbund far outstripped the Kammer in significance and the latter organization disbanded. Ibid., 81.

¹⁰¹ The Kulturbund's charter committee met 8 August 1945 to elect an executive board. Members of the board that was elected there included Protestant ministers Otto Dilschneider and Friedrich-Wilhelm Krummacher, the painter Renee Sintenis (the only woman), and representatives of the main parties: Ferdinand Friedensburg and Ernst Lemmer of the CDU, Gustav Dahrendorf of the SPD and Anton Ackermann (who was the Communists' point man for the organization), Hans Mahle, and Otto Winzer of the KPD. Ironically, this meeting took place at the Kulturbund's designated building which happened to be the former headquarters of the Reichsschrifttumskammer. Gerd Dietrich, "Kulturbund," in *Die Parteien und Organisationen der DDR: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan, Andreas Herbst, Christine Krauss, Daniel Küchenmeister, and Detlef Nakath (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2002), 532-33; Pike, *Politics*, 83-84.

¹⁰² Dietrich, 530.

traces of fascism in Germany.¹⁰³ Many in the western zones remained skeptical of the independence of the Kulturbund from the KPD, however. Moreover, this commitment to non-partisanship, expressed most strongly by Becher, created an irreducible tension with what some KB members chastised as the “*kulturfeindlich*” (culture-averse) KPD and its goal to exert covert control over the organization.¹⁰⁴

More than non-partisanship, however, figures such as Becher and Alexander Abusch argued that the Kulturbund could be an instrument for achieving cultural unity across occupation zones. The fact that the SED came to define this national culture as one excluding non-communists should not lead us to believe that the leaders of the Kulturbund were merely biding their time until they could align the organization more explicitly with the KPD/SED; the numerous conflicts that emerged between Becher in particular and his party indicate that from the outset there was little agreement over the cultural policy to be pursued in the Soviet occupation zone. Moreover, leading cultural figures within communist-created institutions continued to voice differing opinions about German national culture as well as the prospect of political unification (following from cultural unification). Indeed, the SED itself was far from unified in its views on cultural policy, and the opinions expressed by the German communist leaders sometimes clashed with those of Moscow. Before the solidification of German division into two states, German communist leaders like Walter Ulbricht, Wilhelm Pieck, and Franz Dähle, for example, considered the issue of German unification as secondary, focusing instead primarily on economic and administrative issues within the SBZ. Becher, Anton

¹⁰³ Ibid., 532-33; Pike, *Politics*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR, 1945-1990* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik Claus-Peter von Nottbeck, 1995), 5-7; Naimark, 401-402.

Ackermann, Max Fechner, and Otto Meier, on the other hand, continued to push a *gesamtdeutsch* approach to the German question which called for a unified but neutral Germany, one implicitly susceptible to Soviet influence.¹⁰⁵

Given its *überparteilich* claims, among the Kulturbund's most important activities in the immediate postwar period was seeking out intellectuals who had been in exile during the Nazi period. In this capacity, the KB often served as the main contact point for intellectuals wishing to return to Germany and become re-integrated into its cultural life. In November 1945, for example, the Kulturbund issued a "*Ruf an die Emigranten*" (call to emigrants), declaring that the period of exile had ended and it was time to return to Germany.¹⁰⁶ They also pursued those who had remained in Germany in "inner exile" (many of whom were avowedly *not* communists), despite much tension between individuals on both sides of the emigration divide. In fact, Becher himself often tried to play the role of mediator between the two increasingly hostile groups: on the one hand, those staunch communists who had fled Germany often harbored enmity for those who made compromises with the Nazi regime; on the other, those who remained behind lambasted those who had watched Germany's defeat from the outside and now dared to judge those who had suffered through Germany's collapse firsthand.¹⁰⁷ The most

¹⁰⁵ Peter Davis, *Divided Loyalties: East German Writers and the Politics of German Division, 1945-1953* (London: Maney Publishing, 2000), 1-3, 46-47.

¹⁰⁶ Dietrich, 534, Jäger, 17-18. Many prominent writers who had fled Nazi Germany either died in exile (e.g., Kurt Tucholsky, Ernst Toller, and Stefan Zweig) or chose to remain abroad even after the end of the war (e.g., Thomas Mann and Lion Feuchtwanger). Dove and Lamb, 10.

¹⁰⁷ This debate raged in all occupation zones, but unlike in the western zones where most of the external emigrants remained abroad and delivered their moralizing condemnations from afar, the Communist writers, often having returned to the Soviet zone, inveighed their colleagues in person. The recriminations from the Communist exiles assumed an additional character as well: it was all-too-apparent to some of the inner emigrants that their erstwhile judges were themselves thoroughly identified with a dictatorial party (the KPD/SED), adding the charge of hypocrisy to the already poisonous atmosphere. The Communists often took a more conciliatory attitude towards prominent writers who had remained in Nazi Germany,

prominent of the Kulturbund's efforts along reconciliatory lines came with the election in 1945 of playwright Gerhard Hauptmann, the Nobel laureate who remained in Germany during the Nazi period, as their honorary president.¹⁰⁸

The Kulturbund's efforts to attract German intellectuals were aided by the fact that the Soviet occupiers began providing basic necessities for creative intellectuals in a period of tremendous economic difficulty. The SMAD authorities established, for example, a canteen for writers, artists, and dramaturges, quickly reopened many German theaters, and created a club for cultural intellectuals in Berlin (the Seagull) which provided food and a chance for artists and writers to forget their plight for a few hours. The Soviets even established vacation homes and spas for sympathetic members of the intelligentsia. These policies produced praise from many intellectuals and by May 1947 the Kulturbund's membership ballooned to 93,000,¹⁰⁹ but benefits were unequally distributed. The vast majority of authors received little help from the SMAD authorities and even less from the SED, despite the fact that many if not most writers lived lives of bare subsistence. Prominent artists and writers received better treatment, a system that foreshadowed developments in the GDR.¹¹⁰ These cultural "stars" were showered with praise and allotted additional financial resources, all to secure these artists as propaganda

however, even if they possessed tainted records. This group included Hans Fallada and Gerhard Hauptmann among others. Pike, *Politics*, 183-86.

¹⁰⁸ Dietrich, 533.

¹⁰⁹ Pike, *Politics*, 333.

¹¹⁰ By 1949 the SED undertook new initiatives to address the economic and professional needs of intellectuals, offering higher pay, housing, tax breaks, prizes, increased rations, and access to rest homes. Yet these incentives, too, were distributed unevenly. Moreover, a general lack of funding as well as widespread apathy if not antipathy toward intellectuals among local SED branches meant that the overwhelming majority of writers and other intellectuals continued to have economic difficulties. Naimark, 461-63.

for the superiority of the Soviet system. Several cultural figures remained aloof, however, highly skeptical of the organization's non-partisan claims given the prominence of communists in its leadership. Nevertheless, while the Kulturbund was unsuccessful at courting many "bourgeois" writers such as Thomas Mann, occupation officials – and especially Alexander Dymshitz, the chief Soviet cultural officer in the SBZ – fared better with communist writers as they were able to win over, for example, Anna Seghers (living in Mexico) in 1947, Bertolt Brecht (living in Hollywood) in 1948, and Stefan Heym (who had fought for the Americans in the war) in 1953, although several of these "star" authors produced nothing of great merit in the Soviet zone or GDR.¹¹¹

In the Soviet zone, the most important organization specifically for literary professionals was the Schutzverband deutscher Autoren (SDA, Union for the Protection of German Authors), created in late 1945. Though nominally independent, the KPD moved quickly to assert its influence over the organization, establishing the SDA as the largest writers organization in Germany. The SDA not only catered to the economic interests of writers, but it also took the lead (in partnership with the Kulturbund) in organizing the most important event for German authors in the immediate postwar period: the First Writers Congress of October 1947. Though the intention of the congress was to mark a symbolic end to the exile of German writers and a reunification of German culture, the burgeoning tensions of the Cold War quickly destroyed any pretense of non-partisanship. The SDA continued to maintain operations in all occupation zones, but after the congress it increasingly became an organization of writers exclusively from the

¹¹¹ Hans Fallada, for example, died a morphine addict at age 53 in 1947. Ibid., 459-61.

Soviet zone. When it became obvious that maintaining an all-German writers association would be impossible, the leaders of the SDA in conjunction with the SED moved to transform their organization into an *East German Schriftstellerverband*.

While information on the SDA's foundation is fleeting, the idea for the organization probably was born out of the urgency of the postwar period to protect writers from the unauthorized use of their works by newspapers, journals, or publishers, a concept which in some ways stretched back to the goals of the SDS before the Nazi takeover. Unwilling to allow independent professional organizations to emerge, the SMAD authorities and KPD sought to chain associations of writers and other artists to a larger bureaucracy which could influence and coordinate their policies. Understanding that many non-communist writers were cautious in joining organizations that were directly connected to the KPD or SMAD, the strategy adopted by leading communists, especially within the *Deutsche Verwaltung für Volksbildung* (DVV, German Administration for Public Instruction),¹¹² took the form of organizing different types of artists into the KPD's only authorized labor organization, the *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (FDGB, Free German Labor Union, also founded in 1945). In this context, the first meeting to discuss the creation of the SDA met 29 October 1945. KPD member Fritz Erpenbeck took the lead in organizing the meeting; Erpenbeck was cautious not to alienate those authors wary of KPD domination, but still argued that only

¹¹² The DVV, founded July 27, 1945 by SMAD authorities, was a crucially important cultural institution of the Soviet Zone, forming the genesis of the later Ministry of Culture in the GDR. The DVV's activities including the overseeing of the ideological content of literature, promoting acceptable literature while censoring those works deemed problematic, as well as administering theaters, museums, and art schools. For a more detailed account of the early censorship activities and control of publishing in the Soviet Zone and the GDR, see Pike, *Politics* and Simone Barck, Martina Langermann, Siegfried Lokatis, "*Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer*": *Zensur-System und literarische Öffentlichkeiten in der DDR bis Ende der sechziger Jahre* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).

within the framework of the FDGB, committed to democracy and anti-fascism, could writers maintain an independent professional association. On 9 November 1945 the SDA was formally founded, electing a board of twenty-three authors including only three important communists (Becher, Friederich Wolf, and Hedda Zinner – Erpenbeck’s wife) but declaring support for affiliation with the FDGB.¹¹³ Rudolf Pechel, Edwin Redslob, Roland Schacht, and Günther Weisenborn were selected as chairs of the new writers organization while Werner Schendell assumed the role of business manager (*Geschäftsführer*). The stated goal of the SDA was identical with that of the SDS, namely to safeguard and promote the economic and legal rights of professional authors, and by spring 1947 membership in the SDA had grown to six hundred with approximately 20 percent living in the western occupation zones.¹¹⁴

As far as FDGB affiliation went, in 1946 the SDA was made part of the *Gewerkschaft 17 Kunst, Schrifttum und freie Berufe* (Labor Union 17 Art, Writing, and Free Professions).¹¹⁵ The Gewerkschaft consisted of seven subsidiary organizations: the four organizations of the *Verband Bühne-Film-Musik* (VBFM, Union of Stage-Film-Music),¹¹⁶ along with the Verband Deutscher Presse (Union of German Press), the Schutzverband Bildender Künstler (Protective Union of Visual Artists), and the SDA.

¹¹³ Pike, *Politics*, 123-125.

¹¹⁴ Carsten Gansel, *Parlament des Geistes: Literatur zwischen Hoffnung und Repression, 1945-1961* (Berlin: BasisDruck Verlag GmbH, 1996), 42-43.

¹¹⁵ The FDGB had created 18 divisions in April 1946; the Gewerkschaft Kunst, Schrifttum und Freie Berufe was the 17th of these divisions. Pike, *Politics*, 123, 289-91.

¹¹⁶ Formed in May 1945 by actors, stage performers, musicians, and technical theater personnel, the VBFM combined four professional organizations: the *Genossenschaft Deutscher Bühnenangehörigen* (Cooperative of Stage Members), the *internationale Artisten-Loge* (international Artist Lodge), the *Deutscher Musiker-Verband* (German Musician Union), and the *Technik und Verwaltung* (Technology and Management).

However, many artists and writers resisted joining the Gewerkschaft despite an alleged continuity between its constituent organizations and their pre-1933 predecessors. These skeptics remained unconvinced of the autonomy of the respective subdivisions, chained as they were to the Gewerkschaft which was in turn subordinated to the FDGB. The fact that the FDGB continued to insist throughout that labor organizations outside of its auspices were illegal only added to the suspicion, and as a result the SDA and the Gewerkschaft in general attracted far fewer writers than the SED expected.¹¹⁷

A watershed event within attempts to attain cultural unity for Germany was the First Writers Congress, taking place 4-8 October 1947. Originally conceived by members of the SDA in October 1946, the congress was supposed to mark a symbolic end to the exile of German writers. To this end, the SDA began planning the event but soon ran into logistical problems and disputes over who to invite (especially concerning authors who had had connections with Nazism), so that the congress, originally planned for early 1947, was delayed several months. What began with hopes of achieving German cultural unity soon descended into what would later be mythologized by both East and West as the beginning of Germany's cultural Cold War. To be sure, 1947 saw some of the first signs of a developing Cold War with the Truman Doctrine declared in March and the Marshall Plan announced in June. In response to these developments, the organizers of the congress proclaimed their intention to confront the gathering storm with, in the words of Günther Weisenborn, a non-partisan "*Parlament des Geistes*" (Parlament of the Spirit). Three hundred writers descended on Berlin for the congress

¹¹⁷ Pike, *Politics*, 289-300.

from all occupation zones, many with genuine hopes of transcending political differences and finding common ground on questions of culture.¹¹⁸

Given the SED and SMAD oversight of the event's organization, it is hardly surprising that a tempestuous climate emerged at the congress. Occurring a week and a half after the SED's Second Party Congress in which Pieck had declared that the Party's cultural policy must be based on a firm foundation of Marxism-Leninism without compromises, the German communists and Russians at the Writers Congress evinced an aggressive position vis-à-vis their Western colleagues. Invoking the anti-fascist 1935 International Writers' Congress for the Defense of Culture in Paris, the communist delegates continuously prodded their colleagues, in the name of unity, to support the Soviets as the only true force for peace and anti-fascism and accused the United States of continuing the fascist drive for world domination. Turning these provocations on their head was American journalist Melvin Lasky, who in his contribution excoriated the communists for the ill-treatment of writers under Stalin. Lasky pointed to the implementation of sanctions against certain authors and the widespread use of censorship and political pressure, comments which drew both outrage and applause from attendees. The Soviet writer Valentin Katajev responded by accusing Lasky of spreading the vilest falsehoods and compared his statements with Goebbels' vilification of the Soviet Union, adding "and everyone surely knows how that ended."¹¹⁹

Few of the German communist delegates openly advocated that the assembled writers convert to Marxism, however. Becher, for one, worked behind the scenes to

¹¹⁸ Gansel, 44-50, 56-59.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Pike, *Politics*, 375-82

project an image of unity for the congress, especially after the partisan outbursts by the Soviets and Americans.¹²⁰ German communists voiced appeals to politicize literature, but stopped short of naming the party to which the writers should throw their loyalty, although their preferences were easy enough to guess. Still, writers like Becher urged national unity for German literature, transcending the divisions of the country to achieve a united culture.¹²¹ In other words, while clearly partisan, the German Communists clung to the same rhetoric that pervaded the Kulturbund and SDA: cultural unity was needed, but communism was clearly the system most capable of unifying Germany so as to achieve moral renewal and the eradication of fascism. In light of the congress, the claims that the Kulturbund was an *überparteilich* organization were no longer remotely convincing, and the anti-American rhetoric expressed at the meeting was the last straw: several weeks later on 1 November, the Kulturbund was banned in the American sector.

In part to counter the obvious failure of Kulturbund and Gewerkschaft 17 to attract a sufficient number of creative intellectuals, in part as a means of streamlining cultural policy within the SED, and in part to respond to the fallout from the congress, the Socialist Unity Party implemented a number of changes in cultural policy, all designed to strengthen the effectiveness of these organizations and to impose greater control over them. Already by 1946 the inability to lure key intellectuals into its ranks was a source of great aggravation for several prominent Soviet officials to the point that Colonel Sergei Tiul'panov, the chief SMAD information officer, urged the KPD's new incarnation, the

¹²⁰ Davies, 138.

¹²¹ Pike, *Politics*, 378-84.

SED, to take a more direct role in the Kulturbund's recruitment efforts and expressed concerns about Becher's leadership and unwillingness to politicize the Kulturbund. Though Becher was allowed to stay on (mainly at the behest of leading Soviet bureaucrats in Moscow), high-ranking SED members like Wilhelm Pieck and Otto Grotewohl in 1947 began to put more demands on Becher to steer the Kulturbund in a partisan direction, a move which perpetuated long-simmering acrimony between Becher and Pieck in particular.¹²²

In response to Soviet criticism and as a sign of the growing strength of those members of the SED who favored integrating the SBZ into the emerging Eastern Bloc,¹²³ the Socialist Unity Party substantially increased pressure on the Kulturbund in 1948 and 1949 as the struggle in Germany shifted from denazification to resisting what the communists viewed as Western aggression. To this end, the SED ordered the Kulturbund's transformation into a mass organization which included more members of the technical intelligentsia and engaged the working class to a much greater degree than previously. The Kulturbund was now supposed to assign concrete activities to writers and artists among the working class and encourage a favorable assessment of the Soviet Union among intellectuals more overtly.¹²⁴ Moreover, the SED demanded changes in the Kulturbund's charter so as to make it easier for former Nazis to join. The directive

¹²² Naimark, 402-6; Dietrich, 535.

¹²³ Peter Davies persuasively argues that it was not the foreordained decision of the KPD in 1945 to utilize the Kulturbund to solidify Communist control in the SBZ and hence pave the way for an independent state, but rather the gradual strengthening of an "integrationist" line (championed by Ulbricht) within the SED, favoring a separate statehood for the SBZ integrated into the Eastern Bloc, produced a changing emphasis in cultural politics by the end of the 1940s as statehood became a stronger possibility in the emerging Cold War. This integrationist line was far from secure, however, and the instability that followed the June 17, 1953 worker uprising signaled how tenuous the grasp of the "integrationists" on power truly was. Davies, 136-37, 160, 166-67.

¹²⁴ Naimark, 407.

“*Intellektuelle und Partei*” (intellectuals and party) of February 1948 and the SED’s First Day of Culture three months later further solidified Party influence over the Kulturbund, especially since February, when four KB leaders were co-opted into the SED’s steering committee (the precursor to the Central Committee): Becher, Abusch, Heinrich Deiters, and Werner Krauss. To complete the transformation of the Kulturbund into a mass organization, in 1949 several local, autonomous cultural organizations were forcibly subordinated to the KB; the Kulturbund became an umbrella organization for numerous local clubs devoted to literature, art, nature, philosophy, history, photography, Goethe, and nature protection. A retooled Kulturbund was thus established, dedicated to the “methodical binding of science and art with the life our people are now shaping.”¹²⁵ By 1949, then, the leading figures of the SED had decided that the Kulturbund’s purpose was to support communism and eventually its embodiment in a newly independent GDR.¹²⁶

As part of a further reorganization of the cultural sphere, in 1948 and 1949 Gewerkschaft 17 and its constituent parts were extracted from the FDGB, bifurcated, and placed under the aegis of different organizations. The SED had decided the Kulturbund had become the most important organization of “*geistige Arbeiter*,” while the FDGB clearly was better suited for handling cultural work in factories, and so a reshuffling of the cultural organizations seemed well in order especially given the tension created by overlapping claims to shaping cultural policy between the KB and Gewerkschaft. After a series of consultations with top SED leaders in late 1948, in February 1949 the Gewerkschaft 17 was split into two unions: the first would be a *Gewerkschaft* “*Bühne*,

¹²⁵ Quoted in Dietrich, 535-38.

¹²⁶ Davies, 148-49.

Film, Artistik, Musik,” consisting of stage, film, and art divisions as well as “*Technik und Verwaltung*” (Technology and Management); the second would be a *Gewerkschaft* “*Kunst und Schrifttum*,” encompassing the SDA and the associations for journalists and artists. Within a year, the *Gewerkschaft* “*Kunst und Schrifttum*” was in turn disbanded with the artists and writers organizations transferred to the Kulturbund, soon to reemerge as the Verband bildender Künstler (Union of Visual Artists), and the Deutscher Schriftstellerverband, respectively.¹²⁷ The constant reshuffling of writers and other creative intellectuals seemed to indicate if nothing else that the SED’s leaders were not sure at this early juncture how best to handle these cultural figures.

The First Writers Congress declared that the writers must uphold the “German humanistic tradition,” seeing in culture and language “the guarantee for the inalienable unity of our people and country and the connecting link [*Bindeglied*] between all zonal borders and parties.”¹²⁸ This rhetoric of transcending the partition of Germany with a non-partisan cultural unity provided a powerful appeal to German writers after the Second World War and formed the constant refrain in the work of both the Kulturbund and Schutzverband deutscher Autoren. Yet from the beginning it was clear that the KPD/SED and SMAD authorities were intent on influencing cultural developments in their zone, and despite attempting to provide some relief to the many destitute creative intellectuals, the claims of associational autonomy struck many as hollow. Moreover, as the four occupation zones began solidifying into two separate German states, any claim to

¹²⁷ Pike, *Politics*, 497-510.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Gansel, 18.

pan-German cultural unity began collapsing as well. Still, the SBZ and later the GDR seemed to offer writers their first real chance to wield real power and in doing so to shape socialist discourse, to transcend the purported polarity between *Geist* and *Macht*. But power meant engagement with the state and playing by the rules created from above; greater access to power, the writers were finding out, came increasingly at the expense of artistic autonomy.¹²⁹ In the liminal period after World War II, then, cultural life in the Soviet occupation zone was relatively open and inclusive, but as the new East German state took shape, the SED moved toward ever greater control over cultural institutions and the artists and writers who constituted them.

East German Cultural Policy under Ulbricht, 1949-70

In 1956, two years after being named the first Cultural Minister of the GDR, Johannes R. Becher articulated a justification for state supervision of art. “If the state,” he began, “is identical with the interests of the majority of the population like our worker-and-peasant state is, if the principle of progressive development of a people, humanity, are embodied in it, then it would be absurd to deny this state the right to interfere in cultural things.” He continued, “Yes, conversely, such a state has the duty to influence cultural life, and it would be a deep underestimation of the meaning of culture if one were to cut it off from the influence of the state.”¹³⁰ From 1949 until the end of the German Democratic Republic, cultural bureaucrats and leading SED members used this credo to justify their intervention in cultural affairs. Cultural policy in the GDR was far from

¹²⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

¹³⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

monolithic; indeed, there was no uniform Stalinist exertion of control over literary policy, even during the first years of statehood. It should come as no surprise, then, that policy toward writers followed an uneven course, alternating between periods of greater openness and years of clamping down on free expression. To look at writers in isolation, however, would be to miss the larger contours of the SED's attitude toward creative intellectuals as well as the contentious nature of the relationship between all creators of culture and the regime they were now expected to serve.

After the February 1949 decision to split the Gewerkschaft 17 in two, the SDA was removed from the FDGB and placed in the Gewerkschaft "Kunst und Schrifttum." With this change in macro-cultural structures also came a reorganization of the SDA as well. Within the Gewerkschaft's literature division, the "*SDA, Zone*" was founded, a group which consisted of writers from the SBZ, a total of 1,064 members. This would serve as a complement to the existing *SDA für Gesamt-Berlin* which spanned all four occupation zones of the former capital. In the first meeting of the SDA, Zone Werner Schendell, Walther Victor, and Willi Bredel quickly took the lead, authoring a new statement of objectives for the organization which encompassed mainly financial and legal support of members. In October 1949 a group of West Berlin authors, no doubt influenced by the foundation of separate German states, seceded from the SDA to form their own *Berliner Schriftstellerverband*, although this seems to have only slightly affected membership in either the SDA, Zone or the SDA für Gesamt-Berlin (the latter was soon rechristened the "Schutzverband Groß-Berliner Autoren" or the Union for the Protection of Greater Berlin Authors, a.k.a. the *SDA (Groß-Berlin)*). The steering

committee of the SDA (Groß-Berlin) persisted in covering all zones of Berlin, arguing that despite the formation of different states, the organization could serve as an intermediary between East and West. Indeed, several writers were members of both organizations, with Werner Schendell being the most important who served on the steering committees of both *Verbände*.¹³¹

The SDA, Zone accomplished relatively little of what it set out to do. Walther Victor, for example, complained to Johannes R. Becher in December 1949 that the SDA, Zone had achieved practically nothing in ideological and organizational strengthening of its members. Moreover, he believed that the SDA, Zone was languishing under the oversight of the Gewerkschaft “Kunst und Schrifttum,” whose leadership Victor viewed as unsuitable from either an ideological or organizational standpoint. He further asserted that in order to achieve vigorous cooperation between the SED, Kulturbund, and Gewerkschaft, they needed to found a more effective writers association within the GDR. Becher concurred that a drastic reorganization of the SDA, Zone was in order, and to this end he won over the support of the SED leadership as well as the Kulturbund to the idea of a new organization. As a result, on 1 April 1950, the “Deutsche Schriftstellerverband” (DSV) was founded under the Kulturbund; the leaders of the new organization were to be the novelist Bodo Uhse along with Walther Victor and Rudolf Leonhard. Later that year at the Second Writers Congress of 4-7 July, the Schriftstellerverband was officially constituted, headed by a steering committee that had been pre-approved by the SED’s Politburo. Among other writers, the Vorstand included Uhse (now empowered as the organization’s chairman), Johannes R. Becher, Walther Victor, Anna Seghers, Arnold

¹³¹ Ibid., 155-57.

Zweig, Bertolt Brecht, Willi Bredel, Kuba (the *nom de plume* of Kurt Barthel), Friedrich Wolf, Hans Marchwitza, Stephan Hermlin, and Alexander Abusch.¹³²

The DSV's first years proved unstable as the SDA, Zone and SDA (Groß-Berlin) continued their existence (albeit one of greatly reduced importance) and the influence of the Schriftstellerverband among writers remained relatively weak. Because the SDA, Zone and SDA (Groß-Berlin) were not formally abolished when the DSV was founded, this situation created a temporary but intense organizational crisis. The newly created DSV clearly had the SED's support, and so the other writers organizations quickly found many of their leaders resigning and attendance at meetings declining precipitously. The arrest of Werner Schendell, active in both the SDA (Groß-Berlin) and SDA, Zone, in May 1950 on charges of corruption threw both organizations into complete chaos. Moreover, the lingering claims of the SDA to represent writers in both Germanys meant that it had outlived its usefulness as the SED was primarily interested in organizing the writers within its domain and doing so in an organization directly and explicitly tied to itself.¹³³ Still, the DSV was not any more stable. For example, complaints arose that the DSV was deeply mistrusted in Berlin and that it failed to undertake any practical tasks. Also, Bodo Uhse proved unable to fulfill his duties as chairperson because of illness, and Willi Bredel declined the offer of Second Chairman. Kuba asserted that the DSV, so long as it remained subordinated to the Kulturbund, would be unable to act on issues which specifically concerned writers. The SED agreed that the DSV needed restructuring so that it could be more easily directed along Party lines, and so at the Third Writers

¹³² Ibid., 157-63.

¹³³ The SDA (Groß-Berlin) continued to exist until 1961 and continued to operate between East and West Berlin.

Congress in May 1952 the Schriftstellerverband was made a nominally independent organization and given new leadership. The DSV's newly created presidium within the Vorstand consisted of Anna Seghers (President), Stephan Hermlin (First Vice-President), Hans Marchwitza (Second Vice-President), and Kuba (General Secretary).¹³⁴

The Schriftstellerverband was not the only professional organization created for creative intellectuals in the GDR. With the founding of the new East German state in 1949, the regime began organizing all of its intellectuals into professional groups and mass organizations. Indeed, as with every group of working people in East Germany, all creative professionals were organized into unions based around how they made their living.¹³⁵ Although most had antecedents stretching back to before the foundation of GDR, many of these official East German *Verbände* were formed under the aegis of the Kulturbund. We have already seen how the Schriftstellerverband was founded within the KB in July 1950, but others soon followed: preceding the DSV in June 1950 was the Union of Visual Artists (*Verband Bildender Kunst* or VBK), and in April 1951 the Union of German Composers and Musicologists (*Verband Deutscher Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler* or VKM) came into being. Yet this official oversight by the Kulturbund, as was the case with the Writers Union, did not last long, and on 1 April 1952 all the creative professional unions became nominally independent organizations.

¹³⁴ The Second Writers Congress was a carefully orchestrated event, aimed as a direct counterargument to the American-sponsored and unabashedly anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom, which took place in June 1950 in West Berlin. Gansel, 164-72.

¹³⁵ See Ulrich Mähler, "Die Massenorganisationen im politischen System der DDR," in Stephan et al., 103-15.

These organizations, together with two more associations founded in the 1960s, the *Verband der Theaterschaffenden der DDR* (VT or Union of Theater Professionals) and the *Verband der Film- und Fernsehschaffenden der DDR* (VFF or Union of Film and Television Professionals), formed the cultural core of East German professional organizations along with the umbrella Kulturbund (an organization which retained important political significance, represented in the Volkskammer or People's Chamber). All of these associations were organized along similar lines. The highest body of each was said to be national congresses, meeting usually every four to five years (often soon after SED *Parteitagungen* or Party Congresses in which cultural policies, among other things, were discussed and enacted). On a day-to-day basis, however, all were run by an executive steering committee or Vorstand (mirroring the SED's Central Committee). The Vorstand in turn selected a smaller leadership group or presidium to plan the meetings and to serve as the head of the union (analogous to the Politburo of the SED). Finally, around the presidium was the group of cultural functionaries known as the secretariat who undertook most of the bureaucratic work necessary to run these professional organizations and which was headed by the First Secretary (as with the SED). While these associations also had chairmen (only rarely were women heads of these organizations) or presidents, the First Secretary, coming from the cadre system of the SED, held a predominating position. Furthermore, each organization was subdivided into regional branches, organizing the unions vertically along federal lines. Horizontally, each Verband operated a number of *Sektionen* (sections), *Aktive* (Active Groups/Bodies) or committees structured around particular subgenres of art or around general issues such

as peace campaigns, international relations with similar organizations in other countries, or supporting artists of a younger generation (*Nachwuchsarbeit*).¹³⁶

The stated goals of these organizations were also very similar. All recognized and adhered to the Party line as set down by the SED and sought to integrate these cultural policies into their activities and activism. All committed themselves to building a strong relationship with the working class in East Germany and internationally. These themes were then applied to the specific art form represented within each association; the Union of Composers and Musicologists, for example, committed itself in its founding statute to “effect above all the clarification of basic political-ideological, aesthetic, and specific musical questions as well as through the active contribution of its members to the shaping of musical life in the GDR.” The Union of Theater Professionals’ statute declared the association’s support for “the development of socialist German theater art, contributing to and struggling for the comprehensive construction of socialism in the German Democratic Republic with its specific resources so that never again will a war originate from German soil.”¹³⁷ Moreover, all organizations were staffed through the SED’s *Nomenklatur* system whereby all important positions required approval from the Central Committee.¹³⁸ From their inception, all cultural associations in the GDR served as mechanisms for implementing the SED’s cultural policies and translating its vision of socialism to the East German people through art and literature.

¹³⁶ See for example the excellent overviews of these associations provided in Stephan et al., or the GDR’s own official *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen der DDR: Massenorganisationen, Verbände, Vereinigungen, Gesellschaften, Genossenschaften, Komitees, Ligen* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1985).

¹³⁷ Quoted in Stephan, et al, “Verband der Komponisten und Musikwissenschaftler der DDR (VKM),” 835, “Verband der Theaterschaffenden der DDR (VT),” 839.

¹³⁸ Gansel, 30.

With this overview of the structure of East Germany's cultural institutions in mind, we can trace the ebbs and flows of SED cultural policy. As we have seen, early in the history of the Soviet zone, the KPD and later SED recognized the importance of creative intellectuals as the Party was deeply concerned with legitimacy, especially with the founding of the GDR in 1949. The only Soviet bloc country that had not existed prior to World War II, the East German state was also the only country in Eastern Europe that had to compete with a Western variant also claiming to represent their nation. Thus only in East Germany was the question of the legitimacy of the communist government tied directly to the issue of the state's right to exist. In order to make their case for legitimacy the SED utilized various strategies, looking to the history of the German working class (and their victimization by capitalists and, more recently, the Nazis) and to German culture and its supposedly humanistic and anti-fascist values. Under the aegis of organizations like the Kulturbund and the newly minted creative *Verbände*, the SED attempted to build on past traditions while stressing cultural renewal in East Germany, one they hoped would build loyalty to and legitimacy for their new state.¹³⁹

To promote the GDR as the "better" Germany, the SED employed well-known artists and writers to create works celebrating East German socialism and the ideals of a more progressive German society. Yet, in contrast to the relative openness of the KPD/SED to different aesthetic styles and political perspectives among artists and writers in the immediate postwar period, by the time of the GDR's foundation socialist realism became the order of the day, and by the early 1950s the SED began demanding more

¹³⁹ Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft : zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945-1989* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 71-72.

obsequious attitudes from its culture-makers.¹⁴⁰ Socialist realism, pioneered in Stalinist Russia in the 1930s, dominated all forms of art, and urged the culture-producers to engage their proletarian audience by ‘objectively’ portraying the reality of the class struggle while simultaneously transmitting and instilling a deeper understanding of the state’s goals and socialist ideals.¹⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, this focus on propagating the state’s vision of socialism privileged partisanship over aesthetics, and works of art often painted distinctly *unrealistic* portraits of Communist society.

The trend in cultural policy toward greater Party control that began in 1947-48 continued into the early years of the GDR as the SED exerted ever greater control over the Kulturbund and hence cultural life in East Germany. The Socialist Unity Party now openly rejected the *überparteilich* strategies that had been the Kulturbund and SDA’s mantra between 1945 and 1948, and demanded conformity to the SED’s vision of the role of culture in a communist state, namely to express solidarity with the working class and the party that represented it. Moreover, with Stalin’s last efforts at establishing a neutral, unified Germany exhausted by 1952, the “integrationist” faction within the SED aggressively steered artists away from *gesamtdeutsch* outlooks (i.e., making common cause with West German intellectuals)¹⁴² and heavily criticized art that exhibited “formalism and decadence,” code for “Western” or “modernist” artistic styles. The campaign against formalism, paralleling the wider “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign in East Germany, targeted in particular art works and artists who seemed to draw inspiration

¹⁴⁰ Mark W. Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe: German Intellectuals and Cultural Renewal after World War II, 1945-1955* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 172-78.

¹⁴¹ Peter W. Sperlich. *Rotten Foundations: The Conceptual Basis of the Marxist-Leninist Regimes of East Germany and Other Countries of the Soviet Bloc* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 118-27.

¹⁴² Davies, 162-63, 166.

from bourgeois styles or who advocated experimental or *avant garde* approaches deemed too unintelligible to the working class. As Ulbricht noted in a lead article in *Neues Deutschland* from November 1951, “We do not need paintings of moonscapes or rotten fish and the like,” art which was “an expression of capitalist decline.”¹⁴³ All areas of art were taken to task for formalism, from literature to opera music to painting to architecture, and SED leaders such as Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl stressed that art should follow from politics and not the other way around. Individual intellectuals such as literary luminary Bertolt Brecht were accused of formalism as were composers Hanns Eisler and Paul Dessau; architects drawing from the Bauhaus style, developed in the Weimar Republic, were also criticized; and artist Horst Stempel was accused of “mysticism” and promoting a “lumpenproletarian” outlook.¹⁴⁴ All-in-all, in the early 1950s the SED moved ever more toward dominance over cultural production and began rooting out egregious deviations from its preferred socialist realist model.

Easily the most difficult challenge faced by the SED in its first years of rule was the 17 June 1953 uprising by workers protesting a sudden increase in work norms. While most intellectuals were largely passive during the uprising (stemming from a general unease with the masses), the aftermath of the failed revolt spelled a temporary openness in cultural policy, paralleling changes in the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin. During this so-called “thaw,” the badly-shaken SED leadership tolerated some direct criticism on the part of many creative intellectuals, aimed at improving socialism in the GDR. The German Academy of the Arts (*Deutsche Akademie der Künste*, founded in

¹⁴³ Quoted in Jäger, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 34-36.

1950), for example, submitted after its 30 June 1953 meeting a list of suggestions for the SED calling for greater autonomy for artists and writers in cultural production as well as more freedom to maintain contacts with Western artists. However, these suggestions, unlike the 17 June uprising, stopped well short of calling into question the legitimacy of communist rule, a proposition which would have cast doubt on the self-justification of these artistic intellectuals in working with the regime. Hence, the suggestions failed to offer a sober analysis of the meaning of the uprising as many of the prominent AdK members, including writers like Becher and Brecht, were unwilling to question the legitimacy of a communist system which formed a vital component of their worldview. What emerged was a more open discourse *within* socialism for a brief period following the uprising, but not one that openly opposed it as a system of domination in the GDR.¹⁴⁵

Similar complaints were voiced throughout the East German cultural establishment in the months and years immediately following the failed June uprising. The Kulturbund, for example, produced a set of demands comparable to the AdK, criticizing the state's overwhelming control over culture. Individuals like Brecht and journalist Wolfgang Harich attacked the ineptitude of cultural functionaries who, despite ignorance and insufficient training, still had the power to ban works they deemed "decadent." In response to these criticisms, the SED initially acted in a conciliatory manner, founding the Ministry of Culture (*Ministerium für Kultur*, MfK) in January 1954 and naming the pliable Johannes R. Becher as the first cultural minister in GDR history. Becher and others within the Ministry subsequently attempted to protect some degree of artistic freedom, although he was limited in his capacity to achieve this given the control

¹⁴⁵ Davies, 247-53.

exercised by the SED over the MfK. In the aftermath of Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the Twentieth Party Congress in the Soviet Union in 1956, in which he denounced the personality cult and certain crimes of Stalin, East German artists felt even more emboldened to criticize the past policies of the SED in the cultural realm.¹⁴⁶ These outbursts, however, were only permissible so long as the SED felt unsure of its rule and while different factions within the Party jockeyed for influence.

By the fall of 1956, however, Walter Ulbricht had begun to strengthen his control of the Party once more, resulting in a concomitant campaign against "revisionism" and those cultural figures who had been most outspoken in the years following the June 1953 uprising. Wolfgang Harich, publisher Walter Janka, journalist Gustav Just, and writer Richard Wolf, among others, were arrested and sentenced to prison and within the major cultural institutions a counter-offensive against dissent was carried out while simultaneously reasserting the leading role of the SED in cultural policy.¹⁴⁷ These policies were relatively successful at isolating intellectual dissent to private circles, and many cultural intellectuals failed to distinguish themselves in support of their arrested colleagues, while others withdraw into passive acceptance of the regime and its dictates.¹⁴⁸ Anna Seghers, for example, did not act in her capacity as president of the Schriftstellerverband on behalf of Janka despite her private support for him. Silence, it seems, was Seghers's and others' response to growing disillusionment with the regime, a

¹⁴⁶ Jäger, 71-82.

¹⁴⁷ Stephan et al, "Kulturbund," 540-541.

¹⁴⁸ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80, 176-77.

stance that perhaps while understandable was hardly praise-worthy.¹⁴⁹ By the late 1950s, then, the SED had erased the openness of the period immediately after June 1953, greatly strengthening its control over cultural production in the GDR. In this context, the Party sought to implement a policy course which would solidify its ideal of intellectuals in service to the SED and fortify the former's solidarity with the working class.

The path adopted by the SED to achieve these goals was the *Bitterfelder Weg* (Bitterfeld Path) movement, named after the city of Bitterfeld which hosted the April 1959 conference at which the policy was launched. The Bitterfelder Weg movement exhorted writers and artists to go into the factories and workplaces of the proletariat, taking jobs side-by-side with them in order, on the one hand, to be able to create art that better reflected the experiences, needs, and desires of the working class, and, on the other, to encourage workers to try their hand at (state-supervised) artwork and writing. Behind these goals was the SED's attempt to have writers and artists witness firsthand and then articulate the problems hindering economic growth in East Germany, but, because of the constraints of socialist realism, it intended that these conflicts be narrated in such a way so as to ultimately demonstrate the superiority and benevolence of the socialist system. In truth, however, the works produced tended in two directions. Many works became formulaic reports of poor aesthetic quality detailing factory work and the inevitably successful resolution, through solidarity between workers and management, of any problems that arose there. Other works, however, pushed beyond the limits of what the SED had expected in terms of identifying problems in East German factories and

¹⁴⁹ Ian Wallace, "Anna Seghers: A Reputation to be Reassessed?" in *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR, 1976-1990* (Amsterdam: Rodopi BV, 1997), Robert Aktins and Martin Kane, eds., 126-140.

agriculture. After the building of the Berlin Wall, artists' dissatisfaction only increased. Books such as Karl-Heinz Jakob's *Beschreibung eines Sommers* (Description of a Summer), Erwin Strittmatter's *Ole Bienkopp*, Erik Neutsch's *Spur der Steine* (Trace of Stones), and Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (Divided Heaven) were immediately controversial within the SED but garnered international recognition, presenting dilemmas for the GDR's rulers during the 1960s in the face of intellectuals openly challenging Party dogmatism and control over culture.¹⁵⁰

With the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, many writers and other creative intellectuals, though admonished by SED officials to voice public support for the barrier, privately began having strong doubts about the future of socialism in the GDR. In view of this growing disillusionment, Anna Seghers proposed in late 1961 to hold informal discussions between writers and cultural functionaries of the SED. Yet when such a meeting did occur in October 1962, the session resulted in the opposite effect of what Seghers intended. The Party, represented by Alfred Kurella and Alexander Abusch, made it clear that the SED would be steering a hard-line course, rejecting any and all criticism of their cultural policies. In other words, there would be no cultural counterpart to Ulbricht's economic reform program, the *Neue ökonomische Politik* (New Economic Policy), despite the obvious dissatisfaction among creative intellectuals.¹⁵¹ Still, few writers voiced open dissent at these developments, and many authors genuinely hoped that with the construction of the Berlin Wall, the SED would relax control over culture and a freer intellectual climate would emerge. Dogmatism in cultural policy, these

¹⁵⁰ Jäger, 87-89, 102-3.

¹⁵¹ Gansel, 23-24.

authors hoped, would disappear now that the SED had secured itself against the Federal Republic, a hope that for many writers would ultimately be crushed along with the Prague Spring in August 1968. Moreover, the Schriftstellerverband's newly founded Agitation Commission (led by Karl Stitzer, Annemarie Jakobs, and Eva Lippold) was put to work on an all-out media blitz in which many authors defended the construction of the "anti-fascist protective wall."¹⁵² Acceptance of a distinct, East German culture had become a pressing goal for the SED's cultural functionaries during the fallout resulting from the construction of the Berlin Wall.

Faced with this outspokenness among creative intellectuals, Walter Ulbricht and SED cultural officials took action in the mid-1960s. In 1961 renowned playwright Heiner Müller was expelled from the Schriftstellerverband for his "counter-revolutionary" play, *Die Umsiedlerin oder das Leben auf dem Lande* (The Resettler or Life in the Country). In late 1961 the SED instructed all artist unions to provide biweekly reports on the debates, opinions, and arguments of creative intellectuals as well as information on all areas of artistic activity.¹⁵³ Peter Huchel, the critical chief editor of the Akademie der Künste's monthly magazine, *Sinn und Form* (Sense and Form), was forced to step down from his post at the end of 1962 (he would eventually leave the GDR in 1971 after a decade of professional isolation). In addition, several leading artists were criticized in government-controlled publications, talk of ideological coexistence with the West (unlike in other Soviet bloc states) was forbidden, cultural officials railed against

¹⁵² Among other coordinated manifestations of support for the Berlin Wall was an appeal to the writers of the world supporting its construction as a way to avert war, signed by, among others, Franz Fühmann, Peter Hacks, and Christa Wolf, as well as numerous writers from outside the GDR. Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistischen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 20, 27, 47, 51, 57-61, 83-85.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 48-51.

“late-bourgeois decadence” and its influence on art and literature, and even some Soviet films, produced in the context of Khrushchev’s cultural thaw, were censored.¹⁵⁴

Specifically within the Schriftstellerverband, in the early 1960s the SED moved to secure pliable and reliable leadership. Already in 1959, the Central Committee complained to current First Secretary of the DSV Erwin Strittmatter (holding the post 1959-61) that the previous First Secretaries Max Zimmering, Walther Victor, and Erwin Kohn had achieved virtually no influence over the ideological or political direction of the Writers Union, a particularly troubling development given the “bourgeois” inclination of several DSV members who resisted the SED’s cultural policies. It is true that up until that point the DSV’s bureaucracy had been staffed mainly with technical experts and not SED cadre who could better implement the Party’s directives, a problem stemming from a lack of cadre trained to work in cultural fields. In 1961 Strittmatter was replaced by Otto Braun, an old communist, with the hopes of solving these internal problems. By 1963, however, Braun, too, had lost the confidence of the Politburo and was replaced by cultural studies scholar Hans Koch as First Secretary.¹⁵⁵

Yet these measures in the early 1960s did not stem the growing tide of dissent among writers. In 1964, for example, a meeting of the Berlin branch of the Schriftstellerverband witnessed several members criticizing the lack of free speech in the GDR and complaining, with ZK Culture Department members present, that the DSV as an organization had done little to ameliorate the situation. The poet Paul Wiens (ironically a Stasi IM), for example, expressed, “We cannot have a union in the sense that

¹⁵⁴ Jäger, 110-15.

¹⁵⁵ Pamperrien, 44-45.

it is a union of secretaries.” “We must,” he continued, “cease the policies of secrecy.” Annemarie Auer demanded that if the Schriftstellerverband really were an authentic writers’ association, the writers should not be manipulated and should instead seek to transform their organization into a “genuinely democratic union.”¹⁵⁶ Divisions were emerging among artists and writers, with some willing to sacrifice quality in order to echo the SED while others spoke out against narrow prescriptions for artistic work and circumscribed freedom of speech.

The appeals within the Schriftstellerverband for a more democratic union and greater freedom of speech were read by leading SED cultural functionaries as the result of insufficient leadership in the DSV. The solution, in their eyes, was not to cater to the writers’ demands, but rather to streamline their control of the Writers Union. In 1964 the SED ordered that the Party Group in the DSV’s steering committee would henceforth be directly guided by the Ideological Commission of the Politburo’s Culture Department. As a result, the SED asserted control over the most important decisions of the Schriftstellerverband and demanded regular briefings with SED secretaries as well as monthly reports from the central and district SED organizations within the Writers Union. All major DSV events would subsequently need pre-approval from the regime. Still, these measures failed to silence all discontent among the writers. In a meeting of the DSV’s Vorstand in March 1965, for example, several writers voiced criticism of the organizations leadership with various members complaining bitterly that the leaders were

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 64-67.

not providing them with full information about cultural policy developments, especially as they pertained to the West.¹⁵⁷

In December 1965, the SED undertook its most aggressive crackdown on dissent within the East German cultural world to date. Ulbricht initiated what quickly became known as a “*Kahlschlag*” or “clear-cutting” with his speech to the 11th plenum of the SED Central Committee, a speech which inaugurated an attack on free artistic expression with the aim of bringing artists back in line with the Party. Following his speech, several troublesome works were banned and heavily criticized in the press, most prominently the film “*Spur der Steine*,” based on the book by Erik Neutsch. It was in this context that the Union of Film and Television Professionals and Union of Theater Professionals were created in order to establish a firmer grip over cultural activity.¹⁵⁸ The Kahlschlag also touched the Schriftstellerverband as one of Ulbricht’s main targets was Werner Bräunig’s novel *Rummelplatz* (Fairground), a work which Ulbricht accused of denigrating workers and the Soviet Union. The advanced publication of a selection of the novel in the DSV’s literary organ, the monthly *Neue deutsche Literatur*, cost editor-in-chief Wolfgang Joho his job in 1965. Furthermore, in 1965 Hans Koch stepped down as First Secretary of the DSV after scarcely two years in the position. Despite his and Anna Seghers’ personal appeal to Kurt Hager, the head of the Culture Department of the SED’s Central Committee, to pick an active writer for the position, the SED selected instead the Germanist and by-then veteran cultural functionary Gerhard Henniger to fill the post. Henniger, a regular unofficial informant for the Stasi, had long been groomed by the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 17-18, 54, 67-69.

¹⁵⁸ “Verband der Film- und Fernschaffenden der DDR (VFF),” 823-4; “Verband der Theaterschaffenden der DDR (VT),” 838.

Party for such a leading position in the cultural apparatus, and with Henniger's ascension the revolving door that was the Schriftstellerverband's First Secretary position came to a halt; Henniger served as First Secretary of the DSV from 1966 until 1990, faithfully implementing the Party's directives and enforcing ideological compliance among the Writers Union leadership.¹⁵⁹

As the 1960s drew to a close, the give and take between creative intellectuals and the state had shifted decisively in the latter's favor. A new "Gleichschaltung," to use Sabine Pamperrien's descriptor, had been completed.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, like the NSDAP's control over culture in the Third Reich, the degree of the SED's control over culture and the various creative *Verbände* of the GDR were far from total. The relative control exercised by the Party over cultural policy varied over time and from issue to issue. What had begun as a period of relative openness by the late 1940s saw the SED demanding greater conformity to the aesthetic and ideological dictates of socialist realism by the end of that decade. The events of June 1953 badly shook the Party's confidence, resulting in a temporary relaxation on freedom of speech in which several creative intellectuals voiced the need for reform. By the late 1950s, however, the SED had regained its composure and began sanctioning many of those writers who had spoken out most vigorously in 1953. The Bitterfelder Weg movement was meant to build off of these efforts and wed writers and artists to the interests of the Party, but despite a number of obsequious works, many authors produced texts that chronicled actual problems within

¹⁵⁹ Pamperrien, 54-55.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 56.

socialism, much to the SED's chagrin. The building of the Berlin Wall complicated matters further, and the early 1960s proved to be a contentious period with many cultural figures expressing concerns about the lack of artistic freedom while the SED moved simultaneously, albeit slowly, to bring the various cultural organizations of the GDR under firmer control of their cultural functionaries. The late 1960s were a period of relative strength for the dictatorship vis-à-vis writers and artists after Ulbricht's 1965 declaration, but a change in the SED's leadership in the next decade would bring both unexpected cultural openings and in retrospect all-too-predictable reactionary measures in the form of tighter control and the purge of dissidents.

Specifically regarding the Schriftstellerverband, the first two decades of East Germany's existence saw the transformation of a weak and disorganized institution into a vital component of the SED's cultural policy. Periodically, writers had attempted to utilize the Writers Union to express their disagreement with state policies in the cultural realm, but the leaders of the association had also demonstrated a lack of nerve in standing up to the regime in critical moments, allowing their organization to be used to promote the Party's interests, both at home and abroad. Individual writers still challenged the system in important ways through their literary works, but their capacity to act on these challenges from an institutional basis seemed, for the time being, limited. The 1960s witnessed the streamlining of decision-making between the SED's Cultural Department and the writers organization, creating the potential to wield the DSV as an instrument of the state like never before. In the next decade the writers would find out just how powerful the Schriftstellerverband, animated through the SED, could be.

Conclusions

By the close of the 1960s, German writers could look back on over one hundred years of experience in organizing themselves in the name of collectively pursuing professional and economic goals as well as ideological and cultural ones. From the Wilhelmine period, authors learned from the failures of the numerous attempts to found professional organizations that the only way to forge an effective association was to unify writers across genres and regions and pursue common social, intellectual, and economic objectives. In the Weimar period, authors experienced the potential of a national representative writers organization in the form of the SDS, but also witnessed the limits to collective action as the SDS, despite some efforts, was largely unable to ameliorate its members' economic strife during the hyper-inflation and Great Depression. Moreover, the Weimar period saw the tenuous alliance among writers in the SDS begin to fracture over stark ideological differences with rival organizations like the BPRS and Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur emerging to cater directly to the political concerns of literary professionals. The Nazi experience taught writers a set of divergent lessons. On the one hand, both for those who remained in Germany but especially for those who went into exile, the Third Reich conditioned most of Germany's leading writers to become stark anti-fascists and, in many cases, communists. Yet on the other hand, experiences in the Reichsschrifttumskammer taught writers an oft-overlooked lesson: even for many of those who had fled Germany, as far as improving writers' socioeconomic and professional status was concerned, the problem with the RSK was not statist control over cultural organizations or at least not the state's efforts to restrain the free market, but rather the specific ideological bent of the regime. Rather than being wary of ideological

manipulation, many writers concluded that the problems stemming from the Nazi experience resulted from their own insufficient political engagement. Thus in the Soviet occupation zone and the GDR, many writers tried to overcome these three problems in one fell swoop: by embracing the purported ideological antithesis of fascism (communism), by becoming more politically active in support of their communist state, and by readily accepting the state's shackling of the free market for cultural products, many writers, well-intentioned or not, played right into the hands of the East German dictatorship and its ruling party.

To be sure, many literary intellectuals and other artists chafed under unexpected constraints imposed on them by the SED in terms of freedom of artistic expression and dictatorial control, and several paid the price for their outspoken criticism of the regime. Critical works emerged and artists and writers continued to speak out against certain SED policies from 1949 until 1989. Moreover, many German writers obviously did not embrace the solutions offered by SED's to their professional and economic problems, remaining in West Germany and cultivating their own traditions and writers associations there. Nevertheless, the fact that the Schriftstellerverband and the other cultural institutions of the GDR proved remarkably durable coupled with the fact that few writers, despite sometimes vociferous complaints about the direction or content of cultural policy, ever challenged the legitimacy of the SED's one-party rule cannot be explained away simply by references to the state's imposing security apparatus. On a fundamental level, despite a great many contradictions and difficulties, the Schriftstellerverband fulfilled some aspirations of writers to form a professional union that not only was politically engaged but also, perhaps even more importantly, promoted their economic well-being.

The lessons they had learned over the course of the late 19th and early 20th century had inclined many toward the embrace of a paternalistic welfare dictatorship. Therefore, because of ideological affinity for communism (born from their experiences with Weimar democracy and Nazism) and economic self-interest (born from the crises of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s) in the GDR many writers pursued a course whereby when they encountered cultural policies they opposed, they fought to reform those policies from *within* the East German cultural establishment. Only rarely did they fundamentally question the one-party Communist system that had given them their position; the system may have been flawed, many reasoned, but it was not irredeemably so.

Chapter Two

The Socioeconomic Functions of the Writers Union, 1971-1990

In late May 1967 Walther Victor, one of the original founders and former First Secretary of the Writers Union, wrote to the union's executive steering committee to express his dissatisfaction. Ten years earlier Kurt Liebmann, a friend of Victor's and a fellow founding member of the SV, had for his 60th birthday received a greeting and flower arrangement from the Schriftstellerverband. Liebmann's 70th birthday had recently occurred, Victor explained, but this time around he had received nothing. The reason for this difference, Victor concluded, was easy enough to uncover: "When Liebmann was 60, I was the association's Secretary." Victor's invective then continued: "Dear comrades, Kurt Liebmann is nothing more or less than one of the co-founders if not the founder of the association altogether!" He elaborated, "I find it therefore extraordinarily unjust that such a comrade and colleague receives no honor whatsoever for his 70th birthday, to say nothing of his literary work which would presuppose such an honor." Victor then came to the crux of the matter, explaining, "I am writing these lines merely so that in the future greater value will be placed on such things."¹

¹ Walther Victor to the Vorstand des Deutschen Schriftsteller-Verbandes, 24 May 1967, Weimar, Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR 205, 34, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV).

Over the next twenty-plus years the Writers Union did indeed improve its efforts to enhance the lives of its members, offering not just recognition for important days or events in the lives of individual writers but very real material and professional benefits as well. Though one major function of the SV was political, serving as a primary means through which East Germany's ruling Socialist Unity Party enforced its cultural policy vis-à-vis writers, the organization also fulfilled a socioeconomic role for its members. As part of the Faustian bargain made by East Germany's authors to not challenge the legitimacy of either socialism or the dictatorship claiming to advance it, the SED empowered the Writers Union to provide its members with financial and social incentives in return. The exchange of compliance for rewards was not merely a passive transaction, however, as evidenced by the many letters sent to the Writers Union by its members requesting various items while also expressing both gratitude and especially complaints for that which they did or did not receive.

In attempting to meet the social, economic, and career needs of its members, the Schriftstellerverband offered a powerful tool with which writers could navigate the often turbulent waters of the East German economy. Enormous inefficiencies in the German Democratic Republic's economic system, like in all Soviet bloc states, made scarcity a fact of life for East Germans. Much needed attempts to revitalize the economy in the 1960s under the New Economic System (which involved introducing some decentralization of economic control and the new material incentives) were by the end of the decade deemed too politically dangerous as they threatened to undermine the SED's monopoly on power. When Erich Honecker became First Secretary of the SED in 1971, he therefore reinforced the state's central role in economic planning while shifting to a

greater focus on producing consumer goods in the hopes of buying the populace's complacency. As a result, basic goods were for the most part easily available, but because decision-making power lay in the hands of a central planning administration, far fewer "luxury" goods such as televisions, appliances, and cars were produced than what was necessary to meet demand. The scarcity of these goods coupled with the artificially high prices set by the state for these items resulted in long lines and years-long queues to procure these products. Average citizens thus often fell back upon the black market and cultivated connections with those in positions of power in order to obtain what was needed or desired.² It was in this climate that the Writers Union took on a special meaning for writers; some important authors were able to forge their own connections with the SED leadership, but for many writers the Schriftstellerverband was their main resource for overcoming the bottlenecks endemic to the Communist economic system.³

The Writers Union was able to provide a wide variety of goods and services to its members and many authors came to depend on it to generate career opportunities and provide social security. This chapter examines eight dimensions of the social, professional, and economic functions of the Schriftstellerverband, analyzing the intentions behind these actions, the successes and failures in achieving these goals, and the consequences therein for the relationship between writers and their state. These areas are: first, membership policies and disputes over admission to the organization; second,

² Peter W. Sperrlich, *Oppression and Scarcity: The History and Institutional Structure of the Marxist-Leninist Government of East Germany and Some Perspectives on Life in a Socialist System* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 107-158. David F. Crew, "Consuming Germany in the Cold War: Consumption and National Identity in East and West Germany, 1949-1989, an Introduction," in *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*, ed. David F. Crew (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 1-21.

³ Jeanette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2003), 77-78.

opportunities created through Writers Union efforts to advance literary careers and intervene with publishers on behalf of members; third, attempts to create publicity for new literary works and mitigate the effects of bad reviews; fourth, socioeconomic assistance that sought to strengthen writers' social situation by providing them with monetary support for their literary endeavors as well as a social safety net; fifth, the role of the SV in enabling its members to travel to the West; sixth, various forms of social recognition provided by the organization for its members; seventh, policies geared toward supporting young authors and integrating them into associational culture; and eighth, instances where the Writers Union sought to exert influence in societal areas having nothing to do with literary concerns.

By examining the socioeconomic functions of the Writers Union for its members during Erich Honecker's reign as East Germany's leader, one observes that the SV ultimately did not succeed in establishing widespread enthusiasm for the dictatorship or even satisfaction with the status quo; this fact is easily gleaned by reference to the sheer volume of complaint letters registering the failure of the Writers Union to live up to the expectations of its members. Furthermore, by continuously promising its members secure standards of living and better social support, the SV inadvertently raised expectations beyond what the organization was capable of fulfilling, particularly as the East German economy experienced a mounting crisis in the late 1980s. However, precisely because its members expected so much from it, the Schriftstellerverband did succeed in generating a general dependence among many writers upon the state as the primary means of securing their careers, livelihood, and prestige, all of which had long-term consequences for the GDR's stability.

Membership Issues

In order to receive the many socioeconomic benefits proffered by the Writers Union, one first had to become a member. As a testament to the allure of these benefits, complaints and appeals from rejected applicants occasionally found their way to the SV leadership. The frustration expressed by those denied membership often indicated that would-be authors considered abnegation as a slight to their literary ambitions. One also notes a trace of bitterness about being unable to receive the fruits of being a state-approved writer, underscoring the importance of the Schriftstellerverband as a vehicle for transmitting needed or desired goods and services in a society of scarcity.

According to the statute of the organization (as modified by the Seventh Writers Congress in 1973), applications would be accepted from editors and translators of literary works, essayists, literary scholars, literary critics, and of course writers of all literary genres. One also needed to possess East German citizenship and be able to demonstrate not only continuous literary activity but also “commensurate quality” and “to actively participate in associational life in accordance with the associational goals.” Potential members sent their application materials (including personal biographies and samples of literary works) to their district branch, where decisions were to be made in monthly member meetings. These were also accompanied by two *Bürgschaften* or guarantees on the literary quality of the applicant, with at least one of the *Bürgen* (guarantors) needing to be a Writers Union member. Should the author be approved by the SV district branch, the application would be forwarded to the union presidium which reviewed the application material and made a final decision. The presidium then had three options:

they could reject the applicant outright; they could designate him or her for membership in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren* (before 1974) or as a candidate of the organization (after 1974); or they could accept the applicant as a full member. If the applicant were rejected at any stage in this process, they had the right to appeal the decision directly to the presidium, but it seems that the appeals process was hardly ever successful at overturning a negative decision as will be explored below.⁴

Of course, it is impossible to fully grasp the politics of Writers Union membership applications without recourse to Stasi documents, something that lies beyond the scope of this project.⁵ However, from other internal and external documents of the SV, one can gain a useful impression of issues that were considered important in deciding which applicants to accept and which to reject. Based on what was recorded in meeting reports of the SV's presidium, it seems that the primary reason given for rejecting someone for membership was a lack of quality literary production. For example, in March 1981 the presidium rejected several applicants while returning others until further work was produced by the aspiring member. Six applicants were accepted for membership at that meeting while two were sent back, one until his next book appeared (Winfried Völlger), and the other until the book was read by one of the presidium members.⁶ The following May three candidates were rejected and five were deferred until further information could

⁴ "Vorschläge für Änderungen des Verbandsstatutes," 1973, SV 706, 112-14. For a sample *Bürgschaft*, see Jurek Becker, "Bürgschaft für Klaus Poche zur Aufnahme in den Deutschen Schriftstellerverband," 20 May 1971, Berlin, JB 2589.

⁵ Hermann Kant actually later claimed, "We actually never had a case where someone applied who was not acceptable to us politically. That actually never happened. I can't remember anything like that." Interview with Hermann Kant, 28 August 1990, East Berlin, in *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR*, ed. Robert von Hallberg, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 147.

⁶ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 18 March 1981, SV 604, 94.

be produced. Of this latter group, two needed to produce additional literary works, two (again including Völlger) needed to have their manuscripts read by a presidium member, and one needed to procure a new guarantor.⁷ Völlger's saga came to a head that December, when his membership application was once again (definitively) rejected. The presidium opted to deny him membership as well as an extension of his candidacy, justifying their decision based on his lack of literary production in recent years.⁸ Similar trends occurred throughout the 1980s, as in the June 1985 presidium meeting when four applicants were denied membership: one was designated a candidate, one still needed to have his works evaluated by a presidium member, one had not yet submitted his novel for consideration, and the last needed to produce more works.⁹

Sometimes membership politics could be influenced by bureaucratic breakdowns, as was seen in author Wolfgang Müller's bizarre saga. In a February 1979 letter to Kant, Müller complained about several membership problems he had encountered, problems for which he had received no answer from the Writers Union despite multiple written requests for assistance. In 1975 he had been accepted as a candidate of the Schriftstellerverband; after publishing two books and numerous radio and television plays, he then applied for full membership. He claimed that he soon realized that because of "associational politics" one needed to publish only a single anthology in the smaller districts in order to gain full membership, a fact which he expressed "unmistakably and surely not diplomatically in conversation with association functionaries." He

⁷ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 8 July 1981, SV 604, 67.

⁸ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 19 December 1981, SV 604, 3.

⁹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 27 June 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 67.

subsequently disregarded his candidature but found to his surprise eleven months later a letter from the SV indicating that he had been upgraded to full membership “because of special literary achievement,” and all this without having to submit the required guarantees. Yet one month later he received a communication from the Berlin district branch that because he had not paid membership dues during the past twelve months, his membership had been terminated. Shortly before the organization’s 1978 eighth national congress, however, he received a further notice from the Berlin branch asking if he wanted to re-enter the association and he promptly re-applied. After the congress, however, he never heard back from the SV despite several letters he had sent asking for further information. “How do you find that?” he asked Kant. “I find it lousy [*beschissen*].” In the end, Müller exclaimed that he did not care if the Berlin organization wanted him or not – he just wanted an answer either way.¹⁰

Helmut Hanke, an aspiring author, also expressed his dissatisfaction to Kant in July 1979. For years, he explained, he had tried unsuccessfully to gain membership in the Schriftstellerverband and as a result had encountered “disadvantages of a professional kind,” including a publisher’s rejection of a novel of his for “ridiculous reasons.” Since he refused to publish in the West (a key statement suggesting his awareness of the expulsion of nine writers from the SV a month earlier for just such an offense), Hanke had run out of options. He briefly recounted his attempts to join the association, starting in 1975 when the Berlin BV sent his membership application to the central organization for approval, but the latter declined to accept him. Moreover, the central authorities had failed to notify him of their decision, leaving him to hope now that “the new presidium

¹⁰ Wolfgang Müller to Hermann Kant, 25 February 1979, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 2, 23-24.

[chosen at the Eighth Writers Congress with Kant as the new president] distances itself from these practices and approves my acceptance in the association with retroactive force.”¹¹ Hanke here explicitly appealed to Kant’s new leadership in the organization and implicitly to the turmoil inside the organization over critical comments published by East German authors in the Western press, so as to make his case more compelling. His letter also indicates the difficulties encountered by non-members in publishing, a problem with which he expressly asked Kant for help.

Sometimes would-be *Verbandsmitglieder* appealed to the organization’s president in order to overturn a rejection by the district branch or presidium. Journalist and long-time editor of the GDR newspaper *Der Wochenpost* Kurt Neheimer, for instance, presented such a request to Kant in July 1983 after the Berlin district’s steering committee had denied his application, a refusal whose rationale “appeared to me in many ways not justifiable.”¹² In the rejection letter (which Neheimer included in his appeal to Kant), the district branch representative had expressed great interest in Neheimer’s journalist work and acknowledged the latter’s “anti-fascist struggle and your commendable activity in the construction of socialism in the German Democratic Republic,” but added that the Writers Union, according to its statute, comprised only “the author of belletristic works of all genres” and that many fine journalists and authors of popular scientific works therefore could not join the association.¹³

¹¹ Helmut Hanke to Hermann Kant, 1 July 1979, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 89. See also Hanke’s application profile in SV 402, vol. 1, 33.

¹² Kurt Neheimer to Herman Kant, 6 July 1983, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 1, 43.

¹³ Helmut Kähler to Kurt Neheimer, 21 June 1983, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 1, 46.

Neheimer, however, reacted sharply to the notion that his journalist work was unliterary, and sensed something more sinister afoot. His rejection, he claimed, really stemmed from an “old, unfortunately still not fully overcome prejudice against literary journalism.” This was especially outrageous since the organization had accepted “numerous publicists who like myself favor reportage, portraits, reviews, essays, or historical reports,” and in fact many of these members found his rejection astonishing. Neheimer’s one novel, *Der Mann, der Michael Kohlhaas wurde* (The Man Who Became Michael Kohlhaas) was, he informed them, well-reviewed in the GDR and he had even obtained Klaus Höpcke’s help in suing a West German author for plagiarizing the book, (a case he won and then donated the 10,000 Deutsch Mark settlement to the SED). Moreover, Neheimer had, in his estimation, contributed greatly to East German literature by publishing excerpts from many “renowned works of our literature” in his periodical where he provided “a spiritual home and conducive work conditions,” particularly for younger authors. Even more pertinently, Neheimer had for many years been “a fighter against fascism and participant in the construction of socialism in our country.” As if to underscore his purely literary motives for the appeal, he then added, “I do not ask for privileges since I am now exclusively active as a writer participation in associational life means for me establishing a necessary culture-political connection with other writers.” Without such contacts, he concluded, he would remain “isolated” and cut off from the necessary “creative conditions.”¹⁴ The constant protestations against material motives perhaps signaled that the editor doth protest too much, but nonetheless his biggest complaint seemed to be that by rejecting him, the union had slighted his literary talent.

¹⁴ Neheimer to Kant, 43-35.

Not only had they denied the quality of his works but they had also deprived him of the affirmation that would come from being part of an accepted community of authors.

Current members also wrote to their organization's leaders on behalf of colleagues who had been denied membership, often evincing strong emotions. Germanist and prize-winning author Friederich Dieckmann expressed his frustration to Kant on two occasions about rejected membership applications. Dieckmann communicated to his organization's leader in February 1979 that playwright Lothar Trolle had not yet been made even a candidate for the organization. As a result, Dieckmann argued, Trolle had suffered in career opportunities, noting that despite the good reception of one of his plays by the Berlin district branch, it had never been published or performed, and all this "despite longstanding efforts" to become an SV candidate.¹⁵ The main concern articulated in Dieckmann's letter was a lack of career opportunities owing to non-membership in the Writers Union, a common theme in several letters. Dieckmann also wrote to Kant in February 1987 that his colleague Dr. Jürgen Teller, a fellow literary scholar, had been rejected by the steering committee after being approved by the Leipzig district branch. Reacting with "consternation," Dieckmann called the rejection as "an affront to the Leipzig district association," to Teller himself, and to those who had recommended him. There were many scholars who were already SV members, Dieckmann continued, scholars "who have published less – and certainly not with higher literary competence – than Dr. Teller and whose merit in our literature is inferior to his." Teller, Dieckmann recounted, had also been transferred from a promising academic career to a factory job in the 1950s where he lost his arm in an industrial accident. Yet it

¹⁵ Friedrich Dieckmann to Hermann Kant, 22 February 1977, Berlin-Treptow, SV 658, vol. 1, 61.

was only a decade later when he finally received a position in a publishing house that was commensurate with his academic abilities, a decision Dieckmann deemed “literarily notorious” [*literaturnotorisch*].¹⁶ Surely the organization owed a man who had suffered in this way membership? Henniger replied four days later, however, that the Writers Union already had too many literary scholars in its ranks.¹⁷ Dieckmann’s efforts had failed, in spite of his framing of Teller’s biography as a man who knew the working class, a man who had literally given his right arm for them. Moreover, Dieckmann’s description of the “insult” against the Leipzig branch and of the many less qualified literary scholars in the organization indicated his feelings that the Berlin authorities undervalued both Leipzig and *Germanisten*.

Poet and story-writer Uwe Grüning’s membership application bid was similarly rejected in 1986 by the district branch in Gera, and several of his colleagues wrote to the SV’s leaders to demand the decision be overturned by the central organization. Fellow poet Wulf Kirsten, for example, wrote to Kant in February 1987 to criticize the reasons for Grüning’s denial. The justification given, he asserted, was “so degrading and dishonorable, so absurd” that it made him angry just to list the reasons in the letter. Describing Grüning as “the most potent and productive writer in the district,” Kirsten explained, though, that the district branch leaders did not consider him to fall “within the borders of the district-controlled national literature of Reußian provenance [*in den Grenzen der bezirksgeleiteten Nationalliteratur reußischer Provenienz*],” meaning that he lived within the East German district boundaries of Gera but not within the historic

¹⁶ Friedrich Dieckmann to Hermann Kant, 15 February 1987, Berlin-Treptow, SV 548, vol. 2, 55.

¹⁷ Gerhard Henniger to Friedrich Dieckmann, 19 February 1987, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 56.

boundaries of the Principality of the Reuß Younger Line (existing between 1806 and 1918) of which Gera was a part. This arcane technicality left Kirsten questioning his membership in the Writers Union altogether, adding that “the best answer that I can think of would be the acceptance of Uwe Grüning in the association.”¹⁸ Kant replied several days later that though he would contact the Gera district organization, “naturally the presidium cannot accept someone against the will of the district steering committee.”¹⁹ By that summer, apparently, the case was still unresolved as indicated by poet and essayist Jürgen Rennert’s letter to Kant in July 1987 on behalf of Grüning. Henniger had allegedly promised Grüning a year and a half earlier that the local SV officials would discuss the membership issue with him. Since the latter had not occurred yet, Rennert now demanded an explanation.²⁰

Whether Rennert received his explanation is unknown, but his case underscores the point that aspiring writers took membership in the SV seriously. Applicants were often well aware of the career opportunities and benefits that came with membership, not least of which was recognition by a state-sponsored organization of one’s literary talents. Those that were unsuccessful in attaining membership often reacted with indignation, accusing union leaders of disrespecting their talent, their genre, or their district. These perceived injustices toward talent, genre, and district, we will see, found echoes in many

¹⁸ Wulf Kirsten to Hermann Kant, 20 February 1987, Weimar, SV 548, vol. 2, 58.

¹⁹ Hermann Kant to Wulf Kirsten, 25 February 1987, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 57.

²⁰ Jürgen Rennert to Hermann Kant, 5 July 1987, SV 548, vol. 2, 51. In fact, in February 1986 the presidium meeting notes record that Rennert’s original appeal that the association reconsider Grüning’s application was discussed. See Präsidiumssitzung, Beschlussprotokoll, 19 February 1986, SV 512, vol. 1, 117. A clue to the hold-up of Grüning’s membership might be gleaned from the fact that he was the victim of Stasi surveillance. See “Information: Lesung von Uwe GRÜNING am 12.3.1987 im Zentralinstitut Physik der Erde Potsdam/Institutsteil Jena (ZIPE),” 7 April 1987, Jena, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Zentralstelle, Gera KD/X433/78, 356-57.

other complaint letters by Writers Union members when they did not receive what they considered their fair share from the organization. If perception was reality, then, many writers considered union leaders to be prejudiced and preferential in how they distributed membership, material benefits, and recognition.

Publishing Opportunities

When one became a member of the Writers Union, one entered into a network for receiving goods and services to improve one's career and social standing. Because it was the only legal interest organization for literary professionals, members naturally looked to the Schriftstellerverband above all for help in career matters, in some ways adopting the role of literary agents for its members in an unfree market. In a society where all publishing activity was supervised by the government and SED, having membership in the Writers Union ensured a modicum of support for one's literary livelihood and also offered members, at least in theory, an institution to which one could appeal should one's publishing opportunities become diminished. To this end, members frequently called upon their union to intervene on their behalf in disputes with publishers. Doing so only reinforced the notion that in all matters related to protecting or advancing one's career, one's chief resource to draw upon was the Writers Union. However, just because a member expected help from the Schriftstellerverband did not always guarantee that the organizations leaders would be keen to assist writers considered politically troublesome by the SED or even simply annoying. Still, the fact that many writers appealed to the SV for help with publishing issues emphasizes the organization's key role within the professional lives of its members, or at least the role its members thought it should play.

One common area for which authors looked to the Writers Union was assistance with publishers. In the GDR, publishing, book distribution, and censorship were controlled through the Main Administration for Publishing and Booksellers (*Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel* or HVVB), a division of the Ministry for Culture. Since 1973 this office was headed by Klaus Höpcke, the former culture editor of *Neues Deutschland* and a frequent “guest” at the Writers Union’s presidium meetings. The HVVB oversaw some eighty publishing houses, each focusing on specific types of literature. An author’s difficulty with one of these publishing firms could arise for any number of reasons. Particularly worrisome was the fact that paper shortages became increasingly acute from the 1970s onward, meaning writers might encounter difficulty finding a publisher with a sufficient paper allotment to print their work.²¹ Censorship and mandatory revisions also met many writers as they attempted to peddle their manuscripts, particularly from the central censors office within the HVVB as well as from individual publishing houses wary of government censure should a problematic work slip through to the East German public containing critiques of the regime or a discussion of social and

²¹ Each of the eighty publishing houses, save the SED’s Dietz Verlag, suffered to varying degrees from these paper shortages although the larger “showcase” publishers such as Aufbau Verlag typically fared better. At the start of each new year all publishing houses submitted a thematic plan to the HVVB detailing the titles and proposed number of copies to print for each book scheduled to appear that year. These *Themenpläne*, however, were never completely accurate, making paper shortages an inevitable corollary to the GDR’s planned economy. These shortages likewise generated infighting between publishers as they struggled to procure a sufficient paper allotment from the government’s finite supply. Simone Barck, Martina Langemann, and Siegfried Lokatis, “The German Democratic Republic as ‘Reading Nation’: Utopia, Planning, Reality, and Ideology,” in Michael Geyer, ed., *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 95-102; Simone Barck, Christoph Classen, and Thomas Heimann, “The Fettered Media: Controlling Public Debate” in Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 217; Sylvia Kloetzer and Siegfried Lokatis, “Criticism and Censorship: Negotiating Cabaret Performance and Book Production,” in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 255-56.

political taboos.²² Difficulty could also arise over issues of compensation or royalties, a very real concern for writers especially if they were unsure if their next work would, because of the aforementioned potential pitfalls, reach publication. For all of these problems, then, writers sought to enlist the aid of their professional organization to help them overcome the hurdles placed between them and their work's publication.

One of the key goals of the Schriftstellerverband in the early 1970s was to help their members by revising the model contract they and East Germany's publishers had agreed upon in the 1960s.²³ In 1964 the Writers Union and the HVVB had created a standardized contract effective between fiction writers and East German publishers (a "*Verlagsvertrag Belletristik*").²⁴ Complaints that this contract favoring the publishing houses, however, prompted the Writers Union's Rights Commission (*Rechtskommission*) to negotiate with the HVVB in order to revise this model contract. In 1973 a new

²² Censorship, vital to maintaining the SED's monopoly on power and public discourse, operated on four levels within the GDR: within the Ministry of Culture, the SED, the individual publishing houses, and oneself. While SED Central Committee members would occasionally review literature themselves, the main task of censorship fell to the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel within the Ministry of Culture. Fluctuations in the Party line made individual censors' work difficult, especially because a single slip could cost that censor his or her position. Censors therefore often distributed the responsibility to catch and remove problems down the production chain to the publishing houses. Publishers, in turn, worried about sending through a troublesome work, often exercised strict censorship as well. Finally, anticipating the long line of censors their work could encounter, many authors resorted to self-censorship, preemptively removing taboo topics or barbed criticisms. Censorship was far from totalitarian, however, as individual censors might risk overlooking critical passages in a work or an individual author, through personal connections, might apply leverage to challenge censors and otherwise move the book toward publication more quickly. Barck, Classen, and Heimann, 217; Barck, Langemann, and Lokatis, 95-97; David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 38-39; Kloetzer and Lokatis, 252-60; see also, Simone Barck, Martina Langermann, and Siegfried Lokatis, "*Jedes Buch ein Abenteuer*": Zensur-System und literarische Öffentlichkeiten in der DDR bis Ende der sechziger Jahre (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).

²³ The first such standardized contract was created in the early 1950s. Walter Victor, "Kurze Gründungsgeschichte des Deutschen Schriftstellerverbandes," 3 April 1967, SV 205, 44.

²⁴ See Chapter One for the Nazi efforts to achieve a standardized contract between publishing houses and authors.

contract draft was agreed upon, one which would thenceforth be used in most situations between writer and publisher.²⁵

Not all were satisfied with the revision to the model contract, however, prompting at least some writers to register their complaints directly with the Writers Union. One such author was novelist and short-story writer Jurek Becker, always the outspoken intellectual, who penned a letter directly to the Writers Union in June 1973 to express his misgivings. While praising the new contract as an improvement over the 1964 incarnation, Becker pointed out that it still allowed for deviations when it came to ancillary rights (*Nebenrechte*) for authors (such as in contracts with the state television or film agencies). Becker therefore recommended adding clauses requiring compensation to the author for cutbacks in the number of copies to be published in a book's first run, compensation for "reduction of the agreed retail price," as well as "additional advance payment for a delay in the publication date." Becker and others had also apparently worked out a new sample contract which took into account his aforementioned concerns. He attached this new proposed contract to the letter, asking that he and those with similar concerns be kept informed of any new alterations while keeping in mind his proposed changes.²⁶ The Writers Union, Becker's letter signified, should do even more to protect the legal and financial rights of its members vis-à-vis publishers.

²⁵ Dr. Dieter Wendt to unspecified recipients, 19 June 1973, Berlin, Literaturarchiv: Jurek-Becker-Archiv 2589, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (hereafter cited as JBA).

²⁶ Jurek Becker to the Deutschen Schriftstellerverband, 19 June 1973, Berlin, JBA 2589. Becker also wrote to the union's Rights Commission ten days later with similar misgivings. In his assessment, "In the cold light of day this article [of the standard contract] is of such a blurred and indefinite character that the publisher can hide behind it and as soon as it wants, could terminate the contract for any reasons whatsoever." Jurek Becker to the German Writers Union, Rights Commission, 29 June 1973, Berlin, JBA 2589.

Beyond the model contract, from time to time authors looked to their association to expedite publications and intervene on their behalf with publishers. Walter Basan, a historical novelist and radio play author who was active especially in the GDR's first decades, sent a note to the SV's secretariat in 1979 to check on just such an issue. The SV's powerful First Secretary, Gerhard Henniger, had apparently told him two months earlier that Klaus Höpcke would immediately see if a new edition of Basan's children's book *Sumanja und das Mädchen Li* (Sumanja and the Girl Li) could be published since the book had just been included in an official list of recommended school literature. Yet now, Basan explained, his publisher had readied the new edition but he still had not heard back from Höpcke if the publication had been approved: "Let me as well as the publisher know as soon as possible," he requested, "what has become of this matter."²⁷ In what was a rather common complaint among writers, Höpcke had never gotten back to him on his forthcoming publication and therefore Basan therefore called upon the Writers Union to find out for him what the situation was with his new edition.

An unusual but telling instance of such a publishing delay was found in Edith Anderson, an American woman who had immigrated to East Germany after World War II with her German émigré husband. Anderson, who over her literary career penned autobiographical novels, children's literature, and radio plays, appealed to the Writers Union in September 1980 for help with a publishing matter. In 1973, she explained, her story *Der Beobachter sieht nicht* (The Observer Does Not See) had been the subject of a smear campaign by the Communist Party of the United States (orchestrated by SED members, she alleged) which led to the cancellation of a planned second and third edition

²⁷ Walter Basan to the Secretariat, 22 September 1979, Magdeburg, SV 635, vol. 1, 6.

of the book back in the GDR. In 1976, however, she noted that the SV's presidium had intervened on her behalf, helping her procure a second edition of the book with the Verlag Volk & Welt.²⁸ At that time, she continued, the presidium had insisted that "in its opinion [the book] possessed political value for the GDR." Unfortunately, however, the American Communists were unmoved by this show of support and continued to refuse to invite her to literary talks in the United States, and "since my own party [the SED] had obviously abandoned me, my professional worries accumulated." Indeed, she lamented, a collection of her stories was subsequently rejected for publication, and the Verlag Volk & Welt blocked a third edition of *Beobachter*.²⁹ Angry at Klaus Höpcke for hemming and hawing about a new possible publication date for *Beobachter*, Anderson wrote to Hermann Kant, president of the SV since 1978, for help. In her correspondence, she attached a carbon copy of a letter to Höpcke for Kant to read, not least of which because she had heard from a colleague that "this book [*Beobachter*] helped you [Kant] a great deal on your trip to America." Besides, she continued, "I have had good experiences with your fairness,"³⁰ indicating that she trusted – or hoped she could trust – Kant to be an advocate on her behalf in this matter.

²⁸ In fact, as early as 1973 the presidium had discussed the issue. President Anna Seghers expressed "consternation" over her treatment. Vice President Max Walter Schulz asserted that it "had nothing in common with the spirit of the 8th [SED] Party Congress." Hermann Kant, a vice president at the time, went as far as to note that a published criticism of the book was "a regression to the stone age." In the end, "The writers were of the unanimous opinion that one should protect [Anderson] against the course of action obviously staged from afar." They then agreed to request a meeting with Anderson, the publisher, and a representative of the presidium to correct the problems. Leo Sladczyk, "Auszug zum der Kurzinformation ueber die Präsidiumssitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 17. Mai 1973," 25 May 1973, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (hereafter cited as SAPMO-BArch) DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

²⁹ Edith Anderson to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, 28 October 1980, SV 658, vol. 1, 3-4.

³⁰ Edith Anderson to Hermann Kant, 28 September 1980, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 2.

In the letter to Höpcke, Anderson complained that the HVVB director had not gotten in touch with her after promising – a year earlier! – to help her find a new publisher for her book after the original publisher had backed out. Apparently he had told her that “we have a certain influence” with the publishers (no doubt), but then had failed to follow through and had even ignored a letter she sent him several months later asking for an update. “One is happy about the promise of a Minister, even about the very friendly reception, and doesn’t think for a second that for him, with that the whole thing is finished,” she chided. This lack of response was more than rude, however: “Would [you] have done that with a man? I hardly believe it, Comrade Höpcke,” Anderson reproached him. She then elaborated on her charge, complaining that it was quite common “to put off women with nice words and take them as a fool.”³¹ By giving Kant a copy of this letter, Anderson was enlisting the former’s help with her book publication, but also making known her complaint that the HVVB director had treated her in a sexist manner. She declined, however, to ask Kant to do anything specific about this latter charge. The letter to Kant and a later one to the Presidium as a whole³² indicate that in her view, in the face of a corrupt and sexist Party and publishing system, perhaps only her interest organization could help her overcome these setbacks. The presidium did in fact agree to ask Höpcke about her case, but is unclear what the results of that inquiry were.³³

The causes of these publishing delays typically stemmed from both political reasons and paper shortages, and authors often inquired for help against both issues. To

³¹ Edith Anderson to Klaus Höpcke, 28 September 1980, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 5.

³² Anderson to the Presidium, 3-4.

³³ Präsidiumssitzung, Beschlussprotokoll, 12 November 1980, SV 603, 153.

this end, writers sometimes attempted to use the Writers Union as a channel through which to overcome censorship. Prose-author and Germanist Dr. Volker Ebersbach appealed to the Schriftstellerverband, for example, in September 1983 when publication of his story collection *Der Mann, der mit der Axt schlief* (The Man Who Slept with the Axe) hit an unexpected snag. The collection was one of his first publications and Ebersbach had signed a contract with the publisher Verlag der Morgen in 1979 to produce the work. He had worked with the publishing house's editors to make changes to the text and in late 1980 he received word that the book had been approved for publication. Yet in early 1981 he received a second letter from the publisher's chief editor announcing that the book would need to be edited further: what the editor had previously told him was the strongest story in the collection – the titular story no less – now had to be cut from the collection. Another story was added and the book went into production – all without Ebersbach's cooperation. This "brutal intervention," Ebersbach asserted, had occurred at the behest of the Liberal-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (Liberal-Democratic Party of Germany, one of the so-called "block parties" in the East German parliament) which controlled the publisher.³⁴ The reason for the intervention was never stated in Ebersbach's letter.

At a loss for what to do, Ebersbach initially acquiesced to this printing and the book sold relatively well with positive reviews. Yet in 1983 when Ebersbach approached the publisher about a second edition, this time with the title story reinserted, he encountered "abrupt rejection" and an angry rebuke from the chief editor. Admitting that "I should have turned to you earlier," he then reached the key section of his letter: "Is this

³⁴ Dr. Volker Ebersbach to the Writers Union, Dr. Wendt, 21 September 1983, Leipzig, SV 548, vol. 1, 39-40.

behavior by the publisher to be regarded as a breach of contract?" he asked. "Have I," he continued, "by relenting at first to the extortion, forfeited the right to insist on compliance with the contract and demand a revision?" More importantly, he appealed for direct action, asking, "Could you undertake something in my interest vis-à-vis the publisher?" Finally, if the publisher and LDPD wanted to arrange a meeting with him, Ebersbach fretted that such an encounter would be "two against one," and thus inquired if the SV would accompany him to such a meeting as support.³⁵

It is unclear if the Writers Union responded positively to Ebersbach's plea for assistance, but his request is telling. As a relatively young author publishing one of his first story collections and dealing with this particular publisher for the first time, Ebersbach felt manipulated and unfairly treated. Encountering the censorship of his book and, unsure of what to do, he quickly realized that by himself he had no chance to ensure that a future edition of his collection would contain the expunged story. Ebersbach's questions to the Writers Union suggest that he honestly lacked knowledge about what legal recourse lay open to him in order to achieve a favorable outcome and was even unsure if he, by going along with the first publication run, had forfeited his right to object at all. By admitting that he should have approached the SV earlier, Ebersbach indicated that, at least in his mind, the appeal to his association should have been among the first recourses when trouble arose. His questions also underscore that he expected the Writers Union not only to offer him legal advice, but to intervene on his behalf and even provide support at what would surely be an asymmetrical negotiation should he meet with representatives from the Verlag der Morgen and LDPD. In his estimation, the

³⁵ Ibid., 39-40.

Schriftstellerverband should thus automatically provide support in numerous ways to help him overcome his career-related problem. What other function did such a union serve if not to stand up for its members when confronted with unfair treatment by a publisher?

While authors' aspirations to have their works published often ran squarely into the realities of the political censor, the realities of paper supply also exerted a major impact on these opportunities. For instance, in January 1978 Klaus Höpcke consulted with members of Berlin's district SV organization on the situation in HVVB. While between 1973 and 1976, Höpcke noted, the number of titles released by GDR publishers increased from 1,531 to 1,907 (a 25 % expansion) and the number of books produced climbed from 33.9 million to 42.4 million (also 25 % higher), the publishing czar explained that "because of the increase in cost of paper on the world market," it was not possible to raise the belletristic production in 1978. Book production would return to the 1976 level, though he promised that there would be no cutbacks for East German literature. The backlog of books which had been scheduled to appear in 1977 but had not yet been published would count against the 1977 total, not the 1978 calculations, he added. Although the meeting report notes that Höpcke received "great applause" after his presentation, the ensuing discussion saw many tough questions asked by the assembled writers about the criteria for acceptance for publication and the decision to reject works that were critical of the GDR, such as the most recent novel by Jurek Becker (*Schlaflose Tage* or *Sleepless Days*).³⁶ Here concerns over paper shortage and censorship mixed in

³⁶ Abteilung Kultur, Öffentliche Mitgliederversammlung im Bezirksverband Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR mit Genossen Klaus Höpcke, stellvertretender Minister für Kultur," 9 January 1978, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

the minds of many Berlin writers, the former perhaps providing an all-too-convenient justification for the latter.

Nonetheless, authors had good reason to at least hope for a positive response in their appeals to the Writers Union, as the SV secretariat sometimes did confront publishers with grievances on behalf of the organization's members. Sometimes the SV's leaders intervened en masse on behalf of their members whenever Klaus Höpcke attended presidium meetings. At the July 1981 presidium meeting, for instance, Klaus Höpcke presented the HVVB's thematic plan for belletristic publishers in the following year. The presidium members discussed the plan with the minister, suggesting changes to various provisions, particularly "to avoid a disadvantage in the production of satirical-humorous literature of Eulenspiegel Publisher."³⁷ In July 1982, Höpcke once more presented the HVVB's thematic plan for 1983 to the Writers Union's top brass only to hear complaints from the presidium:

The practice of several publishers and booksellers was critically noted to define as 'out of print' titles that actually are still available as well as with the naturally longer time span of sale with higher [publishing] runs (rotary printing) to convey the impression that these books were not in demand.

In addition to these disadvantageous business practices, the SV leaders also took up the plight of playwrights in their ranks, so that "Klaus Höpcke was also asked to act so that the royalties question for dramatists is as of now quickly regulated through the MfK."

Yet while they voiced these numerous concerns to the government minister, the presidium nonetheless approved his 1983 plan for belletristic publishers.³⁸

³⁷ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 8 July 1981, SV 604, 64, 66.

³⁸ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 1 July 1982, SV 605, 67.

Another avenue of assistance taken on by the Writers Union was negotiating an official royalty agreement with the Main Administration for Publishing and Booksellers, a task which fell primarily to the SV's leadership and the Rights Commission. For example, the January 1982 presidium meeting witnessed the body's members approving a HVVB plan to supplement the official royalty structure (*Honorarordnung*) for books.³⁹ In September 1985 the organization's presidium approved a draft of an *Honorarordnung* for book readings by authors.⁴⁰ The presidium, so it was reported in their January 1987 meeting, contacted the Ministry of Culture about the need for a new system of royalty fees, prompting the presidium to note that the "Cultural Department of the [Central Committee] and the Minister of Culture are urgently requested as quickly as possible to bring about a vote on the proposals, prepared by the association, for freelance authors."⁴¹ Such consultations did occur on 29 January 1987 between Kant, Henniger, and Klaus Höpcke and the results of that meeting were discussed at the February 1987 presidium meeting. The President and First Secretary recounted that at their consultation, they had discussed "the composition of the royalty system for writers and about the new regulation of pensions for freelance artists" with talks scheduled to continue on the topic between the Writers Union leaders and government officials.⁴²

These efforts achieved success half a year later. In October 1987 Henniger was able to report with satisfaction, just in time for the Tenth Writers Congress, that "the submittals, initiated by the association, have been confirmed for a reworking of the

³⁹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 19 January 1982, SV 605, 104.

⁴⁰ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 September 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 38, 40-42.

⁴¹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 14 January 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 140.

⁴² Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 12 February 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 119.

official fee structure for publishers and television and for the regulation of an additional pension insurance for freelance members and candidates of the Writers Union after consulting with the proper state organs of the secretariat of the [Central Committee] of the SED” which would take effect 1 January 1988.⁴³ Indeed, Henniger’s satisfaction prompted him to recount at a meeting with the FDGB in 1989 that these measures “quieted down many discussions in the association.”⁴⁴

Beyond book publishing, several SV members earned their keep by writing screen-, stage-, radio-, and television plays, meaning that these members called on their organization for help in these venues as well. Writers often had problems with television officials, despite several attempted interventions by the Writers Union.⁴⁵ In July 1985, for instance, the presidium discussed a complaint letter sent by Eberhard Panitz, author of numerous radio and television plays and also a Vorstand member, to the chair of the State Committee for Television about the production of his television film “*Mein lieber Onkel Hans*” (My Dear Uncle Hans). While not specifying the nature of the complaint (it appears that there was interference in the production or perhaps a change was demanded in his script), the presidium members came out fully in support of Panitz. The meeting report noted that the complaint by Panitz was part of a larger “battery of questions” on the “creative cooperation with authors [and television],” and the presidium “turns with all

⁴³ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 14 October 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 24.

⁴⁴ These provisions were discussed by Henniger with a representative from the FDGB in February 1989. Harald Bühl, “Aktennotiz über ein Gespräch mit dem 1. Sekretär des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, Genossen Gerhard Henniger, am 1.2.1989,” 2 February 1989, SAPMO-BArch DY34/13437. The Berlin SV branch’s steering committee pledged to implement these improvements on behalf of their colleagues and “to actualize [them] smoothly and accurately.” Plan for the District Steering Committee Meeting, 10 March 1988, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 902 Nr. 6780.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 September 1984, SV 511, vol. 2, 35; Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 15 May 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 87.

decisiveness against methods and procedures like the Television [officials] obviously have demonstrated vis-à-vis in the filming vis-à-vis Eberhard Panitz.”⁴⁶ The frustration experienced by writers with television officials continued, however, as can be seen in November 1988 when Hermann Kant wrote to Heinz Adameck, chair of the State Television Committee, “to mark the renewed difficulties in the cooperation with the Television [Committee]” and the presidium sent a five-person delegation (headed by Kant and Henniger) to discuss these issues directly with television officials in 1989.⁴⁷

A particularly dire situation emerged in the late 1980s among GDR playwrights. Many, especially younger authors, had difficulty not only in locating publishers for their work but, more importantly, finding a stage on which to have their work performed. To help rectify the situation, a group of playwrights proposed creating an “Authors Theater” to stage new works by GDR dramatists. Lacking political or financial clout to actualize their proposal, however, the group turned to the Schriftstellerverband, having first attempted, to no avail, to procure help from the Union of Theater Professionals. Irina Liebmann, a reportage writer and radio playwright, first broached the subject to Hermann Kant in March 1987, informing him of a discussion proposal to found such an Authors Theater, a project that was necessary because of “the well-established situation that too few plays by GDR-dramatists appear on our stages.” This theater should not be “just another theater,” but rather “a special theater in which plays are presented quickly and in the intention of the author.” “We ask you,” she closed her letter, “for support of this proposal,” a plan she and others would soon pitch to the Ministry of Culture for

⁴⁶ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 16 July 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 53.

⁴⁷ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 10 November 1988, SV 544, 1; Sekretariatssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 17 April 1989, SV 508, vol. 2, 63.

approval.⁴⁸ She later alleged that the Union of Theater Professionals had accomplished nothing to help its members, despite being aware of the severe problem for a while. Faced with the impotency or obstinacy of the theater union, Liebmann made clear which institution she felt would be their best ally in this endeavor: “I therefore propose, with the support of the Writers Union of the GDR, to establish a theater in which priority for authors will be represented, to which the artistic unions of the GDR belong.”⁴⁹

Despite these appeals, however, Kant and the SV’s leadership declined to support the Authors Theater proposal. The proposal was discussed by the presidium at their April 1987 meeting. At that session, the leaders concluded that “the promotion especially of young GDR dramatic art through the theater must be fundamentally improved and the [Ministry of Culture] is requested to get suitable measures underway in this direction without losing time.” Yet despite acknowledging the real problems faced by East German dramatists, the presidium also surmised that “the foundation of an Authors Theater in the Writers Union is not possible because it would not solve the actual questions of new GDR dramatic art.”⁵⁰ In other words, problems existed but the Writers Union’s founding of an Authors Theater was not the solution.

Radio play author Peter Brasch, son of a former Deputy-Minister of Culture, offered further insight into the presidium’s rejection of the proposal in a letter sent to Kant shortly after a steering committee meeting at which the project had been discussed. No association had yet taken their concerns seriously, he continued, as they ignored

⁴⁸ Irina Liebmann to Herrmann [sic] Kant, 19 March 1987, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 39.

⁴⁹ Irina Libemann, “Diskussionsvorschlag zur Gründung eines Theaters des Autoren,” 10 March 1987, SV 548, vol. 2, 41-44. See also Helmut H. Schulz, “Stellungnahme zum Vorschlag I. Liebmanns ein Autoren-Theater zu gründen,” 12 March 1987, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 45-46.

⁵⁰ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 13 April 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 102.

plausible solutions to the very real problems playwrights faced. A lack of respect for theater, Brasch inveighed, seemed to be at the heart of Kant's rejection: "At any rate, shouldn't [the SV] not close itself off in supporting, at least legally, its members in theater work?" Brasch wondered. There was not, in his estimation, a trace of such concern in Kant's report; it was "useless" if the latter merely to acknowledge their problems "if no concrete steps are undertaken to overcome them."⁵¹ Brasch's criticism and renewed request for the Authors Theater evinced his concerns not only for the plight of playwrights (especially those, like him, who worked in radio), but also for young authors trying to establish their careers and remain financially afloat in a worsening economy. The Writers Union, in his opinion, had nothing short of an obligation to help members in his situation and was further obliged to give the same respect to its radio playwrights as it did to its prose authors.

Attempts by the union's leaders to facilitate publication for their members were in many instances unsuccessful, but the fact remains that these officials were often willing to do what they could. Non-members requesting help in publishing typically received a less salutary answer, however. Such was the case when a certain Frau Ute K. Peemöller from West Berlin, in 1979 sent Kant several political poems "to illuminate the situation in West Berlin and the FRG critically." Via at least two letters and one telephone call, she made it clear she wanted to discuss with him the current political situation (including the "stronger growth of right-radicalism") in West Germany as well as her possible relocation to the GDR. Beyond these things, though, she asked him to evaluate a

⁵¹ Peter Brasch to Hermann Kant, 24 June 1987, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 48-49.

manuscript of hers to determine if it had any literary merit.⁵² Kant was fairly curt in his reply, explaining (clearly annoyed): “As I already told you over the telephone, I am not, after repeated assessments of your manuscript, able to say whether and for whom it could have literary value.” He instead suggested she send it to a publisher to evaluate its merits, closing the matter by stating, “I ask for your understanding if I say to you that I myself can no longer occupy myself with this matter and wish you the best.”⁵³

Kant had shown himself at least willing to pay lip service to members’ demands for help with publishing and in many cases his organization did try to lobby on behalf of its members vis-à-vis publishers. It also seems that at a minimum he humored non-members with a response letter, yet it seems inescapable that, at least as far as Kant was concerned, the Schriftstellerverband existed to serve the material and career interests of its members and not that of the wider East German society. This was an exclusive organization, and the privileges membership entailed were to be equally exclusive.

Publicity

Another career-related area where literary intellectuals frequently looked to their Writers Union was to help them generate publicity for their literary works or in some cases to mitigate or overcome bad press. To this end, writers asked their association to create opportunities for them to publicize or hold a discussion on their work and even to

⁵² One wonders how seriously she actually sympathized with the GDR as she may have been merely presenting herself as a West German fellow traveler in order to possibly earn publication opportunities. If Kant had sensed this façade, it might explain his gruff response. Still, it could be that, given her persistence, she genuinely cared about affairs in East Germany and supported its policies. Ute K. Peemöller to Hermann Kant, 5 February 1979 and 3 December 1979, West Berlin, SV 658, vol. 2, 40, 39, respectively.

⁵³ Hermann Kant to Ute K. Peemöller, 2 January 1980, SV 658, vol. 2, 38.

dispute a bad review of a book or play in the Writers Union's monthly literary magazine, *Neue deutsche Literatur* (New German Literature). In doing so, these authors indicated that their union had an obligation to promote their works, and at the very least not to speak poorly about it in its own publication. Importantly, these publicity actions occasionally took on a larger significance, such as when union discussions of books were used to lobby for the publication of politically troublesome works in the GDR.

A report sent by the Schriftstellerverband in March 1977 to the other national writers organizations in the Soviet bloc indicated the stress they placed upon creating publicity. Recounting the activities of the association and its district branches over the course of 1976, the report enumerated the “numerous literary events, readings, book and solidarity bazaars” prepared by the union. Beyond the “traditional events” such as on the readings and book sales on May Day and the annual “Day of Literature,” the union also sponsored “new forms of publicity work [*Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*]” which “further deepened the creative contact to the workers and collective farmers as well as to the members of the national armed forces.”⁵⁴ The fact that the presidium delegation chose to emphasize the Schriftstellerverband's public relations work at an international gathering of socialist writers associations suggests that such outreach activities, aimed at engaging the public while promoting the literature of members, were a source of particular pride for the SV.

Beyond these public events like book bazaars and public readings, authors sometimes utilized the Writers Union to set up discussions about their works so as to get feedback while simultaneously publicizing them. Annemarie Auer and cultural

⁵⁴ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Information über Aufgaben und Ergebnisse im Prozess des literarischen Schaffens und über die Aktivitäten des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR im Jahre 1976,” 25 March 1977, SV 950, vol. 1, 194.

functionary Helga Ziller, for instance, in February 1975, arranged, at the behest novelist Irmtraud Morgner (also a member of the SV's steering committee), a literature discussion of the latter's latest novel, the feminist-themed *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz, nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura* (The Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatriz as Chronicled by her Minstrel Laura). The main purpose of the meeting, organized through the SV's Berlin district branch, was to generate a sophisticated discussion about the work; as Auer and Ziller expressed in their invitation to the event, "We would be delighted to also hear your opinion about this book and expect you at our literature talk." In a handwritten addendum to an invitation sent to Jurek Becker for the event, Morgner herself underscored this intent by explaining that if "by coincidence" he wanted to participate in the "so-called roundtable," "I would be very happy."⁵⁵

Discussions of new works occurred most frequently at the district level. In fall 1976 positive feedback for such discussions was voiced at election meetings in two district branches. At these meetings, held in Rostock and Neubrandenburg, respectively, members commented, according to the official report, "about the good experiences [...] to discuss most manuscripts of association members in the collective before they go to the publisher."⁵⁶ In May 1983, on the eve of the Ninth Writers Congress, Dr. Joachim Hannemann (a member of the SV's secretariat) reported to the central steering committee that "various literature discussions in the active groups and sections of the association" had taken place. Particularly noteworthy was a "disputatious [*streitbar*] and constructive

⁵⁵ Annemarie Auer and Helga Ziller to Jurek Becker, 21 January 1975, Berlin, JBA 2589.

⁵⁶ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Erste Information über die bisher stattgefundenen Wahlberichtsversammlungen im Schriftstellerverband der DDR," 18 October 1976, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/62.

roundtable discussion” of Friedemann Schreier’s book *Billeschak* and Jurij Brezans *Bild des Vaters* (Picture of the Father).⁵⁷

Yet apparently not all authors were happy with the frequency of these opportunities to discuss manuscripts. At a consultation with the SED’s cultural authorities in January 1983, for example, one of the concerns raised in the SV’s district branches was that “the readiness for discussion about new manuscripts is varied and altogether not satisfying.” Apparently the district branch in Erfurt was particularly vocal in asserting that “such discussions can only be led successful on the basis of knowledge of the subject and such events require a correspondingly thorough and long-term preparation.”⁵⁸ Henniger sought to defend such discussions in a report sent to Kurt Hager before a presidium meeting at which the latter was to discuss cultural policy. In his report, the First Secretary underscored how “the perception must be confronted that literature discussion in the association is insufficient.” To this end, he attached a lengthy list of such discussions for Hager’s reference.⁵⁹ Henniger seemed intent on communicating to Hager the important function such discussions played within the association, perhaps so as to bolster the SV’s authority to police its members works and take collective credit for literary successes.

Sometimes despite a sharply critical discussion of a literary work within the Writers Union, authors still enjoyed benign ramifications. Günter de Bruyn, no stranger

⁵⁷ Dr. Joachim Hannemann, “Bericht des Präsidiums,” 22 May 1983, SV 510, vol. 1, 51.

⁵⁸ Abteilung Kultur (der SED), “Information über eine Beratung mit den Parteisekretären der Bezirksorganisationen des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 13. Januar 1983,” 24 January 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707.

⁵⁹ Gerhard Henniger, “Probleme in Vorbereitung auf die Vorstandssitzung am 20. September 1984,” 27 July 1984, Berlin, SV 510, vol. 2, 144.

to controversy after condemning the Biermann expatriation in 1976, caused a stir when he published his novel *Neue Herrlichkeit* (New Splendor). Saturated in themes of alienation and the inability of the GDR to reform, de Bruyn's manuscript was barred from publication in East Germany in 1983 only to be published in the West in 1984 and then eventually published in the GDR in 1985 for fear of further damage to the state's image abroad.⁶⁰ The novel was discussed at the February 1985 Writers Union presidium meeting where it elicited unsympathetic responses. According to the meeting report, the presidium members engaged in a "critical debate" about the manuscript and many members "had expressed critical objections." Despite these tough remarks, however, the presidium "recommended to Klaus Höpcke to review the appearance of the book in a positive sense."⁶¹ Hence even if a book were not positively evaluated, the presidium was sometimes willing to support its publication nevertheless. Yet the issue also runs deeper; de Bruyn's book had not been banned by the HVVB for aesthetic reasons; the publication ban resulted from cultural policy dictates, and therefore the Writers Union's positive endorsement was not simply an attempt to improve de Bruyn's income or literary reputation, but to loosen censorship restrictions in the GDR more generally.

An even more positive fate befell discussions of a controversial novel by Volker Braun. Braun, a well-known poet, playwright, and prose author, had often encountered

⁶⁰ Detlef Gwosc contends that the SED reluctantly permitted the book's publication for two related reasons: first, they "feared a loss of reputation by non-publication in East Germany"; and second, they "did not want to lose the author Günter de Bruyn for the GDR." See Detlef Gwosc, "Das rauende Unperfekt der Gesellschaft zur Sprache bringen: Günter de Bruyns Roman *Neue Herrlichkeit*," in Dennis Tate, ed. *Günter de Bruyn in Perspective* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 101-18; see also Dennis Tate, *Shifting Perspectives: East German Autobiographical Narratives Before and After the End of the GDR* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), 177-78.

⁶¹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 February 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 133. The book had been distributed to them by Klaus Höpcke at the previous presidium meeting. See Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 17 January 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 144.

difficulty with the SED for the critical content of his works. Because of this history he expressed gratitude to Kant and Henniger in December 1985 for hosting a meeting (on December 12, 1985) among many steering committee members as well as members of the association's Literary Critics Active Group to discuss his *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* (Hinze-Kunze Novel).⁶² First written in 1981 but unpublished until 1985, the novel tells of a functionary, Hinze, and his driver, Kunze, and their various adventures, which contained allusions to censorship and the limits of freedom in the GDR among other things. When Klaus Höpcke, in a move that would draw the SED's rebuke, unexpectedly allowed the book's publication in 1985 and wrote two measured but positive reviews in the East German press, the book created a firestorm among critics and Party members alike.⁶³ Braun must have assumed that this SV literary discussion, especially among loyalists and literary critics, would be contentious at best, but the tone of his letter also suggests, first, that he was grateful that many of the leading figures of the Writers Union had discussed his book at all, and second, that the meeting had actually gone well: "We are happy about the expressed opinions and that the book is seen as belonging [zugehörig]." "I can hope," he elaborated, "that such a vote by the experts will not remain unheard and the confidence that my readership shows me in their letters will also become the official position."⁶⁴ In Braun's case, at a moment of intense scrutiny among

⁶² Henniger's invitation to the meeting was surprisingly neutral in its tone, simply informing the recipients to the meeting "in case you have interest in taking part in the discussion." See Gerhard Henniger to the Members of the Steering Committee of the Writers Union of the GDR, 13 November 1985, SV Berlin, SV 510, vol. 2, 63.

⁶³ Colin B. Grant, *Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker's GDR* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 107-121. For a discussion of the book between Braun, literary critic Dieter Schlenstedt, and representatives of the SED Central Committee's Sciences Department, see Gregor Schirmer, Abteilung Wissenschaften, 8 January 1986, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/7558.

⁶⁴ Volker Braun to Hermann Kant and Gerhard Henniger, 16 December 1985, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 88.

SED elite, the author's appeal for and subsequently positive reception of his novel in the union discussion was a significant resource in his larger political struggle. It thus seems to have meant a great deal to some authors when they could, through the Writers Union, bring together colleagues to discuss their newest publication or manuscript, especially those which had run into the dictates of East German *Kulturpolitik*.

Despite these publicity efforts, however, the Schriftstellerverband still received its fair share of letters complaining that the association should do more to promote the works of its members. In this respect, Writers Union members of particular genres sometimes complained about the lack of respect shown to them by the central organization. A frequent critic of the SV's failures in the arena of publicity was Peter Abraham, chairman of the SV's Active Group for children's literature, who often expressed his belief that the Writers Union undervalued children and youth literature and hence gave it short shrift in its promotional efforts. Abraham, for instance, wrote to Henniger in 1985 in response to an article the latter had written for the December 20, 1985 edition of *Neues Deutschland* praising recent works by East German authors. Calling the article "one-sided," Abraham informed Henniger that he had neglected to mention the achievements of a "not insignificant group of authors...[n]amely the children's book authors." Abraham continued even more bluntly, exclaiming, "Already I have given two papers in the FRG about the equal role of children's literature next to 'adult literature.' Unfortunately the 1st Secretary of my association has now stabbed me in the back." He rebuked Henniger's failure of leadership and inability to fulfill the duties of his office, noting "It would however have been your obligation as speaker of our association to acknowledge

children's literature." Abraham surmised that Henniger's omission was unconscious, but it was precisely this lack of respect that needed to be challenged by children's book writers. The Writers Union should expect no less from Abraham in his provocative letter, he expressed; after all, "The presidium named me to the chairmanship of the Active Group, and I take this function seriously."⁶⁵

In addition to disrespect of certain genres, authors sometimes had individual complaints about bad publicity. For example, writers sent letters to the Schriftstellerverband to register their displeasure with reviews of their works in official East German publications, including the Writers Union's monthly literary magazine, *Neue deutsche Literatur*. Germanist Annemarie Auer was one such SV member who contacted Kant in 1979 on behalf of another writer, Dorothea Kleine, who had received a poor review in NDL. Kleine, Auer described, had striven to make her work loyal and, besides, she had faithfully served for years as chair of the Cottbus district branch of the SV. In addition, Kleine suffered a heart condition and tried to avoid excitement, meaning that the excessively harsh critique in NDL had come as a real shock. Calling the review "malicious" and "gibberish," Auer attacked the reviewer's analysis. She admitted that the "poor Dorothea Kleine [was] probably of middling talent," but her works came out of her genuine life experiences and were certainly competent. The reason for the poor review, Auer implied, stemmed at least in part from Berlin elitism: "as they say, in Berlin

⁶⁵ Peter Abraham to Gerhard Henniger, 23 December 1985, Babelsberg, SV 517, vol. 1, 19. Abraham mailed a similar letter to Henniger in 1987. Complaining that Henniger had not promoted an international meeting for children's book authors, Abraham expressed, "Once again it appears to me to be an underestimation of children and youth literature by the [SV] if I compare the press's total silence about Hildesheim with the effort expended for other important association activities." Peter Abraham to Gerhard Henniger, 26 August 1987, Babelsberg, SV517, vol. 1, 10-11. Henniger, in response, denied any "underestimation or children and youth literature" on the part of the Writers Union. See Gerhard Henniger to Peter Abraham, 1 September 1987, Berlin, SV 517, vol. 1, 4-6.

we won't be concerned since the author doesn't belong to Berlin," a statement which hinted at regional tensions within the organization. In any event, Auer ended her letter asking if in the future such "unscrupulous uncouthness" (*gewissenlose Flegeleien*) could be avoided.⁶⁶ The implication of Auer's letter was that the union should treat its members, especially those who had demonstrated dedication to the association, with at least the dignity of a kinder review, even if the book in question were of middling quality. Moreover, the Berlin members of the Writers Union, by far the most populous district branch, should not look down on those from other districts as provincial.

Novelist and short story writer Horst Deichfuß complained in early 1984 about a poor review as well. Expressing disgust about the critique of his novel *Windmacher* [Wind-maker] in NDL's December 1983 edition, Deichfuß wrote to Dr. Joachim Hannemann (the secretary of the SV's Literature Department) that "the review printed there is not only intolerable, it defames (possibly deliberately?), it falsifies, and it is in many ways stupid..." Deichfuß continued his rant, enumerating various elements of the review that he found particularly aggravating. Among other complaints, he noted, "[Q]uotations from the novel were assembled so that the reader of the review must assume that they refer to each other in the novel when in fact this is not the case; it creates a false conclusion." Deichfuß also railed against the reviewer for misunderstanding the development of his character, accusing him of presenting this development in a single excerpted quote where "the character is picked to pieces." "I'll still add," Deichfuß stated, "this 'review' has triggered outrage among quite a number of my colleagues, not only in the Halle district." The author then came to the crux of his

⁶⁶ Annemarie Auer to Hermann Kant, 1 November 1979, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 6.

diatribe, frankly asking, “if we can’t generally improve the state of criticism in the country, why then can’t we treat association members fairly in the association’s own organ?”⁶⁷ Deichfuß’s accusation was direct: as its official publication, NDL should serve the interests of union members, at the very least by giving members’ works a fair review.

Despite these many complaints, the SV’s publicity efforts won the appreciation of some members. Indeed, the opportunities for publicizing a work of literature prompted even foreign writers to look to the Writers Union on occasion. In May 1987 the Schriftstellerverband planned a banner event entitled “Berlin – A Place for Peace” as part of the celebrations of Berlin’s 750th anniversary.⁶⁸ Held in conjunction with the celebration of Germany’s “liberation” from Nazism, dozens of international writers were invited to read excerpts from works that centered on the theme of peace, followed by a GDR author reading a translation of that work. The SV contacted several prominent writers about participating, but at least one author lobbied vigorously on his own behalf to have his text read. This was Antonis Samarkis, a much-celebrated Greek storywriter, who, nearing 70 years of age, clearly was unconcerned with meaningless formalities when he penned the following letter to the Writers Union (in English):

My dear friend,
If you say NO für my story Der Fluss [the River] I will commit suicide in Der Fluss Oder, and so the story of my life will be ended there.
Permit me to thank you so much for your friendship and to assure you that the whole reading will be very, very short, kein Problem for you.
Your friend,
Antonis⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Horst Deichfuß to Joachim Hannemann, 8 January 1984, Halle, SV 815, vol. 1, 168-69.

⁶⁸ This event will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

⁶⁹ Emphasis in original. Antonis Samarkis to unknown recipients, 5 May 1987, SV 428, 1.

With an introduction like that, the Schriftstellerverband could do nothing else but accept his story, thus preventing the death of the literary master at the hands of the Oder River.

Many authors considered it perfectly natural to expect their union to generate opportunities to publicize their works and many also expected positive reviews in the organization's monthly periodical. Complaints about publicity were thus common, but a great many authors were also very satisfied with the Writers Union's effort to promote their works, including several cases where the SV leadership defended a work that the SED had marked as problematic. In this way publicity work by the union not only was a career service but also a tool that could be utilized to affect larger cultural policy issues.

Socioeconomic Aid

As the East German economy declined in the 1980s, many writers increasingly turned to the Writers Union for financial and social assistance. Yet they were, unsurprisingly, frustrated with the SV, suffering its own budgetary problems, when it proved unable to satisfy all member requests in these areas. From 1971 until 1989, the Writers Union's payroll more than doubled from 610,000 Marks to 1,383,000 even though the union's budget only increased 51 percent over the same period (1,791,600 Marks to 2,710,300 Marks). In other words, the percentage of the Writers Union budget spent on payroll increased from 34% to 51% over the course of two decades.⁷⁰ This trend necessitated sharp cuts in other areas, including in the union's political and socioeconomic activities. Thus, when faced with difficult economic times writers often

⁷⁰ For the 1971 budget, see "Begründung zum Finanzplan 1972," 29 June 1971, SV 595, 26-32; for the 1989 budget, see "Finanzplanerfüllung per 31.3.1989," 20 May 1989, SV 508, vol 2, 10-12.

looked to the Schriftstellerverband for financial and social help, yet increasingly the SV found it more and more difficult to provide that help.

Since the creation of the *Kulturfonds* or Cultural Funds of the GDR in 1949, a foundation established by the FDGB and Kulturbund to distribute material support to writers and artists, the SED had attempted to provide basic financial and social security to its creative intellectuals. Despite efforts to provide for their members, the Writers Union's social coverage had its shortcomings, and these shortcomings were ever more apparent by the 1970s. In January 1973, for example, an SED report on the Schriftstellerverband noted that "still the social guarantee (pensions, sickness insurance, additional insurance) is a key problem that stood in the center of the group discussion [within the SV]." ⁷¹ In March 1974, a meeting with young authors revealed that the latter desired, among other things, more scholarships and "the right to unpaid vacation." ⁷²

These inefficiencies also sparked jealousies and accusations of unfairness over who was to receive funds and who was not. Erik Neutsch, author of the successful but controversial anti-conformist *Spur der Steine* (Trace of Stones), voiced such concerns at an October 1973 meeting of the SED's party group within the Writers Union. At that meeting, Neutsch questioned the "policy with literature prizes," insinuating that the Academy of the Arts had selected two writers to receive the 1973 Heinrich-Mann-Preis (a highly prestigious literary award in the GDR), when it should have gone to Joachim Nowotny, exclaiming, "Would not as clean a writer as Nowotny be much more suitable?"

⁷¹ "Bericht über die Ergebnisse der Gruppengesprächs, die in Dezember 1972 und Januar 1973 in Bezirksverband Berlin des Schriftstellerverband der DDR durchgeführt worden sind," 31 January 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

⁷² Presidium Meeting Notes, 21 March 1974, SV 598, 125-26.

The author also wondered why his latest novel (*Auf der Suche nach Gatt* – In search of Gatt) was not excerpted and published in NDL. He further accused *Sinn und Form* of supporting “only one direction of lyric poetry,” something which smacked of “subjectivism” that “has nothing to do with Party position!”⁷³ Another main point of his critique centered on the stipend policies of the Writers Union, stating that an application by Hans-Jürgen Steinmann to its scholarship commission had been turned down “but [Günter] de Bruyn receives money without application.” Indeed, “I ask, where does the Party position stop and where does the lobby begin?” To refute these allegations, SV secretariat representative Erika Büttner countered, “In the scholarship commission of the association no arbitrariness prevails,” and added, “everything [in the commission] is negotiated properly, including the application of Steinmann!” Ursula Ragwitz, for her part, “suggested” a meeting between Neutsch and representatives of the Central Committee’s Cultural Department as well as a meeting with the SV presidium.⁷⁴ Neutsch’s criticism expressed what was no doubt a common perception among union members that their organization dispensed privileges and support in an unfair manner.

One month later, on the eve of the union’s Seventh Writers Congress, the SED released a decision on “Measures for the Development of Living and Creative Conditions of Writers and Artists.” Though it had professed commitment to fulfilling the aspirations of East Germany’s writers since 1949, the 1973 measures represented a re-dedication to these goals and signaled a goodwill measure on the part of new East German leader Erich

⁷³ This was probably a reference to the “lyric debates” waged between 1964 and 1972 in several East German literary magazines, whereby leading GDR poets viciously attacked literary critics whom they accused of upholding a narrowly ideological standard of poetry. Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech*, 38-39.

⁷⁴ Leo Sladczyk (Abteilung Kultur im ZK der SED), “Information über die Parteigruppensitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 24.10.1973,” 29 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

Honecker (General Secretary from 1971) to go hand-in-hand with his profession of “no taboos” in literature. Indeed, these proposed measures addressed nearly every professional and socioeconomic aspiration of German writers over the past century, though in the end the SED fell short of its objectives in key areas. Nonetheless, the measures were enthusiastically greeted by SV members, at least initially.

According to the Central Committee Cultural Department’s report on these policy commitments, the new measures were meant to demonstrate “what appreciation the Party shows the artists and culture creating people and what meaning they attach to the creative work of writers and artists.” The report’s authors counted 724 writers in the GDR (vs. 3,334 artists and 648 composers) and 7,200 total creative professionals who would be potential beneficiaries of these social policies, which would fall into three broad categories: first would be an alteration to the “formulation and method of working of the ‘Cultural Funds’ in the interest of the methodical development of socialistic-realistic creative works and for the increase of the effectiveness of the artist associations”; second would be “measures for the further improvement of the social position of writers and artists;” and third would be “measures for the safeguarding of important material prerequisites for artistic works.”⁷⁵

The first category of social policy improvements was strengthening of the GDR Cultural Funds’ effectiveness. The amount of money designated for the Cultural Funds, was to be augmented by 25 million Marks. With greater resources, the funds could now be used for a number of specific goals: aiding the creation of artistic works and

⁷⁵ Abteilung Kultur, “Erläuterung des Beschlusses des Politbüros vom 30.10.73 über ‘Maßnahmen zur Entwicklung der Lebens- und Schaffensbedingungen der Schriftsteller und Künstler,’” 12 November 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/8, 1-2.

supporting cultural work within the wider populace; expanding art markets; building or maintaining studios for “artist collectives,” workshops, and convalescence sites; facilitating study trips and distributing scholarships and “support contracts” (*Förderungsverträge*); and lastly, funding “measures that serve to improve the social position of writers and artists.” The funds would be distributed by a board of trustees and could be awarded to “individuals, collectives, artist associations, or cultural facilities.” This board consisted of the Minister of Culture and the heads of the artist associations, the *Gewerkschaft Kunst* (Art Trade Union, part of the FDGB), Academy of the Arts, and Cultural Funds, as well as “further personalities of cultural life.”⁷⁶

Measures for improving the social position of writers and artists were also spelled out in detail. First was guaranteeing artists’ pensions in the form of monthly support once they reached retirement age or were forced prematurely to give up artistic work. The average monthly contribution, the SED’s report specified, was 500 Marks with none exceeding 800. Importantly, however individuals could only apply for these pensions through the artist associations, the *Gewerkschaft Kunst*, the Academy of the Arts, or the leaders of government organizations, driving home the importance of membership in one of these state-dominated bodies in order to receive social support. The principles of awarding the pensions would be placed in the hands of the Minister of Culture and the Bureau of the GDR’s Council of Ministers who would then consult with the presidents of the artist associations and *Gewerkschaft Kunst*. Part of the financing for the pensions, of course, came from social security payments made by artists and writers, but, the plan indicated, those cultural figures with annual incomes under 24,000 Marks could have half

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

of their required contributions to social security refunded to them each year. In addition, artists and writers with irregular incomes could “pay the[ir] contributions for social security and retirement supplementary insurance [*Zusatzrentenversicherung*] retroactively for up to three years whereas the right to short-term cash benefits and benefits in kind remain in effect.” In theory, then, those writers working on long-term projects without steady income, could have a flexible payment schedule for social security contributions while remaining eligible to receive other social benefits.⁷⁷

Beyond pension funds, the plan outlined even more social improvements for artists. It declared, for example, an increase in the number of vacation spots for artists and writers. The measures also called for improvement to “housing and work opportunities” for these creative intellectuals. To this end, local government officials were to secure “in stronger measure [...] the allocation of living space, especially for such writers and artists who must change their place of work for occupation reasons as well as who should be settled in certain territories for the development of a multifarious cultural life.” Also included was the building and renovation of retirement housing and the inclusion of studio apartments in future housing construction. In addition to housing, writers and artists who were parents would receive greater opportunities to place their children in weekly daycare and kindergartens. In Berlin there was to be a boarding school where parents could leave their children under the care of a “pedagogically well-trained supervisory staff.” The SED’s plan also took younger writers and artists into account in that the presidents of the artist associations and the leader of the *Gewerkschaft*

⁷⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

Kunst could submit proposals for support contracts for “talented, freelance writers and artists above all with graduates of educational establishments.”⁷⁸

As for the third dimension of improvements promised to creative intellectuals, the SED presented several benefits specific to the careers of East Germany’s artists and writers. The SED proposed that as early as 1974 they would increase the production of paper, make possible a “stepwise expansion of the production of books and music supplies,” and also shorten the time period between when a book was approved for publication and when it actually appeared in stores. Work materials such as dictating machines and typewriters were also to be provided in greater abundance so that “a continuous readiness for delivery is given.” This enhanced distribution capability would be accomplished through the erection of a mail-order firm and special trading operations in Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden.⁷⁹

What more could artists want? The paternalistic state was pledging that cultural figures would receive material support in producing their works, social support to improve and maintain their social position, and supplementary professional benefits such as better access to materials needed to ply their craft. In one fell swoop it sought to answer the demands voiced by writers over the course of the entire twentieth century, strengthening commitments to insurance, pensions, stipends, parental resources, and even vacation spots, all of which would help writers to weather the perils of the free market by providing a greater sense of security. The regime, it seemed, was making good on its

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6-8.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 8-10.

commitments to providing for its creative men and women, offering a carrot instead of a stick in order to achieve intellectual conformity.

Individual artists and writers were not the only beneficiaries, however. The report on these social policy initiatives drew to a close with a statement of the motivations behind the plan. Certainly these efforts were designed to aid artists and writers, especially the young and old, improve their living standard and enable them to cultivate their creative abilities unencumbered of material or professional impediments. Yet these policy initiatives, the report added, were also intended to “help to increase the role and responsibility of the artist associations corresponding to their significance for our culture and art.” The final page of the report was even franker about the intentions underlying the social measures:

The cooperation of the artist associations in the board of trustees of the Cultural Funds – as beneficiaries of proposals for assistance, pensions, honorary membership, and support contracts for young artists – will contribute to increasing their authority and strengthening their ideological and artistic effectiveness.⁸⁰

The stated aim of these measures was to increase the power wielded by the artist associations over members, making artists and writers ever more beholden to these organizations and, as a consequence, rendering them ever more willing to adhere to state ideological and aesthetic dictates. This was not an altruistic act by a nurturing state; it was a set of policies designed to ensure ideological and political compliance in exchange for social and economic patronage.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8-10.

For the Writers Union, the two main groups responsible for distributing fiscal and social aid to members were the Auftrags- und Stipendienkommission (Contract and Scholarship Commission) and the Sozialkommission (Social Commission). Both commissions were comprised of steering committee members and worked closely with the union's secretariat for administrative support. The Auftrags- und Stipendienkommission could provide its members with subsidies to assist in the completion of their works, thus providing direct monetary support to its members for their literary pursuits. The chairman of the commission throughout the 1970s was Wolfgang Joho, former editor of NDL. From 1982 until 1987 the group was led by presidium members Rudi Strahl (Joho stepped down due to illness), and after the Tenth Writers Congress in 1987 presidium member Jurij Brezan took over the responsibility. Typically, the committee consisted of around twenty members appointed by the steering committee accountable to the presidium in the form of regular consultations.

In September 1976 such a consultation took place between the presidium and the Contract and Scholarship Commission.⁸¹ In two reports submitted for the meeting, the commission outlined its main criteria for extending financial support for book projects, scholarships, study stays, and study trips and also reviewed its activities of the past several years. In the first report, Wolfgang Joho's commission explained that support given to authors in the process of creating their next work was predicated squarely on political considerations: "The support of new socialist literature is essentially a component of the cultural-political leadership activity of the Writers Union of the GDR." The most important criterion for monetary support for book projects, then, was that the

⁸¹ Gerhard Henniger to the Members of the Presidium, 1 August 1976, Berlin, SV 402, 49.

book championed socialism. Such support strove to create “a multifaceted socialist literature that includes the development of all forms and genres.”⁸² The second report surveyed the main activities of the commission in the past year and explained the group’s decision making process. Fees for commissioned works, the report stated, could be dispersed to an individual in one lump payment or in some cases in monthly allotments (up to 1,200 Mark each month). Authors wishing to attain scholarships for finishing a book project were required to submit their working manuscript to be read by two commission members. After these members gave their opinion, the commission as a whole would discuss the application and reach a final decision. If the application were approved, they could receive up to 1,000 Marks monthly for a maximum timeframe of one year. Particular preference would be given to those manuscripts which had already found a publisher. All of the commission’s decisions for the granting financial support were made, so the report noted, by simple majority voting when over half of the members were present along with a representative of the Culture Funds and the HVVB. Finally, all SV members were entitled to apply for scholarships through the commission, and it was required to meet six times yearly to consider requests.⁸³

The Social Commission, founded in the earliest years of the SV’s existence, was led by author Walter Gorrish (a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and World War II) in the 1970s with Wolfgang Held (a novelist and young-adult book author) taking over after

⁸² Auftrags- und Stipendienkommission, “Prinzipien der Foerderung von Literatur durch den Schriftstellerverband der DDR,” 16 June 1976, SV 402, 52-53.

⁸³ Report, “Die Auftrags- und Stipendienkommission beim Vorsatnd des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR (Arbeitsordnung),” 16 June 1976, Berlin, SV 402, 54-56.

the later died in 1981.⁸⁴ The responsibilities of this commission centered on insuring that SV members maintained a secure social standing in order to enable them to write without worrying about, say, health insurance, pensions, and loans. In other words, whereas the Auftrags- und Honorarkommission's job was to augment the writer's ability to produce a particular literary work, the social commission was supposed to make sure that all other social needs were met and thus provide enough security for the writer to be able to produce literature. To fulfill its mission, the Social Commission needed to monitor the social status of union members in order to assess which dimensions of their social needs required the greatest attention. To this end, a detailed review was conducted about the social position of writers in 1976, three years after the SED Politbüro's announcement. In it, Walter Gorrish could express that "the social position of writers [...] has essentially improved." He noted that 71 of 177 members that had reached retirement age received a pension, authors in dire financial straits had been given one-time monetary stipends, and those who had become temporarily inactive because of illness were given temporary assistance as well, usually amounting to 500 Mark a month. Still, he continued, the social situation was less than acceptable for many authors. This was especially true among those authors of Sorbian decent who, because they needed to work supplementary jobs to sustain their livelihood, "in no single case enjoy our new social benefits." Moreover, as far as health coverage was concerned, Gorrish lamented that they had been less successful than hoped as many members complained of heart conditions, poor circulation, and diseases of the digestive system. Another area of setbacks was vacation spots allocated to SV members by the FDGB. Despite being promised additional spots at

⁸⁴ Walter Victor, "Kurze Gründungsgeschichte des Deutschen Schriftstellerverbandes," 3 April 1967, SV 205, 44.

two vacation resorts in Czechoslovakia, for instance, the Social Commission was able to send fewer writers than expected during the peak season. At other locations, there were complaints that the rooms were reserved primarily for lower-income writers (earning between 12,000 and 24,000 Marks annually). Nevertheless, he concluded that “overall, it can be determined that with [the SED’s] decision, above all through its determined realization, the life and creative conditions of authors were improved.”⁸⁵

Throughout the next decade, the presidium met regularly with representatives from the Auftrag- und Stipendienkommission and Sozialkommission. Such was the case in February 1984 when playwright Rudi Strahl, chair of the commission since 1982, reported that in the past several years that available scholarships were distributed primarily based on applications by members. A particular priority in the future needed to be that “[t]he assistance of the association centers on, in the first instance, such literary intentions that deepen our socialist image of society and convey values and standards of value for the further formation of our society and for the struggles of our time.” Long-term support for writers, Strahl observed, “permits the writer to concentrate completely on a literary project for a while and enables him to figure out his own style, to perfect his own modes of composition.” To this end, Strahl confessed that the commission’s future work as a sponsor of literary projects “should among other things be used for stimulating the authors to enter closer connections with proceedings in industry and in other important areas of life.”⁸⁶ The SV’s funds, therefore, should be utilized to generate the

⁸⁵ Sozialkommission des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, “Bericht ueber die soziale Lage der Mitglieder des Verbandes drei Jahre nach dem Beschluss vom November 1973,” 1 October 1976, Berlin, SV 402, 24-27.

⁸⁶ Rudi Strahl, Abteilung Nachwuchs und Auftragswesen, “Grundsätze einer Arbeitsordnung der Auftrags- und Stipendienkommission des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” 2 January 1984, Berlin, SV 511, vol. 2, 105-8; Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 23 February 1984, SV 511, vol. 2, 88, 90.

kind of literature most conducive to reflecting and enhancing socialist society, namely literature which bound the writer more closely to the realities of the working class.

The following month, Social Commission chair Wolfgang Held spoke to union leaders about pressing sociopolitical issues. He delivered a report in which he drew particular attention to the need to address “pension supplements for freelance authors, sickness benefits regulations, and vacation places for freelance authors.”⁸⁷ Held spoke once again to the presidium six months later about the “realization of the social-political program of the SED in the Writers Union of the GDR” while emphasizing the need for further work on pension benefits.⁸⁸ It appears that little progress had been made in the preceding half year toward ameliorating these problems.

Writers Union members were not simply passive in the face of economic or social problems, waiting for the Writers Union to extend its hand. Indeed, SV members took it upon themselves to contact the organization about social and financial aid and sometimes reacted bitterly when denied such privileges, indicating a culture of entitlement. In these requests, the SV’s leaders were often asked by members and intermittent non-members to use their influence to circumvent rules, cut through onerous bureaucratic procedures, and otherwise achieve what might not be accomplished otherwise in the inefficient and corrupt labyrinth of state and Party agencies. In a society of scarcity, these benefits, by bypassing queues and enhancing standards of living, enticed those members who received them and angered those members who did not.

⁸⁷ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 March 1984, SV 511, vol. 2, 84.

⁸⁸ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 30 October 1984, SV 511, vol. 2, 17.

Procuring new automobiles in a country where an ordinary citizen might wait ten years for such a privilege was one area where writers called on their professional organization for assistance. Cars, of course, were not just a material possession but also a status symbol; hence, when the Writers Union assisted individual members in obtaining a vehicle, this act recognized the recipient's stature. Unsurprisingly, important members of the SV seemed to be the most insistent on enlisting the Writers Union to acquire a car. Jurij Koch, a Sorbian author, wrote to Henniger in 1979 with just such a request. Citing not only his position as a member of the SV's steering committee, Koch also noted that his responsibility for youth development work in the organization and his membership in the union Social Commission justified his request. "Meetings and talks in Berlin, Bautzen, and in other places in the Republic (4-6 per month)," he continued, "would be, without an automobile, for me hardly sensible." To this end Koch requested that the association intervene on his behalf with the necessary authorities so that he could buy his car of choice (a Lada 1600 or VW Golf).⁸⁹ A short two days later Henniger sent a request to the Ministry for Trade and Supply [*Handel und Versorgung*] informing that without a car Koch "could not fulfill these time-consuming duties."⁹⁰ Hans-Jürgen Steinmann argued along similar lines in a 1983 letter to Henniger, claiming that as chairman of the Halle district branch of the Schriftstellerverband, he needed access to a car.⁹¹ Less important members also on occasion let it be known that they thought they should have access to an automobile: Jutta Bahre, for example, wrote in 1984 to Hermann

⁸⁹ Jurij Koch to Gerhard Henniger, 26 August 1979, Cottbus, SV 635, vol. 1, 138.

⁹⁰ Gerhard Henniger to Comrade Bricksa, 28 August 1979, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 1, 137.

⁹¹ Hans-Jürgen Steinmann to Gerhard Henniger, 14 March 1983, SV 517, vol. 3, 132-133.

Kant on behalf of her husband Jens, a crime-novelist, complaining among other things that he was not able to procure a car for a reading tour upon which he was about to embark.⁹² Whether they received it or not, evidently many members of the Writers Union felt the organization should help them acquire a new vehicle.

Assistance with housing and lodging was also occasionally requested of the Writers Union, both in terms of permanent homes and places in hotels or vacation resorts.⁹³ Translator and essayist Eckard Thiele, for instance, as early as September 1977 wrote the secretariat asking them to reserve a room for him at the spa resort *Hotel Neptun*, apparently for vacation purposes.⁹⁴ This request sparked a long, contentious correspondence between various members of the secretariat and Thiele.⁹⁵ All attempts fell through, however, despite a concerted effort by the staff to procure the room, including writing to the Hotel Neptun itself and, when this attempt failed, appealing directly to the presidium of FDGB, the organization responsible for allocating rooms at vacation destinations to the Writers Union.⁹⁶ Lacking success, the head of the Writers Union secretariat's Social Policy Department, a certain Frau M. Scheerer, wrote to Thiele in June 1978 (nine months after Thiele's initial letter!) to express that all of their attempts

⁹² Jutta Bahre to Klaus Höpcke, Herman Kant, and Party Secretary Müller, 14 May 1984, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 1, 1-7.

⁹³ The FDGB assigned placed a number of slots at vacation resorts and spa towns at the disposal of the Writers Union every year. See for example the presidium's discussion of the FGDB-allocated spots in July 1985. Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 16 July 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 52.

⁹⁴ Eckard Thiele to Harnisch (Department Finances and Organization), 1 September 1977, SV 635, vol. 2, 135.

⁹⁵ See the letters between Henniger and Thiele from November 8, 16, 24, and December 5, 1977 and April 4, 1978 in SV 635, vol. 2, 123-26 and 128-31, respectively.

⁹⁶ Harnisch to the Hotel Neptun, 14 September 1977, and Henniger to Dr. Harald Bühl (Presidium of the Federal Steering Committee of the FDGB), 16 November 1977, SV 635, vol. 2, 134, 126, respectively.

to gain him entrance into the hotel had proved futile. Suggesting that the best course now might be to put Thiele directly in contact with the hotel's director, Scheerer added that "we want to leave nothing untried in order to make a stay possible for you and are enclosing an endorsement." To close the letter, Scheerer expressed a hope that Thiele would find success in his appeal to the hotel.⁹⁷ While unable to provide everything for which their members asked, the Writers Union seemingly would occasionally go to great lengths and exhaust all efforts to get their members what they requested, even if their efforts were ultimately in vain.

More successful was the case of novelist and screenplay writer Manfred Richter who in 1979 wrote to Henniger to request help in procuring an apartment in a different district than his current domicile. Henniger explained in his letter to district SED secretary Christel Zillmann that Richter, a twenty-year member of the Schriftstellerverband, found the distance between his place of work and his home to be too great and hence wished to move from Dessau to Potsdam. Henniger noted that Richter had completed all of the necessary paperwork and even passed along the latter's ideal choice of locations within Potsdam. Henniger further observed that Richter "is a partisan and qualified author who in addition to his literary work is also socially active." A month later Zillmann replied that Richter's application had been approved.⁹⁸

By the mid-1980s signs of economic troubles were appearing for many writers. One district organization feeling these pains acutely was in Halle, where the union's

⁹⁷ M. Scheerer (Leader of the Department Social Policy) to Eckard Thiele, 2 June 1978, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 2, 115.

⁹⁸ Gerhard Henniger to Christel Zillmann, 16 February 1979, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 2, 55-57.

presidium held its monthly meeting in April 1985 in a joint session with the SV district steering committee there. Prose author Hans-Jürgen Steinmann delivered a report at that meeting explaining the political, social, and financial situation of district members. According to his report, “[the] social/material situation is coming to a head” and “the fewest can live on publications [alone],” meaning that most authors needed to supplement their income in some way. In the discussion, another author commented that he had been an active writer for ten years; in the past three years he had produced 600 pages which had translated into a total of 340 Marks each month, hardly a sum to live off of in his estimation. Erik Neutsch, having lost none of his brashness since his 1973 tirade, quickly retorted that “that isn’t a social question but rather a cultural-political question” while also threatening to leave the SV in protest to the “mafia or lobby in Berlin,” which, he claimed, did not take literature produced in Halle seriously. The head of the Contract and Scholarship Commission, Rudi Strahl, conceded that “the contracts were made to the disadvantage of the authors” and that “[i]t is the obligation of the association to look into such things.” However, he reminded them, “[C]ircumstances are relatively better with us than in other socialist countries.”⁹⁹ In Halle, SV members felt that their organization had not helped them achieve fair contracts or socioeconomic security, with several authors hinting at (or bluntly stating) that they considered the arrogance of the Berlin center vis-à-vis the Halle periphery to be one of the major causes of these disappointments.

These growing economic problems acted as a barometer of the mounting economic crisis throughout East Germany, a crisis, like the Great Depression, which threatened to hit writers and other artists particularly hard. In those heady times the

⁹⁹ “Hans-Jürgen Steinmann zur Präsidiumssitzung in Halle,” April 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 115-17.

Writers Union took on an even more vital function in the lives of its members, helping to ensure career opportunities while also providing a social safety net to a particularly vulnerable professional group. Indeed, as the years passed and the economic climate worsened, Writers Union members expected more and more from their organization, leading to frustration and anxiety when such help was not forthcoming.

Travel in the West

One of the benefits most treasured by writers and most coveted by the general public was the right to travel, especially to the West. Common justifications for trips included participating in colloquia or conferences, giving readings to promote one's latest work, to accept foreign literary prizes, and to gather information for an upcoming book. Study trips to collect material or conduct research for one's latest literary project were a very common reason given for writers desiring to travel to the West. In order to travel abroad for these various professional purposes, authors were required to apply for such a privilege through the Writers Union who then forwarded their list of approved travelers to the GDR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In applying for travel, writers had to make known where they were traveling, who was financing the trip, what the purpose of the trip was, and how long they would be abroad. Upon returning, authors were also often required to file a report with the Schriftstellerverband describing their activities abroad and who they met.¹⁰⁰ It comes as little surprise that the main criterion for approving travel to the West was political reliability, and members learned to craft their applications to encourage the SV bureaucrats to see them as such.

¹⁰⁰ Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistischen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 21, 24-25.

Travel considerations in this period were handled primarily by the organization's *Abteilung Internationale Beziehungen* (Department of International Relations), that part of the secretariat which controlled the administrative aspects of all foreign dealings of the Writers Union. The personnel for the department, like the rest of the SV's secretariat, were staffed with SED-approved bureaucrats and for much of the 1970s and 1980s was headed by Karla Dyck.¹⁰¹ The department was responsible to the presidium, to which it submitted monthly overviews of who had applied for foreign travel and whether or not the person's trip had been approved.

In order to receive permission to travel abroad, an author normally needed to submit proof of the event he or she was attending and explain the purpose of the trip. An April 1980 presidium order captured these requirements well. First, writers must "represent delegations of the association." Second, study and reading trips required prior invitations "that are not opposed to the political principles of associational work." Lastly, the presidium made allowances for "extraordinary personal emergencies and cases of hardship (only in exception)." Each application was then to clarify how the trip would be financed. Finally, "they to report to the appropriate district steering committee, comment correspondingly on their knowledge and experiences, and refer application and statement to the secretariat."¹⁰² All travel activities were to be coordinated through the union and one's experiences abroad were to be reported to the organization as well.

¹⁰¹ Gerhard Henniger, for instance, requested to Ursula Ragwitz in February 1977 that the Central Committee's Cultural Department approve Eberhard Scheibner as the SV's secretary for international relations who "represents in his work the policies of our party." Gerhard Henniger to Ursula Ragwitz, 28 February 1977, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/64. The request was approved several days later and passed on to the Writers Union's steering committee. Ursula Ragwitz to Gerhard Henniger, 4 March 1977, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/64.

¹⁰² Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 16 April 1980, SV 603, 50.

Two criteria were especially important for travel applications: political reliability and the international prestige of the writer or the event they were attending. The centrality of a reliable political disposition was explicitly stated in May 1976 when the presidium discussed a letter from author Karl-Heinz Jakobs complaining about the rejection of colleague Joachim Walther's travel request to the West. In response, the presidium decided that "in the future, authors who beyond readings from their works abroad give speeches and lectures about East German literature are asked to inform the foreign department [of the Writers Union] before the beginning of their trip about the conception of their lecture."¹⁰³ In other words, writers needed prior approval of the content of their public statements before venturing abroad.

Along the same lines, in July 1981 the International Relations Department was instructed by the presidium to thenceforth present at every meeting an overview of "which association authors have gone, through endorsement of the association, in non-socialist countries." While travel in the West had always been a complex endeavor,¹⁰⁴ one might well wonder what prompted the sudden need for such closer monitoring. Part of the issue was no doubt the fragile state the Writers Union found itself in after the repressive period between 1976 and 1979. Still, part of the answer could be found in a recent trip to West Berlin by Volker Braun. Braun had apparently applied for and received permission from the Writers Union to undertake such a trip, but when he got to the other side of the divided city, he promptly scrapped his stated plans and took part in

¹⁰³ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 27 May 1976, SV 402, vol. 2, 120-21.

¹⁰⁴ For the expectations of SV members in the West during the 1960s, see Pamperrien, 21.

an event that had not been pre-approved by the SV. At the presidium meeting, Kant agreed to inform Braun “that such behavior is frowned upon by the presidium and challenge him to conduct himself correctly in the future.”¹⁰⁵

Peter Abraham’s travel request in August 1988 was explicitly tied to a political mission. Abraham, a steering committee member (a fact which Henniger’s directive was sure to note), wished to participate in the convention of the Friedrich-Bödecker-Kreis e.V. (an organization dedicated to organizing readings of children’s and youth literature, especially in schools)¹⁰⁶ entitled “Meeting Place Hannover 1988” and to give readings in West Germany. Henniger clarified that “at all talks Peter Abraham will represent the political-ideological and cultural-political positions of the GDR and rebuff possible attempts to interpret the literature of the GDR as ‘all-German.’” Abraham was thus instructed to maintain East German literature – and by extension the East German state – as distinct from its West German counterpart. After his upcoming trip, Henniger added, “a report is to be submitted to the secretariat of the Writers Union of the GDR.” Henniger also ended the request by noting that Abraham would pay for the travel costs and those inviting him would cover the costs of his stay in the West.¹⁰⁷ The deputizing of travelers to the West as representatives of the “political-ideological and cultural-political positions of the GDR” and defenders against “possible attempts to interpret the literature of the GDR as ‘all-German’” appeared in nearly all of the travel directives issued by

¹⁰⁵ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 8 July 1981, SV 604, 65-66.

¹⁰⁶ The website of the Friedrich-Bödecker-Kreis can be found at <http://www.boedecker-kreis.de/>.

¹⁰⁷ Gerhard Henniger, Travel Directive for Peter Abraham, 4 August 1988, SV 826, 1.

Henniger in 1987-88, underscoring the urgency and importance of these trips as part of the GDR's quest for international legitimacy.¹⁰⁸

Travel abroad, especially for internationally-recognized authors, was also a source of prestige and legitimacy for the GDR and for the East German literary culture, meaning that public relations considerations played a role in some travel decisions. For example, in June 1988, for instance, Henniger indicated his concern about bad press in a letter to Kurt Hager. Dramatist and steering committee member Uwe Saeger, winner of the very prestigious Ingeborg-Bachmann literary prize in 1987, had been invited with his wife for a trip to Austria in June 1988 to stay in the district of Austria which awarded the prize. The invitation had come from a local radio station who had agreed to pay for the trip, but given that the trip was scheduled to take place less than a fortnight from when Henniger sent his request, there would be insufficient time to go through the normal travel application process. "Because of the short notice," Henniger therefore requested, "we would like to request an exception," particularly so as "to give certain western media no possibility of a campaign against us."¹⁰⁹ The main motivation in making this exception, at least in the language Henniger communicated to Hager, was to avoid negative media coverage in the West, especially centered on a writer who was acclaimed in the West.

Likewise, important members of the Writers Union were often able to get travel requests approved quickly. In April 1973, for instance, Peter Heldt, then leader of the SED Central Committee's Cultural Department, wrote to Kurt Hager with the travel

¹⁰⁸ For Henniger's travel directives in 1987-88, see SV 826.

¹⁰⁹ Gerhard Henniger to Kurt Hager, 16 June 1988, Berlin, SV 855, 12. Saeger was also approved a year later for a multi-exit visa to West Germany (February 24 – December 31) to participate in the premiere of one of his plays, give readings, and conduct research for an upcoming book project. See Abteilung Internationale Beziehungen, "Vorlage für Sekretariat," 13 January 1988, Berlin, SV 508, vol. 1, 107.

requests of several writers. Wolfgang Joho, the former editor-in-chief of NDL, wanted to travel in late May 1973 to Karlsruhe for a “private visit.”¹¹⁰ It helped a great deal to know someone high up in the Writers Union hierarchy, as was the case when Prof. Dr. Johann-Lorenz Schmidt made an entry visa request to the SV’s Department of International Relations for his son (who lived in Paris) in November 1977. His wife was ill and wished to see him as soon as possible.¹¹¹ In short order the association swung into action, sending a memo days later indicating the need for the visa and receiving word on 6 December that the visas had been issued, four days before the visitors were to arrive.¹¹² Such a rapid turnaround was extraordinary in East Germany, but the request was surely aided by the fact that Prof. Schmidt’s wife was Netty Radványi, better known by her nom-de-plum, Anna Seghers, then president of the Writers Union.

Rejections of travel applications, ostensibly for political reasons, unsurprisingly often provoked angry responses on the behalf of the author who submitted the application. Some SV members expressed anger that the same authors were allowed to travel abroad each time an invitation came. Such complaints were voiced by members of Berlin’s district SV organization in February 1973. At that meeting, various writers were critical of the distribution of travel privileges, calling the union’s practices “undemocratic since the same circle always travels.”¹¹³ Manfred Jendryschik, a Halle-based author of

¹¹⁰ Dr. Peter Heldt to Kurt Hager, 17 April 1973, BArch DY 30/IV B 2/9.06/63.

¹¹¹ Prof. Dr. Johann-Lorenz Schmidt to Gisela Klauschke (Foreign Department), 1977, SV 635, vol. 2, 85.

¹¹² Gisela Klauschke, “Notiz für die Auslandsabteilung,” 29 November 1977, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 2, 84.

¹¹³ SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin, “Information über Stimmungen und Probleme im Berliner Schriftstellerverband,” 28 February 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/78.

short stories and poems, also expressed such a thought when in April 1985 the SV's presidium held their monthly meeting as a joint session with writers from his district. As part of a larger criticism about the need for the Writers Union to involve a wider cross-section of the East German literary profession in its leadership (he described the steering committee as a "representative dignitaries' lodge"), he concluded, "one should have more confidence in several authors."¹¹⁴

Often the rejection of a visa stemmed from political reasons, as Stefan Heym discovered in 1977. Already encountering trouble with the SED as early as the 1950s, Heym was no stranger to political pressure but, gadfly that he was, he nonetheless expressed outrage when in November of that year the Writers Union informed him that his application for a multi-exit visa to West Germany would have to be changed to a one-time exist visa. According to an official SV memo on a meeting with Heym, the author "regarded this procedure as discrimination of his person and his literary project" (an edited anthology of thirty East German authors through a Munich publisher). Making matters worse, he "alleged that other colleagues (he named [Günter] Kunert and [Ulrich] Plenzdorf) would have obtained multiple exit visas without difficulties." Heym also demanded that the Writes Union "emphatically support his important request with all responsible offices."¹¹⁵ Despite the unlikelihood of his request being fulfilled, Heym – if only to hold the Writers Union accountable to its stated duties for its members – still asked the SV for assistance in achieving the visa he desired.

¹¹⁴ "Hans-Jürgen Steinmann zur Präsidiumssitzung in Halle," April 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 116-17.

¹¹⁵ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Abt. Internationale Beziehungen, "Notiz über ein Gespräch mit Stefan Heym am 25. November 1977," SV 635, vol. 1, 99.

Author Matthias Werner Kruse expressed similar frustration in a 1979 letter to Henniger. Alleging that the Writers Union was opening his mail, he angrily chastised such practices before turning to the issue of travel. He exclaimed, “[W]e simple members are for several coworkers of the association’s apparatus simply necessary evils and only of use if it involves any votes, etc.” He then described how in 1969 he had received the SV’s support in attaining a study trip to the USSR but since then “ten years elapsed [and] I have never again been offered something from you.” Twice applications to travel to the West (“of a completely harmless nature”) were rejected without explanation while other colleagues were able to travel, “to my surprise,” virtually anywhere they wanted.¹¹⁶ From the accusations leveled by the letter, Kruse seemed aware that he was considered politically suspect in the eyes of the SV authorities though it is unclear if he had any idea why.¹¹⁷ Regardless, such suspicions, in his eyes, were keeping him from traveling abroad like many of his fellow writers.

Editor Paul Günther Krohn took his rejection for a travel visa to West Germany in 1979 as a personal insult. Not only was the denial “unexpected” and the cause of professional problems, it had been already been approved by his employer. More egregiously, Krohn’s 78-year-old mother lived in West Berlin who he had been planning on visiting for his upcoming 50th birthday. Given that this was the first such application

¹¹⁶ Matthias Werner Kruse to Gerhard Henniger, 9 November 1979, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 1, 110.

¹¹⁷ Kruse’s history of run-ins with the SED might help explain the decision. In February 1971, for example, he had requested the West Berlin Academy of the Arts send him books by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, prompting the local SED leadership to articulate that he had “acted false politically” and that the act “can be considered as a political statement.” See Betriebsparteiorganisation Deutscher Schriftstellerverband Bezirksverband Berlin, “Protokoll der Parteileitungssitzung vom 1.2.71,” LAB C Rep. 904-097, Nr. 25. Furthermore, in 1977 (two years before his rejected travel application) had abstained from voting on the expulsion of Günter Kunert from the SED, one of only twelve authors (of 120) at the SED party organization of the Berlin Writers Union not to vote for the expulsion. See Helmut Müller, “Information über die Mitgliederversammlung der Parteiorganisation des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes am 20. Januar 1977,” 21 January 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/7497.

for which he applied, he could only conclude that the reason for the rejection was political: “I want to ascribe the question to your political core,” he observed, “and must interpret it as a lack of information and trust.” This dearth of trust cut deeply, as “I have been politically engaged and organized since 1945, winner of state awards, and I have as a Leninist attested in deed and word to my devotedness to the concern of the working class and its party in good and less good times, as well as in highly complicated situations in this country.” Krohn then voiced his plea to have the decision reversed and acknowledged their efforts and “heavy responsibility in the clarification of such a question.” Still, he felt compelled to close the letter by repeating his reaction to the original decision - “astonishment, regret, and surprise.”¹¹⁸ By Krohn’s calculations, as a longtime, loyal Communist, he could only attribute the decision to ignorance and mistrust, reasons he found cutting. The real reasons for the rejection remained unclear, but perhaps the fact that Krohn had only recently joined the Writers Union (his application was approved in December 1977), might have translated to less clout in influencing the organization’s power over travel rights.¹¹⁹

Another angry letter came from the pen of author Axel Schulze in April 1980 when he was informed his travel application to visit the United States for a literature symposium had been rejected. The subject of the symposium was East German literature, and Schulze was perplexed that his trip was rejected given that “it does not involve an anti-communist matter or one directed against the interests of the GDR.” He

¹¹⁸ Paul Günther Krohn to the Writers Union of the GDR Secretariat, Gerhard Henniger, 18 February 1979, Berlin, SV 635, vol. 1, 143.

¹¹⁹ Gerhard Henniger to all members of the Steering Committee of the Writers Union of the GDR,” 28 December 1977, “Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 19. Dezember 1977,” SV 600, 6, 10.

had received no formal rejection letter, moreover, generating “bitterness in me.” “I regard it,” he declared, “as a giant hindrance on my personal and literary development.” The reasons for prohibiting the travel were even more outrageous, he thought, as it was explained to him that the SED’s American counterpart had requested that no GDR writer was sent to the symposium because of the “Trotskyite elements” that were said to be present there. Now, Schulze argued, the GDR had lost an opportunity to impress upon American Germanisten a more realistic view of East German literature and for GDR authors “to broaden their horizon.” He closed with a fulmination:

I must therefore turn to you in order to protest against this method and against this decision. It stands in contradiction to the always verbosely recited tolerance and the readiness to talk with writers. And it stands in contradiction to your own publicly-declared intentions.¹²⁰

Schulze’s ego had been bruised by the rejection and he utilized the opportunity to chastise what he deemed a ridiculous policy regarding American scholars of German literature. As an East German writer, he knew how to present the GDR in a positive light, and by rejecting his travel application, the union not only denied him a chance to act on this knowledge, but it made a mockery of the professed toleration and openness of the organization vis-à-vis its members.

Political reliability as a precondition for travel also came through in 1983 when Bernd Wagner, an author who had been highly critical of the Biermann expatriation, appealed to Hermann Kant for assistance. Turning to Kant “in your function as president of the Writers Union,” he explained that “the opinion and support of the association lies not just with my personal interest.” He explained that he had been previously invited to attend a West Berlin conference (held the previous May), but had not received permission

¹²⁰ Axel Schulze to Hermann Kant, 11 April 1980, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 2, 56-57.

to attend despite his stated desire to use the trip to conduct research for an upcoming essay collection. A second application for a shorter visa was approved by the Writers Union, but shortly thereafter a Stasi agent had appeared unexpectedly at his home who informed him “that the permission for my trip depended on the outcome of the conversation.” The agent then demanded that Wagner compile a report of statements made at the meeting and information about his acquaintances in the GDR. The author at first demurred only to have the Stasi agent return the following week to renew his demands. Finally, on June 7 Wagner received an official communication from the Writers Union that his trip had not been approved and the purpose of his current letter was to receive clarification about the decision. In Wagner’s estimation:

It appears to me therefore necessary [to receive]: a written answer in which the association states its position on this proceeding, whether and how far it is ready to protect its members from infringements of this kind, to what extent it wants to let travel practice be defined by a third party, and in particular how it will behave in the future in my concern.¹²¹

Wagner’s account leaves no doubt as to the coordination of travel policy between the Schriftstellerverband and the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*. The author’s frustration in the face of the situation permeated his letter and one senses a half-heartedness in his demand for a resolution, as if he were merely making known to Henniger that he knew about the Stasi’s influence over the union even though he was completely at the mercy of both organizations. By relating all of this to Henniger, though, he could also have hoped to have the Stasi called off, since the secrecy of the mission would be destroyed. Either way, Wagner was exerting some degree of limited agency in a difficult situation.

¹²¹ Bernd Wagner to Gerhard Henniger, 17 June 1983, Berlin, SV 548, vol. 2, 50-51. Wagner eventually left the GDR in 1985 permanently which prompted the presidium to cancel his membership. See Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 16 December 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 7.

Trips to the West were a carefully guarded privilege of the Writers Union, and given the highly politicized nature of such trips, angry responses were often the result of rejected applications. Many writers viewed rejection as a negative assessment of their political reliability and took these decisions personally. Still, other members learned how to frame their applications so as to maximize their chances for success, especially by drawing on personal connections and also by appealing to the positive or negative political consequences of their going or not going. All of this further underscores the fact that above all else political reliability was the main criterion for enabling travel abroad, something that writers and the Writers Union knew well.

Social Recognition

It is evident that some members seemed very grateful for even small, intangible things they received from the Writers Union, especially in the form of recognition. By stroking its members' egos or paying them respect, the SV helped fortify one of the primary attractions of being a public intellectual in a closed society: the notion that one's words and deeds genuinely mattered. This fact, coupled with the unusually high value placed on literature by average East German citizens who looked to books as a source of authenticity in a bankrupt dictatorship, meant that writers often encountered feedback from both above and below telling them that they were important members of society.¹²²

Acknowledgement of one's birthday in a note signed by First Secretary Gerhard Henniger, for example, was clearly appreciated by numerous writers as evidenced by the large number who wrote "thank you" notes in return. Such birthday cards were usually

¹²² For a discussion of the role of literature in East Germany, see the introduction.

simple in content; typical was the card sent to Jurek Becker for his fortieth birthday in 1976, which read: “Dear Jurek Becker! Good health, creative energy, and personal wellbeing – this is what I wish for you on your birthday today and naturally also joy and new successes for your work in the coming year.”¹²³ The “thank you” cards sent to the SV in such situations were often likewise brief and polite, yet occasionally members were more effusive. Literary scholar and prose-writer Dr. Jutta Hecker, for instance, seemed appreciative in 1979 when she thanked Henniger for wishing her a happy 75th birthday: “It was for me a joy that the colleagues in Berlin also remembered the day,” just like those in the town in which she lived.¹²⁴ Slavicist and translator Dr. Günther Jarosch likewise thanked Henniger for wishing him a happy 64th birthday. “I was delighted about [the birthday greeting],” he recounted.¹²⁵ These various responses indicate how much the simple act of remembering a birthday meant to those who received the greeting.

Children’s author Dorothea Renate Budnick echoed these sentiments, expressing that even though she received it a little late, the card was special. She explained, “I know, I know, such writings are routine things, the secretary lays the pre-printed letter before you on the table and you give your signature below, still...I feel closely bound to Berlin and am therefore touched when someone there remembers me.”¹²⁶ The author felt glad to be thought of in Berlin and valued the greeting. However, one can observe more going on in Budnick’s letter than just gratitude. By pointedly stating that she knew Henniger had nothing to do with writing the card, that signing it was a mere

¹²³ Gerhard Henniger to Jurek Becker, 30 September 1976, Berlin, JBA 2589.

¹²⁴ Dr. Jutta Hecker to Gerhard Henniger, 26 October 1979, Weimar, SV 635, vol. 1, 50.

¹²⁵ Dr. Günther Jarosch to Gerhard Henniger, 4 June 1978, Bad Sulza, SV 635, vol. 1, 106.

¹²⁶ Dorothea Renate Budnick to Gerhard Henniger, 27 May 1978, Welzow, SV 635, vol. 1, 23.

administrative chore for him, she was also highlighting the hollowness of the act. Perhaps both feelings co-mingled: she may have felt glad to have received any birthday wish from Berlin but also wished to express that she knew the entire matter was superficial. Either way, by thanking Henniger in this manner she was in some ways gaming the system (expressing thanks to a patron) while also letting him know, perhaps cynically, that she was aware that the whole endeavor was a game.

Many authors also seemed grateful for having the Writers Union congratulate them on winning prizes or other honors. Author Egbert Freyer, for instance, wrote in 1987 to Hermann Kant, president of the SV since 1978, to express his thanks for the Writers Union recognizing his winning the *Theodor-Körner-Preis* (an award given to East German writers focusing on the military).¹²⁷ Prose-writer Hans-Jürgen Steinmann likewise thanked Henniger for congratulating him on winning the *Vaterländische-Verdienstorden* (Patriotic Order of Merit) in bronze, an award given for service to the state.¹²⁸ Peter Mahling also took time to thank the Writers Union for acknowledging his winning the *Cisinski-Preis* in 1978 given by the Ministry of Culture as a literary prize for Sorbian authors.¹²⁹ Children's book author Brigitte Birnbaum thanked both Kant and Henniger in 1979 for their congratulations on an award she had received.¹³⁰ By acknowledging the reception of awards and honors, the Writers Union at the very least seems to have earned the goodwill of some members.

¹²⁷ Egbert Freyer to Hermann Kant, 18 February 1987, SV 548, vol. 2, 57.

¹²⁸ Hans-Jürgen Steinmann to Gerhard Henniger, 6 May 1978, SV 635, vol. 2, 111.

¹²⁹ Peter Mahling to Herman Kant and Gerhard Henniger, 27 November 1978, Bautzen, SV 658, vol. 2, 3.

¹³⁰ Brigitte Birnbaum to Hermann Kant and Gerhard Henniger, May 1979, Schwerin, SV 635, vol. 1, 21.

Yet a deeper exploration reveals that many authors had good reason to thank the Writers Union for receiving state or literary honors because the Schriftstellerverband played a role in nominating individuals for many awards, awards which often came with monetary stipends of several thousand East German marks. Understanding how the specific persons came to be nominated requires further research, although the presidium usually made the final decision as to who the organization would nominate for various awards and prizes. For example, the presidium in February 1985 discussed nominations for the *Nationalpreis der DDR* (National Prize of the GDR, a high state honor given annually for scientific and artistic achievement), though no specific details were recorded in the meeting report, nor were resolutions reached.¹³¹ An April 1985 SV directive offered further clues: in the monthly presidium meeting, it announced that “proposals of the association for state awards (exception members of the presidium) are to be submitted to the presidium and are to be determined in the presidium.”¹³²

The Schriftstellerverband submitted formal nominations to prize-giving commissions virtually every year, such as the *Theodor-Körner-Preis* committee. In 1979 the Writers Union nominated Wolfgang Held for the award, offering a two-page justification for their choice. The nomination began, “The author has, with his literary works, influenced the ensemble of our socialist contemporary literature in considerable measure.” It then recounted his notable works “of the most diverse genres” and his dedication to his readership. His literary work, the nomination continued, “involves for the author the problems which arise from the coexistence of humans among these societal

¹³¹ Hermann Kant had won the honor himself in 1983. Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 February 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 133.

¹³² Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 9-10 April 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 111.

conditions,” especially in terms of “moralistic positions.” More to the point of the award, the nomination noted that in his recent works, Held explored the “societal area of socialist national defense.” It closed by asserting, that “the latent existing struggling of author [...] to bring [national defense] in line with the societal demands of our socialist society imparts a special educational value upon the works of Wolfgang Held.”¹³³ The primary justification offered in this nomination was the societal value of Held’s literature, its ability to advance the socialist cause and appeal to readers.

During the 1980s the Writers Union had a good track record of its nominees winning the awards for which they were proposed, though they were not universally successful. In January 1981 the presidium made nominations for the *Nationalpreis der DDR*, suggesting Benno Pludra and Hanns Cibulka with the former eventually receiving the prize.¹³⁴ In late 1981 the presidium nominated children’s book author Hannes Hüttner for the *Alex-Wedding-Preis* given by the East German Academy of the Arts as literary award for children’s literature, which he in fact received in 1982.¹³⁵ In December 1983 the presidium nominated Fritz Rudolf Fries for the *Lion-Feuchtwanger-Preis* given as a literary prize for historical fiction, awarded by the *Akademie der Künste*. It also nominated Lilo Hardel for the *Alex-Wedding-Preis*. The Writers Union’s influence was inconsistent in these honors, though, as the 1984 *Feuchtwanger-Preis* went to the historical novelist Kurt David. Nevertheless, the 1984 *Wedding-Preis* was indeed

¹³³ Theodor-Körner-Preis Nomination for Wolfgang Held, 28 November 1978, SV 810, 3.

¹³⁴ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 10 January 1981, SV 604, 128.

¹³⁵ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 19 December 1981, SV 604, 2.

awarded to Hardel.¹³⁶ In 1985 the presidium made similar nominations for major awards: dramatist and children's book author Albert Wendt for the *Lessing-Preis* (given by the Ministry of Culture for achievement in stage literature), author Eva Lippold for the aforementioned *Lion-Feuchtwanger-Preis*, poet Angela Krauß for the *Hans-Marchwitza-Preis* (given by the Academy of the Arts), multi-genre author Gunter Preuß for the aforementioned *Alex-Wedding-Preis*, and Egbert Freyer for the *Theodor-Körner Preis*.¹³⁷ Here, the SV's record was even better: Wendt, Kraus, Preuß, and Freyer all won the awards for which they had been nominated. Also in 1985 the presidium approved a proposal to award celebrated author and former resistance fighter Elfriede Brüning the Patriotic Order of Merit in Gold and the same award in silver to author and Vorstand member Martin Viertel, both of whom did in fact receive the honor.¹³⁸ Thus while not having absolute influence over these prizes and honors, the Writers Union's nomination often carried weight, particularly for those awards given by its fellow cultural organization, the Academy of the Arts.

The Writers Union also gave out its own *Ehrenmedaille* or Medal of Honor, often to foreign writers, GDR political figures, or important members of the organization, given for "outstanding achievements in the propagation of socialist literature in the GDR."¹³⁹ For instance, in 1981 it decided to it would go to Erich Honecker and Kurt

¹³⁶ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 7 December 1983, SV 511, vol. 1, 13. For the complete list of winners of each award, see the Akademie der Künste's website, <http://www.adk.de/de/akademie/preise-stiftungen/>.

¹³⁷ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 20 September 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 38.

¹³⁸ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 15 May 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 90.

¹³⁹ "Vorstand des Schriftstellerverbandes wertet X. Parteitag des SED aus," 27 May 1981, SV 510, vol. 1, 168.

Hager before the upcoming 10th SED Party Congress “in appreciation of the cultural policies of the Party in the promotion of socialist literature.”¹⁴⁰ Later that same year the presidium members awarded the medal to author Wieland Herzfelde, Luise Koepp (editor of Radio GDR), Heinz Gerlach (leader of the district office in Rostock of the Peoples Bookseller), and Jurij Brezan (for his 65th birthday).¹⁴¹ Later that year they awarded the Medal of Honor to the steering committee member, author, and editor (as well as Stasi informant) Peter Edel.¹⁴² In November of the same year it opted to also present the honor to former NDL-editor Wolfgang Joho.¹⁴³

Acknowledging life achievements found its counterpart in honoring one’s memory as an added perk of Writers Union membership, something that must have brought comfort to members fearing their work and legacy might be forgotten. The Writers Union’s honoring the life of a deceased member, of course, also served a vital propaganda function that tied each author to a larger tradition of East German literature (as distinct from West Germany), subsuming the legacy of the author to the promotion of the SED’s state and ideological agenda. Moreover, ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of deceased members’ births proved an important opportunity for the Writers Union not only to engage with other societal organizations such as the Academy of the Arts, but it enabled them to incorporate younger authors in official ceremonies, thus

¹⁴⁰ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 18 February 1981, 109.

¹⁴¹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 18 March 1981, SV 604, 94; “Vorstand des Schriftstellerverbandes wertet X. Parteitag des SED aus,” 169.

¹⁴² Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 8 July 1981, SV 604, 64. For Edel’s activities as an IM, see Joachim Walther, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur: Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Ch.Links Verlag, 1996), 580-81.

¹⁴³ Gerhard Henniger, Memo, 27. November 1981, SV 510, vol. 1, 142.

helping to socialize them into an East German literary culture to which they would hopefully faithfully contribute and feel bound to in ever-increasing ways.

In 1970 and 1980 the Writers Union helped honor the 80th and 90th birthdays, respectively, of Hans Marchwitza (1890-1965), a novelist and reportage-writer who had chosen communism in 1919. He had used his literary talents since then to promote the Marxist cause while also serving as a co-founder of the East German Academy of the Arts. In preparation for the 25 June 1970 ceremony to honor Marchwitza, the author's widow Hilde requested a representative from various organizations be present: the Potsdam district council, the Academy of the Arts, German Television, Aufbau Verlag, and the Writers Union. At the commemorative event, a "symphonic portrait" of the man was to be offered as accompaniment to a reading of his texts. Moreover, all "brigades, schools, etc. that carry the name Hans Marchwitza" were invited. The main preparation was to be undertaken by the Potsdam district council but the invitations were to be signed by the president of the Academy of the Arts, and Anna Seghers, the SV's president. At the event dignitaries were to speak, and, so the Writers Union report on the preparatory meeting noted, "it is to be considered to win over a younger writer for [the event] that Hans Marchwitza personally stewarded." The ceremony would be held at the "Johannes R. Becher" Club of Creative Artists and would be hosted jointly by the Academy of the Arts, the Cultural League, and the Writers Union.¹⁴⁴ Even more specifically, the Writers Union was given chief responsibility for the wreath-laying ceremony to accompany the

¹⁴⁴ Literaturabteilung, "Ehrungen und Veranstaltungen anlässlich des 80. Geburtstages Hans Marchwitzas am 25. Juni 1979," 12 February 1970, SV 410, 4-5.

event as well as joint responsibility with the Kulturbund for organization the readings both at the central event and at local events of similar content.¹⁴⁵

The planning of the 1980 commemorative event for Marchwitza's 90th birthday proceeded in a similar fashion, drawing the Writers Union into a larger web of governmental agencies. Ursula Ragwitz, for instance, requested information from Henniger on behalf of the SED's Cultural Department so as to properly honor Marchwitza and "to put a broader emphasis on our continuous work for the development and dissemination of socialist art traditions." To this end, the SED requested a joint effort between the SV, KB, and AdK "with the goal to guarantee a sensible addendum to the contributions and to implement, as far as possible, a worthy joint event for the remembrance of the writer."¹⁴⁶ In addition to organizing writers to participate in the event, the Schriftstellerverband was to help contribute to funding the commemoration as well.¹⁴⁷ In any event, the SED saw the celebration from a cultural-political propaganda perspective and enlisted the Writers Union in framing the event as such.

On occasion even non-members wrote to the Schriftstellerverband soliciting the acknowledgment that associational members enjoyed. Erna Fritzka, for example, wrote to Hermann Kant in March 1988 about her lifelong (she was 77 at the time) hobby of writing poems and lyrics. "I find that such 'small' authors," she asserted, "who over the

¹⁴⁵ Akademie der Künste, "Kurzprotokoll über die beratung zur Vorbereitung der Ehrungen zum 80. Geburtstag Hans Marchwitzas am 25. Juni 1970," 23 March 1970, SV 410, 7.

¹⁴⁶ Ursula Ragwitz to Gerhard Henniger, 27 March 1980, Berlin, SV 410, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Literaturabteilung, "90. Geburtstag Hans Marchwitza (Brief v. U.Ragwitz zwecks Abstimmung AdK, Kulturbund, SV)," 10 April 1980, Berlin, SV 410, 2.

years publish their works in poetry collections etc. should find recognition as well.”¹⁴⁸

As Mrs. Fritzka’s letter underscores, a valued benefit offered by the Writers Union was a simple recognition of one’s birthday or other accomplishments, something that many writers clearly appreciated. By building up the reputation or stroking the egos of members through awards, birthday wishes, or even commemorating their legacy, the leaders of the Schriftstellerverband enhanced the attractiveness of being a public intellectual in East Germany.

Youth Development Work

The Writers Union’s leaders viewed youth development work as an integral function of their organization. Incorporating younger authors into the organization’s activities served as a way of socializing young authors into the East German cultural milieu, encouraging the careers of budding literary professionals, and, perhaps most importantly, introducing them into an interest group that would hopefully bind them to the SED closely or at least enhance the likelihood that they would toe the Party line. Until 1974 these younger authors were constituted as the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren* (AJA, Working Group of Young Authors) and after 1974 as candidates of the organization, after which they could become full members. At all of these points, including the early years of full membership, younger colleagues were shepherded by the Vorstand’s *Nachwuchskommission* (Youth Development Commission) and supported administratively through the secretariat’s *Nachwuchsabteilung* (Youth Development Department). The welfare and integration of young colleagues into the Writers Union’s

¹⁴⁸ Erna Fritzka to Hermann Kant, Eberswalde-Finow, 7 March 1988, SV 548, vol. 2, 11.

ranks remained a chief concern of the organization throughout its existence.

Nevertheless, the constant refrain of needing to get younger writers more involved in the organization signifies both a general anxiety about passing on the mission of East German literature to the younger generation as well as a general failure to satisfy fully the union's stated objectives of cultivating a self-image of being friendly to young authors.

Before 1974, younger authors not yet qualified for full membership were often placed in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren*. The AJA actually predated the Writers Union as it was first founded in 1947 in Thuringia (with Walter Victor playing a leading role). In Victor's estimation, "In the AJA candidates are, so-to-speak, prepared for the career, while everything teachable should be imparted."¹⁴⁹ According to the SV's statute, membership in the AJA was designed for "Authors whose literary activity has recognized that they will fulfill the prerequisites for membership in the association in the foreseeable future." Membership in the AJA would last typically five years at the most, at which time "membership will be ended through acceptance into the association or through cancellation."¹⁵⁰ Once a member of the AJA, one work with and receive guidance from more established authors, attend monthly meetings, present one's work for feedback and discussion, and even might get the opportunity to work at the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute.¹⁵¹ After several years as an AJA member, the publication of

¹⁴⁹ He also bemoaned the fact that by the 1960s, "all possible young overachievers aspire to skip this development" while "a whole group of young 'lyricists' were made famous who lacked all of the prerequisites that the AJA should have imparted to them." Walter Victor to Gerhard Henniger, 23 February 1966, Weimar, SV 205, 40.

¹⁵⁰ "Vorschläge für Änderungen des Verbandsstatutes," 1973, SV 706, 116.

¹⁵¹ Founded in 1955 by the East German government and partnered with the *Schriftstellerverband*, the institute allowed aspiring writers an opportunity to study literature and take creative writing classes. The institute was renamed the *Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig* (German Literature Institute of Leipzig) after

one or more works, and the procuring of two recommenders, one could apply to become a full member of the Writers Union.¹⁵²

In 1974 the Writers Union fundamentally restructured its system of youth development. Following from demands at the Seventh Writers Congress (held in late 1973) to better support younger writers as well as the pronouncements of the Eighth SED Party Congress (in June 1971) to give “careful support to young artistic talent as an important prerequisite for the development of socialist art,” SV leaders opted to restructure their youth support program.¹⁵³ The main problem, as stated by the Writers Union, seemed to be a lack of effectiveness; in November 1973, for instance, the SED took note that only 25% of the AJA members ever became full members of the Writers Union.¹⁵⁴ Faced with this problem, the Youth Commission proposed dissolving the AJA, replacing it with a candidature system.

Debates on this restructuring of the union’s youth program within the presidium in March 1974 revealed a further reason for the AJA’s dissolution. At the meeting, Henniger fretted over the growing number of aspiring writers who opted not to join the union. Faced with these facts, the organization had to ask tough questions of itself: “How

reunification and is now administered by the University of Leipzig. See their website: <http://www.deutsches-literaturinstitut.de/>.

¹⁵² Screenplay author and later university professor Helga Schütz recounted her AJA experiences in an interview in 1991, enumerating these various aspects of membership. As an overall assessment of her time spent in the organization, she surmised, “That was by itself a really good thing. I liked that.” See Dinah Dodds, “‘Die Mauer stand bei mir im Garten’: Interview mit Helga Schütz,” in *Women in German Yearbook 7: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture*, ed. Jeanette Clausen and Sara Friedrichsmeyer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 137-50, and especially 142-43.

¹⁵³ “Beschluss über einige grundlegende Veränderungen in der Nachwuchsarbeit des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” 24 April 1974, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

¹⁵⁴ Abteilung Kultur (SED), “Information für das Zentralkomitees, Betr.: Einschätzung der Wahlversammlungen zu den Bezirksvorstaenden des Schriftstellerverbandes,” SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/3J/1789.

is the district association in the position to dedicate itself to young authors, and how do we ensure that district associations bring in young talent?" In other words, "What can the association offer?" The AJA, he asserted, was no longer providing those answers. Indeed, they were a "second association within the association." A new solution was needed to overcome this sense of separation so that "young authors feel bound to the district associations" and "district associations feel responsible for young authors." In the end, the presidium opted to submit the candidature solution to the Vorstand for final approval.¹⁵⁵ Henniger's statements revealed a genuine concern that the SV was losing relevance to the younger authors. The organization was losing its influence and it needed a way to reestablish the bond between the union and the younger generation.

In place of the AJA, a candidature period would be instated, overseen by the organization's steering committee. But what kind of support was the Writers Union prepared to offer its young wards? First, it was important to note that support from the Writers Union was predicated on political reliability. "The Writers Union," a 1974 report stated, "supports all young authors who apply their talent and their experiences for the socialist literature of the GDR." These authors would be welcome to participate in the district organizations of the SV, including monthly meetings and attending associational events. Indeed, the importance of utilizing the union's resources for these tasks meant that "for the support of younger authors all district and central opportunities can be utilized." Furthermore, chief among the SV's operating principles would be cooperation with publishers so as to create opportunities for junior members to have their works appear in print. In addition, regular Writers Union members were to take on mentoring

¹⁵⁵ "Präsidium am 21. März 1974," SV 598, 124-26.

roles – especially on a district and local level – vis-à-vis the younger authors as these “are the basis of close relationships of the different generations of writers.”¹⁵⁶

Beyond assistance in the writing process, the union pledged to help the next generation of writers improve their social standing. For further aid, the SV pledged the distribution of scholarships and support contracts, to be used for “the artistic formation of our socialist life, the formation of the working class and the proletarian internationalism.” Continuing educational opportunities were also to be provided by the central organization in the form of creative seminars, talks by scientists, courses on industrial developments, university classes which they could audit, and even language courses to prepare them for study trips abroad. The Writers Union also reserved the right to delegate certain younger writers to the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig, the “closest partner of the association in the support of young authors.” Study trips sponsored by the SV would also help in the “expansion of their worldview, the collection of experiences in our socialist reality” and could help bind young authors to the wider international socialist community. Finally, publicity work was yet another “essential component of the support work” and the Writers Union therefore touted events such as the “Days of Young Literature” (described below), discussions of manuscripts, and readings as key events by which to publicize the literature of younger authors.¹⁵⁷ In addition, the Nachwuchskommission pledged “individual supervision” as well as submitting proposals to NDL for the publication of manuscripts by candidates. The Schriftstellerverband was thus prepared to commit substantial resources toward the development of young talent,

¹⁵⁶ “Beschluss über einige grundlegende Veränderungen”; Nachwuchskommission, “Zur Vorbereitung der naechsten Praesidiumssitzung,” 1974, SV 598, 116-17.

¹⁵⁷ “Beschluss über einige grundlegende Veränderungen.”

and, as we will see, despite many shortcomings the union's commitment to its youngest members remained a constant throughout the ensuing decade and a half.

The Writers Union seemed especially preoccupied with generating publicity for its youngest members and candidates. In December 1972, for instance, the SV in partnership with the FDJ created the "*Tage der jungen Literatur*" (Days of Young Literature) where several younger writers could present their works to the public. Already in early 1974 Renate Drenkow, a bureaucrat in the Writers Union secretariat, could report, "For me the 'Days of Young Literature' events, which we have done together with the FDJ, the literature institute, and the council of the district of Leipzig for scarcely a year-and-a-half, were wholly surprising." At the inaugural event, twenty young writers were presented by older colleagues and their works were then discussed and critiqued in front of a "giant audience;" in fact, Drenkow continued, "I never considered it possible that in a giant hall – a really big hall that was packed – [the texts] would have been debated for hours without anyone having a line [of the text] in their hand, but rather the people spoke completely fresh and free, front and back, standing or sitting, and that filled me with joy."¹⁵⁸ The event was such a success that the SED Party Group within the Writers Union along with the association's presidium announced, in listing the Schriftstellerverband's top priorities after its seventh national congress (in 1973, it announced that the "Days of Young Literature" should become an annual).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ "Beratung des Zentralen Kommission Literatur gemeinsam mit dem Ministerium für Kultur, Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel, und den Schriftstellerverband der DDR über aktuelle Probleme der Arbeit mit der Liteartur in Auswertung des Schriftstellerkongresses am 24.1.1974 in Berlin," SAPMO-BArch DY27/4886, 60.

¹⁵⁹ "Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR," March 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

By the early 1980s the Writers Union was beginning to see some of the fruits of its labor on behalf of *Nachwuchsautoren*. The February 1981 presidium meeting saw members reviewing a report which “gave an overview of the development of candidature since 1974.” The report concluded that overall “candidature has proven itself.” However, in greater than half of the cases of expiring candidacy, no decision had yet been reached by the district steering committees, something Henniger was instructed to discuss with the chairs of each district branch at their next consultation session.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the presidium was able to conclude that “the strengthened focus on young authors called for at the [seventh] congress has been achieved.” Indeed, the presidium was happy to report that since 1974 many candidates had gone on to become full members of the organization. As for the consultations with the district steering committees, the presidium explained that “there was therefore in an array of district steering committees great efforts to clarify these things and also to understand as its central task, more than before, work with the youngest generation [and] discovering new young talent.”¹⁶¹ Seven years of candidacy had achieved many of the desired results, though continued efforts to integrate young authors into the organization were needed.

The leaders of the SV also sought to keep in direct contact with younger writers, dedicating presidium or steering committee meetings each year to the problems faced by up-and-coming authors. The steering committee of the Schriftstellerverband thus agreed in 1981 to host a meeting dedicated to discussion of literature by their younger colleagues. In a report given by Gerhard Henniger at the Vorstand meeting preceding the

¹⁶⁰ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 18 February 1981, SV 604, 109.

¹⁶¹ Vorstandssitzung, “Bericht der Präsidium an dem Vorstand, 27.5.1981,” SV 510, vol. 1, 172-73.

one on youth literature, the First Secretary informed the assembled writers, “We do not want to pat our young colleagues on the back, nor do we want to demand that in their literature they reflect our fundamental experiences.” Instead, they asked of the young writers only that “they do what is theirs to make our country as strong as possible.” There was, after all, an “essential difference” between young and old literature, while young authors “objectively find an entirely different access to the youth of the 80s, to their dreams and problems, to their feeling about the world, and to their criticism.” Henniger’s interest in the younger writers was becoming clearer: they could bridge the gap to the younger generation of East Germans, to those who needed to be convinced of the value of the socialist system into which they were born. These younger writers could “draw on their own experience,” but, the key questions then became “How do they utilize this fund for their stories? How do the young readers who they speak to feel? The answers were not readily apparent, thus necessitating discussion and, perhaps, co-optation, a sentiment implied by Henniger’s closing words on the subject: “To lead a dialogue about such problems with our young colleagues [...] already appears to me worth a meeting.”¹⁶² The fact that they, the senior leaders of the organization, would *lead* (*führen*) the discussion seems to have been taken for granted, incorporating youth into the organization on the terms of those already in power.

An examination of the Writers Union’s work plans in 1980s, approved by the Vorstand, offers a window into the most important priorities of the organization. At the May 1981 steering committee meeting, for example, the body approved a work plan for

¹⁶² Gerhard Henniger, “Entwurf für 2. Teil des Referates auf der Vorstandssitzung,” 27 May 1981, SV 510, vol. 1, 200-1.

the organization for 1981/1982 which focused on, among other things, working with aspiring authors. To this end, the plan envisioned colloquium for young authors to be held in Woltersdorf and Schildow and announced that the main theme of the May 1982 steering committee meeting would be “new literature of young authors – problems and tendencies.” November 1981 would see a literary competition among school pupils as well as members of the Ernst Thälmann Pioneer Organization (East Germany’s organization for school-age children). The SV’s individual commissions and active groups also planned a number of youth-related events. The active group on science-fiction literature, for instance, proposed a “talk about young science-fiction literature” for October 1981. The Youth Development Commission pledged to prepare the steering committee meeting on “new literature of young authors” and prepare the Days Young Literature event in September 1981 as well as organize a series of poetry seminars (jointly with the FDJ) in Schwerin along with and the aforementioned colloquia in Woltersdorf and Schildow (April, September 1982). The Commission for International Relations likewise committed itself to exploring “possibilities for study stays of young authors in Ethiopia, Angola, PR Yemen and Mozambique” in early 1982.¹⁶³

As another example, the organization’s work plan for June 1986-December 1987 also reflected a priority with youth. A steering committee meeting was designated for the theme of “balance sheet and new tasks of the association’s youth development work.” Central events planned included “supporting the FDJ poetry seminar in Schwerin” in August 1986 and 1987, while the presidium pledged to meet with young authors in June 1986 and 1987. The Youth Development Commission agreed to build a new active

¹⁶³ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Arbeitsplan 1981/82,” 27 May 1981, SV 510, vol. 1, 164-67.

group for “young authors” by December 1986 and to prepare the meetings between young authors and the steering committee and presidium, respectively. It also was tasked with preparing the “Days of Young Literature” in November 1986 in Potsdam and a reading of young authors in the “Club of Culture-Creating People” in Berlin (September 1986). Furthermore, it was to sponsor a candidate workshop for radio play authors and dramatists (November 1986), for songwriters (March 1987), lyrics (May 1987), and prose (September 1987). It also was to put together several more practical career forums, such as a meeting with delegates to the 11th SED Party Congress (June 1986), and a “forum” with Klaus Höpcke (December 1986), presumably to discuss publishing.¹⁶⁴

Likewise, the work plans for NDL are telling in terms of the publicly articulated priorities of the organization. In December 1981 the presidium approved a work plan for the coming year which listed, as “emphases of the editorial work,” “question of the young literary generation” as its top point of emphasis. Under this heading other issues the magazine pledged to focus on included “presenting characteristic texts of young authors,” “writing information and standpoints of young writers,” “particular acknowledgement of young authors in the review section,” and “winning over of well-known writers for presenting younger authors (debut).”¹⁶⁵ In January 1985 the presidium approved NDL’s work plan for that year. The thematic priorities listed included “the strengthened concentration on efforts of younger authors in their political as well as aesthetic-creating problems.”¹⁶⁶ The NDL plan for 1987, approved in November 1986, listed, among other

¹⁶⁴ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Arbeitsplan Juni 1986 – Ende 1987,” 18 June 1986, SV 510, vol. 2, 39-42.

¹⁶⁵ “Neue Deutsche Literatur – 1982,” SV 604, 10.

¹⁶⁶ “Die Neue deutsche Literatur 1985,” SV 511, vol. 3, 151.

“primary ideological aspects of the editorial work,” “the detection of young talent who feel bound to our society and to the principles of realistic forms and in the foreseeable future will take the place of established and renowned authors of our country.”¹⁶⁷

Despite the importance of the youth issue to the organization, by the time preparation had begun for the Ninth Writers Congress (the second since the 1973 decision to re-conceptualize the organization’s youth development policies), many members felt that much more work was required to integrate the *Nachwuchsgeneration* into the union. In May 1982, for instance, the organizations leaders began conceptualizing their ninth national congress to be held in one year. One of the concerns expressed at the meeting was to get younger authors more involved in the leadership of the organization, proposing that the Youth Development Commission should make suggestions for the SV’s central steering committee (to be confirmed at the congress). To this end, “proposals should be submitted that guarantee that in strong measure suitable younger associational members are proposed for candidature to the new steering committee.” It was also decided that part of the congress would be spent in smaller work groups organized around a variety of themes with three receiving specific mention: “literature and peace,” “literature and youth,” and “literature and readers.”¹⁶⁸

An additional reason for this strong emphasis on incorporating younger writers into the higher echelons of the Writers Union’s hierarchy came from the SED’s Cultural Division. In a January 1983 consultation with the SED secretaries of the SV’s district

¹⁶⁷ “Neue Deutsche Literature Arbeitsplan für das Jahr 1987,” SV 512, vol. 1, 19.

¹⁶⁸ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 19 May 1982, SV 605, 76-77; Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 8 September 1982, SV 605, 42.

branches, it was emphasized that the organization faced a “necessary rejuvenation of the leadership of the district associations,” something that had apparently been discussed in the district branches leading up to this consultation. Importantly, however, this youth movement “should not be carried out at the cost of political stability.” Accordingly, the number of steering committee members was not to be enlarged just as to incorporate younger members.¹⁶⁹ The SED wished to have it both ways: to involve younger authors in union leadership, but co-opt only those who were politically reliable.

Such concerns persisted into 1985, when a press release in June issued by the Writers Union announced that one of its top priorities in the coming year would be “the demand and assistance of the younger generation.”¹⁷⁰ As a result, throughout the fall of 1985 youth development work appeared as a regular item on the agenda of the Writers Union’s presidium.¹⁷¹ In December 1985 youth development was discussed at length at the monthly presidium meeting with a report given by SV vice-president and Leipzig literature professor Joachim Nowotny. In the discussion following Nowotny’s report, the presidium members agreed on the organization’s priorities in the field of youth development, laying stress on the fact that, for example, the “youth development work of the association should concentrate in the future above all on young authors 35 years of age and under” regardless of whether or not the young writers were already candidates or members of the organization. The Youth Development Commission, he implored, must

¹⁶⁹ Abteilung Kultur (der SED), “Information über eine Beratung mit den Parteisekretären der Bezirksorganisationen des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 13. Januar 1983,” 24 January 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707.

¹⁷⁰ “Presse-Information 27.6.1985,” SV 511, vol. 3, 70.

¹⁷¹ See Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, for 29 October 1985, 27 November 1985, and 16 December 1985 in SV 511, vol. 3, 24, 5, and 1, respectively.

try harder to ensure “that experienced authors stand at the disposal of young authors for desired consultations.” Moreover, a meeting was envisioned for early 1986 between the presidium and young authors while in late 1986 a central steering committee meeting would be dedicated to the question of youth development work. The presidium further decided that the SV’s secretariat should test the feasibility of creating an “additional publication opportunity for the works of young authors.” Finally, the Youth Development Commission and the Secretariat’s own Youth Development Department were to present the presidium with proposals for creating a “Club Conversation of Young Authors” and for the next “Day of Young Literature.”¹⁷²

Following from Nowotny’s recommendations, during the late 1980s the Writers Union expanded its efforts to support the works of younger authors by inaugurating a series of “Club Conversations” whereby those writers would present their first publications, receive commentary from a senior colleague, and then discuss the work with an audience. In March 1985, for example, the SV organized an event with Gabriele Herzog, a dramaturge with East Germany’s film production company, *Deutsche Film AG* (DEFA or German Film Corporation). At the gathering, she read from her debut work, “*Das Mädchen im Fahrstuhl*” (The Girl in the Elevator), published in 1985 and afterwards Rudi Benzien (author of young adult fiction books) led the discussion with an “overwhelmingly young audience.” In the conversation, the audience seemed particularly interested in how the author sought “to grapple with the socialist education system as well as to trace certain behavior patterns of her main character back to the social stratum and class, respectively, from which she came.” Clearly the book, situating

¹⁷² Präsidiumssitzung, Beschlussprotokoll, 16 December 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 2.

its main character in a student milieu, resonated with the youthful audience, and the evening closed successfully “with the desire of the guests for further interesting disputations on works of younger authors.”¹⁷³ The meeting also seemed to be appreciated by Herzog, who, according to a later report, expressed interest in becoming a candidate of the Writers Union; as a result, she was invited to join a delegation, assembled by the SV, of young writers to visit the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁴

Similar events were held in the fall of 1986 as the union seemed to make an effort to listen to the requests of junior colleagues for opportunities to discuss their work with a younger public. The first event of the series featured a discussion of Holger Teschke’s first poetry collection, *Bäume am Hochufer* (Trees on the High Bank). Günter Rücker, radio- and screen play author, gave commentary for the reading.¹⁷⁵ In the weeks that followed, a work by Andreas Montag (“Karl der Grosse oder die Suche nach Julie” – Charlemagne of the Search for Julie) was presented, also commented on by Rücker. To this meeting 21 young writers, 15 Germanists, and also representatives from art colleges, newspapers *Neues Deutschland* and *Berliner Zeitung*, and even a TV news program were invited.¹⁷⁶ The Writers Union’s leaders appeared to want to give aspiring authors a chance not only to be active within their association but to enable them to step onto the public stage as creative intellectuals and to engage an eager public.

1987 witnessed yet more concern about integrating young writers into the SV. That June, the steering committee meeting was dedicated to youth development work and

¹⁷³ Report on Gabriele Herzog’s “Junge Autoren im Streitgespräch,” March 1985, SV 466, 1.

¹⁷⁴ “Gespräch mit Gabriele Herzog am 13.1.86,” SV 466, 2.

¹⁷⁵ Monika Hummel to Herr Wyzniewski, 17 September 1986, Berlin, SV 466, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Invitation, 4 December 1986, SV 466, 27.

included members of a newly created active group within the organization for “Young Authors.”¹⁷⁷ This group’s main task was “above all to promote young authors of our country and its literature.” It would consist of “members, candidates, and young writers from the various districts of the GDR” and would work “on the basis of the statute and the goals of the Writers Union.”¹⁷⁸ At a later meeting, the presidium evaluated the session with young authors as “positive” and drew attention to the fact that “the talk on several important fundamental political-ideological questions must be continued, as they were conveyed in the contributions of several young authors [at the meeting].” In fact, the presidium members were so impressed by the contributions of these younger authors to the Vorstand meeting that they agreed to host another meeting between themselves and their junior colleagues that September. In conclusion, “great regard,” the presidium stated, “must be given as well to the literary tasks of young authors about which they spoke at the steering committee meeting.” This would include an upcoming anthology which “should offer the opportunity to convey new themes to interested authors.” Finally, the presidium gave itself the task of drafting proposals for “rejuvenation in the composition of the steering committee” that would also increase the number of women on the Vorstand, the latter especially being long overdue.¹⁷⁹

Finally, beyond working with candidates, the Writers Union also reached out to young aspiring writers through key events it sponsored. In early 1981, for example, the

¹⁷⁷ Gerhard Henniger to the Members of the Steering Committee, 1 June 1987, Berlin, SV 510, vol. 2, 1.

¹⁷⁸ “Arbeitsprogramm des Aktivs ‘Junge Autoren,’” 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 89.

¹⁷⁹ Präsidiumssitzung Beschlussprotokoll, 29 July 1987, SV 512, vol. 2, 68-69.

SV district branches hosted talks with participants in the 10th Central Poetry Seminar, forging connections with “an array of these young poets.” Because of the success of this event, the presidium declared that “solid contact is established with the district leadership of the FDJ” for the next seminar. Moreover, “it is essential,” the report continued, “that acceptance into candidature can be used for shaping literary achievement,” a view shared in the district branches. Yet such a view required recognition of talent long before candidature, something that is “one of the basic tasks of youth development work in the next years.”¹⁸⁰ The Schriftstellerverband, in other words, could not content itself to work with the young authors already in its ranks; it needed to forge connections with students who one day might wish to become writers.

Along these same lines, the East German Council of Ministers, in consultation with the Writers Union presidium, issued a directive in early 1982 on “work with young writers and other citizens interested in writing.” In the official memo reporting the decision, it was decreed that each of the GDR’s district would create an official “literature center” whose composition would be, in theory, left to the individual districts. These organizations would deal “above all predominantly with young people who are supervised neither through the Writers Union nor the FDJ-Poetry Clubs.” Each center was to ensure that “the universally valid fundamentals of the literary development of the young generation in the socialist society are kept in mind.” The centers were to be overseen by a representative from the Ministry for Culture and of the HVVB. To support the “political-ideological as well as literary activity” of each literary center, advisory boards were to be created comprising representatives from the Writers Union district

¹⁸⁰ Vorstandssitzung, “Bericht der Präsidium an dem Vorstand, 27.5.1981,” SV 510, vol. 1, 173.

organizations, the FDJ, the FDGB, the Kulturbund, and other literary institutions.¹⁸¹

Potential writers could thus be engaged at a very early stage in Writers Union activities, a policy aimed at increasing the likelihood that they would want to join the union later.

A constant concern of the Writers Union was thus to satisfy the demands of their youngest members and would-be members, in the process incorporating them into associational life. By socializing these young colleagues into the union's culture, the SV's leaders hoped to win over the next generation of literary intellectuals to the socialist project, but the continual call that *Nachwuchsauctoren* needed to be better incorporated speaks to the difficulties the association's leaders had in accomplishing their mission.

Societal Influence

Beyond providing goods and services related to their literary careers, authors sometimes looked to the Writers Union to provide them benefits such as moral or legal support that went beyond narrow professional interests. One could, in theory, justify the procuring of a car for a particular author if it helped in their work for the SV or arranging a hotel stay so one could attend a literary conference, but it was something different to ask the Writers Union to intervene in a court case having nothing to do with literature. This final category of requests, then, indicates that at least some members perceived that the Writers Union wielded influence in East German society that extended beyond a purely literary purview.

Among the more moving letters sent to the Writers Union was one from poet and children's author Reinhard Bernhof. In the fall of 1979 Bernhof's son, Tim, drowned

¹⁸¹ "Beschluss des Ministerrates der DDR zur Arbeit mit jungen Schreibenden und anderen am Schreiben interessierten Bürgern," n.d., SV 605, 107-8.

while under the care of government swim instructors. According to Bernhof, the instructors behaved negligently but various details of the police report had been forged to exculpate them. As a result, the court merely placed the instructors on probation and even allowed them to keep their jobs, an outcome which Bernhof linked to the defendants' SED connections.¹⁸² It was clear that Bernhof wanted the Writers Union's help in pursuing the alleged irregularities in the case and Kant's response letter several weeks later detailed what that help would entail. Expressing his deepest sympathies, Kant wrote that he had instructed vice president Joachim Nowotny to conduct an investigation on behalf of the organization's Leipzig branch and to speak with local authorities about the matter, which he did.¹⁸³ In a later letter, however, Kant explained to Bernhof that their inquiry had found that the police investigation and the trial outcome were legitimate. To partially offset this no-doubt disappointing news, Kant closed with words of comfort, stating, "I can now do nothing else but assure you once again that in this depressing matter I am solidly connected to you and that over the course of my investigation I have met no one who thought differently."¹⁸⁴ Having no other recourse in fighting what he considered an unfair ruling, Bernhof turned to the Writers Union for legal and even moral support. His case illustrates that members could indeed appeal to their union for non-professional issues and that the SV was, at least in some cases, receptive to such inquiries.

¹⁸² Reinhard Bernhof to the Members of the Steering Committee and Hermann Kant, 31 October 1979, Leipzig, SV 658, vol. 1, 16-22.

¹⁸³ Hermann Kant to Reinhard Bernhof, 20 December 1979, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 25.

¹⁸⁴ Herman Kant to Reinhard Bernhof, 21 January 1980, Berlin, SV 658, vol. 1, 23-24.

Other members asked the SV to influence bureaucratic decisions. In 1988, for example, a certain Jörg Kowalski, poet and self-proclaimed historical preservationist, wrote to Kant about the planned demolition of a manor home in Wiederstedt, the former home of the early Romantic writer Novalis. The town, Kowalski explained, desperately needed to save the home as it was the only major cultural site in the area. So why write to Kant? “We live in a country,” Kowalski observed, “in which every now and then it happens that a cue from above does wonders. Here such a motion would be a good thing.” Kowalski then proceeded even more directly: “Couldn’t you assert your influence,” he inquired “so that the decision of district council is in this respect quickly and un-bureaucratically influenced by an overriding authority”?¹⁸⁵ It is unclear whether Kant used his influence to steer the district council toward protecting the home (the home was saved, incidentally), but it is clear that Kowalski believed that Kant, as Writers Union president, did have the leverage to affect the decision if he chose.

Sometimes non-members – even West Germans – saw the organization as a back channel through which to get things accomplished as well. Even a few non-union members seemed to believe that the SV was capable of helping their housing situation. Rudolf Schielicke, a building engineer from Beelitz (Mark), wrote to Kant in 1980 with a request to help his son, a student at Humboldt University in Berlin, find a room or small apartment because “boarding school life is, in the long run, nerve-wracking [*nervenaufreibend*].” Despite pleas for Kant to use his “influential position” to help his son, the SV president politely declined Schielicke’s request.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Jörg Kowalski to Herman Kant, 23 March 1988, Halle, SV 548, vol. 2, 14-15, 27.

¹⁸⁶ Rudolf Schielicke to Hermann Kant, Beelitz (Mark), 10 March 1980, SV 658, vol. 2, 50-51.

Who one knew counted for something in the GDR, and writers counted on their organization's leaders to have influence on areas of East German society that had nothing to do with literature. Members and non-members alike thus came to view the Schriftstellerverband as a powerful institution, one whose leaders wielded clout beyond cultural policies, and one whose influence writers would be reluctant to give up.

Conclusions

Given the wide range of goods and services explored above, one can draw a number of conclusions about the role of the Writers Union as a professional organization under the East German dictatorship.¹⁸⁷ If from the SED's perspective the chief role of the association was to promote the regime and enforce its cultural policy, from the perspective of many authors, the Writers Union's most important function was promoting their career, social, and financial interests. Once one became a member of the union, one joined a support network that could enhance one's status in any number of ways: helping with publishing matters, generating positive publicity for new works, granting material assistance and social support, enabling travel to the West, bestowing public recognition for accomplishments, cultivating the literary talents of the younger generation, or even exerting influence in non-literary areas of society. The animated feedback given to the

¹⁸⁷ Further investigation is needed in order to evaluate the relative uniqueness or typicality of the Writers Union vis-à-vis the other artistic unions in the GDR such as the Union of Visual Artists or the Union of German Composers and Musicologist. Given the relatively high importance of literature in East Germany, however, one can hypothesize that the Writers Union was at least on par with these other organization in terms of being able to provide members with benefits and services, and may have been one of the more influential of such groups. Moreover, because all of these organizations were designed to serve a similar propaganda function for the regime, it is likely that conclusions drawn about the Writers Union can be at least suggestive for the function of such associations in general under the dictatorship. Finally, additional research is necessary to explore the extent to which the Schriftstellerverband's socioeconomic policies changed between the Ulbricht and Honecker years. However, given the GDR's early financial difficulties in the 1940s and 1950s, the Writers Union likely received a proportionally smaller budget than in the 1970s and 1980s and hence was less able to disperse benefits.

organization by its members, both in thanking the union for what they received and complaining about what they did not, speaks to the importance of the goods and services provided by the SV. Clearly writers felt that their union was in many cases a favorable or even preferred channel for obtaining that which they needed or wanted under the dictatorship. Moreover, while the SV's leadership was unable or unwilling to fulfill every request, the fact that at least in several cases Henniger and Kant did help or attempted to help their members in a variety of capacities illustrates that the leaders, too, sent the message that these requests were entirely appropriate and were, in fact, a legitimate way to get things done in the GDR.

While the Schriftstellerverband existed as a key node in a system for distributing goods and services in a society beset by problems of scarcity, to focus simply on the macro-level risks losing sight of the people engaging that system. Authors were not merely grateful, passive recipients of what the state graciously bestowed upon them. In all of these areas where the Writers Union might help them, time and again we see authors learning to game the system so as to enhance the likelihood of achieving a favorable outcome. In doing so, writers often very consciously tried to frame their requests or complaints so as to give themselves the best chance for success: in applications for travel, authors presented their proposed trips as vital to national interests; in thank you notes for birthday recognition, SV members ingratiated themselves with their organization's leaders; in requesting help with a publisher, writers emphasized career more than political issues. From the membership application process through the honoring of deceased colleagues, then, members styled themselves so as to best take advantage of the opportunities presented to them by the Writers Union.

Despite the posturing efforts of authors, not all union members were created equal, however. The perception of differential treatment sparked jealousies among writers against individual authors who appeared to receive better or more benefits from the organization. Resentment and recriminations also occurred on a regional scale as members of certain district branches felt that other districts, especially Berlin, were favored by the organization or that members of the Berlin district looked down upon their “provincial” colleagues. Authors of certain genres also felt disrespected by their organization and peers, accusing them of belittling children’s literature or drama as inferior to prose or poetry. These perceptions of unfairness strengthened the frustration felt by members who did not receive that which they wished or needed. It was one thing to be disappointed not to get a support scholarship because someone else was more qualified; it was another to know that the only reason that other person received the scholarship was because of their home district, genre, or connections to the SV’s leaders. In the space of the SV, then, egos and senses of entitlement collided with genuine feelings of injustice to produce a volatile, cantankerous mixture that occasionally erupted into both petty squabbles and serious disputes over social policy in the GDR.

In the end, the Writers Union – as an arm of the state – failed to live up to all its promises in terms of increasing the socioeconomic standing of its members and creating career opportunities. We will return to the long-term consequences of these policies in the remaining chapters, but suffice it to say that members’ frustration at these failures, evident in the letters from union members to the SV, built up over decades and can thus help explain part of the motivation of many writers to desire serious reforms within the GDR. In other words, the Writers Union’s distribution of privileges, goods, and services

was a double-edged sword: material incentives sweetened the bargain between writers and state, but also eventually raised expectations beyond the point of the latter's realistic capacity to meet them, resulting in inevitable disappointment and contributing, in some circles, to disillusionment and radicalization. Yet because these writers often wanted more from their state than what they received, it is reasonable to expect that many of them would be unwilling to dismantle or even fundamentally question the system which generated these privileges in the first place. Hence, as we will see, the 1989 revolution became a paradox for writers – it was a long-awaited moment of liberalization for many, but when in the wider public calls for reform gradually gave way to calls for unification, writers proved by and large unwilling to follow their compatriots down that path.

Therefore, more than expecting much from the SV, many members came to depend on their organization as a principal means of securing necessities and desires in a closed society. By not directly challenging the SED's right to rule, writers were granted access to an influential interest group in the Writers Union, an organization which enabled them to circumvent the shortages, long queues, and inefficient bureaucracies to which the average East German was subjected. In other words, literary professionals learned that they needed the Writers Union in many ways. While the numerous complaint letters illustrate that many writers were not necessarily enthusiastic about union leaders or even the quality of that which they did receive, nevertheless many authors certainly came to depend on the state-sponsored organization to satisfy their needs and enable them to pursue their professional ambitions. Indeed, if anything, given the many letters complaining about the inability of the SV to procure this or that good or service, many writers clearly wanted the state to do more for them, not less. Thus, while

certainly not stamping out criticism, writers harboring disapproving thoughts toward the SED often had to think twice about biting the hand that fed them. In this respect, understanding the socioeconomic functions of the Writers Union in the lives of its members sheds light on an important reason for the ability of the East German dictatorship to stifle widespread intellectual dissent and, as a consequence, create relative regime stability over several decades.

Chapter Three

The Era of No Taboos? 1971-75

When evaluating the seventh national Writers Congress, held in November 1973, the presidium of the Writers Union could not help but congratulate itself on a job well done. First Secretary Gerhard Henniger, the SED's most powerful advocate within the organization, noted the "largely positive prevailing mood" while reporting that foreign guests had been "impressed" and that the event had demonstrated a "close connection between writers and Party leadership." Dr. Leo Sladczyk, a member of the Cultural Department of the SED's Central Committee, echoed these sentiments by declaring that the congress enjoyed "great esteem" among Party leaders. Sorbian author and SV Vice President Jurij Brezan chimed in that in Dresden's district branch of the Writers Union the discussions begun in the congress's four workgroups were so productive that they wanted to continue them on a local basis. He then added that the congress had also illustrated that East German writers were able "to speak with each other about problems of criticism and other things." Speaking more directly than anyone at the meeting was Max Walter Schulz, another union vice president, who described how in his workgroup "everyone had the proper political line and group psychology was served through the

formulation of themes.” It was his recommendation that similarly formulated themes be introduced for future steering committee meetings of the SV as well.¹

This evaluation of the Seventh Writers Congress laid bare some of the basic visions held by the Schriftstellerverband’s leaders as to what function their organization, and by extension East German writers, should serve in the German Democratic Republic. First, it was crucial that the SED approve of the actions of the SV members and that the relationship between writers and state was strong and trusting. Second, the Writers Union should encourage literary intellectuals to gather and discuss “problems of criticism and other things,” that is, mainly cultural policy but occasionally non-literary matters. Finally, the SV should organize its meetings and events so as to minimize political dissent or deviations from the official Party line. Discussion of important topics would be permitted, but only within prescribed discursive boundaries.

These were the visions that predominated amongst the Writers Union’s leaders after Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht in 1971 as head of the SED and, by extension, as the leader of East Germany. In December of that year, the newly minted leader declared, “When one proceeds from the firm position of socialism, there can, in my opinion, be no taboos in the field of art and literature.”² Though carefully couching the SED’s position behind the formulation “from the firm position of socialism,” Honecker’s statement appeared to contemporaries to signal a general easing of restrictions on writers and artists so long as they demonstrated their loyalty to socialist

¹ Telegram to Hermann Kant, 13 December 1973, “Erste Auswertung des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR (14.-16.11.1973 in Berlin),” Berlin, Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR 597, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV), 6-8.

² Quoted in Ann Stamp Miller, *The Cultural Policy of the German Democratic Republic: The Voices of Wolf Biermann, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller* (Boca Raton: Universal Publishers, 2004), 39.

principles. Authors, like many in East German society more generally, understood these pronouncements as a move away from the more circumscribed cultural and social dictates of the late Ulbricht era, and several authors consequently began experimenting with new subject matter and literary styles.³

To this end, in the early 1970s Writers Union members produced works with a loyal but critical attitude towards socialism in East Germany. The first half of the decade thus saw the publication of Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neue Leiden des jungen W.* (The New Sorrows of Young W., 1972),⁴ Hermann Kant's *Das Impressum* (The Masthead, 1972), Stefan Heym's *Der König David Bericht* (The King David Report, 1973), Reiner Kunze's *Brief mit blauem Siegel* (Letter with Blue Seal, 1973), Jurek Becker's *Irreführung der Behörden* (Fooling the Authorities, 1973), Irmtraud Morgner's *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz* (Life and Adventures of the Troubadour Beatriz, 1974), a new printing of Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (The Quest for Christa T., originally published 1968, 1974), and Volker Braun's *Unvollendete Geschichte* (Unending Story, 1975). Two examples from this collection will suffice to demonstrate the types of messages emerging from the literature of the early 1970s. Perhaps the most impactful of all East German literature produced in these years was Plenzdorf's *Die Neuen Leiden des jungen W.* Taking his title from Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, Plenzdorf's story (originally appearing in *Sinn und Form*) centers on the

³ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 22, 172-73.

⁴ Kurt Hager at a seminar of the Party organization of Berlin's district branch, held 13 June 1973, noted that this work "was never designated as an anti-GDR play," although he stressed that because it had found resonance with the East German youth, Plenzdorf should pay close attention to the many discussions his play had inspired. Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," July 1973, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 904-097 27.

attempts of Edgar Wibeau's father to reconstruct the life of his estranged son, who died via electrocution in what may or may not have been a suicide. Young Edgar tires of life as a student and, becoming disenchanted, drops out and escapes to Berlin where he listens to rock 'n roll, reads *The Catcher in the Rye* and Goethe, and rebels against the conformity demanded of him by East German society. Falling in love with a school teacher, he tries to get his life back in order but she rejects him, at which point he makes an ill-fated attempt to construct an electronic painting machine for his job on a paint crew.⁵ Volker Braun's *Unvollendete Geschichte* centers on a young couple, Frank and Karin. Frank doesn't have Karin's parents' approval given his troublemaking past, and they (an SED official and a newspaper editor), continuously put pressure on Karin to end things with him, alienating her in the process. Eventually Karin leaves Frank but discovers she is pregnant; Frank then attempts suicide, whereupon we learn that the police suspected he had been preparing to escape the GDR for the West. Frank recovers eventually, but we do not get to see the end of the story.⁶ Both stories feature disaffected young people rebelling against the pressures of the East German dictatorship, exposing the difficulties of reconciling individuality and creativity with socialism.⁷

In comparison with the restrictive cultural sphere of the late 1960s, the period 1971-75, was thus characterized by relative but far from total openness. The Writers Union's leaders, for their part, busied themselves in managing these newly awakened expectations of openness among the organization's members. This meant not only

⁵ Ulrich Plenzdorf, *The New Suffering of Young W.: A Novel*, trans. Kenneth P. Wilcox, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973).

⁶ Volker Braun, *Unvollendete Geschichte* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1977).

⁷ For a helpful comparative overview of these works, see Thomas C. Fox, *Border Crossings: An Introduction to East German Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 127-43.

promoting Party loyalty but also structuring discussions among writers so as to prevent deviations from the sometimes vaguely defined official cultural policy. Restricting itself primarily to literary affairs, the Writers Union in this period nonetheless promoted opportunities for writers to discuss and expound upon pressing social, economic, and political issues of the day. As some writers began to press this relative openness further than the SED desired, however, it was the Writers Union that was also tasked with bringing these authors back in line.

In order to explore these years, this chapter focuses on five themes. First is the reaction of the members of the Writers Union to the West German *Ostpolitik* of the early 1970s and the subsequent East German efforts at solidifying the GDR as an independent state. Second are efforts by the SV to express solidarity with the wider socialist world and in particular the Soviet Union. Third are efforts by the union members and leaders to promote their organization and profession as a legitimate place to comment on real existing socialism. Fourth are the preparations, execution, and evaluation of the Seventh Writers Congress, held in November 1973. Last are explorations of remaining taboos, those topics and the authors writing about them that the SED and Writers Union's leaders still considered inappropriate subjects for literature and public statements. Within each section there are three key questions: Which issues did writers get involved with and what role did the union play in this process? How well did these experiences comport with the expectations of union members, SV leaders, and the SED, and what happened when they did not? Finally, how did the union's involvement in these areas impact ideas about the function of literature and its creators in the GDR as well as the relationship between writers and the state? In answering these questions across the five themes, it is

clear that the early 1970s were a period of relative cultural openness and accord between writers and state, and both sides advocated union members' involvement in key societal issues. Yet by mid-decade the limits of this mutually beneficial arrangement were also becoming apparent, leaving many writers questioning the sincerity of Honecker's promises of "no taboos."

Ostpolitik and Delimitation

In the early 1970s the Central Committee instrumentalized the Writers Union, like it had many times in the past, to marshal support for its policies – and the policies of the Soviet Union – at home and abroad. Members of the association often took these propagandistic roles seriously and, consequently, Writers Union events, meetings, and publications in these years were dominated by such concerns. Especially in foreign affairs, the role played by authors thrust their organization onto a world stage, and the SED invested in them the ability to orate and write, responsibly of course, about some of the most important issues of the day. Whether it was confronting Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, defending the actions of the Soviet Union, or declaring solidarity with the peoples of Vietnam and Chile, in the early 1970s the Writers Union's members were important players on the international cultural scene, thanks in large measure to opportunities created by their professional organization.

Chief among these issues was the all-important German question, raised anew by the radical "New Eastern Policy" or "*neue Ostpolitik*"⁸ of Willy Brandt's West German

⁸ The first incarnation of *Ostpolitik* came under Konrad Adenauer's center-right FDP-CDU coalition government beginning in 1949. Believing that reunification would never occur so long as the Soviet Union was in a position to prevent it, Adenauer's government reasoned that strengthening West Germany and firmly rooting it in the Western camp would help tip the balance in that direction. Thus Adenauer's

government. Inaugurated in 1969, this new Ostpolitik was a strategy aimed at taking reunification into German hands at a time when it seemed that the two superpowers were content to leave the two-state solution as permanent. To accomplish this, Brandt and his adviser Egon Bahr initiated negotiations with the countries of Eastern Europe, renouncing German claims to territory lost after World War II along with any design to acquire nuclear weapons or use force. Following from these efforts, treaties were concluded in 1970 between the Federal Republic on the one hand and the Soviet Union and Poland, respectively, on the other. The next year witnessed the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin which helped reduce Cold War tensions while stabilizing the divided city's Western half. In 1973 West Germany and Czechoslovakia's communist government signed a bilateral treaty and extended diplomatic recognition to each other.⁹ For his efforts, Brandt received the 1971 Nobel Peace Prize.

As far as the two Germanys were concerned, the capstone of Ostpolitik was the signing of the Basic Treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) between the two German states in late 1972 (it went into effect in June 1973). Though stopping short of full recognition, the Basic Treaty renounced the Hallstein doctrine, opening the door for other countries to

Westpolitik pursued a long-term project for German reunification by advocating a "policy of strength." The correlation to this Westpolitik was an eastern policy; in 1955 West Germany and the Soviet entered formal diplomatic relations, although Bonn simultaneously pressed the Hallstein doctrine with its goal of international non-recognition of the GDR as an independent state. Nonetheless, Adenauer's government sought negotiations with the Soviet Union independent of the Federal Republic's NATO allies at several points in the 1950s and 1960s, such as in 1962 when he offered a ten-year truce regarding the German question if the Soviets were willing to grant greater freedom to those living in the "occupation zone." Julia von Dannenberg, *The Foundations of Ostpolitik: the Making of the Moscow Treaty between West Germany and the USSR* (Oxford, 2008), 16-21; Clay Clemens, *Reluctant Realists: the Christian Democrats and West German Ostpolitik* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 13-54.

⁹ Carole Fink and Bernd Schaefer, "Ostpolitik and the World, 1969-1974: Introduction," in *Ostpolitik, 1969-1974: European and Global Responses*, ed. Carole Fink and Bernd Schaefer (Cambridge, UK, 2009), 2-7; see also M.E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente & Ostpolitik, 1969-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

recognize the German Democratic Republic as a sovereign state and paving the way for both states to enter the United Nations in 1973. The treaty also enabled friendlier relations between the two Germanys, including facilitating economic relations and easing travel restrictions for those with family on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The East German reaction to Brandt's policy of "*Annäherung*" (rapprochement) was ambivalent. Because of Ostpolitik, the GDR was able to achieve international recognition for the first time in the non-socialist world, but greater contact with the more prosperous West was also a dangerous prospect for a government that had never felt secure in its popular legitimacy. Thus the process of *Annäherung* was matched by one of *Abgrenzung* (delimitation or demarcation). This meant intensified efforts by the SED to solidify a genuine GDR identity, one that was clearly distinct from that of the Federal Republic. To this end, the SED downplayed references to a unified "Germany" and spoke instead of the cultural and social distinctiveness of the German Democratic Republic. Any efforts by West Germans to speak of a single German nation were met by the East German camp with derision and charges of aggression. Delimitation was recognized most visibly in these years by changes to the East German constitution in 1974 by which the country was no longer referred to as a "socialist state of the German nation," but rather as a "socialist state of workers and peasants."¹⁰ Thus in the early 1970s, the GDR's perpetual existential crisis experienced a new challenge, one the SED was determined to overcome.

To this end, the SED relied heavily on its cultural figures to communicate the Party's vision for the East German state and society as well as its relation to West

¹⁰ Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 177-82; Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10-11.

Germany and Brandt's Social Democratic Party in particular. In this process, the Central Committee enabled the Writers Union to play an important role. As a first step, the SED's leading cultural officials needed to educate writers on the Party's position on these topics. As a second, the SV's members were given a chance to discuss these positions amongst themselves. And as a final step, they were expected to communicate these positions to the public through literature, local events, declarations, speeches, and especially during their most important event of the early 1970s, the Seventh Writers Congress. The process was never clear-cut, however, and although the SED's cultural officials encouraged and demanded that union members adhere to their dictates, many questions and some disagreements remained among the association's members.

Ostpolitik was a topic of frequent discussion within the Schriftstellerverband in the early 1970s, especially within the SED's Party Organizations of the SV's district branches. Given its status as the GDR's metropole, the Berlin district dwarfed the others within the Writers Union, meaning that much of the SED's efforts to enlist the Writers Union's members came through Berlin, a fact which did not go unnoticed by authors living outside of the capital.

Berlin's SV district Party organization was active early on debating the real goals and potential impact of Ostpolitik on the GDR. In January 1970, for instance, Henniger spoke at the Party organization meeting about the political situation in West Germany and the relationship between the two German states. Afterwards there commenced a lengthy discussion about whether the SPD, now the governing party of the FRG, was still a party of the working class. Presidium member Fritz Selbmann, a hard-line Communist since the Weimar Republic, led off the discussion by asserting that it was not, a statement

with which most in attendance agreed.¹¹ Unaccustomed to dealing with any party other than the Christian Democrats as the ruling party of West Germany, East Berlin's writers seemed unsure how to evaluate the ascendance of a social democratic party.

Evaluation of the Moscow Treaty between the USSR and FRG occupied the attention of the leaders and rank-and-file members of the Berlin Party organization in the autumn of 1970. For instance, individual discussions in the Berlin branch in September and October 1970 assessed the recently signed treaty. Indicating his approval for the accord, poet Heinz Kahlow voiced concern in his talk over rightwing forces in the Federal Republic threatening to derail Brandt's efforts. Literature professor and publisher Wieland Herzfelde lauded the treaty as a "magnificent achievement of the Soviet Union" and, for good measure, added that "Nixon is more dangerous than Hitler" since he had avoided Hitler's key mistakes of "turning against the Jews and turning against the West."¹² The leadership of the Berlin Party organization likewise met in November 1970 to discuss the Moscow Treaty, among other issues. Some in attendance expressed grave mistrust regarding the SPD, while others, especially younger authors, asserted that the SED should not recklessly criticize the West German Social Democrats.¹³ Even within the leadership group of the SED organization, then, confusion existed as to how to assess Brandt's policies and party, especially along generational lines. Still, overall the mood in the Writers Union's Berlin branch, at least in their SED

¹¹ Betriebsparteiorganisation deutscher Schriftstellerverband, Bezirksverband Berlin, "Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung vom 28.1.1970," 29 January 1970, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 904-097 18.

¹² Grundorganisation der SED im Schriftstellerverband, Bezirksverband Berlin, notes on discussions with individual members, September-October 1970, LAB C Rep. 904-097 22.

¹³ Betriebsparteiorganisation deutscher Schriftstellerverband, Bezirksverband Berlin, "Protokoll der Parteileitungssitzung vom 9.11.1970," November 1970, LAB C Rep. 904-097 19.

organization, was one of cautious optimism regarding Ostpolitik. This optimism was tempered, however, by the belief that in West Germany and America enemy forces constantly threatened to undo these vital steps towards peace.

As a corollary to Ostpolitik, the national question also loomed large in Writers Union discussions and events in the early 1970s. Especially after the ratification of the Basic Treaty in 1973, there was new cause for the writers committed to the GDR to fear for their country's legitimacy in the face of closer contact with the more prosperous, freer West. It is for this reason that one of the main tasks of the Writers Union in the early 1970s was to draw sharper distinctions between the GDR and its Western counterpart.

As with the early phase of Ostpolitik, many of the SED's Abgrenzung initiatives were enacted through the union's local Party organizations. The first step in many cases was for the SED to educate writers as to how exactly the two German states differed. Differences between the Germanys and the relationship between the terms "nation" and "state," for example, were discussed at a Party organization meeting in the Berlin Bezirksverband in June 1971.¹⁴ At another meeting of the SED's base organization in the capital's SV branch in February 1972, a discussion occurred on the "cultural political conception of West German social democracy," led by two researchers from the Institute for Social Sciences of the Central Committee.¹⁵ Three months later in May there was a similar discussion in the base organization about "several developmental problems of social democracy in the Federal Republic," including international and internal problems

¹⁴ Betriebsparteiorganisation deutscher Schriftstellerverband, Bezirksverband Berlin, "Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung vom 29.6.1970," June 1970, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 904-097 18.

¹⁵ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," February 1972, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

in the FRG.¹⁶ And in the same organization's November 1972 meeting, recent electoral victories by the West German SPD gave rise to questions as to whether "social democracy represents the interests of the working class better in the present era" or not, and "Why does the social democratic ideology have greater popular influence now than the Christian-reactionary ideology, but also a greater popular effectiveness than the DKP [(West) German Communist Party]?"¹⁷ The SED leaders within the Berlin writers association clearly feared that social democracy, with its socialist roots and leftist rhetoric, would be mistakenly viewed by writers as closely related to East German socialism, and hence felt compelled to dispel these false ideas decisively.

The signing of the Basic Treaty in December 1972, though advantageous in some ways for the GDR, intensified these fears of blurring the lines between the two states. Assessments of the Basic Treaty within the Writers Union reflected the ambivalent nature of the agreement for the GDR. In December 1972, for instance, the base Party organization in Berlin carried out a discussion on "the present set of problems in the national question," with the goal of preparing a meeting of the entire district branch later that month. The ensuing meeting was marked by a consensus that "our socialist state – the GDR – must not in any way be ready to abandon positions both related to progressive traditions of German history and the results of becoming the socialist state of our republic." Their country's ultimate goal was to be a "socialist German nation-state," but because this was not fully realizable at present, the immediate goal had to be the

¹⁶ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," May 1972, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

¹⁷ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," November 1972, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

continued survival of the GDR and the related step of delimitation “vis-à-vis bourgeois perceptions of the nation-state.”¹⁸ In other words, the meeting’s organizers hoped to strike a delicate balance between still being able to claim that East Germany represented progressive traditions throughout German history while maintaining a distinct national existence from West Germany. They would do so by advancing an alternative definition of the nation-state, one that linked nation with social class.

At the same time, in late 1972 and early 1973 the Writers Union’s Berlin district organization conducted group discussions with a member of the local SED leadership and of the SV’s district steering committee. At these meetings, in which the majority of Berlin’s members participated, one of the more important topics of conversation was, predictably, the relationship between East and West Germany. During the course of the talks, most writers “strongly greeted” the signing of the Basic Treaty, the summary report indicated. Moreover, the majority of participants came to the conclusion that class conflict still existed between the two Germanys. There was “no doubt” among the discussants, the report stated, that there was “no unified German nation,” “no unified German culture,” and “no unified German literature.” Still, a portion of the authors at these meetings failed to understand the GDR’s “tactical actions vis-à-vis the Brandt/Scheel government.” Evidently some writers were puzzled as to why the GDR had reached an agreement with a country it had demonized for almost twenty-five years.

¹⁸ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, “Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben,” December 1972, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

Another prominently discussed topic was who would be able to travel to West Germany from the GDR, zeroing in on one of the more important dimensions of the agreement.¹⁹

The majority of participants also reacted with “discomfort” at the slew of name changes that the SED had imposed on its societal organizations in order to promote delimitation. Several described these alterations as “a formal campaign that changes names but nothing in content.” Some of the participants feared that with the “abandonment” of the terms “German” and “German nation,” they would “relinquish the banner of the German nation and insufficiently express the claim to leadership of the German working class for a socialist Germany.” A number of authors even expressed pride in being called “German writers” while abroad as opposed to merely “GDR-writer[s],” prompting the report’s author to conclude that Western foes had had some success in creating divisions among East Germany’s literary community.²⁰ The SED’s fears were being realized, so the report indicated – the line between the literary worlds of East and West, never clearly demarcated, was growing hazier. The report also revealed a conflicting set of identities held by writers and a correspondingly conflicting set of roles that some East German writers saw themselves playing in their country. Some SV members derived a sense of prestige from being identified as simply “German” writers, feeling an emotional connection to revered cultural traditions. Moreover, adding “East” to their nationality would relinquish claims to speak for the working classes of both states; after all, their organization’s full name was the *German* Writers Union, not the

¹⁹ Abteilung Kultur, “Bericht über die Ergebnisse der Gruppengesprächs, die in Dezember 1972 und Januar 1973 in Bezirksverband Berlin des Schriftstellerverband der DDR durchgeführt worden sind,” 31 January 1973, Berlin, Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (hereafter cited as SAPMO-BArch) DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

²⁰ Ibid.

Writers Union of the GDR. The SED was now demanding this self-identity be altered and some writers were clearly apprehensive about such a change.

Similar events occurred in the Berlin district branch over the course of the next several years. February 1973, for instance, witnessed Konrad Naumann, First Secretary of the city's SED leadership, speaking to the Writers Union's Berlin base Party organization about the Basic Treaty, including questions of travel to the GDR.²¹ At a similar meeting with local Party officials in April 1973, the discussion focused on the Federal Republic; here it was especially stressed that "it is our task to compel the ratification of the [Basic T]reaty with the FRG." To this end, writers were encouraged to cooperate with "progressive revolutionary writers of the entire world," not just with West German authors.²² Hence the Writers Union was directly instructed to organize pressure groups aimed at ensuring the Basic Treaty's passage in the West German Bundestag. Whereas they had once been mere commentators, now the GDR's authors were given the responsibility of being among the custodian's of the agreement's ratification.

Delimitation was a goal expressed at several events in 1974 as well. In April, the SV district organization in Berlin hosted a discussion with Helmut Müller, Second Secretary of the district leadership, on current events. Here Müller laid emphasis on the relationship between the two German states and the internal situation in the FRG.²³ A month later, another discussion took place between members of the Berlin

²¹ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," February 1973, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

²² Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," April 1973, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

²³ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," April 1974, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

Bezirksverband and Konrad Naumann in which the latter was asked questions about relations between East and West Germany and the position of social democracy after Brandt's startling resignation a fortnight earlier.²⁴ In October of that year the SED base organization in the SV's Berlin district organized a seminar where Party members evaluated the GDR's recent constitutional changes, particularly regarding the national question. Topics of conversation included "the historical process of the development of the nation in the GDR and its reflection in the constitution," "relationships between 'state' and nation," and "socialist and bourgeois views of the term 'nation.'" ²⁵ All of these were by then familiar themes to Berlin's SV members; the SED and the local leaders of the Writers Union had made sure that the key differences between the GDR and Federal Republic remained fresh in the minds of Berlin's literary professionals. The relative frequency of such instructional events speaks to the anxiety felt by Party and cultural officials that writers were turning away from the policies of the SED.

Shaping Real Existing Socialism

If one of the primary goals of delimitation was differentiating East and West Germany, another, related goal was increasing the GDR's legitimacy at home and improving socialism there. In the previous chapter, we have seen how the Writers Union's members often spoke out on behalf of their own socioeconomic interests. In the early 1970s they were also very vocal about claiming a right to help shape what

²⁴ Günter Guillaume, a member of Brandt's inner circle, was discovered to be an East German spy, causing a national scandal. Fink and Schaefer, 5. Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," May 1974, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

²⁵ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," October 1974, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

Honecker declared to be real existing socialism in the GDR. For the most part, the SED encouraged writers to embrace these societal roles as evidenced by multiple statements by top leaders as well as a number of consultations and educational events between government officials and SV members. Armed with this knowledge, the Writers Union sought to help build the GDR's legitimacy among the East German populace and, in turn, craft its self-image to justify this important role.

Writers were often reminded of the role they were expected to play in East German society by high-ranking SED officials. For example, less than a year into his tenure as First Secretary, Erich Honecker spelled out his vision for the Writers Union's function in an address written to the SV's steering committee on the occasion of the association's 20th anniversary. In it, he expressed, "Your union, as an association of writers of the German Democratic Republic, has a significant share in the forming of our socialist society." Over the past twenty years, he continued, "you have [...] created an organization that understands ever better how to conduct a constructive exchange of opinions." The writers of the GDR, he asserted, were also constantly improving the depiction of people living under socialism and adhered faithfully to the decisions of the SED's 8th Party Congress in 1971. "Following from the position of socialism," he stated, "the writer has shown he is equal to all problems and has acquired new insights which allow him the creation of works with high socialist idea content and with great artistic mastery." Literature was even more crucial in the present, Honecker concluded, as it had a "growing significance in the ideological class struggle with imperialism." Therefore it was necessary to "stabilize as well as increase the authority and effect of our writers in

the intellectual conflict of our present.”²⁶ In sum, the Writers Union had been a vital force in “forming” socialist society in the GDR, a role only possible, he implied, because they knew how to lead (*führen*) a “constructive exchange of opinions.” In other words, the success of the endeavor derived from the controlled debate initiated by the union. It was a loyal organization, Honecker stressed, and given their importance, the “authority” of its writers should be strengthened.

To ensure that the Schriftstellerverband’s members wielded this “authority” wisely, the SED’s leaders made sure to inform Writers Union members regularly not only about literary and cultural policy but also about pressing political, ideological, and economic issues. We have already seen the extent to which leading officials like Konrad Naumann consulted SV members regarding international issues. At many of these same meetings, such as the one in February 1973 with the Berlin branch’s Party organization, SED officials informed writers about burning domestic topics. Naumann spoke to 80 Writers Union members in a setting that the SED’s Berlin officials described as “an open and trusting atmosphere.” In the session, Naumann elaborated on political and ideological issues as well as questions of East Germany’s economic development. He then opened the floor to questions and twelve of the assembled literary figures made use of the opportunity to ask about these topics.²⁷ Writers Union members could ask questions, but it was Naumann leading the meeting.

²⁶ Erich Honecker to the Steering Committee of the German Writers Union, 6 April 1972, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/9564.

²⁷ SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin, Abteilung Kultur, “Information über Stimmungen und Probleme im Berliner Schriftstellerverband,” 28 February 1973. Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.2024/78.

In the general mood of optimism prevailing in the early 1970s, authors of all stripes seemed highly cognizant and appreciative of their societal role, something frequently discussed within the confines of the Schriftstellerverband. Gerhard Henniger emphasized the official role of writers in the GDR, for example, at a central steering committee meeting in February 1972. In addition to an emphasis on mutual trust between Party and authors, he elaborated that writers were also charged with depicting the “leading role of the working class,” dealing with “problems stemming from shaping of worker personalities,” as well as addressing “the need to strengthen frank, creative disputes as the main form within the association for the clarification of important questions in the creative process.”²⁸ His main points were that writers served to justify the SED’s ideological vision for society through emphasizing the working class’ predominance, and to better accomplish this goal, candid discussions within their organization were needed.

The discussion following Henniger’s comments featured a vibrant exchange of opinions about the role of literature in East German society. Fritz Selbmann spoke first, addressing Honecker’s “no taboos” declaration of 1971 explicitly. He asserted that “if artists speak of taboos, they do not mean that their works may not be criticized by the Party.” Instead, “it is not at all about aesthetic questions but rather problems which are connected with the subject itself.” He also agreed with Honecker’s caveat “that one must start from socialist positions” when addressing taboos. Remembering this point would allow a writer to accomplish the “most important task of socialist art,” namely “to contribute to the spiritual formation of developing socialist personalities.” Günter de

²⁸ “Information über die Vorstandssitzung der Deutschen Schriftstellerverbandes vom 29. Februar 1972 in Berlin,” 10 March 1972, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/78.

Bruyn, a more critical author than Selbmann, differed slightly, asserting that every society had their own taboos, but worried that what were considered taboos in a particular time period would rigidify into “conventions” over time. He concurred, though, that the important thing to keep in mind was that taboos were “inseparably bound to the question of the socialist standpoint.”²⁹ Though there was disagreement over the extent to which taboos existed in the GDR, the overall consensus emerging from the meeting was that when dealing with subjects that were currently or had previously been considered taboo, one should tread carefully and err on the side of the Party. Doing so would ensure the productive utility of their literature in the development of East German society.

Both SED and union members agreed on the importance of writers in improving real existing socialism in the GDR, but how would they make an actual contribution? For one, the Writers Union was enlisted to help promote key anniversaries and national events in the comparatively young country. For example, the 25th anniversary of the founding of the SED was celebrated in 1971, and in March of that year the Writers Union hosted an event in Berlin to commemorate the occasion.³⁰ The Schriftstellerverband likewise hosted a joint poetry reading with the Free German Youth organization in October 1974 to honor the GDR’s 25th anniversary, in the process illustrating the connection between writers and East Germany’s younger generations.³¹ Later that year at a meeting between Henniger and the leaders of each district organization, the First

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gerhard Henniger to all members of the Steering Committee of the DSV, 2 April 1971, Berlin, SV 595, 59.

³¹ Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 25 October 1974, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 42.

Secretary stressed that in 1975 the 30th anniversary of “liberation from fascism” would be a major point of emphasis for their union.³² To this end, in the spring of 1975 the SV played host to three international poetry readings in Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin featuring themes of anti-fascism, peace, and international understanding.³³

Such activities were carried out on a local level as well. For example, in October 1973 the newsletter for the Rostock’s branch reminded members that the GDR’s 25th anniversary was fast approaching. In light of this crucial anniversary, the newsletter indicated, “[T]he Party of the working class and the entire working population expect new works from us writers as an expression of our strong bond with our worker and farmer state.”³⁴ Also in the Rostock district organization in March 1975 there was a three-day event with the theme “30 years liberation from fascism and the socialist reorganization in the country,” an event which featured writers from their Polish “partner association” from the city of Szczecin.³⁵ By promoting key anniversaries, the Writers Union was helping to build new national traditions for the GDR.

In addition to anniversaries, the union was also deployed to promote prestigious national events. One such event came in 1973 when East Germany hosted the Tenth World Festival of Youth and Students games from 28 July through 5 August.³⁶ The

³² Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 23 December 1974, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 38.

³³ Gerhard Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 4 March 1975, SV 402, vol. 1, 110; “Bericht des Präsidiums – Vorstandssitzung am 24.4.1974,” April 1974, SV 579, 50; Gerhard Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 16 June 1975, SV 402, vol. 1, 94.

³⁴ Rostocker Mitteilungen, “Informationen aus dem Schriftstellerverband der DDR,” no. 3, 10 September 1973, Rostock, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Zentralstelle, Berlin (hereafter BStU) Rep. 2 209 58, 121-22.

³⁵ Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 25 March 1975, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 31.

³⁶ First held in 1947, the World Festival of Youth games were organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a self-described left-wing youth organization.

games, held every 2-6 years, were heavily attended by peoples from socialist nations and were thus a very important event for the GDR, especially coming so soon after the Basic Treaty had gone into effect.³⁷ Although the Writers Union did not play much of a role in the actual event, the sheer importance of it for the GDR's international prestige necessitated some participation. For instance, together with Eulenspiegel publishers, the Writers Union staged an event at the games featuring poetry on posters. In addition, the SV organized a "solidarity bazaar" with 60 writers selling books as well as an event at a Berlin bookstore with some of the biggest names in East German literature such as Christa Wolf, Eva and Erwin Strittmatter, Jurek Becker, and Franz Fühmann. The presidium also hosted a cocktail party for foreign guests attending the games.³⁸

Socialism vs. Imperialism

Relations between the two Germanys did not occur in a vacuum, of course, and the larger context of the Cold War and the Eastern bloc also played a role in shaping the societal and international mission and identity of the Writers Union and its members. During the period 1969-1973, the United States and Soviet Union engaged in their own version of détente, capped by the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in 1972. Elsewhere, 1973 saw the advent of the Yom Kippur War between Israel and its Arab neighbors, culminating in the oil shocks that rocked much of Europe and the globe.

³⁷ On the course of the Weltfestspiele in the GDR, see Stefan Wolle, *Die Heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR, 1971-1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998), 164-66; Ina Rossow, "'Rote Ohren, roter Mohn, sommerheisse Diskussion': Die X. Weltfestspiele der Jugend und Studenten 1973 als Möglichkeit für vielfältige Begegnungen," in *Fortschritt, Norm und Eigensinn: Erkundungen im Alltag der DDR*, ed. Andreas Ludwig (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1999), 257-76.

³⁸ Katja Petters to the Department Information and Documentation (Ministry for Culture), 24 August 1973, SV 763, vol. 1, 82-83.

Meanwhile, a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the socialist government of Chile. And throughout the early 1970s the Vietnam War dragged on Southeast Asia, provoking outcries around the world.³⁹

Strengthening the bonds between the GDR and the socialist world figured among the chief goals of the Writers Union's leaders in the 1970s. To this end, the Schriftstellerverband centered its international tasks primarily on other socialist countries. As was stated in a report issued in November 1974 in preparation for a SV steering committee meeting on international affairs, the organizers expressed, "Based on the goal to support the further convergence of the peoples of the socialist community of states in ideological, spiritual, and cultural areas, the Writers Union of the GDR concentrates above all on the further deepening of cooperation with the partner associations in the Soviet Union and the other brother countries."⁴⁰

One of the primary arenas in which the Writers Union showed solidarity with the Soviet Union was in supporting it through a major literary and political controversy, namely its dispute with and eventual expulsion of the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn.⁴¹ Tiring of the relentless and open criticisms leveled at the Soviet Union by Solzhenitsyn in books such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* (1962) and *Cancer Ward* (1967),

³⁹ Fink and Schaefer, 2-5.

⁴⁰ Scheibner and Engelke, "Vorstandssitzung zum Thema 'Die Welt in unserer Literatur – unsere Literatur in der Welt,'" 25 November 1974, Berlin, SV 394, vol. 4, 9.

⁴¹ With Stalin's death, Khrushchev removed the hard-line leaders of the Union of Soviet Writers and by the late 1950s had initiated a cultural thaw, symbolized most vividly by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* in 1962. Authors now began speaking out, using the Second Writers Congress in 1954, for example, to criticize the distribution of prizes and awards to works of no literary merit. However, with the shift in Soviet leadership from Khrushchev to Brezhnev, the latter restructured the USW and initiated a cultural crackdown with the 1965 arrests and trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel, followed by Solzhenitsyn's ouster from the Writers Union and then expulsion to the West in 1974. John and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 62-64, 80-81.

the Union of Soviet Writers voted in 1969 to cast the critical author from its ranks.⁴²

Stripped of his ability to publish in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn continued to publish critical works in the West, such as his massive *Gulag Archipelago*, and in 1970 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature although he was barred from traveling to Sweden to receive it. Confounded by this dissident, in 1974 the Soviet government decided to expel him to West Germany, beginning a 20-year exile for the author.

Shortly after Solzhenitsyn was named the winner of the Nobel Prize, in October 1970 Dr. Arno Hochmuth, leader of the Cultural Department in the Central Committee from 1966-1972, sent a memo to Kurt Hager regarding the position of the Writers Union vis-à-vis the Russian dissident. A cultural attaché from the Soviet embassy, Hochmuth explained, had inquired on behalf of the Soviet Union of Writers if the leaders of the Schriftstellerverband were willing to their declare solidarity with them against Solzhenitsyn. Hochmuth indicated that a report by the SV's presidium to its steering committee did indeed mention the issue.⁴³ The presidium report in question described the reasons for Solzhenitsyn's ouster from the Soviet Union of Writers the previous year, stressing that the organization had taken issue with the novelist for political, not aesthetic reasons, thus underscoring the Communist Party's supposed non-involvement in artistic questions while emphasizing their right and willingness to protect their political interests.⁴⁴ At the same time, the SV presidium published a declaration entitled "A

⁴² At the time of his expulsion, a defiant Solzhenitsyn prophetically declared, "The history of literature will some day show an interest in this meeting of ours." Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 675.

⁴³ Dr. Arno Hochmuth to Kurt Hager, 20 October 1970, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVA2/9.06/144.

⁴⁴ "Aus dem Bericht des Präsidiums des Deutschen Schriftstellerverbandes an den Vorstand am 20.10.1970," 20 October 1970, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVA2/9.06/144.

Rebuff for Anti-Communism (Alexander Solzhenitsyn).” The declaration stated that literature’s role was “to communicate insights into life, to set knowledge against ignorance, experiences against prejudices, reason against unreason.” For socialist writers, literature meant “humanity,” “friendship,” and “peace.” It was for this reason, the declaration continued, that the presidium stood in solidarity with their Soviet “brother association.” In short, the decision to award Solzhenitsyn the Nobel Prize for Literature was a “crude error” that had done détente a “terrible service,” and “with it literature as well, since the one prospers through the other.” Thus in the declaration, the presidium showed themselves to be loyal Cold Warriors while also asserting a privileged role for literature in bringing about understanding, reason, and peace. Socialism was depicted as a force for mercy and humanity, which was contrasted with capitalism, the purveyor of savagery and “barbarism.”⁴⁵

The Solzhenitsyn issue reared its head once more within the Writers Union in early 1974 when he was deported to the West. In a meeting of the Berlin branch of the Writers Union in March on “literature and historical consciousness,” a more measured but still largely partisan conversation about Solzhenitsyn occurred. In his opening remarks at the meeting, author and illustrator Peter Edel offered criticism of the Russian author, proclaiming, among other things, that there existed a “necessity that every writer opposes the falsification of history through bourgeois and social democratic ideologies.” In a similar vein, Günter Görlich, the chair of the Berlin SV district’s steering committee, suggested that there was a “great responsibility” for writers to ensure “the depiction of historical events for the development of a correct view of history,” a view that “stands in

⁴⁵ “Erklärung des Präsidiums – Eine Abfuhr für den Antikommunismus (Alexander Solschenyzyin), 26 October 1970, Berlin, SV 594, 82-83.

agreement with the goals of our Party's policy." During his time to speak, Jurek Becker offered a dissenting opinion, arguing that while authors had a right, "out of consideration for the politics of the day, to omit distinct sections of history," this would prove problematic in the long-run given their "responsibility for the truthful depiction of historical relationships." Becker then expressed his belief that while Solzhenitsyn was "no man of letters and an enemy of socialism," he himself was in no position to judge the accuracy of what the Russian author had written, because "that is never written about by us." He pushed further, prodding that East Germany's writers had neglected to pursue such an open discussion on personality cults within socialism. The older colleagues quickly dismissed Becker's criticism, reacting defensively to a perceived insult about their lack of candid assessment of Stalinism. Edel, fifteen years Becker's senior but like him had survived the Holocaust, retorted that Becker believed less in truth than in "the necessity to spark anew the debate among us about the personality cult." Jan Koplowitz, an original member of the League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers in the 1920s, leapt to the defense of the Old Guard, replying to Becker that they had indeed considered the question of personality cults and drawn important conclusions, a statement with which children's book author and former Soviet spy Ruth Werner concurred although she added that they should continue said exploration.⁴⁶

Becker's comment had struck a nerve. Görlich, in a postmodern vein, continued the rebuttal of Becker's opinion by asserting that there was in fact no universal truth at all; "it is bound by class," he explained, "and for this reason the author must always think

⁴⁶ Sepp Müller (Abteilung Kultur der Bezirksleitung Berlin der SED) and Helmut Kuchler (Sekretär der Parteiorganisation des Bezirksverbandes Berlin), "Information," 1 April 1974, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB 2/9.06/63.

about what he writes at what time.”⁴⁷ Görlich lamented that Solzhenitsyn portrayed Stalin in a wholly negative light when the leader should instead be put in historical context.⁴⁸ Werner Neubert, editor-in-chief of *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, asserted that the dissident’s real intent was to demonize communism and derail détente.⁴⁹ Channeling Honecker, he elaborated that “of course socialist literature cannot omit any theme, but there is always the question of which base position and with which goal such a topic is taken up.” Poet, screenplay author, and longtime IM Paul Wiens (also the husband of Irmtraud Morgner) concurred, adding that Solzhenitsyn had “through his entire personal development become an enemy of Marxism and socialism.” Wieland Herzfelde, another veteran communist, dismissed the Russian author as a “sales item” in the West, but turned his gaze on the GDR as well, noting that they also had writers “who do not have any great literary work to show for themselves [but] for political reasons [are] excessively overvalued.”⁵⁰

Yet not everyone disagreed with Becker. Playwright Rudi Strahl, for instance, blamed history books and history teachers for the poor understanding of the past in the GDR – they were too simplistic, presenting events as either good or bad, black or white. Stefan Heym quickly and strongly agreed with Strahl, expanding the latter’s critique to include television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Moreover, he added, beyond

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Werner Neubert, “Mitgliederversammlung des Berliner Bezirksverbandes am 26. März 1974,” 28 March 1974, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.204/78.

⁴⁹ Müller and Küchler, “Information.”

⁵⁰ Werner Neubert, “Mitgliederversammlung des Berliner Bezirksverbandes am 26. März 1974,” 28 March 1974, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.204/78.

history there were many other problems not discussed in the GDR.⁵¹ While lamenting this state of things, though, he expressed his appreciation at the frankness of their discussion on that day – “such discussions,” he stated, “are encouraging and they should absolutely be continued.”⁵² The SED officials writing the report on the meeting concurred with the latter point, describing the meeting’s atmosphere as “disputatious, partisan, and frank.”⁵³

A conversation about Solzhenitsyn had become a discussion about the function of literature and writers in the GDR and in socialism more generally. The central disagreement revolved around the truth-teller function of authors; some, led by Becker and Heym, cautioned against a selective reading of history and praised Solzhenitsyn, not for his literary style but for his willingness to examine controversial issues. Others, like Görlich, Edel, and Koplowitz, were quick to correct Becker, asserting that historical truth was a malleable concept which could be manipulated to support the larger, more important political truths underpinning socialism. All supported the SED and its brand of socialism, but there was a developing rift within the Writers Union as to how writers could best support their ruling party – should they strive for honesty for the sake of improving socialism or should they distort so as to convey more significant truths?⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Müller and Küchler, “Information.”

⁵⁴ Interestingly, most of the participants in these exchanges were Germans of Jewish heritage: Becker, Edel, Koplowitz, Werner, Wiens, and Heym.

The flipside of defending the Soviet Union was attacking Western “imperialism,” especially in Vietnam and, after the “fascist” coup of 1973, in Chile. The Writers Union even founded its own “Vietnam Commission” (rechristened the “Solidarity Commission” after the seventh congress) in the late 1960s, headed by presidium member Kurt Stern. This group conducted many awareness- and fundraising campaigns for the Writers Union, both among authors and in the general public. One such campaign was initiated when Stern spoke to the presidium on behalf of the Vietnam Commission in April 1970. There it was decided that all members of the SV were to be instructed to continue solidarity efforts for Vietnam “at all readings and events.”⁵⁵ Another donations campaign was approved by the presidium in May 1971 bearing the title, “Electricity for Vietnam.”⁵⁶ Such efforts proved successful, because one year later the Vietnam Commission could boast that this latest campaign had raised 50,000 Marks.⁵⁷ In December 1972 Kurt Stern announced another Vietnam campaign with several writers scheduled to appear on television over the course of a week, encouraging their compatriots to contribute.⁵⁸ Yet another fundraising event occurred in February 1973 when the Writers Union agreed to cosponsor an action entitled “For Vietnam’s Children” with the Theater Union and the Union for Television and Filmmakers.⁵⁹ As a way to combat Western “imperialism,” the

⁵⁵ Gerhard Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 13 April 1970, SV 594, 37.

⁵⁶ Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 25 May 1971, SV 763, vol. 1, 167.

⁵⁷ Gerhard Henniger to all Members of the Steering Committee of the DSV, 11 May 1972, Berlin, SV 596, 33.

⁵⁸ Gerhard Henniger to all Members of the Steering Committee of the DSV,” 20 January 1973, Berlin, SV 596, 2; Gerhard Henniger to all Members of the Steering Committee of the DSV,” 1 December 1972, Berlin, SV 596, 8.

⁵⁹ Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 23 February 1973, SV 763, vol. 1, 113.

philanthropic work on behalf of the Writers Union was a way to lend moral legitimacy to East Germany, raising its international prestige in the process.

The Chilean coup d'état on 11 September 1973 also drew the outrage of the Writers Union's leaders and many of its members. That same month, Gerhard Henniger could report to the Vorstand members that at the most recent presidium meeting those present had unanimously adopted a protest resolution against the coup. The resolution stated, "Filled with horror, rage, and grief, we, in the name of the writers of the German Democratic Republic, condemn the treasonous military clique which in the interest and by proxy of internal and foreign reaction toppled with bombs and tanks the legal, democratically elected government of the Chilean people." This "murderous putsch" outraged millions across the globe, they charged, but they remained convinced that "the just cause of democracy and socialism, their champions and martyrs in defiance of the mindless fascist terror, will prevail."⁶⁰ At the October 1973 Vorstand meeting the authors agreed on a similar protest resolution against the "terror" in Chile.⁶¹ And at a Party organization meeting in Berlin that same month, the members compared the "counterrevolutionary coup d'état in Chile" with the situation during the Cuban missile crisis.⁶² These resolutions and statements offered little practical help to the peoples of Chile, in contrast to the Vietnam campaigns, but enabled the Schriftstellerverband to continue its presence on the international stage as a champion of a morally just cause.

⁶⁰ Gerhard Henniger to all Members of the Steering Committee of the DSV, 19 September 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 52-53.

⁶¹ Katja Petters to Kurt Löffler (Cultural Department of the CC), 25 October 1973, SV 763, vol. 1, 77.

⁶² Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation das Parteileben," October 1973, LAB C Rep. 904-097 27.

In the months that followed, the Writers Union continued making itself heard, at least in the GDR and socialist world, on Vietnam and Chile. Attending a meeting of the leaders of socialist countries' writers associations⁶³ in Prague in March 1974, for instance, the SV joined other delegations in expressing solidarity with the peoples of Vietnam and Chile. They then declared their intention to aid the construction of a writers' home for the Vietnamese writers association. They also drafted a resolution condemning the "terror of the fascist military junta in Chile."⁶⁴ In May of that year the Solidarity Commission renamed the association's Vietnam solidarity fund the "Pablo Neruda" fund so as to reflect its more expansive character.⁶⁵ That summer, the Solidarity Commission planned a reading for July (eventually held in September) to honor what would have been Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's 70th birthday.⁶⁶ Similar events and campaigns continued into 1975, when the leaders of the socialist writers associations made additional solidarity declarations and the Schriftstellerverband proposed to publish the literature of Chilean writers living in exile in an anthology.⁶⁷ Through these many declarations and campaigns, the Writers Union could justifiably boast in a 1975 report

⁶³ The leaders of the various writers associations met annually to discuss common and national literary and cultural developments as well as seeking opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual support.

⁶⁴ "Bericht des Präsidiums – Vorstandssitzung am 24.4.1974," April 1974, SV 579, 55.

⁶⁵ Peter Heldt to Geggel, Abteilung Agitation, 9 May 1974, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/64; Abteilung Kultur, "Pablo-Neruda-Fonds des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR," 26 June 1974, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/64.

⁶⁶ Katja Petters, "Informationsbericht," 25 April 1974, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 58; Katja Petters to Kurt Löffler (Cultural Department of the CC), 26 August 1974, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 47; Katja Petters, "Informationsbericht," 25 September 1974, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 44. See also Katja Petters, "Informationsbericht," 25 February 1975, Berlin SV 763, vol. 1, 33.

⁶⁷ Gerhard Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 4 March 1975, SV 402, vol. 1, 111.

that East German writers had played a vocal role in calling attention to “anti-imperialist” struggles in Vietnam and Chile.⁶⁸

The Seventh Writers Congress, 1973

All of these roles played by the Writers Union and its members helped shape the Seventh Writers Congress in November 1973. The congress was called as per the statute of the organization and because two years had elapsed since the SED’s Eighth Party Congress, a meeting “from which stock is taken and new accents of literary development are set.”⁶⁹ East German writers congresses, typically held every four-to-five years, were enormous undertakings for the leaders and staff of the Schriftstellerverband given their prominence. The lead-up to the Seventh Writers Congress was no different. As the signature event of the Writers Union, these congresses attracted international media attention and provided the loudest amplifier to the East German people, aside from literature, that most writers would ever experience. In the preparations leading up to the seventh congress, nothing was left up to chance by the presidium, the secretariat, or the SED’s Central Committee, a fact which ensured that the event ran smoothly while also revealing the limits of Honecker’s “no taboos” promise within the Writers Union. The actual course of the congress was fairly uneventful, although several writers used their chance to speak in order to stake out some degree of artistic autonomy from the SED. Likewise, the evaluations of the congress by the Central Committee, central Writers Union, and SV district organizations also more or less agreed that the event had been a

⁶⁸ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Einige Gedanken zur Entwicklung der DDR-Literatur nach dem VIII. Parteitag der SED,” July 1975, SV 402, vol. 1, 66-71.

⁶⁹ Katja Petters, “Informationsbericht,” 4 June 1973, BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/31.

success, although especially in the district branches, assessments also revealed tensions bubbling beneath the surface of East Germany's literary community.

Planning for the Seventh Writers Congress took place on three main levels: within the SED, within the central bodies of the Schriftstellerverband, and within the SV's district organizations. The bulk of the conceptual preparation for the congress came from the first two, meaning that the Central Committee worked closely with union leaders to ensure that their goals were met for the event. A critical resource for the SED was thus the Party group within the Writers Union's steering committee, a collection of SED members who typically met before or after the steering committee's meetings to plan what was about to occur or evaluate what had just transpired. With these infrastructural inroads, the Central Committee was intimately involved in the planning of the congress from the beginning, a fact which decisively shaped the ultimate form the congress took. Still, the leaders and members of the SV had their own ideas of what the congress should accomplish and often initiated plans before seeking SED approval. Although in the end the visions of most members conformed to the state's dictates, some friction was created in trying to bring these views in line with one another.

In October 1972 the SV's central steering committee approved a basic set of guidelines for organizing the congress.⁷⁰ Among the topics to be handled were literary and aesthetic questions, how best to assure quality in writing, issues of literary criticism, how to integrate younger writers into the organization more effectively, and improving

⁷⁰ Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 24 May 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 94.

the material conditions of writers.⁷¹ With these general themes in place, the first concrete details for the congress began to emerge in January 1973. At a central steering committee meeting, Henniger informed the assembled members of recent presidium decisions, especially that it was to be a work congress at which many writers could speak. The introduction of smaller workgroups on the second day of the congress would facilitate the latter goal. After Henniger's sketch of the congress, the Vorstand members considered other topics to include at the congress. Erwin Strittmatter, for instance, suggested they deal with the problems of younger authors. Novelist and former actor Inge von Wangenheim called for a clarification of the national question at the congress, no doubt posing this question with the recently signed Basic Treaty in mind. Such concerns were also held by other steering committee members such as Henryk Keisch, a screenplay author from Berlin, who complained that *Neues Deutschland* had stopped referring to their organization as the "German Writers Union" and instead were calling it the "Writers Union of the GDR" – "Were we even asked about it?" he wondered. After further discussion, though, the Vorstand members reached the conclusion that a name change "would only confirm what at this time is anyhow the international practice: we are accepted and recognized as the GDR association." Keisch's views, though, suggest that not all members supported this stance. Finally, Leo Sladczyk, representing the Cultural Department of the Central Committee, commented that the writers should formulate the congress' questions themselves, though he also noted the Party group within the steering committee would play an important role in this process.⁷²

⁷¹ Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation über das Parteileben, October 1972, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 904-097 Nr. 27.

Appearances mattered: the writers must be the ones posing their own questions to answer instead of the Central Committee telling them what to discuss. A little guidance from the SED group within the Vorstand or perhaps Hager, however, might go a long way.

In March 1973 the steering committee's Party group issued a plan to ensure that congress preparations followed official policy guidelines. To this end, the Party group was instructed to form a Party active group (*Parteiaktiv*) "that above all must assure the political and content-related safeguarding of the congress preparation and implementation."⁷³ According to the plan, in April the leaders of the various base Party organizations in the Writers Union's district branches were to be instructed regarding Politburo decisions and then were to consult with other members of the district leadership. Kurt Hager would hold a talk with writers that same month followed by individual discussions with authors led by members of the Central Committee's Cultural Department, Minister of Culture Hans-Joachim Hoffmann, and Klaus Höpcke, among others. There would also be a series of training seminars for members of the literary bureaucracy which would be "paramount for orienting the ideological-artistic preparation and implementation of the VII. Writers Congress."⁷⁴ Very early in the planning process,

⁷² "Information über die Vorstandstagung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 22/23.I.1973," 24 January 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/78.

⁷³ Members of this select group included a great many veteran communist writers like Anna Seghers, Fritz Selbmann, Jurij Brezan, Max Zimmering, Alfred Kurella, Max Walter Schulz, Erwin Strittmatter, Otto Gotsche, and Kurt Stern; writers of the younger *Aufbaugeneration* such as Günter Görlich, Hermann Kant, Bernhard Seeger, Gerhard Holtz-Baumert, Helmut Sakowski, and Werner Neubert; and Party bureaucrats like Hans Koch, Alexander Abusch, Klaus Höpcke, Renate Drenkow, Gerhard Henniger, and Leo Sladeczyk.

⁷⁴ "Plan zur parterimässigen Führung der Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR von 14.-16. November 1973 in Berlin," 14 March 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57. The seminars were held that summer "in order to prepare a larger circle intensively for the associational elections and the congress." At all seminars, the decisions of the Politburo were "extensively explained." See Abteilung Kultur, "Information über die Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR," 5 September 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

then, the SED group within the Writers Union had asserted control over much of the congress planning and content.

Simultaneously, the presidium-approved “Conception for the Convening and Implementation of the VII. Writers Congress of the GDR” was submitted to the Central Committee for approval.⁷⁵ According to this plan, the main goal of the congress would be “to demonstrate the tasks and responsibility of writers in the forming of developed socialist society in the GDR.” That a discussion of creative problems was only a secondary goal to articulating and reinforcing the organization’s duties within socialism indicates the event was never envisioned primarily as a literary conference. The improvement of literature was to be an important theme, but only insofar as it was made more effective in shaping East German lives and improving its ability to “pose and answer new questions of the socialist way of life.” A further task would be to discuss the “special contribution of writers in the struggle for peaceful coexistence between states of different social systems,” especially in the face of (Western) imperialism. These were familiar refrains by 1973; the special role of literature in shaping socialism had been the overriding concern for the Writers Union since its creation, especially during the process of differentiation between the two German states in the early 1970s. For this reason, the conceptual plan also emphasized an author could only fulfill this role if he or she “proceeds, in their work, from a solid socialist position and gives an empathic, artistically appropriate answer to the multifaceted questions of life.” This formulation represented a claim that, first, writers were indeed essential components of socialist society, and second, they could only maintain these positions of importance if they were compliant

⁷⁵ The plan had first been considered by the presidium in February. Henniger to the Members of the Presidium, 31 January 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 127.

with the dictates of East Germany's ruling party; Honecker could not have said it better himself. This much was clear: in literature, conflicts must be presented from a "partisan" perspective; only then could one proceed to "evaluation and genuine striving for change."⁷⁶ With the plan's approval by the Politburo in March,⁷⁷ by early spring the main contours of the congress had been decided.

By April 1973 the themes of the congress' workgroups were approved by SV leaders. These groups were: "literature and historical consciousness," "literature and criticism," "literature and reality," and "literature and effectiveness" (later renamed "literature and reader").⁷⁸ The following month, the steering committee deliberated on the key questions and topics on which each group would focus,⁷⁹ and in June a tentative list of such topics met the presidium's approval. This list, prepared by the SV's Literature Department (within the secretariat), raised many questions which struck at the heart of writers' sense of self. For example, the first question for the group "literature and reality" was "what place does literature occupy in our society?" followed by "Of what consists its uniqueness (literature is not simply non-scientific recording of reality), of what consists its irreplaceability?" For the group "literature and historical

⁷⁶ "Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR," March 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

⁷⁷ On 15 March, Peter Heldt, leader of the ZK's Cultural Department from 1973-76 (Hoffmann's replacement), forwarded the conceptual plan to Hager for approval. Hager signed off on the plan as did the Politburo, and the proposed name change for the organization was also approved. Peter Heldt to Kurt Hager, 15 March 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57; "Vorlage an das Politbüro des ZK der SED: Einberufung des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR von 14.-16. November 1973 nach Berlin," 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

⁷⁸ Problems with the development of young writers, another pressing issue for the Schriftstellerverband, were to be handled as part of each workgroup rather than having a separate group devoted to that topic. Renate Drenkow, Literaturabteilung, "Arbeitsgruppen zum VII. Schriftstellerkongress," 15 June 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 69.

⁷⁹ Henniger to all Steering Committee Members, 24 May 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 94-95.

consciousness,” of particular concern was how to create a “real as well as artistic, polemically imbued concept of history [...] for education in socialist patriotism and internationalism in our time.” The “literature and effectiveness” group was likewise to query, “Of what consists the special effectiveness of literature in socialist society?”⁸⁰ By framing the main questions ahead of time, the union leaders could mold the discussion likely to ensure.

In September 1973 the Writers Union submitted a list of candidates for the Vorstand and presidium, (s)elected at each congress to serve until the next congress, to the SED. The number of presidium members was to be increased from 11 to 14. To this end, the list proposed Seghers once more for president, Jurij Brezan, Hermann Kant, Fritz Selbmann, Max Walter Schulz, and Erwin Strittmatter for vice presidents, Gerhard Henniger for first secretary, Werner Neubert as editor-in-chief of *Neue deutsche Literatur*, and also Helmut Sakowski and Kurt Stern. Newly proposed to fill the three new slots plus the one vacated by Hans Koch⁸¹ were Rainer Kerndl, Gerhard Holtz-Baumert, and Günter Görlich. The name of the fourteenth candidate was not included (it eventually was filled by Joachim Nowotny). No reason was given for the increase, but presumably a larger presidium, consisting of SED-loyalists, would give the Party an even greater say in the organization. Moreover, the new presidium members were on average thirteen years younger than the carry-overs, signaling the beginnings of a generation shift within the union’s leadership. Several new, younger members were to be added to the

⁸⁰ Drenkow, Literaturabteilung, “Arbeitsgruppen zum VII. Schriftstellerkongress,” 15 June 1973, Berlin, SV 597, 69-73.

⁸¹ Koch’s withdrawal from the presidium came “at both sides’ request.” Though the report did not elaborate why this decision had been made, it indicated that Koch could remain in the steering committee. Koch would go on to become a Central Committee member between 1981 and 1986, when he committed suicide.

central steering committee as well, including Nowotny, Uwe Berger, Volker Braun, Karl-Heinz Jakobs, and Rudi Strahl, in addition to the fifty-one-year-old Franz Fühmann.⁸²

October was the busiest month in terms of preparations; it was in this month that the district organizations completed their election meetings and the central SV bodies met regularly with Central Committee officials to iron out important details for the impending congress. An SED progress report that month stressed that the preparations had taken Politburo decisions into account well, but there were still a few details to work out. For example, the report criticized the tendency among some writers to voice complaints behind closed doors or in private circles, declaring, “We are magnanimous but also determined to seek out consequences if it is appropriate (Party expulsion of [Rainer] Kirsch in Halle).” The invocation of Kirsch’s expulsion⁸³ made it clear that the Party was not afraid to consider strong punishments if need be for literary professionals. In addition, Anna Seghers was instructed to champion the proposed name change for the association in her opening speech and then others should echo these sentiments throughout the congress. For the plenary sessions, the report proposed it cover “several broad, overarching questions,” including old standards such as peace policy (the Soviet Union would have just completed their World Peace Congress in Moscow), solidarity with Vietnam and Chile, and “conflict with the ideological maneuvers of the ideological enemy.” As for the delegates to the congress soon to be selected by their districts, “they

⁸² “Vorschlag für den auf dem VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR neu zu wählenden Vorstand des Schriftstellerverbandes,” September 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

⁸³ Kirsch was expelled from the SED following the appearance of his comedic play, “*Heinrich Schlaghand’s Höllenfahrt*” (Heinrich Schlaghand’s Descent into Hell), in the East German periodical, *Theater der Zeit*. In the play, Schlaghand, a Faustian character, builds an ideal city in hell and then attempts to convince the living to move there. Given that hell was easily read as a stand-in for the GDR, the banning of the play and Kirsch’s expulsion from the SED are unsurprising. Inez Hedges, *Framing Faust: Twentieth-Century Cultural Struggles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 90.

should be spoken with, especially individually with those who will appear before the plenum.” In other words, “for us it would be significant to be informed early enough about sentiments and opinions of important participants of the congress so as to be able to better guarantee the political conduct of the congress!”⁸⁴ As the congress neared, Central Committee members moved to ensure that their message was presented through the congress, regardless of who was speaking.

Along these lines, the Party group within the Writers Union’s steering committee met on 24 October 1973 to continue planning the congress. The meeting was led by Central Committee member Leo Sladczyk with Henniger discussing proposals for who was to be elected at the congress to central SV bodies. The meeting proved more controversial than expected, however, thanks largely to Erik Neutsch.⁸⁵ At the meeting, the Halle author complained that “the bloated machinery of the steering committee grows ever larger.” Neutsch no longer participated in Vorstand work, he elaborated, because it was “no longer fruitful.” He also wondered aloud what, if anything, the congress was going to accomplish. Congresses were supposed to strengthen the Party line, so what really could be achieved with a workgroup like “literature and reality”? Perhaps they should simply call it what it really was: “literature and partisanship.” The tension between Berlin, by far the largest district, and the other districts also came through when he noted that “a scientist has calculated that a writer from the republic must work about 50% more than a Berlin author in order to gain prestige and book copies,” implying that

⁸⁴ “Zur Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR in Berlin,” 18 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

⁸⁵ This is the same meeting at which Neutsch sounded off about the distribution of socioeconomic privileges within the union. For more, see Chapter Three.

authors from outside the metropole, like himself, had to work even harder than his Berlin colleagues in order to get the same recognition. Fed up with these alleged injustices, Neutsch brashly declared that he would refuse to stand for reelection to the steering committee at the upcoming congress, choosing instead to “budget” his time by working only in his district.⁸⁶

Many of Neutsch’s colleagues reacted defensively against the latter’s accusations. Fritz Selbmann took issue with Neutsch’s criticism of the steering committee. Hermann Kant echoed Selbmann’s words, advising that there was “no reason to sound the alarm.” Neutsch fired back, “There you are wrong!” to which Kant quickly retorted, “To set up an opposition of republic and Berlin – that is simply nonsense!” Henniger next jumped into the fray, rebutting Neutsch’s claim of hostility on the part of Berlin’s writers by stating that such a claim was “a fully false and pointless notion.” Neutsch countered that his provocations were not merely his own but were also shared by many SV members. He expressed that he did not feel insulted, nor did he feel like a “people’s tribune,” but “I can indeed say my opinion here...” The Party group meeting within the Writers Union, Neutsch claimed, should be a space for frank discussion and honest opinions. The prominent literary scholar Klaus Jarmatz was the next to challenge Neutsch’s charges, implying that Neutsch had lost his credibility to make such charges because he had not bothered to attend the last several meetings of the Vorstand and Party group where they

⁸⁶ Leo Sladczyk (Abteilung Kultur im ZK der SED), “Information über die Parteigruppensitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 24.10.1973,” 29 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57. For another account of this meeting and Neutsch’s behavior in particular, see Peter Heldt (Head of Central Committee Cultural Department), “Material über einige Probleme und Fragen in Vorebreitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress. 30 October 1973,” Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

had discussed the plans for the upcoming congress.⁸⁷ Neutsch, in his eyes, was guilty of a violation of protocol; what right did he have to complain if he refused to participate?

Others in attendance were more conciliatory. Veteran communist Walter Gorrish rejected Neutsch's expressed desire not to stand for reelection to the steering committee, voicing, "I see from him no convincing reason for this conclusion." Alexander Abusch, the former Minister of Culture, concurred, adding, "Neutsch should not stay away." Günter Görlich chimed in that "Neutsch must participate!" Acknowledging that Neutsch was entitled to ask whatever questions he wanted, Görlich chided the author all the same for raising them so soon before the impending congress: "That does not correspond to the principle of democratic centralism," he scolded. He then turned to Neutsch's point regarding the ineptitude of the Vorstand. Explaining that the steering committee meetings should be dedicated to "interesting problems," he conceded that when confronted with a new problem, they should be flexible and not adhere so rigidly to long-term planning. Max Walter Schulz agreed, adding Neutsch was "un-Party-like to behave in such a fashion" but should still remain in the Vorstand.⁸⁸

Neutsch's outburst garnered much attention among the leaders of the Writers Union and the Central Committee, becoming one of the more acrimonious moments during the run-up to the congress. Neutsch's resentment about the seeming ineptitude of the Vorstand and presidium, his complaints about Berlin writers not having to work as hard for recognition, and his belief that the congress was little more than a propaganda event which would accomplish nothing of substance were likely shared by many of his

⁸⁷ Leo Sladczyk (Abteilung Kultur im ZK der SED), "Information über die Parteigruppensitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 24.10.1973," 29 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Writers Union colleagues. He clearly struck a nerve with the other Party group members judging by the sharp reactions he inspired, especially by the presidium members present. Calling his actions “un-Party-like,” they were probably incensed both by his critique and the brash manner in which he articulated it. This violation of behavioral norms was in theory forgiven after reproaching him, judging by their insistence on Neutsch’s right to his opinions as well as on his renewed candidature for the steering committee. Whether for fear of losing Neutsch to the opposition or out of a genuine desire to promote frank dialogue within the boundaries of the Writers Union (or some combination of the two), the assembled literary figures had sharply disagreed with Neutsch, rebuked him for being unpartisan, but in the end tried to heal the rift and keep him in the fold.

Several of the same players assembled a week later as the Writers Union’s presidium consulted with Kurt Hager a fortnight before the congress. After explaining the social and material measures approved by the SED the week before,⁸⁹ the meeting turned to the impending congress. When describing his keynote address, Hermann Kant pledged to stick closely to the Party’s cultural policy. Fritz Selbmann spoke next, addressing the issue of the workgroups. They should, he reasoned, include “controversial discussions,” affirming, “Yes, we want that!” Selbmann continued, “The artist should formulate conflicts, perhaps also the solution of the conflicts,” though he expressed doubt about the latter proposition by asking, “Does the writer always know the answers?” Hager clarified that the Politburo itself did not always know the answers, so of course writers need not always offer solutions for the questions they posed. Kant responded that “[a]t any rate, you all could discuss it, that’s fine, but to write about it, that is really our

⁸⁹ See Chapter Three.

work; that is already something else!” Kant’s subtle reply deferred to the ultimate authority of the SED on political issues, but he also was trying to claim a measure of autonomy for writers in this important process within socialism. Selbmann then used the example of Volker Braun, who had recently presented a conceptual plan for his congressional workgroup (“literature and historical consciousness”) to the presidium. According to Braun, Selbmann recounted, “[O]ne gets history off one’s back.” “That,” he commented, “cannot be our opinion, however.” Thus, Selbmann concluded, “comrades of this workgroup must be prepared for this discussion,” although professionalism was important: “Naturally there should be no discussion where they attack each other!” Open discussion, to Selbmann, clearly had its limits. To police these limits, he proposed that the leaders of each workgroup and those designated to report on their group’s activities to the main plenum should be briefed by the Party active group. Later in the meeting, Anna Seghers also weighed in on the subject of open debate. Noting, “I know what I say carries weight,” she pledged to give the congress “a little direction” in her address. As for criticism, she stated, “We had a period where one contained [*Zügel anlegte*] criticism [...W]e now have a broader discussion. That is very good.” Along these lines, she conceded that she and Kant might disagree about certain things in their speeches, but “that is, however, not bad!”⁹⁰ In this, Seghers agreed with Selbmann: debate within limits was productive and welcome.

The group then turned to the issue of delegates and guests to the congress. Hager warned that the congress would feature some guests who “to us will not be so welcome!” namely, the foreign press. He acknowledged that there was an “enormous interest” in the

⁹⁰ Leo Sladczyk, “Aufzeichnungen von einem Gespräch des Genossen Kurt Hager mit dem Präsidium des Schriftstellerverbandes am 31.10.1973,” 5 November 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

congress, especially in the GDR. These circumstances, plus the fact that the Western press was expecting “sensations,” prompted Hager to instruct both Kant and Seghers to calibrate their speeches, at least as far as key questions were concerned. For smaller questions, about artistic creation, he agreed with Seghers that differences were tolerable. He then admitted that the workgroups were a “fortunate solution” since they allowed many people to speak. They were also “fortunate,” he added, because with the workgroups “we will have an open discussion; no show.” It would be clear that everyone in the groups “write[s] from a socialist standpoint,” and thus no one would be able to assume that “anti-socialist views are disseminated [there].” Moreover, the participants in these groups “must act more aggressively, so that it doesn’t appear [...that] only one side has a say.” Indeed, “to discuss openly – that boosts the significance of the congress!” Most importantly, Hager emphasized, “the congress is not a secret affair; it will be carried out in public.” Yet Hager also assured them that “[n]othing is left up to chance” and therefore they would not be caught off-guard by any surprises at the congress.⁹¹ Finally, he made clear that the chief goal of congress would be to demonstrate solidarity with the SED: “That is the most important thing, partisanship!”⁹²

Hager remained confident that things would go well at the congress, but his extensive and detailed pronouncements on how to minimize dissent without appearing to stifle criticism showed that, despite claims to the contrary, the Central Committee wished to leave nothing to chance. The SED should make clear their positions to the delegates, who in turn would need to declare their basic agreement with those positions. Moreover,

⁹¹ To this end, Hager instructed that the press would be allowed to participate in the plenary session, but not the workgroups. They would also be given written material from the congress.

⁹² Sladczyk, “Aufzeichnungen.”

open discussions were encouraged at the congress, but no “show” must emerge for the press to seize on. By ensuring a socialist baseline for discussions, these leaders were attempting to circumscribe genuine openness, framing each conversation so as to permit some free exchanges of ideas, but only to a point.

Final preparations for the congress dragged on into the days before the event. A week before the congress, the presidium finalized the list of speakers who had been selected to participate in the “open” discussion during the congress’s plenary session.⁹³ At that same meeting, they gave final approval to the congress schedule.⁹⁴ Kant’s speech was submitted to the Central Committee first on November 6 and then again with revisions on November 9. The day after the first draft, SED cultural officials conducted a several-hour meeting with Kant about the speech. Kant, for his part, was “extraordinarily pleased” about the meeting and agreement was reached on all important questions discussed. The main improvements were to strengthen his sections on the “global balance of power, the peace offensive of the socialist states (especially the role of the Soviet Union thereby),” and “the dialectics of peaceful coexistence and the class struggle.”⁹⁵ Kant’s cheerful cooperation and pliancy here was no doubt one of the reasons he was selected five years later to replace Seghers as Writers Union president.

At the district level, the primary tasks facing each Bezirksverband in congress preparations were first, to assess their work and activities in their district since the last

⁹³ “Diskussion im Plenum,” November 1973, SV 597, 15.

⁹⁴ “VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR – Ablaufplan,” November 1973, SV 597, 24-26.

⁹⁵ Peter Heldt to Kurt Hager, 9 November 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

congress, second, to select delegates to represent them at the congress, and third, to vote on a new district steering committee (the main candidates for which having already been preselected by the district branch's own Party organization). Though the SED would evaluate these meetings positively on the whole, some of the same rifts and tensions hinted at in the central SV's congress preparations were also evident at the district level.

At these district meetings, many writers were able to express their opinions on topical issues and many also articulated praise for the SED's policies. Not all comments were platitudinous, however. At one meeting, screenplay author Wolfgang Kohlhaase wondered why political expectations were often placed ahead of artistic ones when it came to literature, when in fact "the political tasks of literature can only be fulfilled through literary achievement." Moreover, "What happens with an author," he and others pressed, "who takes up questions that have not yet been clarified by a plenum?" Kohlhaase and others like him seemed most concerned with preserving artistic integrity while also protecting themselves from future shifts in SED cultural policy. Others, such as Franz Fühmann, added that literature could help overcome the contradictions of society through its critical reflections. Volker Braun criticized what he regarded as the falsification of history through literature. His position, he explained, stemmed from the fact that his own play about Lenin had been banned in the GDR.⁹⁶ These views aimed at protecting literary autonomy in candidly confronting problems in East German society.

The SED's Cultural Department had largely positive assessments in mid-October for district branch election meetings, although they acknowledged some problems. The

⁹⁶ Peter Heldt (Head of Central Committee Cultural Department), "Material über einige Probleme und Fragen in Vorebreitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress," 30 October 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

main sore spots came from contributions by Stefan Heym and Reiner Kunze, whose speeches were labeled “liberalizing.” Others at the meetings called for “uncompromising [*rücksichtslosen*] debate and sharper confrontation” as there was too much “plain and stale literature.” Such statements, the report judged, were not constructive. Therefore the SED’s goal should be “to prevent a culmination [of this dissent], to involve the aforementioned more strongly [in the Writers Union], and to achieve a greater understanding with them of the cultural policy of the Party and stronger activity for their realization.” Authors demanding that the limits of the SED’s cultural policy be tested should thus be reigned in and set straight. Heym and Kunze might be a different story, however, as might Stefan Hermlin, who all exhibited “certain cosmopolitan lines of thought,” “demanded greater openness to the world,” and decried East Germany’s “provincialism.”⁹⁷ Heym, Kunze, and Hermlin, the report implied, might be too far gone to be rehabilitated. Yet in general, these district meetings addressed all of the major concerns of the SED: proclaiming strong trust between writer and state, praising the SED’s cultural policies, extolling the responsibility of writers in shaping East German development, expressing solidarity with other socialist states, and policing authors who had transgressed acceptable boundaries.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Abteilung Kultur, “Einschätzung der bisherigen Wahlversammlung zu den Bezirksvorständen des Schriftstellerverbandes,” 16 October 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/62.

⁹⁸ Reports from 30 October and 5 November confirm these positive assessments by the SED. In the report from late October, The main observation made by SED officials about these meetings was “their solid connection with the party of the working class and their strong readiness and ability to create works that serve the development of the socialist personality and the shaping of socialist society in the GDR.” Peter Heldt (Head of Central Committee Cultural Department), “Material über einige Probleme und Fragen in Vorebreitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress. 30 October 1973,” Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57. For the 5 November report, see Abteilung Kultur, Information für das Sekretariat des Zentralkomitees, “Einschätzung der Wahlversammlungen zu den Bezirksvorständen des Schriftstellerverbandes,” 5 November 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IV2/3J 1789.

Not all district meetings went quite as smoothly as the SED's evaluation would suggest, however. A report describing the election meeting in Halle's district organization offers a case in point. Here there was a noteworthy distraction when Heinz Czechowski, a well-known poet and dramaturge in Magdeburg known for his critical views on the GDR, walked out of the meeting when the group was discussing the district's congress delegates. The report chalked this sudden exit up to the simple fact that "it was obvious that Comrade Czechowski was frustrated not to be nominated as a delegate." After this episode, the group agreed – in consultation with local district leaders, the Cultural Department of the ZK, and the SV's central steering committee – that Czechowski "should be made aware of his politically-inappropriate behavior." However, the dramatic exit apparently worked because they also decided to bring him back into the meeting and select him as a delegate after all. This curious turn of events was explained by the report as follows: "unnecessary discussion material would be furnished for the public – most certainly for entire districts – if the doubtlessly most-talented poet of the region did not participated in the congress." Here it was evident that participation in the congress was considered a sign of prestige, not only for the participants but for entire districts which could take pride in sending their favorite sons and daughters to such an important event. More importantly, it would have been a major embarrassment not to have sent the poet, and controversy seems to have been something the district organization members wished to avoid. Later at the meeting one colleague even nominated Czechowski for the district steering committee; however, this suggestion was not accepted.⁹⁹ Despite the "happy ending," the fact that the poet felt slighted and

⁹⁹ Leo Sladczyk, "Information über die Wahlversammlung des Schriftstellerverbandes im Bezirk Halle am 28.9.1973," 1 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/62.

that a controversy erupted within the district organization over his being a delegate indicates some tensions within the local organization and some clout among dissenting voices like Czechowski. Moreover, the incident indicated that the poet held some leverage in the district branch despite his controversial reputation; his renown translated into capital within the union, and so ploy for a delegate position worked. In response, his colleagues could only chide him for “politically-inappropriate behavior.”

Ministry for State Security reports originating from the SV’s district organization in Rostock provide another glimpse into district-level planning for the Writers Congress and the extent of government interference in these preparations. As the congress neared, September saw the local MfS administration issue instructions to all IMs connected with the Rostock Bezirksverband. In an official communiqué, Lieutenant-Colonel Henschel ordered that “all reliable unofficial informants are to be oriented towards the district delegates conference [of the Writers Union] and the preparations for the Writers Congress.” To this end, the IMs were to begin collecting information on the “activities and intentions of negative and hostile forces.” The directive also included a list of specific topics for the IMs to address, such as “known efforts to get negative persons in the district steering committee and to elect as delegates of the congress, respectively.” Other points included reporting on those seeking to “falsify the decisions of the SED and government” in cultural policy and those planning “disruptions or outbursts” at the congress. He also requested a list of IMs who could be utilized during the congress and those who, while attending the congress, would need to be “directed.”¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Oberstleutnant Henschel, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Rostock, Stellvertreter Operativ, “VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR,” 18 September 1973, Rostock, BStU Rep. 2 209 58, 78-79.

One report based on remarks by IM “Stephen Matthias” described a meeting in the fall of 1973 with Rostock’s intended congress delegates.¹⁰¹ Observing the meeting, “Matthias” judged that one delegate, Sigrid Pitschmann, a writer and also widower of the recently deceased author Brigitte Reimann, had “stubborn views and opinions of art and literature.” Another colleague, nature poet Annemarie Langen-Koffler, then 75 years old, was appraised as having hardly been published, something which the IM decided had left her “somewhat embittered.” For yet another colleague, the IM noted that he had been thrown out of the SED for unspecified reasons and now wanted to be rehabilitated, although he sometimes spoke “rashly,” “likes to play the opposition for the sake of opposition,” and it seemed likely that he watched West German television. This candid, subjective rundown of the delegates smacked of pettiness but not of significant challenges to SED policy among the designated delegates. Confirming this sentiment, the report’s final assessment was that there were no negative efforts against the conception of the congress. The Party active group within the district organization, the IM explained, had already preselected the group to make sure that there were no “negative persons.”¹⁰²

Less than a week after Rostock’s SV election meeting, an unidentified IM submitted a report answering Henschel’s questionnaire from September. For most of the questions about “hostile” or “negative” activities or intentions, the informant replied that there were none. He or she provided a list of the new Vorstand members and a brief

¹⁰¹ The delegates (including guests) were to be Heinz Knobloch, Kurt Biesalski, Sigrid Pitschmann, Dr. Schneider, Prof. Dr. Hans-Jürgen Geerds, Annamarie Langen-Koffler, Egon Richter, Kurt Batt, and Konrad Reich. The actual delegates were all from this list except Pitschmann, Schneider, Langen-Koffler, Batt, and Reich. Preselected for the district steering committee were Biesalski, Pitschmann, Herbert Mühlstedt, Lena Foellbach, Richter, Lietz, and Heinz-Jürgen Zierke. All were confirmed as steering committee members.

¹⁰² Oberleutnant Schädlich, “Auswertung der Treffs mit IMS Stephen Matthias vom 27.9. und 9.10.73, 10 October 1973, Straslund, BStU Rep. 2 209 58, 115-17.

description of them, but offered little more than innocuous details and the occasional cheap shot at his or her colleagues (one colleague was described as writing “boringly”; another was evaluated as “undistinguished, of no literary significance whatsoever”). He or she did note that Egon Richter had been tapped by the SED to become the chairman of the district branch at the next election (several years from then) as he has spent a year in the district Party school. The informant provided a similar list and descriptions for the delegates and guest delegates selected for the congress. Of note was the fact that nominated for the congress by the central SV’s steering committee but not actually elected were Kurt Batt, chief editor of Hinstoff Publishing House, and Konrad Reich, the publisher’s director, although the reasons for this turn of events were not specified.¹⁰³ In summary, the informant expressed “efforts to elect negative persons in the election committee or as delegates must, after this overview which I have just given, clearly be answered in the negative.”¹⁰⁴ What emerges from this glimpse into Rostock’s district preparations for the Writers Congress was that while there did exist some local controversies, most conflicts were personal or petty in nature and, as a whole, the members declared their agreement with the SED and its cultural policies.

¹⁰³ Hinstorff, once a regional press, was transformed under these two men into one of the leading publishers of contemporary German literature, publishing Ulrich Plenzdorf, Jurek Becker, and Franz Fühmann, among others. Batt died prematurely from a heart attack in 1975 and Reich was forced out his position in 1977, replaced by the more pliant Harry Fauth. Christoph Links, *Das Schicksal der DDR-Verlage: Die Privatisierung* (Ch. Links Verlag: Berlin, 2009), 148; Sander L. Gilman, *Jurek Becker: A Life in Five Worlds* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003), 104-5; Dennis Tate, “Keeping the Biermann Affair in Perspective: Repression, Resistance and the Articulation of Despair in the Cultural Life of the Honecker Era,” in *Retrospect and Review. Aspects of the Literature of the GDR 1976-1990*, ed. Robert Aktins and Martin Kane (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1997), 5.

¹⁰⁴ Abteilung XV, “IM Bericht,” 26 October 1973, Rostock, BStU Rep. 2 209 58, 166-72.

With preparations complete, the congress opened as scheduled on 14 November 1973. Attending were 231 delegates, approximately a third of the Schriftstellerverband's 725 members,¹⁰⁵ and 118 guests, including Erich Honecker, Chairman of the Council of State Willi Stoph, Chairman of the Council of Ministers Horst Sindermann, Chairman of the State Television Committee Heinz Adameck, and Kurt Hager. In addition, some 44 members of the AJA attended as did 26 foreign dignitaries (mainly from the literary world) such as Georgi Markow, president of the Soviet Union of Writers. The list of SV members included only 44 women (19% of total delegates), mostly from the Berlin district.¹⁰⁶ Berlin was also by far the largest of the 15 district delegations, sending 123 members (53% of all delegates) versus only 15 (6%) for Leipzig, the next largest delegation. The smallest delegations were from Cottbus and Suhl, respectively, each sending only three representatives. Of all the delegates, 78% were members of the SED while seven others belonged to the bloc parties and 44 (19%) were without party affiliation.¹⁰⁷ The following chart breaks down the ages of these representatives:

¹⁰⁵ According to the presidium's instructions, each district was supposed to elect roughly one delegate per five members, not counting the members of each district who were also in the central steering committee (and thus automatic delegates). In the end, excluding Vorstand members (60% of whom came from Berlin), the average ratio was one delegate to every 4.92 non-Vorstand members. Gerhard Henniger to all District Steering Committees of the DSV, 1973, Berlin, SV 705, 101; "Delegiertenschlüssel VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR," 9 July 1973, Berlin, SV 705, 95.

¹⁰⁶ These numbers were still relatively progressive in the Soviet bloc: at the 1971 5th Writers Congress of the USSR, of the 527 delegates, only 39 (7%) were women. Botschaft Moskau, Kulturabteilung, "Information über den V. Schriftstellerkongress der UdSSR," 8 July 1971, Moscow, SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/3566.

¹⁰⁷ Johannes Arnold, Georg Pijet, and Martin Stade, "Bericht der Mandatsprüfungskommission," 16 November 1973, Berlin, SV 705, 3-4; Attendance roster, VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR, SV 705, 18-61. Women were represented in about the same proportion in the new steering committee which was approved at the congress. See "Vorschlag für den Vorstand des Verbandes," 4 February 1974, Berlin, SV 705, 5.

TABLE 1: Age Range of Seventh Congress Attendees¹⁰⁸

Age Cohort	Female	Male	Total	Percentage
1) under 30 years old	1	3	4	2
2) 31-45 years old	16	81	97	42
3) 46-55 years old	7	62	69	30
4) 56-65 years old	14	21	35	15
5) over 65 years old	6	20	26	11

Already one could see the numerical predominance of the Hitler Youth generation (in the 31-45-year-old group) in the Writers Union, the generation that grew up under Nazism and were often marked by strong anti-fascist beliefs. Women made up the highest percentage of the 56-65 year-old cohort (32%), though overall they were better represented in the ages under 45 than over, indicating a demographic shift underway in the Writers Union.¹⁰⁹ Finally, in addition to these delegates, a small army of secretariat personnel worked in administrative and organizational jobs throughout the Congress to ensure smooth sailing from a logistical standpoint.¹¹⁰

The peace agenda and the new post-Ulbricht atmosphere of openness represented the most important aspects of the statement made by Erich Honecker before the congress and the opening speeches given by Anna Seghers and Hermann Kant. On the day of the congress' opening, *Neues Deutschland* ran a front-page address from Honecker to the

¹⁰⁸ Source: Arnold, Pijet, and Stade, "Bericht der Mandatsprüfungskommission," 3-4.

¹⁰⁹ The Soviet Union's 5th Writers Congress in 1971 had similar age range breakdowns. Of the 527 delegates, 51 (10%) were under age 40, 155 (29%) were between 41 and 50, 162 (31%) were between 51 and 60, 125 (24%) were between 61 and 70, and 34 (6%) were older than 70. Botschaft Moskau, "Information."

¹¹⁰ Particularly involved were members of the secretariat's Department of Finances and Organization. Abteilung Finanzen und Organisation (hereafter AFO), "Einsatzplan der Mitarbeiter zum VII. Schriftstellerkongress der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik," 1973, SV 705, 66-74; AFO, "Organisationsplan zur Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR in der Kongresshalle Berlin vom 14. bis 16. November 1973," 31 October 1973, SV 705, 125-30; AFO, "Protokoll über Arbeitsbesprechung am 9.10.1973," SV 705, 131-36.

delegates. In his declaration, Honecker welcomed the attendees while affirming his ‘no taboos’ speech two years earlier, touching on a variety of topics such as a request for the depiction of problems in “our socialist present.” To this end, he mentioned the virtues of “exchanges of opinions” several times, stating, for instance, “The exchange of opinions, to which stronger stimulating support should also be granted through literary studies and literary criticism, will inform new impulses of literary creation.”¹¹¹

The opening-day speeches by Anna Seghers and Hermann Kant repeated many of these same themes. Wishing to set the tone for the congress while heeding Honecker’s words, Segher’s speech represented a relatively surprising foray into a subject that had earned Christa Wolf opprobrium at the 6th Writers Congress, namely subjectivity. For example, Seghers noted that despite the fact that they were writing for the socialist collective, writers nonetheless engaged in a very solitary act, one that left each author with sole responsibility for properly conveying the story to the reader. This principle extended to readers as well; indeed, the idea of a single, consistent message in a book was unattainable: “It is also possible that different readers will get something special out of a book, each one being different,” she elaborated.¹¹² Seghers thus was taking Honecker at his word and implicitly rejecting an important aspect of the literary genre of socialist realism that had for so long been the mode of artistic expression demanded by the SED. Seghers’s statement thus represented a defense of more *avant garde* modes of expression that were difficult to accommodate in the rigid socialist realist model.

¹¹¹ Erich Honecker, “Grußadresse des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,” *VII. Schriftstellerkongress der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Protokoll* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1974), 14.

¹¹² Anna Seghers, “Der sozialistische Standpunkt läßt am weitesten blicken,” *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 15.

Hermann Kant delivered the keynote address, expressing all of the major themes of the congress and almost all of the points he was instructed to make by the SED a week earlier. His main theme was clear and familiar, namely writers' contribution to the socialist project. Indeed, the title of his speech was "Our words have an effect on the class struggle." In his speech, Kant laid out a case for the critical necessity of writers to engage in and ensure not only the socialist project but, more importantly, world peace and a "community of solidarity." His speech was peppered with praise for the Party and stressed the democratic character of life in the GDR. Yet it also was evident that Kant, drawing on Honecker's own words, was attempting to position the Writers Union to have a voice in socialist policy, stating "we shouldn't avoid controversy; lasting relationships are established not in the least through the exchange of very different views." Kant's speech also explored issues of aesthetics as well as larger international questions. He called for strengthening the writer's bond with the working class while also proclaiming the end of the Bitterfelder Weg movement. He was careful, though, not to go too far: "the farewell of a name like 'Bitterfelder Weg' shouldn't be understood as a farewell to the thing or to a position," he explained, adding that the idea of working class solidarity would always be "an essential part of the socialist cultural revolution." He closed with a warning that indicated distrust for the West, stating that even if they professed peaceful intentions, some West Germans wanted only to berate the USSR and work against genuine peace. Against this, the writers of the GDR must be constantly vigilant.¹¹³ Kant thus ended with a defiant and defensive attitude, emphasizing an anti-fascist East Germany against a fascist West. Yet his speech also featured moments where he

¹¹³ Hermann Kant, "Unsere Worte wirken in die Klassenauseinandersetzung," *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 31, 35, 47.

suggested a specific course of action for East Germany, a course in which his voice and the voice of other Writers Union members would continue to be heard.

The workgroups at the congress also featured many pronouncements on key issues of the day and, not coincidentally, all had presidium or soon-to-be-elected presidium members as their reporter back to the plenum. For example, Max Walter Schultz, assigned to report on the discussion in the workgroup “literature and historical consciousness,” mentioned that one of the main topics of discussion was “the relationship of literature to the fathers,” especially concerning the Nazi past. Twenty-six authors participated in the discussion, making points such as “My father identified himself as a ‘Jew of German faith’; he ended at Auschwitz” and “the majority of the German working class were not seduced but subjugated” by Hitler. Someone else warned against a West German lawyer’s brochure entitled “The Auschwitz Lie” and contrasted it with the simple truth conveyed by Seghers’s anti-fascist novel *Transit*. The speaker praised the latter, especially for its straightforward approach and also for its incorporation of the sentiment, “We are the *other* Germany!”¹¹⁴ Another speaker questioned the framing of the discussion, wondering “and what about the mothers, the mothers and wives who historically were doubly expropriated over centuries?” “[T]hey, too,” the speaker reminded the group, “made history.” Thus it seems that the discussion, although filtered through Schulz’s perspective, nonetheless indicated that, to many delegates, anti-fascism played a prominent role in the creation of literature. Such prominence given to the topic hinted at a fundamental agreement among many of these writers and their government about the centrality of anti-fascism to their socialist beliefs. Moreover, this focus also

¹¹⁴ Emphasis in original. Max Wallter Schultz, *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 232-35.

reflected the role anti-fascism played in the Writers Union's sense of its main societal function and what bound them together as an organization.

Most men and women who spoke at the congress took the opportunity to express solidarity with the SED, the working class, or the Vietnamese and Chilean peoples, thus presenting themselves, on a national stage, as good, loyal socialists. Kurt Stern, the consummate champion of Vietnam, praised Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev for working toward the “ancient dream of eternal peace” and declared his support for Chilean poet Pablo Neruda as well as the Vietnamese people.¹¹⁵ Moreover, both the joint declaration of the delegates made at the end of the congress and their concluding letter to the SED Central Committee stressed the strength of their bond with the working class and its party. The declaration's first line stated, “In the great class struggle of the age we writers live and work for socialism in the German Democratic Republic.”¹¹⁶ In the letter to the SED, the last line read, “We understand ourselves as comrades-in-arms of the Marxist-Leninist Party under whose leadership socialism will be achieved.”¹¹⁷

A few authors did make use of their speaking time to offer mild criticism of the SED's cultural policies. Franz Fühmann, for example, used his speaking time at the congress (giving the introductory remarks for the “literature and criticism” group) to address the role of literature in a socialist society and the relationship between ideology and art. Calling it “insufficient” to define literature only as an extension of ideology, Fühmann expressed that “man is not merged with ideology.” In fact, “Man, this curious

¹¹⁵ Kurt Stern, *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 100-1.

¹¹⁶ Erklärung der Delegierten des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR, “*VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 280.

¹¹⁷ “Grusschreiben der Delegierten des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR an das ZK der SED,” *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 283.

creature, is not even simply a social being; he is defined by society *just as* by nature, a contradictory, and yet indissoluble unity [...A] starry night, a hill, a river, a sudden wistfulness – *only* ideology?” Ideology and literature were not, in his opinion, “coextensive and they are also not in a relationship of lord and handmaiden.” “Both, he continued, “were tasked with serving their society but each with its own means and in its own manner.” It would be therefore very problematic if, as was often the case, “literature is reduced to its ideological aspect.” In other words, Fühmann was staking out a modicum of literary autonomy outside of ideological dictates and a special role for writers in the development of society. It was literature’s task to show how the present society came into being; “history,” he described, “is no stairway and society is not a form of coal bucket which is lifted from step to step by a *Weltgeist*.” Fühmann’s point, a challenge to classic Hegelian philosophy, was that history did not advance merely because of some self-sustaining mechanism, but rather through the enormous efforts of humans, a process for which writers were indispensable. Finally, Fühmann voiced that conflicts between writers and critics were natural, but they should be contained within the literary community; “appeals to extra-literary authorities should disappear from practice.”¹¹⁸ Reversion to ideology, Fühmann implied, was an inappropriate standard for judging a work or its creator.¹¹⁹

Beyond these statements by authors, the chief order of business at the Seventh Writers Congress was revising the organization’s statute. These revisions, approved

¹¹⁸ Emphases in original. “Franz Fühmann (Schriftstellerkongress 1973),” SAPMO-BArch DY17/3424.

¹¹⁹ Rainer Kerndl, the reporter for Fühmann’s workgroup on literature and criticism, all but demanded in his report that Fühmann’s contribution be published as soon as possible given its high quality. Rainer Kerndl, *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 242-43.

beforehand by the presidium and steering committee and ratified at the congress,¹²⁰ in essence represented a reformulation of the organization's self-understanding and societal role. Most prominent among these revisions was the aforementioned name change of the organization from the *Deutsche Schriftstellerverband* (German Writers Union) to the *Schriftstellerverband der DDR* (Writers Union of the GDR). In its mission statement, the old statute had declared, "The German Writers Union is, as the association of the writers of the German Democratic Republic, component and active co-designer of the societal system of socialism." Now, the newly minted Schriftstellerverband der DDR was "the societal organization of the writers of the GDR, who in their creative work are active co-designers of the developed socialist society."¹²¹ The tone thus shifted from one focused on the organization to one focused on its constituent members, members who would now be "active co-designers" of a socialist system that was no longer developing but rather was already developed. Furthermore, the new emphasis on creativity as what set the members of the SV apart from other societal groups also spoke to a new valuation of originality, perhaps as a response to the climate of cultural relaxation. Finally, the name change was clearly a product of the *Abgrenzung* process. No more would the association comprise writers claiming to represent all of Germany; now, the name implied, the Writers Union was rooted firmly in one state, the German Democratic Republic. Although its identity had changed, much of the union's self-defined societal mission remained the same, however. Authors still helped shape socialism in the present and

¹²⁰ See Summary Report for VII. Schriftstellerkongress, 14 January 1974, SV 705, 165-66.

¹²¹ "Vorschläge für Änderungen des Verbandsstatuts," undated, SV 705, 109; "Statut des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR," in *VII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 291.

future, in part by forming the thoughts and feelings of people living under socialism, and in part by defending socialism from “reactionary” forces.

The overall tone of many of the speakers was one of cautious optimism. The statements made by attendees generally paralleled those of the government and writers became increasingly vocal in asserting their role in building and perfecting socialism. Some seemed reluctant, understandably perhaps, to take Honecker at his word regarding differences of opinion. Yet many writers probably also genuinely believed progress was being made and therefore speaking out too harshly against the regime would be detrimental to that progress. Finally, there were others, leaders of the Writers Union included, who took the opportunity to quietly and carefully suggest that at the very least they be heard when the Central Committee was making decisions; after all, the members of the Schriftstellerverband were “active co-designers” of socialist society.

Evaluation of the congress was conducted by the SED, the Writers Union’s central leadership, and the SV’s district branches. Generally, the congress was officially well received. National press coverage of the congress was effusive in its praise, a fact which is hardly surprising given the extensive press plans devised by the SED before the congress. One plan, for example, dictated that the most important points for the media to convey were: first, the idea of “the writers – discoverer of our socialist reality”; second, “the inseparable connection of authorial effect with the struggle of the working class and its Marxist-Leninist Party”; and third, “the depiction of the contemporary worker personality and the socially- and historically-formative tradition of our literature.” Other points included “our literature in the worsening intellectual argument between socialism

and imperialism” and “proletarian internationalism and socialistic patriotism.”¹²² In the end, the SED got what they wanted: *Neues Deutschland* featured extensive reporting on the congress, devoting the lead article on its front page to it each day it was in session. Moreover, the entire texts of several of the speeches were printed while other speakers were paraphrased. The paper seemed particularly impressed with Hermann Kant, calling his keynote address one of the “highpoints of the day” and extolling the language he used.¹²³ One further element that received much attention was the openness and candor of the discussions, a reflection of Honecker’s stress on “no taboos.” For example, *Neues Deutschland* lauded the congress’ “frank discussions” as one of the highlights.¹²⁴

More discerning but still positive were the assessments of the congress by members of the SED.¹²⁵ The Central Committee’s Cultural Department issued their own evaluation of the congress on 19 November. Labeling the event “significant,” it noted the

¹²² It was further stipulated that press coverage should be steadily increased, including commentaries, summarizing pieces, and editorials. The daily *Berliner Zeitung* would be running a long series entitled “Writers on the Literature of our Time” which, through its “published reader feedback should serve as stimulation for the press of the remaining districts.” As far as coverage and evaluation of the actual congress was concerned, the press was tasked with publishing part or all of the key speeches and discussion contributions, especially so as to be able to continue reflecting on the themes presented during the congress. This would include reader reflections on the congress as well. It also would not hurt to include a few words from guests of friendly [read socialist] writers unions in other countries. Above all, “the new higher level of literature and literary discussion must be evaluated as an expression of the continuous development of the GDR, also in cultural and cultural-political regard.” Deutscher Schriftstellerverband, “Presseplan zum VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR,” 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57. See also, “Konzeption zur weiteren Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongresses auf den Kulturseiten des ND” (Vorlage zur Kollegiumssitzung am 13.9.1973), SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57; “Zur Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR in Berlin,” 18 October 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

¹²³ “Literatur – dem sozialistischen Leben untrennbar verbunden,” *Neues Deutschland*, November 15, 1973, 1, 2.

¹²⁴ “Ideenreiche Beratung über das literarische Schaffen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 16 November 1973, 1.

¹²⁵ Initial evaluations were highly positive. Already on the day of the congress’s opening, an SED memo boasted that all district Party secretaries had concluded that “among the delegates prevail a very good mood and the certainty that the congress will have a good run and great societal meaning.” “Kurzinformation,” 14. November 1973, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

“clear agreement with the politics and cultural policy that was determined at the 8th Party Congress of the SED.” Writers’ “tasks and responsibility” for the “forming of the developed socialist society” proved they were truly “active co-designers of our society.” Amidst a “good, creative atmosphere,” the writers were “partisan, self-assured, and closely connected with the Party of the working class.” Honecker’s presence was, according to the report, greatly appreciated, as were the SED’s new social provisions for artists announced at the congress.¹²⁶ Seghers and Kant’s addresses were praised as well, and the general discussion was characterized by a “high political and ideological-artistic level.” The name change, pushed by the SED all along, was hailed as “an entrance into a new self-understanding adjusted to the socialist perspective.” Furthermore, the name change evinced the “unbreakable connection of GDR literature with the working class.” The workgroups in particular were lauded as successful. The report’s one complaint was that at one point Erik Neutsch expressed views which the report’s author attributed to Rainer Kirsch, who had just been evicted from the SED. This prompted three writers to walk out of the room, including Heinz Czechowski, whose penchant for dramatic exits was already well established.¹²⁷

Evaluations by the central bodies of the Writers Union were equally self-congratulatory. Katja Petters, on behalf of the SV’s secretariat, could only make glowing remarks regarding the congress in a regular progress report filed in late November 1973 to Kurt Löffler of the Central Committee’s Cultural Department. “The extraordinarily

¹²⁶ See Chapter Three.

¹²⁷ Abteilung Kultur, “Information über den VII. Schriftstellerkongress der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik von 14. bis 16. November 1973 in Berlin,” 19 November 1973, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/57.

high resonance which the congress has found in the public is to be emphasized,” she noted. This was particularly so because the congress had demonstrated the “mutual trust between the party of the working class and the writers which has deepened since the 8th Party Congress.” The congress also successfully combated the ridiculous idea, she elaborated, that there was a unity to German literature, thus praising the congress’ contribution to *Abgrenzung*. She described the atmosphere of the congress as “a constructive exchange of thoughts and experiences about multifaceted aesthetic-ideological questions of creation,” one marked by a genuine “joyfulness of discussion.” To conclude, she summarized that “the congress has made clear that many questions of our lives and our times can only be fully grasped from the international [i.e., socialist] position.”¹²⁸ Like the SED’s own evaluation, Petters’s report to the Central Committee also emphasized the strong relations between writers and state and the open, productive, and partisan discussions.¹²⁹

From the perspective of the district organizations, the picture emerging was cloudier than for either the central Writers Union leaders or the Central Committee, but still relatively benign. In BV Rostock, for example, an unofficial informant nicknamed “Robert Kracht” reported to his Stasi handlers that the district members viewed the congress as having gone well. Just like in the central evaluations of the congress, Kracht

¹²⁸ Katja Petters to Kurt Löffler (Cultural Department of the CC), 26 November 1973, Berlin, SV 763, vol. 1, 74.

¹²⁹ Similar comments were made in evaluations conducted by the central steering committee. In its February 1974 meeting, the first since the congress, presidium members proposed a number of steps to assess the congress, including continuing to discuss the problems raised in the workgroups, providing better support to younger writers, and continuing discussion of new literary works in the Vorstand. Presidium, “Für die Vorstandssitzung am 7.2.1974: Arbeitsplan 1974,” 7 February 1974, SV 579, 103. At the April 1974 steering committee session, Max Walter Schulz noted the congress’ “success,” especially in helping start the process of “self-understanding.” This was evident, he articulated, in the district organizations’ planning for the congress as well as in discussions of literature “which were conducted in public.” Max Walter Schulz, report for Steering Committee meeting, 24 April 1974, SV 579, 28.

described how the Rostock delegates had experienced “great joy” that Honecker was in attendance, implying their appreciation for being taken seriously by the SED. This was particularly the case because he did not speak at the event, the report continued, demonstrating “that the Party does not interfere in DSV affairs/expert questions.” Apparently there had been a tense, informal discussion, however, between Honecker and Ulrich Plenzdorf at the congress. The Rostock writers present evaluated this confrontation “positively,” because “Plenzdorf until now was uncomfortable and was often criticized.” Martin Stade, one of Rostock’s delegates, had seen the incident and described Honecker’s rational approach to the confrontation. Thus despite some tensions, in this incident most writers in attendance seemed to take the state’s side. Still, there were complaints voiced about the fact that at the congress, the vast majority of the people given the chance to speak were part of the union leadership, especially from Berlin. Apparently the view had been growing in the district that “factually, only the Berlin association had their say and the cleft with the other district associations has now become larger and was clearly visible here.”¹³⁰ Overall, then, the Rostock district evaluated the congress as positive, but the event had also exacerbated inter-regional tensions, particularly vis-à-vis Berlin.

Remaining Taboos

Literature scholars have demonstrated convincingly that in cultural policy, the SED began putting the brakes on the “no taboos” openness well before the Biermann expatriation of November 1976. In fact, the SED leaders began plotting against

¹³⁰ Oberleutnant Pohle, “Information,” 14 December 1973, Rostock, BStU Abteilung XX/7 Rep 2 209 58.

Biermann in 1973.¹³¹ As a further example, Stefan Heym's *Fünf Tage im Juni* (Five Days in June), a story about the 17 June 1953 worker uprising he had been working on for over a decade, was published in the West in 1974 but barred in the GDR.¹³² Additionally, by 1975 the Stasi had stepped up its surveillance of authors deemed oppositional.¹³³ The limits of "no taboos" were therefore beginning to be exposed as early as 1973, less than a year and a half after Honecker's statement.

These growing restrictions in literature policy found their parallel within the Writers Union. In 1973, Stefan Heym, a thorn in the side of the SED since the 1960s, found it increasingly difficult to publish his manuscripts, as evidenced by a book reading he gave in March organized by the Writers Union. Reading from *Der König David Bericht* (The King David Report), a novel that had recently been published in West Germany but had not been permitted in the GDR, Heym's reading demonstrated that there were clear limits to what could be said about socialism as evidenced by the multiple Stasi reports criticizing the event, book, and author. Heym's story recounted a scribe commissioned to pen an account of King David's rise to greatness. Though pressured to conform to the accepted narrative, the scribe, upon digging deeper, discovers inconsistencies and contradictions in that narrative. The scribe is then summoned before

¹³¹ Dennis Tate, "Keeping the Biermann Affair in Perspective: Repression, Resistance and the Articulation of Despair in the Cultural Life of the Honecker Era," in *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR, 1976-1990*, ed. Robert Aktins and Martin Kane (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 2-3.

¹³² Peter Hutchinson, *Stefan Heym: The Perpetual Dissident* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 167-68.

¹³³ Joachim Walther and Gesine von Prittwitz, "Mielke und die Musen: Die Organisation der Überwachung," in *Feinderklärung. Literatur und Staatssicherheit: Text und Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich: Verlag Edition Text + Kritik, 1993), 80; David Rock, "Introduction: Voices of Writers, Opposition Movements and the Churches: their Role in Preparing the Way for the *Wende*," in *Voices in Times of Change: The Role of Writers, Opposition Movements and the Churches in the Transformation of East Germany*, ed. idem. (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 3-4.

King David and ordered to write what he is told, covering up whatever factual contradictions he encounters that might diminish the greatness of the king. The scribe refuses and is condemned to silence, forcing him into isolation and eventually exile.¹³⁴

In attendance at this reading were somewhere between 70-100 people, many of whom were students and young people as well as several of Heym's literary colleagues. One report of the meeting observed that especially the young people seemed to comprehend Heym's story was meant as an allegory for the GDR, one in which he criticized the "falsification of history in reference to the revolutionary workers movement and especially in the valuation of personalities (W. Ulbricht obviously)." Moreover, the story's narrator was obviously a stand-in for Heym. The critique articulated by the novel was most glaring when the narrator leaves Jerusalem after tiring of the pressure to adhere to obvious untruths in the name of political loyalty. When asked in the Q&A session after the reading why he had written the book, Heym admitted that he had wanted to say something about the present. Indeed, one report concluded that the reading had demonstrated Heym's intention to call attention to the "falsification of history" by leading GDR functionaries whose only real interest was shoring up their own power.¹³⁵

The other truth revealed by Heym's reading was that literature and in particular public book readings could and did serve as forums for some form of public discourse in an otherwise closed society. Not only could writers sometimes read from works with critical content, but readers also had the opportunity to ask questions and comment on the

¹³⁴ Staff Sergeant Gellrich, "Buchlesung des Schriftstellers Stefan Heym am 27.3.1973 in der Magdeburger Erich-Weinert-Buchhandlung," 23 April 1973, Magdeburg, BStU AOP 1066/91 21, 110-11.

¹³⁵ Abteilung XV, "Information: Lesung des Schriftsteller Stefan Heym im März in der Erich-Weinert-Buchhandlung," 2 May 1973, Magdeburg, BStU AOP 1066/91 21, 157-58.

book and its themes. In other words, these readings gave East Germans a chance to discuss socialism in public at officially-sanctioned and -organized events. At the Heym reading, some audience questions were mundane, asking him why he wrote the book, why he had set it in the past, or what his opinion of historical scholarship was. The older people in the audience tended to ask these historical questions, according to a Stasi informant's account. However, the same report observed that younger audience members tended to ask more probing questions such as inquiring why his book had not been published in the GDR. By the evening's close it was clear to the Stasi that Heym had not written a purely historical novel but rather one that compared past with present in order to criticize the latter. Moreover, it concluded, his goal appeared to have been to whet the public's appetite for a book that was not permitted in the GDR so that they would begin demanding its publication. In short, the reading and the novel represented a "concealed and negating critique of the Central Committee and the Writers Union."¹³⁶ The failure to publish the book in the GDR and the hostile reaction to Heym's reading by the Stasi indicate that he had discovered a taboo that the SED was unwilling to overlook. Still, the fact that the event had been organized by the Writers Union, albeit with different intentions,¹³⁷ demonstrates the organization's commitment to engage both the public and those challenging societal taboos.

¹³⁶ Ibid.; Staff Sergeant Gellrich, "Buchlesung des Schriftstellers Stefan Heym am 27.3.1973 in der Magdeburger Erich-Weinert-Buchhandlung," 23 April 1973, Magdeburg, BStU AOP 1066/91 21, 112-13.

¹³⁷ The reading in question was part of a series inaugurated in 1971 by science-fiction author Günter Braun and the steering committee of Magdeburg's SV district organization. The first of these readings, held in 1971, featured Reiner Kunze, a relatively young prose and poetry author who would soon find himself in disfavor with the regime for publishing works critical of real existing socialism. Kunze declined to lead an open discussion following the reading, however, despite the Writers Union's intentions to the contrary, a move which sparked consternation among local SED officials; henceforth the Magdeburg organizers were instructed to be more careful. Transcript of meeting with GMS "Martin Schreiber" on 14 March, 3 April

A year later Heym was in an even less conciliatory mood as were SV leaders. At a talk given in November 1974 between Berlin's SED First Secretary Konrad Naumann and the members of the Berlin Bezirksverband, one of the topics the secretary addressed was an outburst by Heym at the most recent meeting of the Berlin district organization. Earlier that month Heym had attended said district meeting and insisted that censorship be ended in the GDR, backed in his statement by Plenzdorf and others.¹³⁸ Now Naumann stated categorically that there was no reason whatsoever to alter or abandon the SED's cultural policy. Instead, "all energy must be directed at developing them further and bringing them fully into effect." He contended that the SED had done everything it could to facilitate reconciliation with Heym, but "[o]bviously" Heym was hypocritical, "not ready or capable to submit his own position to a self-critical evaluation." Naumann then explained that the non-publication of Heym's latest book was tied directly to the latter's "basic ideological position." Simply put, "Heym has not depicted particular historical processes and events from the standpoint of a socialist but rather clearly with social democratic positions," a major problem indeed given the efforts the SED had taken in the preceding years to disparage the West German Social Democrats. Masquerading as a "critical 'socialist,'" Naumann accused Heym of attempting "to place everything in question and to defame that which has decisively caused and causes the rapid development of our socialist society," namely the leading role of the working class and the Party representing it, their socialist state, and the mutual trust between workers and

1973, Magdeburg, BStU AOP 1066/91 21, 116-18. See also "Auszugsweise Abschrift aus Treffbericht," 9 April 1973, Magdeburg, BStU AOP 1066/91 21, 114.

¹³⁸ Jeannette Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndshill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 172-73.

the SED. In sum, Heym had not contributed to socialism's development but instead had maligned and detracted from it, adopting ideological tendencies of the GDR's enemies. Moreover, when offered a chance to repent, i.e., to make changes to his manuscript, Heym had refused, thus demonstrating, from Naumann's perspective, that he did not wish to reconcile with the SED. Naumann's remarks drew "undivided, strong applause" from the assembled writers, according to the report.¹³⁹

In the subsequent discussion, eight people made contributions, none of whom defended Heym. In fact, most questions concerned domestic, economic, and foreign policy, as if the Heym issue had been settled. Rudi Strahl did address Heym's actions, though, condemning the author for creating "great mistrust and rejection," expressing remorse that he hadn't had the courage to confront Heym at the aforementioned Berlin district meeting. To illustrate his point, Strahl likened Heym to an armchair critic who stood on the sidelines while others actively took part in a struggle. Heym was also a hypocrite, Strahl charged, because he demanded tolerance of his own views, but refused to tolerate the views of those that differed from him.¹⁴⁰ Strahl's comments were not representative of all members of the Writers Union, to be sure; the public nature of the meeting with Naumann perhaps kept those with more supportive opinions of the critical author from voicing their concerns (a fact the SED and union leaders were surely aware of). Nonetheless, the talk with Naumann at an event sponsored by the Writers Union's

¹³⁹ Helmut Kühler, Parteisekretär, "Information über das PODIUM mit Genossen Konrad Naumann, Kandidat des Politbüros und 1. Sekretar der SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin am 21. November 1974," 22 November 1974, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Berlin leaders provided an opportunity to demonstrate the purported solidarity between the organization's members and the ruling party by criticizing a wayward colleague.

Growing tensions were also evident when in January 1975 Kurt Hager met with leading cultural figures, including several SV leaders, in order to advise them on the results of the recent 13th Plenum of the SED. During the session, Hager repeated familiar official statements praising cultural figures, noting that “the significant works of the creators of culture are infused in ever stronger measures with the ideas of socialism” and that writers and artists “prove themselves as creative co-designers of socialist society.” Hager quickly added that there were still some problems, however, such as artists and writers who judged the GDR's reality on the basis of an image of socialism that was too idealistic, evincing, in his view, a lack of working class experience. There were also “tendencies of abandoning the socialist position” in biased depictions of life in the GDR as well as in an overestimation of the “critical aspect of art.” He then warned, “[W]e will permit no work that turns against socialism.” As an illustration of this principle, Hager held forth the case of Heym whose trouble with the SED, the Central Committee member explained, stemmed not from any artistic criteria but because of his political behavior. Next he brought up Reiner Kunze, focusing especially on the fact that he had criticized the GDR in the Western press. Despite attempts to convince him to adhere to the basic tenets of the SED's policies, Hager lamented that the author had remained recalcitrant.¹⁴¹

The upshot of Hager's statement was that too many writers and other cultural figures were challenging the core principles and policies of the GDR and its ruling party.

¹⁴¹ “Gedächtnisprotokoll über eine Beratung des Genossen Kurt Hager zur Auswertung des 13. Plenums mit Mitgliedern des ZK und einigen Mitgliedern von Bezirksleitungen, die im Kulturbereich tätig sind, am 20.1.1975,” 31 January 1975, SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/5657.

Pointing out problems from within in order to improve socialism was one thing, he had repeatedly emphasized, but when one moved outside of socialism, then one transgressed a boundary which set that author or artist against the SED and the interests of East German society. But who defined what it meant to be “within socialism?” Heym and Kunze considered themselves to be loyal East German citizens, meaning that “within socialism” was a criterion whose parameters were defined by the SED and its cultural officials. Moreover, in Hager’s view the West, despite its claims to pursuing “peaceful coexistence” with the Soviet bloc, was in the end still imperialistic, out to manipulate naïve artists from socialist countries and play them against their states. Heym and Kunze therefore could be dismissed because they went “outside” of the GDR in making their criticisms instead of directing their comments internally. But others could be reproached as well, especially those who had been too “idealistic,” who had held East Germany to too high a standard, who had expected utopia but found only real existing socialism. This drawing down of expectations by the regime was particularly telling, signaling a government growing wary of cultural openness which had resulted in too many taboos being challenged. Yet there was a silver-lining in Hager’s formulation: these errors, deriving from insufficient working class experience, could in theory be corrected. There were few authors who were too far gone to make amends with the Party.

The ensuing discussion embraced similar themes. Roland Bauer, a key figure in the SED district leadership in Berlin, commented that there were not many cultural figures who openly opposed the SED’s cultural policy, naming only Heym and Wolf Biermann. Yet he also observed that there were several who were sympathetic to these men, including Volker Braun and Jurek Becker. Correspondingly, he strongly suggested

that the Writers Union's leaders prevent the formation of a faction (a Leninist organization's cardinal sin) within the SV based around these dissidents, thus echoing Hager's comments that few writers and artists were too far gone to be able to earn their way back into the SED's good graces. When it was Hermann Kant's turn to speak, he addressed the Heym situation directly, explaining that the latter was active in the SV but also admitted that he did have a group of admirers in the union. This group, Kant concurred, needed to be split up by confronting them directly. Yet Kant also stressed that these issues needed to be dealt with locally, indicating the SV vice president's desire to police the Writers Union internally as much as possible. The district chairman, Günter Görlich, agreed with Kant, stating that Heym's behavior in the SV had been "normal," and the real problems only began with his behavior "on the other side." Overall, Görlich added, the Berlin district organization was working well. The steering committee, he also noted, was marked by "great differentiation and lively debates which often bear a creative character." Both Kant and Görlich seemed most interested in downplaying the influence of Heym and his admirers within the Writers Union. Not all those in attendance were so willing to dismiss Heym's influence as harmless, though, as Otto Gotsche (an author, Central Committee member, and former secretary of the GDR's Council of State) asserted that there was indeed a very real problem of factions within the Writers Union. In response, Görlich rhetorically asked, "Could Plenzdorf, Sarah Kirsch, Volker Braun, I[rntraud] Morgner, [Klaus] chlesinger, [Jurek] Becker be in cahoots [*unter eine Decke stecken*]?" This seemed to him dubious; therefore he felt that discussing "factions" or

“groups” within the Writers Union was unnecessary.¹⁴² A leading member of the Writers Union had once again downplayed signs of internal rifts.

Following the discussion, Hager made his summary remarks. He stressed, among other things, “We are in the know and can evaluate the situation exactly. We know who stands where, with whom one can contend, who has a solid class attitude and who stands apart, and for whom one must and can struggle.” For instance, it was worthwhile to fight for Volker Braun. After all, “everyone has had a teacher or mentor, everyone often thanks an experienced communist who led directed him to the right path.” The follies of youth had led Braun astray, Hager hinted; he and those like him must be brought back into the fold and shown “the right path” before they drifted too far away. As for the formation of factions, he acknowledged that several artists and writers were not in full agreement with the Party; now they should be won over. As for Heym, Hager instructed to focus on his “right social democracy” political deviations. He then instructed the SV’s Berlin district branch to bring Heym in for a talk, one conducted by writers themselves so as not to give rise to the excuse that they were compelled to take issue with the dissident. All those present, he continued, must then act “aggressively.”¹⁴³ The emphasis on proactive countering of dissent was especially important; the troublemakers could be dealt with through triage – those that were too far gone could be contained, but those worth fighting for should be pursued with the utmost energy by all.

Such a process played out for Volker Braun in December 1975 when he was asked to appear before a meeting of the SED leadership group within the Berlin branch of

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

the Writers Union. Called before the group to explain the political position expressed in his poem “*Gedächtnisprotokoll*” (Record), the group reportedly told Braun that though they were his friends and had helped him on many previous occasions, for this poem, “that no longer works.” Braun explained that earlier in the year he had submitted several poems for publication and the publisher requested he edit the poem in question, changing some of the lines in view of the fact that it was to appear in the Federal Republic where “there could be false understanding.” The most controversial line of the poem read: “The people here spit in my ink” (*Die Leute hier spucken mir in die Tinte*); the publisher had requested that “here” be dropped while leaving the rest of the poem untouched. Braun, however, had declined the opportunity to revise the poem, arguing that he was describing readers, not the HVVB censors in the poem.¹⁴⁴

The assembled leadership group reacted skeptically to this explanation. Hermann Kant asserted that no one was fooled, stressing, “we are all writers here and know how to circumvent with words.” Günther Cwojdrak – himself dismissed in 1957 as editor of *NDL* for his efforts to establish German cultural unity through its pages¹⁴⁵ – agreed, reminding him that they, too, “are surely your readers.” Author Karl-Heinz Jakobs joined the critique, arguing that the poem was certainly political: “There is a boundary that you overstepped,” he scolded. In his eyes, the poem was clearly a “denunciation of the Party and society as well as your comrades.” This “cynical and base” poem, Jakobs continued, stemmed from Western ideas, something “that doesn’t work with us!” Harald

¹⁴⁴ “Kurzinformation über den Verlauf der Parteileitungssitzung im Berliner Schriftstellerverband an 4. Dezember 1975,” December 1975, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

¹⁴⁵ For an overview of the early history of *NDL*, see Dennis Tate, “Neue deutsche Literatur: the Forum of the Divided Nation?” in *German Writers and the Cold War, 1945-61*, ed. Rhys W. Williams, Stephen Parker, and Colin Riordan (Manchester University Press, 1992), 47-64.

Hauptmann, claiming to be “no friend of [Braun’s] poetry,” lectured him that “one can criticize everything, but one must feel that you have your home here [...] but you no longer feel that way!” Gerhard Henniger articulated similar sentiments, as did Ruth Werner. Hearing his colleagues’ comments, Braun was astonished, claiming he had not expected such criticism. He stuck to his argument that he had intended to describe readers in the poem, not the government, but he conceded that the poem failed to be effective. Pledging to never again attempt to publish the poem, he expressed his regret for the entire episode. Kant dismissed him, telling him to go home and clarify his true position. Braun, defending himself, declared, “I have nothing in common with those over there [in West Germany].” Kant, after the meeting, approached Braun privately and suggested he give the poem to Stephan Hermlin, “a relentless critic and connoisseur,” who might be able to advise Braun on how to rewrite it.¹⁴⁶ These prominent Writers Union members had acted exactly as Hager had wished – they had aggressively confronted Braun, not with the intention of driving him away but aiming instead to show him his errors so that he could correct them in the future. And at least for the time being, it appeared that Braun had responded the way they had hoped.

Seemingly settled, the episode was nonetheless played out again a week later at a full meeting of the Party base organization in the SV’s Berlin district branch with more or less the same results. Anna Seghers, not present at the prior meeting, complained that it wasn’t even worth the effort to make a fuss “since it is simply a bad poem.” Braun was a literary talent, she consoled, but this poem did not reflect that talent, admonishing, “Volker, control yourself better in order to become a real master!” Jurek Becker stressed

¹⁴⁶ “Kurzinformation über den Verlauf der Parteileitungssitzung.”

that the attention paid to Braun's poem demonstrated the "responsibility of the Party leadership for the effect of literature." Yet he cautioned that they should act on this responsibility only in cases where "the goal is overshot in a certain direction." He then questioned whether the conditions in the Writers Union were present for "mutual communication" and called for NDL to provide a space for a real debate, hitherto lacking. Braun responded to these comments in a manner similar to the previous meeting. He explained that he viewed writing as his "Party work," stressing loyalty to his country and his commitment to working on behalf of socialism. In fact, while recently in West Germany for a reading tour, he recounted how surprised he had been by the lack of understanding of even basic facts about life in the GDR. In the end, he admitted, the discussion of the poem was not very important. In it, he had laid too much emphasis on the detrimental aspects of criticism of one's works when he had actually wanted to say that criticism by others makes one's work better.¹⁴⁷ Once more, Braun stuck to his argument about the poem's meaning, but as a gesture of contrition admitted it wasn't effective and professed his loyalty to the SED.

Conclusions

By mid-decade, the pattern in these events was clear. The incessant declarations by both the SED and the Writers Union's officials that there existed close unity between writers and the Party, that the former understood and embraced the latter's cultural policy, that writers were a vital part of forming socialist society, and that literature could

¹⁴⁷ Roland Bauer, "Erste Information über die Berichtswahlversammlung der Grundorganisation des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, Bezirk Berlin, am 12. Dezember 1975, 12 December 1975, SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/7021.

help sort through the new conditions the GDR faced, all evoked a common tone of mutual trust and responsibility. It was one thing, however, to present this unified front to the outside world; it was another to repeat the mantra internally. As various reports indicated, there was anything but complete unity within the Writers Union, let alone between the organization and the SED. In all districts, to be sure, there was an overriding consensus and most writers did not have major conflicts or disagreements with the SED, yet report after report pointed to some level of internal discord and tension with the ruling party. Why, then, was it stated so frequently that there was perfect harmony?

This message was reiterated because it was in the best interest of both groups to do so. The Central Committee leaders and cultural officials sought control over the message being disseminated in literature and in public by their country's authors. The Writers Union's leaders, aware of the national spotlight put on them because of the congress, their involvement with key foreign policy issues, and their help in shaping society, had an interest in maintaining their position of influence within East Germany, and the best way accomplish this was to assure the SED of their loyalty and the indispensability of their contributions to the GDR and its people.

Tensions should not be overblown, however. For the most part, the early 1970s were years of convergence of interests for both the writers and the SED. Honecker's proclamations on cultural liberalization and the publication of more critical works generated genuine optimism among many authors. The roles that the SED called on the Writers Union to play in confronting Ostpolitik, advancing Abgrenzung, and defending socialism at home and abroad only confirmed this sense of self-importance. In many ways the highpoint of this optimism came with the Seventh Writers Congress in

November 1973, a gathering at which writers from across the GDR extolled the new culture of openness and declared their vital and unique contributions to East Germany and its socialist system. It was also at the congress where the SED announced its program of socioeconomic assistance to authors and artists, further cementing this optimistic mood. Experiencing these events would make any SV member feel self-important, as if he or she were indeed indispensable to the continued success of the GDR, as if the SED really took writers and their role in improving socialism seriously.

But underneath the surface there was evidence of lingering anxiety. The sheer meticulousness with which the Central Committee and other Party and government groups coordinated activities with the Writers Union belied the deep sense of mutual trust that both sides claimed existed between writers and the state. In these years, the Writers Union and the Party organizations within it frequently organized training sessions, educational events, and consultations with SED officials in order to ensure that its members understood and parroted the Party Line in essential policy areas. The detailed planning for the Writers Congress illustrated the anxiety felt by Party and SV leaders as well. In many ways these thorough preparations are unsurprising given the publicity such events garnered, yet through them and through the limits to open expression that became increasingly clear by the mid-1970s one can glimpse tensions and fissures both within the Schriftstellerverband and between that organization and the SED.

Many of the conflicts between districts or between authors and the Party were petty and personal, but other authors raised more fundamental questions about the roles they were being told to play and the responsibilities that they were commanded to take seriously. Some were confused by Ostpolitik, the Basic Treaty with “fascist” West

Germany, and the change in identity it necessitated by delimitation. Some believed that Solzhenitsyn, though an anti-communist, was still correct in trying to shed light on errors in the socialist past through his literature. Others felt that not enough was being done to confront the problems within socialism's present and that the promises of the Honecker regime to eliminate taboos needed to be tested. At the heart of these tensions lay an internal debate about the function of authors in East Germany. Literature, the refrain went, was crucial in shaping socialist society, forming the people living within it, and defending those people from Western imperialist aggression. Writers depicted conflicts at home and abroad in order to augment, not diminish real existing socialism. Critical views would be permitted, the Central Committee emphasized and the Writers Union leaders echoed, but only up until a certain point. That threshold, it was repeatedly emphasized, was when the views reached the point where they stopped contributing to socialism's development and began harming it.

Where this point lay, however, was far from clear. By framing their crucial role in terms of responsibilities, not privileges, the SED hoped to oblige writers to defer to the Party in making such judgments. The Writers Union leaders took these responsibilities seriously, but nevertheless occasionally voiced concerns that these responsibilities had not yet translated into genuine trust between writers and the government. Certainly these leaders agreed that the Central Committee held the final word on cultural matters, but Seghers, Kant, Görlich, and others, by no means radicals, also laid claim to the Writers Union playing an increased role in determining the possibilities and limits of literature by promoting its irreplaceable function in East German society. To them, the SED should trust authors enough to grant them some degree of genuine autonomy in handling vital

issues in literature. Other authors, such as Plenzdorf, Braun, Heym, and Fühmann, were even more vocal in demanding this right. To these and other SV members, the responsibility and right to critically reflect on real existing socialism for the sake of improving it was not empty rhetoric. In short, the Writers Union's leaders and many of its members saw the organization's chief ideological function as asserting that they were *partners* in the socialist project, not merely subjects. What exactly this entailed depended on one's perspective, but this sentiment was a common thread in the numerous and diverse opinions expressed on the subject.

Differences on this subject, though, were harder to transcend by the mid-1970s as the limits of the "no taboos" era were becoming clearer. Some authors, Kurt Hager and other SED officials emphasized, had gone too far in their criticism while others were too idealistic in their expectations. Faced with these challenges, the Central Committee instructed the Writers Union to confront these members, rehabilitating those who could be rescued and containing those who could not. Here, too, the SED was emphasizing another function of the Writers Union, namely policing its own ranks, a responsibility that the leaders of the organization vigorously defended, ever more so as conflicts began to intensify. If part of the SED's vision for East Germany was to make it into an educational dictatorship, then the Writers Union's leaders would be the teachers for fellow authors, especially those who had strayed from the right path. The problem was that increasingly, members such as Heym, Neutsch, and Czechowski were learning how to exploit this system. Because they were considered important writers at home and abroad, they had capital within the union and could push the envelope further than other colleagues. So long as their outbursts were voiced within the organization, they were

able to bluntly express criticism of the union and the SED's policies. To be sure, many colleagues seemed annoyed or aggravated about these comments, both in style and substance, but time and again the only consequences they could bring to bear were a stern reminder of proper decorum or the proper political position. Though the union's leaders and SED had reached an accommodation of sorts with these critical writers, this was not a basis for long-term stability, especially as authors became increasingly emboldened to take their critiques beyond the Writers Union's walls.

One thing was for certain: by the end of 1975 the Central Committee's patience was wearing thin, and the optimism of the early Honecker years was waning. Herein lay a great unknown: When confronted with these circumstances, would Honecker act differently than his predecessor and cleave to his pronouncements on cultural openness? Or would he adhere to the well-established pattern in East German cultural policy, whereby when the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of openness, the SED would give it a strong push in the opposite direction? Moreover, as tensions mounted, would the Writers Union make good on its claim to defend its members' interests, or would it ultimately serve as an extension of the state's disciplinary apparatus? If the early 1970s were any indicator, the latter seemed increasingly likely as the GDR's cultural world drifted towards crisis.

Chapter Four

A Disciplining Instrument, 1976-79

Hermann Kant probably never imagined that he, a man of fifty and vice president of the Writers Union, would ever stand in front of one-hundred-twenty fellow writers and cry. Yet that was exactly what he did on 26 November 1976 at the Party base organization meeting within the Berlin district branch of the Schriftstellerverband. The base organization was meeting for the second time that week, a fact which reflected the urgent situation the union was now facing. Wolf Biermann, the dissident poet and songwriter, had had his East German citizenship stripped from him three weeks earlier on 16 November whilst playing a concert in Cologne, West Germany. Though he considered himself a loyal communist, Biermann's music and poetry had been critical of the SED, and despite a total publication and performance ban after 1965, he remained a thorn in the side of the Party up until the decision to expel him. In the days and weeks immediately following the expatriation, the "Biermann Affair" quickly became the most controversial cultural-political episode in Honecker's tenure. Dozens of Biermann's colleagues – among them Stephan Hermlin, Sarah Kirsch, Franz Fühmann, Heiner Müller, Christa Wolf, Volker Braun, Jurek Becker, Ulrich Plenzdorf, and Stefan Heym (including six members of the steering committee of Berlin's SV branch) – signed an open petition in the days that followed, declaring that the proletarian revolution needed to

“criticize itself relentlessly” and demanding the SED “reconsider the agreed-upon measures” against the songwriter.¹ First presented to the editors of *Neues Deutschland*, within hours it was also distributed to western media outlets for immediate publication.² Scarcely a week after the petition’s publication and after much consultation with local and national Party leaders, the SED’s Berlin base organization within the Writers Union demanded those signatories of the petition living in the GDR capital appear at a two-part meeting (held 23 and 26 November) of all district Party colleagues.

Hermann Kant had been in Moscow for the first meeting, returning in time to offer a statement at the second. Worrying that he had been too lenient in statements he had made about Biermann and his supporters over the past few days,³ Kant now stressed that “[t]oday I would like to declare myself somewhat more sharply and clearly in favor of the measures of my state.” Seemingly trivializing the concerns of the petitioners, he added, “We all have experienced our injustices. I know what I’m talking about!”⁴ Kant then got to the heart of the matter, stating, “I thought that we manage certain adversities among ourselves! And only among ourselves and through each other and not otherwise!” Moreover, “[w]hat we have achieved in the last five years,” he elaborated, “for us all, for

¹ Petition against Biermann expatriation, 17 November 1976, Literaturarchiv: Jurek-Becker-Archiv 2589, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as JBA).

² Kreisleitung der SED der zentralen Organe der Gewerkschaften, “Information über eine Beratung des Sekretariats der Bezirksleitung Berlin der SED zu den Ergebnissen der Parteiversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes mit den Sekretären für Agitation und Propaganda der Kreisleitung der SED am 30.11.1976, um 16.30 Uhr,” 1 December 1976, Berlin, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (hereafter cited as SAPMO-BArch) DY34/12215.

³ Kant was one of many writers to condemn Biermann and the petition signed on his behalf in *Neues Deutschland* on 20 and 22 November.

⁴ Kant’s novel, *Das Impressum*, was denied publication in 1969, appearing only in 1973 after key changes had been made. Editors’ note, Roland Berbig, et. al., eds., *In Sachen Biermann; Protokolle, Berichte und Briefe zu den Folgen einer Ausbürgerung* (Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag, 1994), 142.

this country – we haven't accomplished by bringing just anyone in, but rather our own intelligence, our own reason, our own courage, and our comrades in different areas, from which one could help us.”⁵

Kant then addressed the petition's main organizer, Stephan Hermlin, who he counted as an old friend. Having been in Moscow when the controversy erupted, Kant had felt embarrassed, even ashamed, of Hermlin's actions. When he returned to Berlin from the USSR the day after the first base Party organization meeting, Kant had immediately telephoned Gerhard Henniger to find out what had happened. Now, standing before the second meeting, he recounted his initial reaction to Henniger's news: “And I'll tell you what – you can brush it aside, can forget it – but I was excessively happy that...”⁶ Kant had stopped speaking. Fighting back tears, he stepped away from the podium, wiping his eyes. He swallowed hard, overcome by his emotions for several seconds. He appeared ready to end his speech right there, but scattered applause from the audience woke him from his trance and he returned to the microphone.⁷ What had made Kant so happy that he would tear up in front of his colleagues? Eva Strittmatter shouted a guess: he was happy because Hermlin had admitted his actions might have been a mistake. “Yes,” Kant confirmed, “I was happy about that.” Realizing he should account for his momentary paralysis, the author explained, “I suddenly had the feeling that I'd almost lost: Yes, that is my friend.” They had known each other twenty-five years, and while Hermlin sometimes uttered “nonsense,” almost always he offered Kant wonderful

⁵ “Protokoll der Fortsetzung der Parteiversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes,” 26 November 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 141-42.

⁶ Ibid., 141-42.

⁷ Editors' note, Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 143.

guidance. It was a great relief, therefore, when Hermlin admitted he might have made a mistake in giving the petition to the Western media. Such a statement, Kant signified, should aid reconciliation within the Writers Union; it “would be the basis from which one can really deal with one another.” Pressing forward, the vice president indicated that the real problem he had with the petitioners was that they had not asked for help from their colleagues. “Had one of you appeared at my door at three in the morning,” Kant explained, “and had you said, ‘Are you coming? We’re going to Honecker. We want to see him. We want to speak with him.’ Then I would have wiped the sleep – the little that I have – out of my eyes and would have come with you.” Indeed, Kant clarified, “To Honecker: Always! Or to the Party: Always! But to them [the West]: Never!”⁸

Kant’s tone quickly shifted, as he called out the other petitioners who had not admitted mistakes and had instead tried to justify their actions. Expounding on the errors of Biermann’s supporters, Kant moved to Sarah Kirsch, questioning, “What does it cost, dear Sarah, to say: Yes, here were [people] who also helped me! What does that cost? Can’t one say it? Must one only speak here about the blows that befell someone [as justification for signing the petition]?” Kirsch, no doubt aggravated and caught off-guard by the accusation thrown her way, responded, “I have not enumerated blows, I haven’t said anything at all.” Kant, never missing a beat, retorted, “Therefore it also applies to your future speech! It’s for you to consider, if perhaps at one point you pipe up!” Returning to his speech, he next considered what should happen next within their organization. He voiced concern that “if we proceed thusly with each other, there is only

⁸ “Protokoll der Fortsetzung der Parteiversammlung,” 143-45.

a great noise and a dreadful amount goes up the creek!”⁹ What was needed, he emphasized once more, was reconciliation.

Was Kant being hypocritical, calling for reconciliation one minute and calling Kirsch out the next? In his mind, his response to the situation was perfectly logical. The petitioners had made a mistake, not in harboring disagreements about the SED’s decision to bar Biermann from returning to East Germany, but in handing their letter to the Western press for publication. Indeed, Kant would have been willing to go with them to Honecker, even though he thoroughly agreed with Biermann’s punishment, as if the Party would have taken their demands seriously. What he wanted now from these colleagues was not a justification for their actions, but an admission of wrongdoing in having aired their dirty laundry in public for the capitalist enemy to see. In other words, in the Writers Union, they solved problems internally, not externally.

Kant’s way of thinking about the Biermann fallout is therefore revealing. The tearful embrace of Hermlin’s (possible) repentance was an odd display of emotion, and the preemptive reprimand of Kirsch came across as patronizing, perhaps even sexist. But more than that, both of these moments exposed an understanding of their union, held by many members, as a community of creative intellectuals with a shared sense of societal responsibility, importance, and even suffering. The community’s members believed in the value of constructive criticism to overcome the shortcomings of real existing socialism. Kant, after all, had not berated his colleagues for disagreeing about Biermann’s fate. They also shared a privileged status within East Germany stemming from their ability to articulate problems and suggest solutions, either in literature or by

⁹ Ibid., 145-48.

turning directly to the SED's top leadership – it was only half-absurd that Kant suggested they could have visited Honecker's home at 3 a.m. Finally, there's was a community in which privilege coexisted with limitations along with punishments for transgressions of those limitations. Most writers encountered both over their careers, and so sharing these experiences with each other only strengthened the bonds they felt with their fellow Writers Union members and marked their professional identities as unique. This was one reason why Kant was so dismissive of Kirsch justifying her actions through the injustices she had encountered. To Kant, this was making excuses – they had all suffered, himself included. In short, going to the Western media had betrayed the trust and sense of community built up among the members of the organization. It had broken their internal rules established over many years and introduced division into their ranks. And to move forward, they needed the deviant members to admit they had violated those norms before they could be reincorporated into associational life.

The self-understanding of writers and their professional organization was thus severely strained in the years following the Biermann affair. Tensions that had been building in the years prior to the expatriation now came to the fore, driving wedges within the union and confronting its members with uncomfortable questions about their role as public intellectuals in the GDR. It also laid bare the strains between the two primary functions of the Schriftstellerverband: promoting the interests of its members and serving the ideological needs of the state. The resulting conflicts destabilized the Writers Union for several years, taking until the end of the decade to forge a new compromise between writers and the SED while marginalizing those who refused that compromise.

This chapter traces the Biermann expatriation and its fallout chronologically, mapping out five phases. First, how did the handling of Reiner Kunze's expulsion from the union in October 1976 impact the subsequent Biermann crisis? Here it is necessary to consider the impact of Kunze's ouster in late October 1976 on subsequent events, in terms of patterns of conflict established by the union's leaders and members. Second, how did the union's leaders and members, including SED members, respond in the short-term to Biermann's expatriation? Explored here are the days and weeks immediately following the November decision, with particular emphasis on how the Writers Union functioned as a forum for adjudicating the dispute. Third, what efforts did SED officials, union leaders, and members take in the medium-term to contain the Biermann fallout and prevent a recurrence? In this section, both punitive efforts and conciliatory gestures within the framework of the Writers Union are investigated. Fourth, once the petitioners had been dealt with, how did the union attempt to move forward and forge a new consensus with members? Here we explore the Eighth Writers Congress, the first such event since the Biermann incident. Finally, why did these attempts at moving forward falter in 1979 and how did the union's leaders and members deal with the renewal of conflict? This final section evaluates the events surrounding the decision in June 1979 to expel an additional nine writers from the Writers Union, an event which, even more than Biermann's ouster, would haunt the association for years, even if in the short-term it provided an opening for a new compromise between members and the SED.

Prelude: The Expulsion of Reiner Kunze, 29 October 1976

In retrospect, the real beginning of the Biermann affair came three weeks before the poet-dissident's expatriation, when on 29 October 1976 the Erfurt/Gera district branch of the Writers Union expelled 43-year-old lyricist Reiner Kunze from the organization. The decision was confirmed five days later on 3 November by the central presidium. Kunze, who had quit the SED in protest of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, had remained openly critical of East German policies in the early 1970s. Yet given the Honecker's liberalization of cultural policies he was still able to publish his poetry anthology *brief mit blauem siegel* (Letter with a Blue Seal) in 1973. In 1976 he published *Die wunderbaren Jahre* (The Wonderful Years) in West Germany, a prose collection which satirized East German socialism. Using the publication as a pretense, the Erfurt/Gera district branch of the Schriftstellerverband opted to expel Kunze, and the organization their decision in *Neues Deutschland* for all East Germans to read.¹⁰ The ensuing controversy, though soon overshadowed by Biermann, nonetheless revealed the contours of many of the conflicts that would emerge a month later as well as some of the strategies developed by the Writers Union leaders for dealing with them.

The publication of *Die wunderbaren Jahre* highlighted a growing dilemma for authors, committed to improving East Germany but lacking access to the desired channels for doing so at home. Prior to his expulsion, Kunze wrote a report which addressed this concern in advance of the district branch meeting for Erfurt/Gera to be held in late October. As far as his book was concerned, Kunze stressed that while it had

¹⁰ The central presidium had first discussed problems arising from the publication of *Die wunderbaren Jahre* at their 14 October meeting. See Gerhard Henniger, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 14. Oktober 1976," 14 October 1976, Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR 402, 16, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV). See also Gerhard Henniger, "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums am 3. November 1976," 5 November 1976, SV 402, 9.

been published in the Federal Republic, he still hoped to see it appear in East Germany so that it might help “several people – above all the younger generation” improve their lives, meaning that “finally the publication of the book will be used for the societal development of the GDR.” The book was useful, in his eyes, precisely because it laid bare the inner functioning of the GDR, namely “the structures of the crystal formed by the iceberg and the climate that leads to its formation and allows it to grow.” Building on this metaphor, the poet added that “many people have adapted to the coldness, which impinges destructively on their humanity, and that they accept the growth of the iceberg as unavoidable, provided that they even still notice.” His book did not, in contrast to the charges against him, call into question the leading role of the SED; in fact, he proceeded “on the basis of the cultural policy which the Socialist Unity Party of Germany [...] has practiced over a long period of time,” but was now contradicting.”¹¹ Kunze couched the defense of his book carefully: he declared his support for the Party and his desire to improve East Germany – but his justification was ultimately in vain.

Kunze’s expulsion provoked a range of opinions among Writers Union members. Although some members and ordinary East Germans expressed agreement with the action, other prominent authors immediately protested the decision. Stephan Hermlin wasted little time in sending an angry letter to the presidium, expressing “my regret about the decision and my protest against it.”¹² Stefan Heym and Jurek Becker followed suit a few days later. In his letter, Heym chided the presidium by reminding them that the “task of our association is to protect its members and represent their interests, but not to

¹¹ Reiner Kunze, Report, 20 October 1976, Greiz, SV 549, 24-26.

¹² Stephan Hermlin to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, 5 November 1976, Berlin, SV 549, 1.

penalize writers or not at all to expel them from the ranks of the association if they write a critical book.”¹³ Jurek Becker conveyed his “consternation” about the “arbitrary” decision, adding “I want to make no secret that this expulsion can be interpreted as an attempt at intimidating those writers who think differently about fundamental questions than the members of the presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR.”¹⁴ Günter Kunert echoed these sentiments in his letter to Anna Seghers of 10 November. Demanding a more exact explanation than the vaguely worded rationale published in *Neues Deutschland* (namely that Kunze had committed “numerous violations of the statute”), Kunert suggested the real reason was the publication of *Die wunderbaren Jahre* and its critical message. Removing Kunze from the Writers Union was tantamount to punishing him for “what assuredly is his function and through which he is a writer in the first place,” namely, “to reflect literarily one’s own critical relationship to reality.”¹⁵

The most important concern expressed in these letters was that by expelling Kunze, the Writers Union was curtailing the right to think differently and express criticism of the GDR in literature. These authors viewed Kunze’s expulsion as punishment for doing exactly what he was supposed to do as an East German writer – to criticize socialism in order to improve it. Moreover, the authors, especially Heym and

¹³ Stefan Heym to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, 8 November 1978, Berlin-Grünau, SV 549, 2.

¹⁴ Jurek Becker to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic, 8 November 1976, Berlin, JBA 2589.

¹⁵ Günter Kunert to Anna Seghers, 10 November 1976, SV 539, 27. Kunert’s “confusion” about the vague charges made in *Neues Deutschland* were echoed in letters by other creative intellectuals. For example, composer Tilo Medek, who would be forced to leave the GDR in 1977 for his support of Biermann, demanded a better explanation for Kunze’s expulsion, given that the two had worked together in the early 1970s (Medek had set one of Kunze’s poems to music). Medek was therefore “very interested which violations this poet must have committed to warrant such an expulsion?” Tilo Medek to the Presidium of the Writers Union, 6 November 1976, Berlin, SV549, 29.

Becker, were challenging the leadership of the Schriftstellerverband, asserting that ousting Kunze violated the union's commitment to its members. The leaders would have agreed that writers had an obligation to improve the GDR through exploring its contradictions, but expressing those contradictions in a book that was too "problematic" to be published at home proved a tipping point.

The Biermann Affair: The SED Phase, Late 1976

The acrimonious reaction to Kunze's ouster was well-exceeded by the response to the deprivation of East German citizenship for Wolf Biermann. In this process, the Writers Union played a crucial role even if the decision to expatriate the lyricist had been made by the Politburo.¹⁶ Biermann, a German of Jewish descent originally from Hamburg, had voluntarily settled in East Germany in 1953 at the age of 17, believing it to be the better Germany. Soon garnering attention for his songwriting ability, he was refused membership in the SED in 1963, and two years later he was banned from performing. The officially permitted concert tour in November 1976 had therefore been an important occurrence, seemingly reflective of Honecker's promises of cultural openness. Apparently having planned the expulsion for several years, however, some members of the Politburo used critical statements made by Biermann at the Cologne concert as a pretext for their announcement on 16 November that he had forfeited his East German citizenship and was therefore not welcome to return.¹⁷ Biermann had

¹⁶ Roland Berbig, et al., in their 1994 published collection of documents relating to the Biermann affair, assert that the Writers Union documents they surveyed "elucidate the central position of this institution." Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 8.

¹⁷ Dennis Tate, "Keeping the Biermann Affair in Perspective: Repression, Resistance and the Articulation of Despair in the Cultural Life of the Honecker Era," in *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR, 1976-1990*, ed. Robert Aktins and Martin Kane (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 2-3.

criticized the SED at the concert, quoting Rosa Luxemburg, for instance: “Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element.”¹⁸ Yet despite what it viewed as a justifiable action, the Politburo underestimated the response that their actions would provoke, for the entire affair proved to be a major watershed in East German cultural policy and in the relationship between writers and the state. Given the fractious effects of the expatriation, serious conflicts emerged within the union, prompting new strategies by both leaders and members to protect and promote their interests and practice their understanding of the role of writers in East Germany amidst cultural crisis.

The SED seems not to have anticipated either the speed or intensity of the reaction by East Germany’s intellectual community to the revocation of Biermann’s citizenship. The very day the expulsion was announced, Stefan Heym phoned Stephan Hermlin about organizing a response. After some initial hesitation, Hermlin agreed to have Heym over the next day to discuss it. Upon arriving at Hermlin’s home, Heym was surprised to find not just his host but also a who’s who of East Germany’s literary establishment: Erich Arendt, Volker Braun, Christa and Gerhard Wolf, Sarah Kirsch, and Günter Kunert. Rolf Schneider was also in attendance and Heiner Müller arrived later in the day. Franz Fühmann and Jurek Becker, though absent, had authorized Hermlin to sign a protest resolution in their names. These were many of the same authors who had protested Kunze’s expulsion earlier that month, and their experiences with that no doubt strengthened their response to the treatment of Biermann. With the group assembled,

¹⁸ Editors’ note, Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 78.

Hermlin set before his guests the text of a petition demanding that the SED rescind its decision. The text found universal agreement, and so the authors, along with sculptor Fritz Cremer (who lived near Hermlin), signed it. The resolution was then published in the Western press, and within days dozens more East German intellectuals had signed. Hermlin probably calculated that in openly defying a Party decision of this magnitude, in the Western media no less, he needed to assemble a group of literary intellectuals who were held in high esteem both in the GDR and internationally in order to have any chance of success, or at least to mitigate any potential responses by the SED.¹⁹

Hermlin's calculation, though, did not prevent a severe reaction from the ruling party, and consequently the SED organizations within the Writers Union immediately became key instruments for punishing the initiators of the petition; indeed, in this early phase of the Biermann affair, the central Writers Union leaders generally deferred to national and district SED officials on how to proceed against Biermann's supporters. On 23 November, less than a week after the protest resolution had been introduced, Party members within the Berlin district branch of the union met to discuss the situation candidly, a session at which several of the signatories of the petition were present. Günter Görlich, chair of the Berlin branch, headed the meeting, which 130 of the 174 SED local members attended. A day earlier, he and several authors, chief among them Writers Union president Anna Seghers, had published responses to the petition in *Neues Deutschland* in which they condemned the actions as giving ammunition to the

¹⁹ Christa Wolf had apparently suggested that before publishing the petition, Hermlin might speak to Honecker in person. Hermlin and Honecker had been active together in the communist underground in Berlin during the Nazi period and had since become good friends. But when Wolf suggested he contact the SED chief, Hermlin was said to have demurred, claiming there was no time for such an appeal. Roland Berbig and Holger Jens Karlson, "Einleitung: "Leute haben sich eindeutig als Gruppe erwiesen. Zur Gruppenbildung bei Wolf Biermanns Ausbürgerung," in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 11-14.

“imperialist” Western media to “demonize” the GDR, stressing that they, the leaders of the Writers Union, had not approved the petition.²⁰ At the 23 November meeting, Görlich’s chief complaint (according to Karl-Heinz Jakobs) was in the same vein as these prior statements, namely that West Germany had been ramping up its ideological warfare and that Biermann’s concert had been nothing more than anti-communist propaganda.²¹ These early Party responses became staples in the discourse that emerged from SED officials within the Writers Union throughout the entire Biermann affair.

Gerhard Holtz-Baumert, one of the Party leaders within the Writers Union and another author who had condemned the petition in *Neues Deutschland*, spoke after Görlich. The author expressed that he was initially taken aback by the decision, but he soon became aware that in the West “everything that we do, right or wrong, is of course correspondingly judged and attacked.” In other words, the petition was problematic, but not because it expressed discontent. The issue at hand was that they had placed the document “in the hands of the enemy to play with,” which “in the cultural history of our republic is a unique occurrence!” Holtz-Baumert seemed hesitant to express enthusiastic support for the SED’s decision, yet for guidance he appealed to a leitmotif of many earlier discussions within the Writers Union when he expressed, “How great, greater than we often wish ourselves, is the responsibility of the writers, of the artist, especially in such situations in which our long-imagined stability shows itself as brittle in parts.” Towing the Party line, even in disagreement, seemed paramount to Holtz-Baumert. What was important to remember was that the West’s attacks had failed, and so now they must

²⁰ Editors’ notes, Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 74, 80

²¹ Ibid., 71.

proceed to a “political analysis of the exact development” so as to “find and remove the conditions for our falling apart.” Party loyalty and reconciliation were thus the overriding themes of Holtz-Baumert’s final assessment, stressing that disagreements among writers would not affect decisions on publication. Indeed, “a hasty and decisive condemnation would be equally wrong and damaging as the placating covering-over of opposing views.”²² In this manner, Holtz-Baumert shifted the issue at hand from a lack of civil rights to a lack of Party discipline.

Heinz Kamnitzer, the president of East Germany’s PEN Club, seemed no fan of the ex-East German. One hears, he explained, that Biermann spoke for the GDR, but did he really? He wanted no part of East Germany’s accomplishments and “what speaks for us is lacking in his verses, songs, texts.” In other words, Biermann was terribly misguided if he claimed to be working for a better republic. It was as if, Kamnitzer opined, “He does not mention the virtues of his lover, but rather only what he considers to be her vices.” Continuing in gendered language, Kamnitzer explained, “With exuberant lust he alone describes in public how his belle displeases him until no one comprehends what he can still have left for her.” “Unless,” he continued, “one sees in him the German bourgeois [*Spießer*] with the marital leitmotif: ‘I love you, therefore I beat you.’” This metaphor revealed that in Kamnitzer’s view, the author was gendered male and East Germany female, and the former must take care to complement but never strike the latter. Kamnitzer also betrayed a hint of jealousy, lamenting that Biermann alone among them could reach millions of West German citizens with his art, influencing how they viewed the GDR, but instead of presenting “a portrait of light and shadow,” the

²² “Protokoll der Parteiversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes,” 23 November 1976,” 71-75.

singer painted a “negative image of truly pitch darkness [*ägyptischer Finsternis*].” The more one listened to Biermann, the easier it was to uncover his real designs:

Revolt, revolt, and once again revolt! And where? Against those in the heart of Europe? Oh no, not in the country that certified the freedom for him to openly preach, in which he was given the highest pulpit. Not in the paradise of the rich in which the lords of heavy industry and the big banks rake it in and call the shots, as always. They and many others gladly heard the happy message that change in Germany is urgent only where they lost their power and their wealth [the GDR].

The sarcasm in Kamnitzer’s tone was clear, though he then proceeded more directly in laying out what Biermann wanted, namely “He wants in the GDR different conditions, a different party, a different government, and agitates and appeals so that in a socialist state which displeases him, a radical change in head and limbs must be forced.”²³ Kamnitzer’s objections to Biermann were that he wasted his talent, misleading people and treating his “lover” abusively, preaching radical revolt instead of improving what was already there.

Stephan Hermlin, the principle organizer of the petition, also spoke at the 23 November Party base organization meeting. Hermlin offered few thoughts about Biermann beyond acknowledging that many years earlier he had endeavored to bring the songwriter’s work to the public given his enormous talent, and that after 1965 they had hardly spoken. Nonetheless, Hermlin suggested that Biermann was in many ways like the canonical German poet Heinrich Heine. Not that they were equals per se, Hermlin admitted, but “there are writers, poets, they have a distinct material, a substance in itself. The substance of Bierman is the substance of Heine.” By linking Biermann with a larger German tradition of literature, and a larger tradition of conflict between German *Dichter* and the state, Hermlin was lending authority to Biermann’s controversial works. Still, Hermlin insisted he was not seeking to defend Biermann’s ideas, declaring that with the

²³ Ibid., 76-80.

petition he “had wanted to protect him against a measure that I considered wrong.” He clarified that he never would have demanded freedom for Biermann in the GDR, but recalled that he himself had once been an “expatriated person,” referring to his forced exile from Germany in the Nazi period for activities as a communist. Furthermore, he, too, in the 1960s had had trouble with leading authorities and as a consequence was forbidden from traveling. As for the petition, Hermlin defended himself against charges of factionalism within the SED (a cardinal sin) by insisting that he had not intended for it to be an opening salvo in a larger intellectual conflict: “This is no campaign. It is a letter with twelve signatures and nothing more.” More importantly, he claimed he intended it to be “a discussion with writers, with colleagues,” indicating that he wished for this to be an internal matter. This is why he had given the petition first to *Neues Deutschland* and only later took it to *Agence France Presse*, asking the latter that they wait until five o’clock in the evening before doing anything with it. Unfortunately, *Neues Deutschland*’s editor had been unable to reach Honecker before the deadline, and the letter was published in the West. Hermlin now admitted that he had handled the situation poorly and was “ready to bear the consequence of this error.” He had acted, he assured them, only because he felt the Biermann expulsion went against the wider SED cultural policy which he wanted to uphold.²⁴ Thus Hermlin cast himself as a concerned loyalist, one who feared the Party was contradicting its well-established and correct policy. Doing so distanced Hermlin from the ideas of Biermann while also backing off, by admitting a possible mistake, of what clearly seemed to be the sticking point with many of his

²⁴ Ibid., 82-86.

colleagues, namely that they had gone to the West. If he had committed a mistake, it was in procedure, not substance, he insisted.

Yet Hermlin's careful contribution did not satisfy all in attendance. Hans-Joachim Hoffmann, the GDR's Cultural Minister and one of the chief architect's of the expatriation, took Hermlin to task in his speech to the group. He apparently accused Hermlin of forcing the sculptor Cremer, who was very ill at the time, into signing the petition and for having agreed with an anti-Soviet resolution approved by a meeting of the international PEN Club in London.²⁵ Hermlin had also, Hoffmann continued, joined the West Berlin Academy of the Arts without consulting him first, even though he had been allowed to do similar things in the past. Hoffmann apparently also insinuated that Hermlin had only joined the Academy in exchange for a large sum of money, implying corruption.²⁶ The Minister of Culture appeared interested in discrediting the petition's organizer, tarnishing Hermlin's stature within the East German literary community and by extension the legitimacy of his critiques.

Jurek Becker was among the last to speak, stepping boldly into the fray. Becker, an old friend of Biermann's, had held a conversation with the dissident shortly before he left for West Germany. Biermann had apparently asked him what he should do if he were not allowed back in the country, upon which Becker replied, "I'll turn myself upside down if that doesn't happen!" "My signature on this letter," Becker therefore reasoned, "is the turning-upside-down." As for the notion that the expatriation was purely a

²⁵ Hermlin was chosen as vice president of the International PEN Club in 1975.

²⁶ Editors' notes, Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 86. The meeting transcript did not include the contributions of several present, including Hoffmann, Gerhard Henniger, and Anna Seghers. Eyewitness accounts, chiefly by Karl-Heinz Jakobs, were used by the editors to reconstruct the main points raised in each of these missing contributions.

defensive reaction against Biermann's actions in Cologne, Becker voiced skepticism, adding his disappointment that the assembled authors had expressed fear that they would see their publishing ability in the West diminish if they sided against the SED, manipulation so obvious that even the tabloidesque West German paper *BILD* could see it for what it was. More importantly, Becker raised a fundamental question anew, namely, "whether the criticism of 13 authors would be openly discussed by us [...]" Should one speak about such things publicly or only among ourselves?" Answering with the latter would assume, Becker concluded, that the public was not capable of handling it, a position he considered insulting. He expressed hope that the publication of the petition in *Neues Deutschland* could have sparked a larger discussion, but "with us, to speak about a thing like that has no chance."²⁷ Becker's growing disillusionment with the GDR was becoming apparent, and in contrast to many of his colleagues, he believed that public, not internal discussion was what the GDR needed, and therefore the failure to publish their petition in East Germany had been a missed opportunity.²⁸

²⁷ "Protokoll der Parteiversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes," 86-89.

²⁸ Berlin district SED Second Secretary Helmut Müller evaluated the statements by various authors at the meeting and paid special attention to contributions by Hermlin and Becker. He noted that Hermlin had clearly condemned Biermann and repeated Hermlin's emphasis that he opposed the expatriation not because he agreed with Biermann, but because he felt the punishment did not conform to SED policy. Recounting Hermlin's willingness to admit his errors and pay the consequences, Müller surmised, "In the behavior of Hermlin attachment to the Party and our cause is perceived and also an attitude towards the responsibility." In sum, "He gave a shattered impression." Becker's actions, on the other hand, "show that he doesn't grasp or doesn't want to grasp at all what this is about." Müller noted that Becker's recalcitrance was met by a barrage of questions and that, while not knowing about Biermann's exact intentions, he had boasted that he had intended to protest if the songwriter were not allowed back in the country. Complaining about Becker's arrogance, he summed the author up as "overbearing." He also noted that those who made statements at the meeting with a "clear position" received strong applause but no one applauded either Hermlin or Becker. But the overall perceptions of the two signatories were quite different: "[Becker] disqualified himself through his behavior while there is a noticeable sympathy for Hermlin among the comrades." "Bericht des Zweiten Sekretärs der SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin im Sekretariat des ZK der SED über die Parteiversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes," 24 November 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 92-93.

Though the transcript of SV president Anna Seghers's speech is not extant, we can reconstruct her speech based on the evaluation of it by Helmut Müller, 2nd Secretary of Berlin's district SED. According to Müller, Seghers had differentiated herself from Hermlin, criticizing the latter primarily because he had taken the petition to the foreign press. She allegedly had said to him, "You were my friend, and [if] I had my way so you should and can remain. But why didn't you (all) come to me?" She also had seemed upset that the group's actions implied that "one cannot candidly discuss the thing here." She had ended by asserting that for the petition's signers, there should be no further action against them, their books should still be published, and the right to free expression must be upheld. "I am against punishment of every kind," she allegedly concluded.²⁹ If Müller's impression is more or less accurate, Seghers, as the president of the Writers Union, aimed at reconciliation above all else. She condemned the actions of the petitioners, again primarily because they had gone to the foreign media. Interestingly, she also seemed wounded that they had not come to her first. One gets the sense that Seghers wished the whole thing had never happened and her contribution to the meeting was more a lament of how the signatories could have proceeded differently than a sharp condemnation of their actions.

The second Party base organization meeting was as well-planned as could be expected given the short time between the meetings. Second Party Secretary Müller issued instructions building off of decisions from the first meeting. At the beginning, there would be a proposal for a decision, backed by the Party leadership, condemning the petitioners. Karl-Heinz Jakobs was to be removed from his position as member of the

²⁹ Ibid., 91-92.

Party leadership and the first speaker was to be the trusted writer and screenplay author Gerhard Bengsch, who would initiate a Party proceeding against Jurek Becker aimed at his being thrown out of the SED. As for the rest of the wayward authors, there would be a differentiated approach based on their future behavior and political position. Expecting a “rearguard action” among several colleagues at the meeting to trivialize the seriousness of their actions, statements by Cultural Minister Hans-Joachim Hoffmann and district SED secretary Roland Bauer would make clear the seriousness of these transgressions. Finally, after the upcoming meeting there was to be a general meeting of the Berlin district branch where members would be thoroughly briefed on the situation.³⁰

Honecker himself weighed in on Müller’s assessment of what to do next. He lauded the Party leadership meeting in the Writers Union of the previous day as a success, showing “that the situation in the Writers Union is better still than we estimated yesterday.” Most important was preparing the upcoming Friday meeting, taking into account foreseeable objections, especially as the petitioners would try to justify their actions. Thus one had to be well-prepared: “one must assemble all material which you have already employed and which are also recently added, [...] give it to the comrades and exploit it well. One must be tactically clever.” Appearances of democratic centralism were important, meaning that the petitioners should be given a chance to speak. Otherwise, he agreed that a resolution needed to be prepared and then vetted by Kurt Hager in which the authors in question would be condemned, “because they are practically not compatible with the principles of our party, and one must stand fully and completely behind the decision of the Party leadership and government.” The resolution,

³⁰ Ibid., 93-94.

he cautioned, should not be introduced early on at the Friday meeting, but after enough time had elapsed to build a strong consensus. This should be followed by Jakobs's aforementioned removal. As for Becker, a proceeding against him "must be done entirely democratically" as "[e]veryone has the right to object with the next higher Party leadership." Finally, regarding the upcoming general Berlin district branch meeting, it should wait until the atmosphere was ready for it: "We have no need to rush it." More important would be a meeting of the leaders of the Writers Union, who would prepare a resolution themselves condemning the signatories and fully supported the SED's decisions in the matter.³¹ In these evaluations of the initial meeting within the Berlin Writers Union Party base organization, the Central Committee leadership seemed pleased with progress but braced for the other shoe to drop. As little as possible would be left to chance at the next meeting, but one could never predict how the petitioners would react.

On Friday, 26 November, the Party base organization within the Berlin Writers Union met as planned in what became a much more tempestuous meeting than the first one, as if the SED's fears had been realized. Things began well enough as Bengsch made the opening report to the group, as prearranged. The very first point of Bengsch's speech noted that First Party Secretary of the Berlin district SED, Konrad Naumann, was in attendance, lest the writers forget their audience. Bengsch's wish for the meeting was simple: "we argue out principled positions and do this as objectively and calmly as at all possible." As for "poor Biermann," how he suffered in the West: Bengsch calculated that the songwriter had received at least 60,000 Marks from his trip thus far. In addition to being a hypocrite, he dismissed Biermann as having misguided ideas about socialism,

³¹ Ibid., 94-95.

supporting, for instance, Tito's Yugoslavian style of socialism over that of East Germany. Finally he turned to the petition's signers, reminding them that, as members of the SED, they had every right to express their opinion freely within the Party until the Party had reached a decision (a classic democratic socialist formulation). These wayward authors, though, had aligned themselves with the class enemy who was attempting "to tear a hole between creators of culture and Party and government." Such a plan would not come to fruition.³² Bengsch's speech, if uninspired, was exactly the dogmatic onset that Honecker and Müller had wanted.

Gerhard Wolf was up next, reading a text written by his wife, Christa, on both their behalves (the latter was seriously ill at the time). Wolf's text considered the cultural policy of the past several years, a policy which had promised openness, such that "[i]t appeared to me again meaningful and effective to work with the full dedication of my person." The text then declared her loyalty to socialism above all else and to defending the GDR abroad, but lamented that many East Germans had come up to her at book readings, claiming "I could never speak as you do in my seminar group, my collective, without being subjected to the strongest suspicion." The text then turned to the Wolf's reaction to Biermann's expulsion. She did not belong to a long-lived conspiratorial circle with Biermann, but she nonetheless felt compelled to express her opinion on the matter. She then explained that they had discussed whether or not they should speak with "leading comrades," to go through backchannels to make their message heard. Indeed, "[e]veryone here in the room knows that very many comrades and citizens these days have selected this very same path to express their dismay, their concern, their misgiving."

³² "Protokoll der Fortsetzung der Parteiversammlung." 95-103.

They admitted that they had clearly understood they were violating Party discipline by giving the petition to the Western media. They also claimed to have debated intensely over sending the petition to the West, but opted to do so upon reflection on a commentary published in *Neues Deutschland* earlier that day which “contained in a short space an unacceptable number of distortions, insinuations, demagogueries, and cynicism appearing.” Reconciliation would now be difficult, as she saw “no solution for the difference of opinion that has become obvious between the comrades of the Party organization and us about the concrete case at issue.” They were thus prepared to accept whatever the Party group decided about them.³³ The Wolfs seemed more disillusioned than engaged with the Writers Union; reconciliation was not a serious consideration given the chasm that existed between their views of the Biermann affair and those of the SED and union leadership. At heart, their text evinced a concern for freedom of expression, not just for authors but everyone in the GDR. The tried and tested methods for writers to get things done – backchannel appeals – seemed no longer appropriate given the magnitude of the conflict facing them.

Another of the signatories, Günter Kunert, spoke briefly later in the meeting. Kunert, who had been heavily criticized by the GDR cultural establishment since the 1960s, did not pull any punches in his statement. He conveyed the many bitter experiences he had encountered with the state, “which despite everything I consider mine.” Turning to the 23 November meeting, he questioned those who had asserted that the petitioners should have first turned to their colleagues before approaching the Western media. Kunert sharply dismissed such an approach as naïve: “In the course of

³³ Ibid., 111-18.

the last fifteen years I have send an array of protests, requests, declarations, solicitations to institutions and leading comrades, and in ninety percent of all of these postal undertakings have not even once received a confirmation of receipt; my letters have been filed away for fifteen years.” Therefore his motivation for signing the petition was simple: The “[f]oundation of my work, and this is generally known, is my consistent anti-fascist position.” East Germany presented itself as an anti-fascist state, and yet “the greater the shock about a measure, which in the world must stain the image of our republic . . .” Dialogue seemed, to him, no longer possible if the attitude of Roland Bauer was any indication. Kunert recounted how in 1970 when he had been called before the Party leadership of the Writers Union about a publication in the West, Bauer had at that time said to him, “Biermann can’t break the GDR, Stefan Heym also can’t break the GDR, and Kunert also can’t. But the GDR can break Kunert.” To Kunert, then, such brazen threats “had nothing at all to do with either the norms of Leninist Party life or with the norms of human coexistence.”³⁴ Kunert, in line with the Wolfs, did not hope for reconciliation, lamenting the lack of genuine dialogue as a violation of Leninist principles (even if his assessment of Lenin was too optimistic).

Eva Strittmatter, member of the Party leadership and wife of SV vice president Erwin Strittmatter, took her turn at the podium a short while later. The major issue at hand, in her mind, concerned “the activity and the meaning of our base organization, which, as today shows, plays a fairly large role in the self-understanding of our society.” She considered Kunert an important author, as an absolutely truthful writer,” yet she could not believe that the authors in question did not know what they were doing: “You

³⁴ Ibid., 132-33.

knew what that meant, you took that into account, you wanted publicity.” Still, it was critical they reached some sort of understanding, lest the split in East German literature persist “for the long run.” She was nonetheless upset that some of the signatories present at the meeting had evidenced a sentiment that “[s]he has a different standpoint on that. We can therefore not respect that. You belong to the people, with whom we do not speak any longer.” She sensed a martyr-complex among some, but these individuals needed to get past that, to realize that “we others chose our arguments just as seriously, that we are not puppets on whom one pulls from behind, so-to-speak, with which they spit out something which corresponds to the official tactic or official line, but rather that we are humans just as you, who reflect on their position and on their decision...”³⁵ Strittmatter, in a position of relative power in the organization, condemned the petitioners while urging reconciliation, although her criticism suggested that it was the signatories that needed to come back in line rather than a compromise be forged.

So what should the Party organization do with these authors? To this end, it was Strittmatter who unveiled the prearranged resolution, seemingly spontaneously, hoping they would adopt it as a “last point to build upon for today.” According to the resolution, the Party organization within the Berlin Writers Union professed its “unshakeable connectedness with their socialist fatherland, the German Democratic Republic.” It pledged adherence to the 8th and 9th Party congress’s decisions and, after “detailed, frank, and principled discussion” gave its “full agreement with the decision, because of his adversarial behavior against the GDR and because of gross violation of civic duties, to divest Wolf Biermann of permission to remain in our country and to deprive him of

³⁵ Ibid., 137-140.

citizenship.” The resolution also condemned the West German “smear campaign” against the GDR, dismissing it as an encroachment into the internal affairs of a sovereign country. It further condemned the petition as aiding the “anticommunist agitation of our enemy” and stated that the signatories had been “criticized and condemned.” It also demanded that these authors “immediately reverse their un-Party-like behavior.”³⁶ The resolution met with applause from the assembled authors, representing the Party’s ultimate goals: total loyalty and rejection of an alternative means of articulating dissenting views within socialism. This was hardly the basis for reconciliation.

Later, Konrad Naumann, Politburo member and Berlin SED First Secretary, spoke to the group. The secretary began by praising the Party organization within the Berlin Writers Union as having a “good tradition” in that “it is a respectable base organization to which the country listens.” Given this importance, the conflict they were today discussing was certainly a “fundamental” one. Decrying the petition as indicating a lack of trust in the Party, he expressed that such behavior was not a “norm of behavior” for their SED organization. In other words, certain behavior patterns were expected from members, patterns which were violated by sending the petition to the West. He also struck a conciliatory tone, suggesting, “Is it possible that one can get on the wrong track? – Yes! I haven’t at any time today had the feeling that anyone denies he can repent! No one!” Clearly Becker must have made some kind of expression at this notion, prompting Naumann to ask why the author was staying quiet. Becker piped up, shouting “Then let me!” to which another in the crowd retorted, “He’s already spoken!” A brief moment of disorder broke out, and as Naumann shouted “Wait a minute! Wait a minute!” he

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

seconded the notion that Becker had spoken at the previous meeting. Animated, he launched into a lecture about the “Leninist principles of the Party – for us that isn’t dogmatism!” They couldn’t allow themselves to ruin the “good path of the VIII. and IX. Party congress,” even for “those who belong to the elite of GDR literature,” but they could discuss things openly within the Party organization.³⁷ Becker’s outburst prompted Naumann to lay his cards on the table – they could discuss things within the Party, but outside of it, members were expected to conform to established guidelines and norms.

Roland Bauer was the final speaker before the resolution was voted upon. He remarked on the nine or ten hours that they had devoted between their two meetings, taking pride in the “seriousness which we seldom have in our base organization or in political discussions.” What was clear to him was that their discussion was no longer about Biermann; “[I]t is about several fundamental questions of the conception of the development of our country, and indeed the development of socialism, that we actually have decided in our Party program at the Party congress by democratically elected delegates.” It was the obligation of those entering the ranks of the Party to adhere to implement its policy and decisions; if one disagreed, then one should quit. Calling out the petitioners for demanding trust from the Party when they had not given trust to the SED in return, he expressed that the Party organization should therefore give a signal of support: adopt the declaration proposed by Strittmatter. Voting by hand, 110 authors approved the resolution, with only six against and four abstaining.³⁸ Bauer had invoked

³⁷ Ibid., 148-50.

³⁸ Ibid., 182-86. The six voting against the measure were Becker, Braun, Hermlin, Jakobs, Kirsch, and Wolf. Abstaining votes belonged to Helfried Schreiter, Heinz Kahlau, Jutta Bartus, and Reimar Gilsenbach. “Bericht des Ersten Sekretärs der SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin an das Politbüro des ZK der SED,” 6 December 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 217.

the specter of writer responsibility within the Party as well as the need to adhere to Party discipline, and his words were effective in securing the resolution's passage.

Despite the resolution's passage, there were still sixteen who had earlier requested to speak, and Helmut Kuchler, in charge of the meeting, suggested letting four talk and then they would break off for the evening. Karl-Heinz Jakobs objected that "this calamitous discussion would have come to a vote before everyone here had spoken." Kuchler reminded him that the resolution had passed and the issue was therefore closed. Volker Braun was then invited to speak, upon which he described the resolution as a statement "which at bottom contains almost only sentences which everyone approves [and] does not give the impression that here on the other hand there is a gap between us." Karl-Heinz Jakobs then repeated his complaint, shared with Braun, that they should have passed a "more thoughtful resolution." The resolution was so "calamitous," that it was the first time, Jakobs claimed, that he had ever voted against a Party resolution, and he would have liked the chance to explain why he was voting against it. He began to outline these objections, declaring it his duty, as a member of the Party leadership, to have opposed Biermann's expatriation. He read a letter he had written to Honecker in which he explained to the SED Party boss that for years he had lobbied to have Biermann's publishing ban lifted and he was therefore "dismayed" that "now through his expatriation every possibility to lead the essential, public ideological argument objectively, has been frustrated." The way the Biermann case had been handled left nothing but "damaged principles of socialist democracy." Indeed, "the German Democratic Republic should not hand over socialists and communists who think differently to international fascism."³⁹

³⁹ Hearing this, Gerhard Branstner, who had interrupted Jakobs a minute earlier, loudly announced that if he had to listen to any more statements like that, he'd leave the room. Jurek Becker joined the fray,

Like the other petitioners, Jakobs championed the right to disagree and the value of open discussion of problems to improve life in East Germany.

Immediately after Jakobs finished his speech, Rudi Strahl rose to speak, proposing that Jakobs be expelled from the Party leadership. This seemingly spontaneous suggestion had of course been instructed by Honecker, and Strahl delivered a short statement he had surely practiced beforehand. Considering Jakobs's words, he declared "such a perfect example of intolerance and dogmatism [...] I have never once in my entire Party membership experienced." Jakobs, he explained, had been well informed about the reasons behind Party policies, so when he articulated views like he had a moment earlier, "I can only consider that a filthy human position." Finishing his statement, many in the hall applauded.⁴⁰ Jakobs was voted out easily: 110 approved his dismissal, three voted against, and seven abstained.⁴¹

The last author to speak at any length was Reimar Gilsenbach, who had given his assent to the petition via the telephone. Now, however, perhaps reacting to Jakobs's treatment, he declared, "I think it would have been sensible not to publish this letter in the West." He then briefly laid out his objections to the Biermann incident, stemming primarily from his belief that people should not be stripped of their citizenship, a punishment he alleged was unconstitutional in the GDR and was not possible even for the worst crimes. The only constitutional provision for expatriation, he explained, was when one relocated to the West. He agreed that Biermann had violated East German laws and

attacking Branstner for not storming when he had heard any of the other "lies" that day. "Protokoll der Fortsetzung der Parteiversammlung," 187-94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁴¹ "Bericht des Ersten Sekretärs," 217.

had he returned he would have been punished. He concluded by noting how much he had written in the GDR and, even though his literature was not of central importance, he believed that he had made a “very small contribution to the development of the GDR” and hoped that he could continue to do so. This act of contrition garnered a round of applause.⁴² Gilsenbach’s strategy, perhaps influenced by the hostile crowd, was crafting a narrowly legalistic justification for his protest against Biermann’s expatriation – it was not that he agreed with Biermann, but that it was illegal to treat him thusly.

In the days that followed, the district Party leadership assessed the two Party meetings (23 and 26 November) collectively. Together, they comprised “the most comprehensive and principled dispute in the last 14 years in the Party organization and in the Writers Union, for example, far more principled and also sharper than after the 11th Plenum [in 1965].” The petitioners were said to have been defeated and a victory was credited to “the correct line and position, but still not the final victory.” The majority of members, the report was pleased to announce, condemned the decision of the petitioners to provide their letter to the Western media. Finally, the resolution reached by the group counted as a strong foundation “for the further political-ideological clarification, stabilization of the [base organization], formation of positive forces.” Important concluding remarks included the observation that the petitioners had formed a group; it was therefore important not to treat them as a group but as individuals since there were differences in their behavior and doing so would serve “to lead several back to us, although that is difficult and will not succeed with everyone.” Once again, the educational aspects of the dictatorship were apparent: the SED would try to redeem some

⁴² “Protokoll der Fortsetzung der Parteiversammlung,” 195-96.

of the dissenting authors, although it doubted all could be salvaged. Moreover, the district SED leaders decided that no further measures would be taken against them as “literati and artists” unless they persisted in this fight. They also recommended that the union’s Party organization kick Becker and Jakobs out. Hermlin was to receive only a rebuke “in view of his many years of membership and the still visible connection to the Party.” With the Wolfs, Braun, and Kirsch they would wait until they had spoken further with Party leaders. Kunert, because he did not belong to the organizers of the petition, would be offered the face-saving chance to resign from the Party. This would satisfy the urging of many members “to stop treating many comrades with kid gloves.” The renowned petitioners “must begin with the [base organization] and not first with the [Central Committee] or Politburo, and they should also not be handled differently in traveling abroad.”⁴³ The resentment and jealousy behind these comments was obvious.

The Party leaders of the Berlin Bezirksverband also set out more concrete plans of actions to involve regular members of the Writers Union in activities so as to help mold their opinions on the Biermann incident. First, they confirmed that they would lead a Party proceeding against the signatories and would prepare such undertakings in a meeting beforehand. They planned individual talks with the writers in question to be followed several days later with a meeting of all SED members within the Berlin branch. The members of the steering committee of the Berlin branch were also instructed to remove those signatories who were also part of the Bezirksvorstand (Becker, Braun, de Bruyn, Kirsch, Plenzdorf, and Dieter Schubert) from their positions, which they did on 17

⁴³ “Bericht des Zweiten Sekretärs,” 203-5. The Politburo also approved of the meeting, asserting that “it proves the political maturity of the Party organization of the Berlin Writers Union that 110 members approved the resolution, 4 abstained, and only 6 were against it.” Konrad Naumann, “Bericht des Politbüros des ZK der SED (Auszug),” n.d., in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 206.

December.⁴⁴ As soon as this was accomplished, the district branch would hold a meeting, organized before hand by the members of the writers' local Party group, to inform members about what had occurred within the Party organization. In addition, the district branch was instructed to plan a general meeting under the theme "literature and class struggle," to be held in January so that "the dispute is still fresh in the memory, that all comrades are politically activated." After this, the district branch would plan another election meeting to replace those who had been voted out in December.⁴⁵ The local SED leadership was leaving nothing up to chance; the Writers Union had been fully instrumentalized to contain the fallout from the Biermann affair.

On 30 November the Writers Union's presidium met for the first time since the Biermann scandal had broken. Many of the presidium members had participated actively in the earlier meetings, so most were well-versed in the state of affairs. However, in contrast with their Berlin Party organization, the presidium had two additional concerns. First, how to handle the situation within the organization as a whole and not just in Berlin, and, second, how the union should respond to the petitioners in addition to the Party proceedings they were about to undergo.

⁴⁴ The Party group of the district steering committee of Berlin's Writers Union branch met 17 December with the purpose of preparing a resolution to remove the six members of that body who had signed the petition would be removed. Thus Becker, Braun, de Bruyn, Kirsch, Plenzdorf, and Dieter Schubert were discharged, by a 12 to 6 vote, because their actions had "damaged the statute of the association" and because "they were not prepared to appraise self-critically their behavior as steering committee members which was contrary to the statute." Konrad Naumann, "Information über den Stand der Diskussion und Auseinandersetzung in den Parteioorganisation des kulturell-künstlerischen Bereiches der Hauptstadt zur Kenntnis," 17 December 1976, SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/7458.

⁴⁵ "Mitteilung der Parteileitung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes an die SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin," n.d., in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 198-200.

Missing Hermann Kant and Anna Seghers, the presidium meeting still dealt almost exclusively with Biermann-related issues. Those present affirmed the correctness of the SED's decision and that "the 13" had erred in presenting their petition to the Western media. Gerhard Henniger provided a detailed explanation of the events surrounding the Biermann expulsion, a position no doubt stemming from his Party connections. Interestingly, almost all members present recounted that they were "surprised and needed some time to find their bearings." They also recognized soberly that "before the Writers Union stands a difficult time when it will not be easy to find common ground now." Thus their immediate concerns were to keep the organization unified in the face of crisis. The Biermann incident also raised several ancillary questions that would have to be dealt with, including about "our information policy, problems of youth, of public education and the artists of the younger generation, questions of literature and art criticism, 'to sweep under the rug,' do we only play the role of a fire brigade that is called when it's burning," and so on. In the end, the presidium decided to hold off on the planned December 1976 Vorstand meeting until the new year (it was postponed first to January, then later to March), giving the district organizations a chance to hold meetings first. These meetings would be guided by Henniger, who would host the district chairs in a week or so for a briefing. As for the steering committee members who had signed the protest petition, the presidium deferred to the resolution of the Berlin Party organization.⁴⁶ The immediate aftermath of Biermann's ouster raised anew issues with which the union had been grappling for years, but with added

⁴⁶ Leo Sladczyk, "Information über die Präsidiumssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 30.11.1976," 1 December 1976, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61. See also Gerhard Henniger, "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 30. November 1976," 13 December 1976, SV 402, 1-2.

immediacy. The role of the union in the wake of the Biermann affair was an open question, and although there was established precedent, the presidium members seemed somewhat uncertain. Moreover, in contrast to the steely resolve and decisive actions of the local SED leaders, the Writers Union's leaders as a whole appeared reluctant and unsure of how to proceed, deferring to the Berlin district branch or postponing the steering committee meeting until they could see how the dust would settle.

A closer look at the presidium reveals differential positions. Regarding those SV members who had signed the petition, Helmut Sakowski, Rainer Kerndl, and Günter Görlich, all part of the Hitler Youth generation, were quick to label their actions as “counterrevolutionary.” Both Jurij Brezan and especially Erwin Strittmatter, both of the veteran communist generation, complained that they had not been properly informed about the background of recent events, and Strittmatter further claimed that he had warned about just such a rift occurring within the union many times in the past, and now chastised the others for not having listened to him. He spoke openly about giving up his position as vice president of the Writers Union (he eventually left the presidium in 1978 after the Eighth Writers Congress that year).⁴⁷ Klaus Höpcke, Henniger, and Leo Sladczyk, three cultural bureaucrats, countered that the presidium leaders had been well informed about pressing cultural policy issues. Kerndl was more even-keeled about the situation, suggestion that a Party proceeding was to be expected, and that one should learn to live with the consequences of one's actions. Still, he admitted, he could not

⁴⁷ In the report assessing the presidium meeting, Sladczyk deemed it “urgently necessary” to conduct a talk between the Writers Union's vice presidents and leading SED officials, especially with Erwin Strittmatter. In particular, they needed “to erase problems and difficulties, prejudices, etc. as well as to hinder the resignation of the function of vice president.” Sladczyk, “Information über die Präsidiumssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 30.11.1976.”

bring himself to expel the veteran Hermlin from the SED.⁴⁸ Thus clear groupings were emerging in the presidium in response to the events of that autumn, with generational experience playing an important role in this process. The younger colleagues, stamped with anti-fascism, were quicker to condemn the petitioners, whereas the older colleagues, perhaps given their identification with older, non-Marxist cultural traditions, appeared less rigid but more uncertain as to how to proceed. Interestingly, at least Kerndl had been unwilling to condemn Hermlin too strongly, evincing a respect for the veteran communist from someone of the younger generation.

The meeting of the base organization of the SED within Berlin's Writers Union district branch on 7 December 1976 was far from normal. Scarcely a fortnight after the petition's publication and after much consultation with local and national Party leaders, the base organization demanded the local signatories of the petition appear before a full assembly of district Party colleagues to receive their punishment.

Six of the nine writers in question – Stephan Hermlin, Volker Braun, Jurek Becker, Sarah Kirsch, Gerhard Wolf, and Reimar Gilsenbach (Christa Wolf, Günter Kunert, and Karl-Heinz Jakobs could not attend due to illness) – arrived on 7 December to face the judgment of their peers and their professional organization. The one-hundred-twenty-two assembled literary intellectuals listened intently to the recommendations of the local Party leadership, who accused the signatories of committing a “gross political error” and having “objectively served the communist-baiting of our enemies.” “Consciously violating the rules of socialist and intraparty democracy,” these authors had

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“breached party discipline and contravened fundamental principles of the standing of our Party.” The district branch SED leaders explained that these six writers had been brought in for terse discussions, where it was clearly communicated to them that the outcome of the Party proceedings against them depended above all else on “their willingness to amend their unpartisan behavior.” Since two of the six, Hermlin and Gilsenbach, had already officially recanted, the leadership advised the assembled writers to treat each of the accused individually, voting on a punishment proposed by the SED.⁴⁹

The punishments meted out by the group indeed varied from author to author. Hermlin, for instance, received a “strong rebuke” for his role, a lighter punishment which reflected his stated contrition and stature (93% voted in favor of this penalty).⁵⁰ Gilsenbach got off with a mere warning (98% approved this penalty). Volker Braun, who admitted in retrospect that submitting the petition to the Western media was a mistake, found 97% of his colleagues voting for a rebuke. Wolf, Kirsch, and Becker, recalcitrant to the end, garnered harsher penalties from their peers. One hundred and nine of the

⁴⁹ Konrad Naumann, “Information der Bezirksleitung Berlin der SED über die Durchführung des Mitgliederversammlung der Grundorganisation der SED des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes vom 7. Dezember 1976 (17.00 bis 19.00 Uhr), SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/7441. In a letter from 4 December, Hermlin reminded the Party leaders that he had helped found the GDR and that he was loyal to the SED, the Politburo, and the policies of the 8th and 9th Party Congresses. He expressed a desire to avoid a rift between writers and Party, and admitted it was an error to have given the petition to the Western media. Stephan Hermlin, “Erklärung von Stephan Hermlin,” 4 December 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 261-62. Gilsenbach, in a 1 December letter, declared that he had never gone to a Western press agency and that he was against forced expulsions of any kind. He continued, “I acquiesce, however, to the discipline of the Party and will not publicly express this objection in the case of Biermann.” Reimar Gilsenbach to the SED Party Organization of the District Association Berlin of the Writers Union of the GDR, 1 December 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 364. Hermlin actually renounced his declaration a week later after Becker and Gerhard Wolf had been expelled from the Party and Kirsch had been removed from its ranks, creating an “unbearable situation.” Stephan Hermlin to the Leadership of the Party Organization in the Berlin Writers Union, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 264-65.

⁵⁰ This amounted to 114 of 122 voting for the penalty. Of the eight who voted against it, three claimed the punishment was not harsh enough, and of the remaining five, four (Becker, Wolf, Kirsch, and Braun) were among the accused. As for the rest of the writers, only Kurt Stern, longtime SED member and a leader within the Writers Union, voted against the measure.

authors (89%) voted to expel Wolf from the SED, a reaction to the fact that even after several hours of meetings with SED officials, he still refused to make amends for his behavior. Instead, he insisted, “I cannot acquiesce to the Party discipline if it is against myself.” According to the meeting report, Kirsch had declared that she had “obviously lost her connection to the Party,” lacking the will “to comply with the duties connected to Party membership.” Eighty-nine percent of her colleagues voted to “remove [her] from the ranks of the party,” a less severe breaking of bonds with the SED whereby the Party, while acknowledging the error of the person, still considered them to be in tolerable political standing vis-à-vis the GDR.⁵¹ Last to be adjudicated was Becker, whose recommended penalty was, as with Kirsch, being removed from the ranks of the party. Before the voting could commence, however, Becker requested to say a word on his behalf. Rather than offering an eleventh-hour apology, however, the author refused once more to atone for his behavior and defiantly defended his actions in providing the petition to the Western media since it declared before the world that “he under no circumstances wants to be taken for someone who agrees with the measure of Biermann’s expatriation.”⁵² These comments provoked “agitation and indignation” among the crowd, prompting 93% of them to reject the local leadership’s recommendation to remove

⁵¹ “Aus den Reihen der Partei zu streichen” signaled more of a mutual parting of ways than a severe punishment. See Stefan Wolle, *Die Heile Welt der Diktatur* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998), 103-4; Frank Hirschinger, *“Gestapoagenten, Trotzlisten, Verräter”: kommunistische Parteisäuberungen in Sachsen-Anhalt 1918-1953* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 230; Rüdiger Wenzke, Torsten Diedrich, and Hans Gotthard Ehlert, *Staatsfeinde in Uniform? widerständiges Verhalten und politische Verfolgung in der NVA* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2005), 268-76.

⁵² For the full text of Becker’s declaration, see Jurek Becker, “Stellungnahme vor der Parteiversammlung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 7. Dezember 1976, JBA 2589.

Becker from the SED ranks, opting instead to levy the much harsher penalty of outright expulsion from the Party.⁵³

Christa Wolf made a written declaration, similar to the written statement she had prepared for the 26 November Party base organization meeting, to the Party leaders of the Berlin district branch the same day as the proceeding against her husband. In the statement, she admitted that she and her husband had made a mistake in giving the petition both to *Neues Deutschland* and the Western press. But she also expressed once more her profound disappointment in the manner in which the Biermann decision was announced in *Neues Deutschland*. As for the petition, they had always intended it for East Germany, but they knew full well “under no circumstances would it be published here.” She had seen her choice as either to remain silent or to commit a violation of Party discipline by going to the Western media. She reminded them that she had never done such a thing before, but “to this day I do not see how else I should have handled it.” She made clear that she had hoped the publication of the petition might trigger a discussion about “whether and how in the stable condition our society could further develop the socialist democracy...” She considered the creation of the GDR to be one of the most significant accomplishments of the postwar world and declared her full commitment to the policies of the 8th and 9th Party congresses. She referenced her 27 years as a Party member, to which she owed many of her most positive and challenging experiences, it was an “impression [...] never to be erased.”⁵⁴ Wolf’s tone was defiant but principled, fiercely defending her belief that openness in East Germany was the key to societal

⁵³ Naumann, “Information der Bezirksleitung Berlin.”

⁵⁴ Christa Wolf, “Stellungnahme Christa Wolfs vom 7.12.76,” 7 December 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 277-78.

development and refusing to back away from the petition. Yet she had run into a central dilemma, no doubt felt by other writers as well: she was in favor of socialism, but disillusioned with how it was being practiced in East Germany.

Wolf finally met with district branch Party secretary Helmut K  chler in person on 15 December. At the meeting, she repeated that she felt the publication of the Biermann petition was the only way to have a real impact on the GDR, elaborating that there were many contradictions in East Germany between “material conditions and spiritual demands,” especially among the youth, which could only be resolved through public discussions. She clearly understood she had violated the Party statute and was ready to bear the consequences and could not imagine that she and her husband would receive differential treatment. In her 27 years of membership, the report noted, she had had to show a great deal of Party discipline, but now she had reached a point where Party discipline was hindering her writing, and yet she refused, as a devoted communist, to ever leave East Germany for the capitalist West. She expressed doubts to K  chler, however, about her membership, suggesting she might be able to do more if she were no longer a member. Nevertheless, she stressed, “I am no Biermann and I will not be one.” Still, she definitely felt that, although it was not easy, she “had reached a point [in the Party] where she couldn’t say anything else.” Finally, she knew she had to pay a “very high price” for her actions, and she should receive the punishment her husband did.⁵⁵ Wolf appeared resigned to her fate, almost relieved at the thought of leaving the Party but also lost without it. It had been her life, and she clearly considered herself a devoted

⁵⁵ Herbert Jopt, “Aktennotiz   ber das Gespr  ch mit der Genossin Christa Wolf am 15.12.76,” 15 December 1976, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 280-83.

communist, but she also felt that she no longer could work or express herself as she would like within the SED's confines.⁵⁶

The Biermann Affair: The Union Phase, 1977

For the first month and a half of the Biermann affair, the Writers Union's presidium deferred to the SED's initiative for how to handle those who had signed the 17 November petition. Several of these union leaders were of course active in the SED base organization within the Berlin district branch, but the presidium had opted to postpone all important non-SED union meetings until the new year so as to buy time to work out a strategy for how to deal with the petitioners as an organization. By 1977, the presidium once again asserted its leading role within the organization; they still collaborated with the SED, but union leaders took a much more active role in this second phase of the Biermann affair than the first. Four sub-phases are perceptible in 1977: first, January and February when the presidium worked with the SED to prepare for key union meetings; second, March when both the central steering committee met for the first time since Biermann affair broke and the Berlin district branch held its long-overdue election meeting; third, late spring and summer when the presidium eased up on its demands to expel petitioners from the Vorstand, attempting to move the union out of the mire caused by the events of late 1976; finally, late summer and fall when, despite conciliatory gestures by the presidium, several high profile steering committee members resigned.

⁵⁶ One of Wolf's darkest novellas, *Kein Orts. Nirgends* (No Place on Earth), was written during the aftermath of the Biermann affair. It offers a fictional retelling of the suicide of two German Romantic poets.

The first important event of the new year was the 7 January presidium meeting, which concerned itself primarily with planning the upcoming central Vorstand meeting at the end of the month (eventually postponed until 11 March). The groupings within the presidium from the previous month were still evident in January. For example, Kant, Görlich, and Kerndl expressed in January that it was necessary to expel the petition's signatories from the central steering committee if they still felt their actions had been justified, even if all also agreed that "the problem [...] should not be handled carelessly." Likewise, in light of recent expulsions from the Berlin Vorstand (the Biermann supporters, a third of the total district steering committee, was expelled on 17 December), they should proceed cautiously; in the district organization, the expulsions had been urgently needed "in order to quickly maintain a working steering committee," but "the situation in the central steering committee is different." Two older colleagues, Seghers and Strittmatter, insisted that each affected member have time to rethink their positions before expulsion from the central Vorstand was considered. Fellow veteran Kurt Stern, for his part, expressed solidarity with the signatories, but before he could explain himself several colleagues implored him to quit such a mindset. Their main concern, however, seemed to be themselves, as some colleagues voiced, "Don't get us in yet more trouble!"⁵⁷ While there were some within the presidium pushing for a tougher line than others, the common theme in all contributions was to limit controversy, not just in keeping the "wayward" authors from critiquing them, but also striking a conciliatory tone themselves. The presidium, it appears, was ready to turn the page on the Biermann crisis.

⁵⁷ Abteilung Kultur, "Information über die Präsidiumssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 7. Januar 1977," 11 January 1977, in *In Sachen Biermann*, 322-23. The document is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

These sentiments came through in the subsequently lengthy discussion on the possible behavior of Kurt Hager at the upcoming central steering committee meeting. The duration of this discussion, coupled by the anxiety expressed in reaction to Stern's statement, indicated that several members of the presidium were worried about how the Central Committee was viewing their work. They were certain that Hager's intention was to have a meeting "which helped the writers to fulfill their societal mission..." Leo Sladczyk was therefore asked to request Hager speak to their group about "the continuation of the established cultural policy of the VIII. and IX. Party Congress of the SED." This would relieve the pressure on presidium members from having to pronounce on official cultural policy under the increasingly watchful eye of a Party leadership now highly sensitive to deviations from orthodox understandings of socialism. As for the central Vorstand meeting, Stern proposed Hager wait until next time to come, so as to give the authors a chance "to speak among ourselves for starters." Seghers wondered aloud why the SED had not been consulted first about the Biermann decision. In addition, the president repeated her concern that no professional penalties befall the petition's signatories or supporters. "That must," she intoned, "be clearly stated, and the association should pay attention!" The Party members in attendance urged Seghers to go directly to Hager with her thoughts. As with Stern's complaints, the group seemed unwilling to debate the SED's post-Biermann settlement, even if the issues were raised by their president. Finally, most of the group expressed a strong desire for Hager to discuss the "worldwide ideological dispute and the situation of the ideological class struggle." The key point in this request was telling, namely that "The Biermann case in a narrow sense, its handling in the association, should remain the concern of the Writers

Union.”⁵⁸ Probably amplified by the mounting scrutiny to which they were subjected, the presidium nonetheless articulated a long-held belief of many members that they should have jurisdiction over their own affairs.

At the next Party organization of the Berlin Writers Union, held 20 January 1977, 120 comrades from the base organization attended as did Helmut Müller (Central Committee member and Second Secretary of the district SED leadership) and Lothar Witt (member of the secretariat of the district SED leadership and First Secretary of the local Berlin-Mitte leadership). Kuchler recapitulated the Party proceedings of the past month against the signatories of the petition. After the punishment meeting on 7 December, they had also met individually with the petitioners who had been unable to make the first session: Jakobs, Kunert, and Christa Wolf. There, these three were all reminded how great an error they had committed and how much they had aided the class enemy. It was also driven home for them that they had willfully broken Party rules and had attempted to pressure the Party and government to act. Jakobs and Kunert had remained steadfast in their defiance at these meetings. Given the results of these talks, Kuchler, on behalf of the Party leadership of the base organization, proposed that they initiate Party proceedings against those three authors today. They recommended Jakobs be expelled from the Party, due to “gross violations against the Party statute, especially un-class-like behavior and damaging of Party discipline.” One hundred eight of the 120 in attendance voted for this sentence (90%) with 11 “no” votes (including Braun, Jakobs, Kahlau, Kunert, Helfried Schreiter, Jeanne and Kurt Stern, and Christa Wolf) and one abstention. As for Kunert, the Party leadership recommended, for the same reasons as Jakobs, that he

⁵⁸ “Information über die Präsidiumssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 7. Januar 1977,” 11 January 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 323-24.

be removed from the ranks of the Party. The difference in sentencing seems to have stemmed from the fact that Jakobs had been a leader in the local SED group and so his transgressions were all the more egregious. Kunert received 107 votes for the proposed sentence (89%) with nine voting against and four abstaining votes.⁵⁹

Finally, they came to Christa Wolf, whom they recommend receive only a strong rebuke. A key factor mentioned was that she had been the one to at least consider going to Honecker before publishing the letter and she had seemed more convincing in her stated support for Party policies. In other words, she had adhered to the established norm, or at least had remembered it. The voters also surely must have been taken Wolf's strong reputation outside of the GDR into account. Taken together, the leadership was convinced, "that we in the Party help her learn once to fight for the correct view again, to seek the advice of the Party, and to take it seriously." A discussion on the proposed sentence ensued, with nine authors participating. Wolf herself was caught off-guard by the light sentence, especially since she still saw no difference between her and her husband's views. Several authors, chief among them Hermann Kant, expressed full support for the proposed penalty. The one troublemaker among them was Jeanne Stern, who raised anew questions of the legitimacy of Biermann's expulsion. She argued that exiling the songwriter had done a lot of damage, and that the notion of Party discipline was little more than "slavish obedience." Of note was the fact that Stern's statement aroused a great deal of agitation, according to the meeting report, and she was asked to stop speaking. When it came to the actual voting, 111 voted for Wolf's proposed

⁵⁹ "Information über die Mitgliederversammlung der Parteiorganisation des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes am 20. January 1977," 20 January 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 228-31. The document is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/JIV2/2J/7497.

punishment, six against (including Braun, Jakobs, Kunert, and Schreiter), and three abstained (both Sterns and Wolf herself).⁶⁰ Wolf got off lightly, much to her surprise, and perhaps even disappointment. But she had shown herself, in the local SED base organization's eyes, to be salvageable.

The central steering committee meeting was postponed until 11 March just as the Berlin district branch's election meeting was moved to 29 March. This allowed for greater preparation in advance, which for all intents and purposes meant greater coordination through the Central Committee.⁶¹ At the well-prepared steering committee meeting, the first words of Hager's speech set the tone for the meeting: "For the enemies of freedom, there can be no freedom." This phrase, he lectured, "is the basic principle upon which the revolutionary movement acts." Hager also offered concluding remarks for the meeting, meandering through several topics before expounding upon the "eternal and classless confrontation, bound to no societal development, between writer and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 231-33.

⁶¹ Also, in early March, Ursula Ragwitz further elaborated the ever-evolving plan the Cultural Department had prepared for the steering committee meeting to take place in one week. Kerndl would lead the session, and after Hager's keynote speech, the discussion would be well-planned in advance. They also had contingency plans in place for potential troublemakers: should Kurt Stern, for example, "behave and once more declare his solidarity with the signatories of the protest resolution," they had Harald Hauser ready to be the first discussion participant to counter his words. Then, after a break, Gerhard Henniger would deliver a speech evaluating the 9th Party congress and recapping recent elections in the union. Most importantly, he would state the association's official position on the dispute within their ranks and present the steering committee with the aforementioned resolution against the Biermann sympathizers. Ragwitz confirmed that they had secured sufficient support for the resolution, so that it should be passed without incident. And if Kurt Stern voted against the resolution and continued his provocative solidarity with the signatories, his future status as a steering committee member "is called into question." Ursula Ragwitz, Abteilungsleiter, "Vorbereitung und Ablauf der Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 11.3.1977," in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 326-29. The document is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61. For more on the planning of the 11 March meeting see "Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband," n.d., SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61; Leo Sladczyk, "Betr.: Beratung mit Schriftstellern am 9. Februar 1977 in der Abteilung Kultur des ZK zur Vorbereitung der Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 11. März 1977, 4 February 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 325-26. The document is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

power.” To him, the main question was: “Should the individual – in this case the writer – prostrate oneself before power, or should one adhere to one’s own opinion?” Luckily, in the GDR the question was moot, because “[n]o one needs to prostrate oneself before our power if they have really understood this power.” The present conflict, he elaborated, really stemmed from the fact that the petitioners had not come to their Party colleagues first and said, “Listen up! Explain to us, advise us! What is actually the matter?” Instead, they had caused a “deep, deep disappointment” by going to the Western media. Therefore because there were no problems between writers and power in the GDR, at least on the part of the SED, the petitioners could well have discussed their grievances with the Party, or at least had it explained to them. So what was to be done now? First, it was important to consider carefully the individual motivations and actions of each writer in question, something they had already done in the party organization and in the Writers Union district organization in Berlin. However, these steps by themselves were insufficient – one needed to deal with the authors as an organization. It was thus “important for the association to lead the discussion, to not completely cut ties with the colleagues who show a readiness for cooperation.” This was now the most important task, “to struggle for that individual, to try to convince him, to try to communicate to him the correct knowledge, to really try to win his talent for our cause.”⁶² Party supremacy needed to be established but if it could be balanced by reconciling with some writers who had diverged from the accepted path, all the better. The *Erziehungsdiktatur* would bring these writers back into the fold, redeemed through contrition.

⁶² Kurt Hager, “Tonbandtranskription des Referats des Sekretärs für Kultur des ZK der SED auf der Vorstandssitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR (Auszug),” 11 March 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 330-38.

Hearing Hager's speech, the steering committee adopted a proposed resolution from the SED.⁶³ The resolution declared 1977 to be a special year for the writers of the GDR as the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution ("the most momentous and successful act of liberation in human history") was to be celebrated. Also noteworthy that year was a meeting of the signatories of the Helsinki Accords, a meeting which would contribute to "collective security and cooperation in Europe [...] a goal to whose realization the writers of the German Democratic Republic turn all their political, moral, and literary powers." Because such important tasks required unity, the Vorstand declared itself against the actions of the Biermann petition signatories who "gave the enemies of détente opportunity to strengthen their campaign against the socialist German Democratic Republic, against the socialist states, against socialism." Thus "to bear responsibility in socialism, to bear responsibility for socialism" was the guiding maxim of writers, and it was consequently wrong "to use the media of the class enemy in handling of our problems." Finally, 1977 also marked the Writers Union's twenty-fifth anniversary, and since then, "[w]e have done our work as comrades-in-arms and allies of the workers and peasants of our country, we have done so under the leadership of our Party and working class." Truly, the Writers Union could claim a "share in the successful development of our republic." Through the resolution, the steering committee was staking a claim to societal importance, connecting their mission to key national and international events. Moreover, they openly and resolutely condemned the actions of those who had signed the Biermann petition, specifically in turning to the Western media.⁶⁴

⁶³ The text of the resolution can also be found at SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

⁶⁴ Der Vorstand der Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, "Entschließung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR," 11 March 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 342-43. The

In evaluating the 11 March meeting, the Culture Department of the Central Committee hailed the session for achieving a “clear, partisan position” vis-à-vis the eight members of that body who signed the Biermann petition. The steering committee unanimously approved the resolution represented to them and decided to give those not in attendance the chance to submit written endorsements of the adopted resolution, especially those absentees who had also signed the Biermann petition. These authors were then to be brought in for talks by presidium members. If they had not signed onto the resolution by the next steering committee meeting, they would then be released from their positions in the Vorstand.⁶⁵ Approving the servile resolution had become a *sine qua non* for remaining a member of the central steering committee, forcing the petitioners to either condemn their own actions or to make a stand.

Meetings between the presidium and those authors who had signed the petition occurred in April 1977. There, Volker Braun expressed his belief that the resolution was necessary and he therefore had no objections to it. Jakobs refused to condemn his fellow colleagues, but agreed with the principle “to solve our problems among ourselves and not to use the media of the enemy.” He also expressed an interest in continuing to work within the steering committee. Stephan Hermlin⁶⁶ and Christa Wolf⁶⁷ did not approve of

resolution’s text is also found in SV 583, 72-73. The official press release for the meeting made absolutely no mention of any disagreements at the meeting, or did it even mention the fact that there had been action taken against the Biermann supporters. See Press Release, Writers Union, 11 March 1977, SV 583, 71.

⁶⁵ “Information über die Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband der DDR am 11. März, 1977,” 14 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 344-46. The document is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

⁶⁶ Hermlin stated he agreed with most of the resolution, but “there it also contains sentences that cannot be acknowledged by me” as he they smacked of “self-incrimination.” Stephan Hermlin to Gerhard Henniger, 14 April 1977, Berlin-Niederschönhausen, SV583, 56.

⁶⁷ Wolf disagreed with the section of the resolution concerning the petitioners, but agreed with the rest. She wanted to remain in the Vorstand, but “it was clear to her that – in the event of her non-consent – she must

the resolution but likewise voiced their desire to continue as part of the Vorstand. Franz Fühmann⁶⁸ and Sarah Kirsch⁶⁹ also refused to approve the resolution, claiming the right to publish in foreign papers if there was no opportunity in the GDR to openly express criticism of Party or state decisions. A talk had not yet been held with Günter de Bruyn⁷⁰ but was to occur soon. In view of these consultations, the report instructed to try to keep Braun, Hermlin, Wolf, and Jakobs⁷¹ as part of the steering committee.⁷²

leave the steering committee.” Renate Drenkow, “Aussprache mit Christa Wolf am 6. April 1977,” 12 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 284. The document is also found in SV 583, 61.

⁶⁸ Fühmann wrote a letter to Henniger expressing just this. He agreed with most of the resolution, but there was one part (unidentified) that he could not agree with. In the face of this refusal, he accepted that “[i]f the steering committee wants to draw the conclusion from this writing that my further remaining in this committee is not possible, I will accept the decision in case it is not coupled with discriminating commentary.” Franz Fühmann to Gerhard Henniger, 14 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 250-51. The document is also found in SV 583, 59.

⁶⁹ Kirsch refused to agree to the resolution because of the sections condemning her colleagues. She also was upset that fifteen people had been thrown in jail, including the author Jürgen Fuchs, who had done less than herself. Hans Joachim Schädlich had likewise had his book contract rescinded by the Hinstorff Publishers for signing the petition and Thomas Brasch also had a publication ban, conditions which Kirsch considered unacceptable. She still desired to work with the central steering committee, but her discussant considered her “to not have the ability presently for a critical evaluation of her position in respect to the the recognition of oppositional class interests in the ideological dispute.” Eberhard Scheibner, “Ergebnis eines Gespräches mit Sarah Kirsch am 13.4.1977 zur Entschliessung des Vorstandes, SV 583, 57-58.

⁷⁰ De Bruyn had written a letter to Henniger declaring his support of all of the resolution but the blanket condemnation of those going to the foreign press. Günter de Bruyn to Gerhard Henniger, 20 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 360. The document is also found in SV 583, 62.

⁷¹ In his talk, Jakobs expressed a desire to take a yearlong break from his duties on the Scholarship Commission, although he repeatedly stated his willingness to continue working with the central steering committee. He claimed he could not support the Vorstand’s resolution, however, as he was unwilling to agree to the part about condemning colleagues who had gone to the Western media, especially “not under threat of expulsion.” He also declared his intention to write a letter to the presidium protesting a government instruction banning arts sections of GDR periodicals from mentioning his name. The Writer Union representatives (including NDL chief editor Walter Nowojski) claimed that no such order existed. Walter Nowojski, “Gespräch mit Kalr-Hienz Jakobs am 13.4.1977,” 14 April 1977, SV 583, 54-55.

⁷² “Mitteilung des Sekretariats des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” 14 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 356-58. The document is also found in SV 583, 74-76. See also, “Zur Lage im Vorstand des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” 13 May 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

At the election meeting of the Berlin Writers Union branch, held 31 March, it was clear that a general but incomplete sense of calm had returned to the organization following months of turmoil and uncertainty. At the meeting, 266 of 397 members attended, in an atmosphere that the Central Committee evaluated as “open-minded” and “very disciplined.”⁷³ Some authors did express concern over the branch’s role in what had transpired, however. Klaus Schlesinger, for instance, held the expulsion of one-third of the district Vorstand last December as evidence of “a slightly disturbed relationship of several colleagues to real socialist democracy.” Görlich had claimed that the removal of the district steering committee members was perfectly legal according to the organization’s statute, but Schlesinger objected, “I have not read [the statute] from back to front, but rather from front to back,” and in the very first point of the statute it read: “The member meetings of the district associations are the highest organ in the district, [they] elect the district steering committee and district audit commissions at a minimum of every three years in a secret vote, and so on.” In other words, the district Vorstand was beholden to the member meetings, and should therefore not have had the right to expel members without the approval of the former. Moreover, the current district steering committee had been elected in October 1973, meaning that after October 1976, it was no longer legitimate and had no authority to oust six members that December. To make matters worse, there had been an election meeting scheduled for 2 December but it had been postponed until the present, in order, Schlesinger suspected, to favorably prepare the meeting. So why weren’t they talking about it now? Doing so, he concluded, “would be

⁷³ “Information über den Verlauf der Berichtswahlversammlung des Bezirksverbandes Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

actual socialist democracy.”⁷⁴ He thus challenged the SED’s appropriation of the term socialist democracy in order to criticize their failings.

Schlesinger’s statement drew applause but also a rejoinder by Hermann Kant. Offering to help with “understanding of democracy,” the union vice president acknowledged that they should have held an election meeting earlier, a fact which could not be excused unless there were “powerful reasons” for it. Luckily there were such compelling reasons. Moreover, if Schlesinger was going to call into question the legitimacy of the expulsion decision for this period, he would have to call into question the legitimacy of all decisions made by the steering committee, including decisions that Schlesinger had already expressed agreement with. They’d have to rescind numerous decisions and start again with everything they’d accomplished over the past six months if Schlesinger’s logic was followed, including social benefits provided by the organization for housing, travel, cars, and the like. They should not kid themselves – they knew exactly what had happened in the past six months, “we know what kind of atmosphere here in this literary life began to unfurl, incidentally not at the initiative of the majority of the steering committee, but rather at the initiative among others of a part, a minority of the steering committee.” They were not the ones who had raised a fuss, but they were the ones who wanted “to speak with each other calmly.”⁷⁵

Stefan Heym rose to speak after Kant had finished, using his time to challenge an “error in reasoning” expressed by Konrad Naumann when he had said earlier that day “We, the Party [...] will always differentiate between enemies and those who don’t find

⁷⁴ “Protokoll der Wahlberichtsversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes (Auszug),” 31 March 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 346-48.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 348-50.

their way in certain questions.” Yet in reality, “[t]he colleagues, who back then in the very precarious situation expressed their opinion about a decision diverging from the authorities, are neither enemies nor idiots.” Differences of opinion were natural, he asserted, and “here our differences of opinion should not degenerate into a political fistfight, in which the organizationally weak ones are smacked against the wall and punished economically.” Therefore, “I would like to have the right and plead for the right that we can also express this different view.” Directing his attention to Konrad Naumann, he continued that these difference amounted to “important questions,” which could not be answered “through administrative measures, not through expelling writers [...] from the steering committee with a narrow two-thirds majority, or reprimanding them, not through curtailing their publication opportunities, not through, Comrade Naumann, expelling one from the Party.” Naumann shot back that no one was above the Party and that Heym “has no right to speak about the Party.” Au contraire, Heym responded. He certainly had the right “to speak about the Party,” because the Party was part of the GDR, “and I am a citizen of this republic!” Heym’s plea was for them “to collectively discuss these questions and to collectively find the answers to these questions.” In other words, he believed that in the future they should proceed by “vocalizing and discussing openly and honestly our differences of opinion.”⁷⁶ The question, really, was the medium through which they discussed these differences.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid., 352-54.

⁷⁷ Konrad Naumann agreed with Heym to a point. For instance, he concurred that if one had issues with the Party, one should say so, but at the same time, the Party also had the same right “to say to the individual that we have difficulties with him. That is an entirely normal dialogue.” As for the SED’s Party statute, it was an “extremely democratically adopted statute, where one must know if one attaches oneself to the SED, if one has difficulties there, one can be expelled from this Party.” Clearly incensed, Naumann continued his verbal assault on Heym, exclaiming, “What has happened with those who in a critical situation stabbed us in the back? Nothing! Their books have appeared, they could travel, they have decent

Despite the controversy, the group successfully barred Sarah Kirsch and Günter de Bruyn from being elected to the new district steering committee. These authors had been nominated by Elke Erb and Stefan Heym, respectively, but in each case someone had successfully challenged the nomination, including Hermann Kant's refusal of Kirsch's candidacy. In secret voting, the "overwhelming majority" of voters affirmed the prepared list of district steering committee candidates and also reelected Günter Görlich as chair of the Berlin branch.⁷⁸

The election meeting also passed a resolution submitted to Honecker in early April, in which the district branch declared that the members of their organization through literature help "to form the thinking, feeling, and acting of humans who build and perfect socialism." They further

recognize the leading role of the working class and their party in cultural policy, commit themselves to the creative methods of socialist realism, resolutely oppose at all forms of ideological coexistence and the infiltration of reactionary and revisionist views in the area of literature.

Moreover, "Party positions also remain in the future the principle of our literary creative work, our political engagement, our responsibility for socialism." Importantly, any deviations from this "established path" would be "thwarted." As for the significance of their work as an association, they declared it as being "to create the most favorable conditions for a combative, humanistic socialist literature." In addition, they would adhere to "tested forms" of communication, meaning "literary debates, podium discussions with leading personalities of the Party and the state, group talks, member

accommodations, themselves debaters, who are against us, live in centrally heated rooms on Leipzig Street, receive stipends, get scholarship help every month." Ibid., 354-56.

⁷⁸ "Information über den Verlauf der Berichtswahlversammlung des Bezirksverbandes Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR," SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

meetings, and the various events of our literary active groups.” At the dividing line between two worlds, the members of the Berlin branch affirmed their “commitment and responsibility.” “Only in peace,” it concluded, as forged by the Soviet Union and other socialist states, “are humane existence and creative art secure.”⁷⁹ While not terribly novel, the resolution’s emphasis on adherence to “tested forms” of communication underscored the centrality of the Biermann petition’s publication in the Western media to the dispute which had ensued.

The rigidity of the union’s stance on the petitioners began to soften weeks after the conclusion of the Berlin election meeting. At the presidium meeting of 27 April, for example, Kurt Stern announced he could not approve of the resolution because of “honesty.” Furthermore, he had recently aligned himself with the protest petition of November 1976, although after a “principled discussion” with other presidium members, he eventually expressed his willingness to reconsider his position. For her part, Seghers was pleased with the Vorstand’s resolution, as it evinced an “unequivocal political position” and “thereby the immediate dispute should be closed.” She also preached reconciliation, declaring that most of the petition’s originators recognized, at least internally, “that their step was a mistake,” although they had not acknowledged as much publicly. The most important thing was that the political situation in the Vorstand was “stable” and therefore “one should desist from expulsions from the steering committee.” With a new writers congress to take place in 1978, Seghers suggested that those who, between now and then refused to change their ways, would not be allowed to stand for

⁷⁹ Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic, District Association Berlin, Declaration, 1 April 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/63.

reelection in the Vorstand. Brezan and Strittmatter expressed agreement with Seghers. Kant differed somewhat, arguing that only those who had in the past several months shown their willingness to continue to work in the steering committee in action, not simply words, should remain in the leadership body. The rest of the presidium members tended to agree with Kant, worrying that a decision without consequences would send the message to younger authors “not to become known through hard work and talent but rather through oppositional conduct.” In the wider Vorstand and in the district organizations, many others had likewise opined that rejection of the steering committee resolution of 11 March was indeed grounds for expulsion from the steering committee.⁸⁰

The union leadership was thus divided over whether they should follow through on their threat to expel those steering committee members still standing behind their decision to sign the November 1976 petition. It was clear that the petitioners would most likely be removed from the Vorstand, but how and when exactly this would happen remained an open question. First there was Segher’s proposal in May 1977 to postpone further action on the issue. She was reluctant to come to a decision regarding those petitioners who had not yet been removed from the steering committee, suggesting instead that they simply wait until the new Vorstand would be elected at the 1978 congress. This approach avoided confrontations and accomplished what they wanted without much incident. Ursula Ragwitz, however, considered this approach impractical as it would cause confusion among many writers and Party officials. Second was the

⁸⁰ In March several members of the Vorstand’s Party group demanded an explanation as to why the petitioners had not been thrown out of the steering committee much earlier and held the resolution to be too “mild” in its ramifications for said authors. “Zur Lage im Vorstand des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” 13 May 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61. See also “Information über die Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 27.4.1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

proposal to immediately expel all remaining Vorstand members who supported the pro-Biermann petition. In general, though, Seghers, Erwin Strittmatter, Jurij Brezan, and Kurt Stern opposed this step, a fact which prompted Ragwitz to worry about a “solidarity,” which “would be exploited by the enemy.” Third there was Hermann Kant, who opted for a “differentiated approach,” which would remove those who still maintained “hardened positions,” meaning Kirsch and de Bruyn especially. Ragwitz assessed that it would only be possible to keep some signatories in the Vorstand “if the steering committee is overall politically stable.” Still, in her opinion Kant’s option seemed the most viable.⁸¹ Of note was the generational component of this disagreement; the older colleagues had been willing to relax their view on expelling writers from the Vorstand whereas younger presidium members had called for stronger action.

Momentum shifted towards reconciliation by the summer, at least within the presidium. In June, the presidium met the day before the steering committee session, where a “testy and very emotional discussion” on the petitioners ensued. Seghers repeated her oft-made point that those who had gone to the Western media were to be condemned, but the debate about them should be ended “in order to switch back to writing work.” Many admitted “a strong feeling of dissatisfaction,” apparent in the many comments about “the large number of events and political campaigns, which keeps the authors from the artistic work.” Kant had even claimed, “I feel surrounded by meetings!” Kerndl and others, though, encouraged sober reflection on the fact that just because they might officially terminate debate on the petitioners, did not mean the problems they had

⁸¹ Ursula Ragwitz to Kurt Hager, 16 May 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

raised were suddenly resolved.⁸² Exhaustion was setting in after six months of constant political agitation, and they were ready to turn the page and get back to writing.

At the actual Vorstand meeting, Christa Wolf, Volker Braun, Günther de Bruyn, and Franz Fühmann participated, despite not having supported the March resolution. Henniger presented the presidium's report and detailed the most important work for the organization in the near future: the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution and the Eighth Writers Congress. The First Secretary was orienting them away from the Biermann conflict and towards the future, channeling their energy back into familiar activities. Seghers once more strongly condemned the distribution of the petition to the Western press but also strongly urged the end of debate about "signatures, formulations, revocations, declarations, etc." Instead, she intoned, their focus should be on the upcoming congress where they would select a new Vorstand. Further debate on potential expulsions was unproductive: "there are incidentally more important tasks for the writers in the socialist society." Unlike its predecessor, the steering committee meeting of June found almost no opposition to the presidium's suggestion, a fact which the Central Committee attributed to ideological discipline overcoming personal convictions within the union,⁸³ although political exhaustion was probably the main culprit.⁸⁴

⁸² Leo Sladczyk, "Information über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Vorstandssitzung im Schriftstellerverband am 28. Juni 1977," 28 June 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61. See also Writers Union, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 27.1.1977," SV 600, 66-68.

⁸³ Sladczyk, "Information über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung."

⁸⁴ The official press release for the Vorstand meeting likewise emphasized moving forward as an organization and the vital role (acceptable) writers continued to play in the GDR and even in the wider world. Here it was emphasized that the main subject of discussion at the meeting had been the "multifaceted initiations in preparation of the 60th anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution," as well as evaluations of a major international writers congress in Sofia on peace to which the SV had sent a delegation and an assessment of the Berlin branch election meeting "in which a creative evaluation of the IX. Party Congress was conducted for the work of the writers of the GDR." Writers Union, Press Release to *Neues Deutschland* and the *Berliner Zeitung*, 29 June 1977, SV 583, 53.

Just when the steering committee appeared to be turning the corner, the decision of Sarah Kirsch to leave the GDR in August 1977 set in motion a new wave of defections from the steering committee. On 11 August, Franz Fühmann penned an angry letter to Gerhard Henniger expressing his disillusionment. Calling Kirsch the “most significant contemporary poet of the German language,” he conveyed how the news of her leaving had “stunned and appalled” him and many others. He had written the union many times to express his willingness to set aside his own work “in order to seriously help with nagging problems that could not be delayed in our literary life.” He had never received so much as an acknowledgment of receipt. His most recent unacknowledged letter had convinced him “that in the secretariat of the Writers Union either there exists no inclination to speak about these problems serious, or if there are, then not with me.” He admitted his naivete in thinking that “if not yet my sorrow, then at least my confusion would be shared, but I have, to formulate it cautiously, only found satisfaction draped with phrases about the decision.” Kirsch was now gone as was poet Bernd Jentzsch, he lamented. Jurek Becker had already quit the union in April,⁸⁵ “and I do not desire to be responsible for more.” Therefore it had come down to this: “I do not want to work in the steering committee of an association, to whom such losses appear negligible, because otherwise I can no longer understand the utter unwillingness to reflect on the causes.” Hoping not to create a scandal, he proposed that when in the coming year the new

⁸⁵ Becker had quit in April, after the Berlin election meeting. He did not feel the new district steering committee represented him, and so he had come to a crossroads: “I therefore see no sound reason to be a member of an association any longer, which elects almost unanimously such a steering committee, and I herewith announce my withdrawal.” Jurek Becker to the Writers Union of the GDR, 4 April 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 245-46. The document is also found in JBA 2589 and SV 583, 64.

Vorstand was chosen at the congress, he would not submit himself for reelection. Expecting no response, Fühmann considered this turn of events a “completely fitting close to my twenty years of activity.”⁸⁶

Christa Wolf wrote to the presidium later in August after Kirsch had left. Distressed, Wolf described Kirsch’s emigration as “an occurrence of great human, literary, and political concern,” a concern that was not “grasped and dealt with” in the Writers Union as it should have been. She seemed incensed that various members had tried to call the poet’s integrity into question, and blamed the “defamation and humiliation” as a major reason that she had opted to leave East Germany. No one in the Schriftstellerverband had even asked her about her reasons for wanting to leave. Within the union, there wasn’t the proper atmosphere “to be able to discuss [...] deeply disturbing questions in appropriate ways.” These prevailing conditions, she chided, could not be changed by anything she could do, and therefore, “my hope is worn out.” She could not understand these events and therefore wished to refrain from participating in them. “It leaves me, therefore, no choice,” Wolf concluded, and so “I declare herein my resignation from the steering committee of the Writers Union of the GDR.” To make sure that there were no mistakes about her intentions, she also forwarded a copy of her letter to Erich Honecker.⁸⁷ And in a follow-up letter,⁸⁸ lest it go unstated, Wolf made sure to add that “[t]he Writers Union has played a role in this.” It should be fairly

⁸⁶ Franz Fühmann to Gerhard Henniger, 11 August 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 254-55.

⁸⁷ Christa Wolf to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, 14 August 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 285-86.

⁸⁸ Henniger had responded to her first letter strongly urging her to make an appointment as soon as possible to discuss said questions and to reconsider her resignation. Gerhard Henniger to Christa Wolf, 29 August 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 286.

obvious to them, she closed, that she “presently sees for me do opportunity for effectiveness there.” No talk would change her mind.⁸⁹

By the end of 1977, although much tension still remained, by and large the Writers Union, as an organization, was starting to move on from the tumultuous months following Biermann’s ouster. The Berlin Party organization, the epicenter of the conflict, put it thusly in a monthly report from November: “Our goal to pursue the necessary dispute with adversarial and revisionist attacks, at the same time to bring to the fore again the questions which directly relate to the work of writers for socialism, we have essentially achieved.” Moreover, though some colleagues had expressed mid-year that the organization should bring the conflict to an end. However, the “growing majority” felt that “we should continue the policy of readiness for the objective cooperation and discussion in the organization with simultaneous, principled dispute with incorrect perceptions and actions.”⁹⁰ Was the organization ready to move on?

⁸⁹ Christa Wolf to Gerhard Henniger, 8 September 1977, in Berbig, *In Sachen Biermann*, 287. The Culture Department of the Central Committee urgently proposed that the presidium meet as soon as possible to decide what to do about Wolf and Fühmann, and especially who would try to convince them to rethink their decisions. Hermann Kant had apparently volunteered to talk with Wolf. Ragwitz was particularly concerned because “An exit of these writers from the steering committee will surely be utilized by the enemy to verify the emergence of a kind of ‘inner opposition’ in the Writers Union of the GDR.” For the time being, she recommended the discussion remain within the presidium. Moreover, “in consideration of her medical condition,” she recommended not informing Seghers about the situation. Ursula Ragwitz to Erich Honecker, 19 August 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61. Finally, the SV steering committee discussed the exits of Fühmann, Wolf, and Kirsch at their November 1977 meeting. Henryk Keisch and Paul Wiens couldn’t help but take issue with the “exaggerated praise” for Kirsch as the “greatest German poet” alive. Volker Braun, disgusted by these statements, threatened to walk out of the room, prompting a brief but agitated exchange on the subject. Some commented that authors like Wolf and Fühmann had made use of this unwarranted praise for Kirsch in order to reach “politically false conclusions.” Braun retorted that “concrete facts, which for example document the ‘persecution’ of Sarah Kirsch, had never been provided.” Overall, the steering committee defended their handling of the past year’s events, concluding that “it is not necessary [...] to practice self-criticism” because “[t]he association had patience, perhaps too much patience.” “Kurzinformation über die Vorstandssitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 23.11.1977,” 23 November 1977, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

⁹⁰ Parteisekretär, Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Einige Bemerkungen zum Stand der politisch-ideologischen Arbeit im Bezirksverband und zu politischen Fragen, über die in der letzten Zeit besonders diskutiert wurde,” 17 November 1977, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 904-97 30.

Return to Normalcy? The Eighth Writers Congress, 1978

The best opportunity to move forward as an organization was through a national congress. As seen with the Seventh Writers Congress in 1973, these were tightly coordinated affairs. In a highly controlled environment, congresses offered the organization a national, even international spotlight, and so long as everything went according to plan, they provided the Writers Union with a chance to (re)define its societal mission and the value of art in a socialist society. More than that, it gave the organization an opportunity to clarify boundaries; by articulating rules (explicitly or implicitly) about the conduct of writers under socialism, the congress enabled the union's members to glimpse a new standard for what they could and could not say about socialism.

To this end, planning for the eighth congress, eventually held in late May 1978, began in June 1977. In that month the presidium decided to hold the congress sometime in early 1978 and instructed each district organization to hold member meetings shortly before the congress to elect delegates. Normally these meetings also featured the election of a new district steering committee, but because new *Bezirksvorstände* had been elected in late 1976-early 1977, this was deemed unnecessary.⁹¹ Over the next several months, the presidium hashed out conceptual plans for the congress, eventually presenting their ideas to the central steering committee in November 1977. For example, in September it was proposed that the keynote address's topic should be "writers in their responsibility for the socialist society." There was also discussion about how or if to address the absence of those who had recently parted ways with either the steering committee or the

⁹¹ Writers Union, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 27. Juni 1977," 27 June 1977, SV 600, 67.

organization as a whole (Jakobs, Wolf, Fühmann, and Kirsch were all named), although they appear to have reached no definite conclusion yet on this matter.⁹²

In early August, the Literature Department within the SV's secretariat prepared a report on the congress' conception and goals. The congress was to "demonstrate the specific contribution of the writer to the further formation of the developed socialist society and to take a position in candid and objective discussion on important political-ideological and artistic-aesthetic problems, which arise for the socialist-realistic literature of the next few years." It was to illustrate the "connectedness of writers and artists with the party of the working class" as having reached a "new high level." Particularly important to discuss would be how writers could improve their "artistic responsibility for socialism" and the value of "partisanship, connectedness to the people, and socialist idea content" as "inalienable principle in the creative process." Another key point would be the dynamic between socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism as well as the "coherences and manifestations of the class struggle between socialism and imperialism." Further key points included "the care of rich cultural traditions of our people and the revolutionary worker movement as well as the humanistic and progressive achievements of the international cultural heritage," along with working with younger authors and creating a "creative atmosphere through the assistance of controversy about new works of art."⁹³ These were familiar themes, ones that emphasized the role and responsibility of literature and its creators, and importantly, themes which made no direct mention of the turmoil which had beset the organization over the past year.

⁹² Handwritten notes on congress preparation, n.d., SV 600, 63-65.

⁹³ Literaturabteilung, "VIII. Schriftstellerkongress," 3 August 1977, SV 498, vol. 1, 7-8.

At their November meeting, the presidium members opted to push the congress back from March to May, with member meetings to elect delegates occurring in March and April. Kant was also selected, as with the previous congress, to give the keynote address.⁹⁴ The presidium presented their conceptual plans to the central steering committee in late November, sketched in detail by Henniger. To begin, the First Secretary laid out the basic goals of the congress. Key was the Ninth Party Congress, whose program “gives the concrete and real objective for the further formation of the developed socialist society in the GDR for the next decades,” a program that was simultaneously “revolutionary and realistic.” Following from this, the task of the upcoming congress would be “to demonstrate the place of our literature, the place of writers in this struggle, in this process constantly changing our life.” Part of their work was to highlight the high volume of works produced since the last congress, and also “to name open problems clearly and to take a critical position on that which is insufficient.” He also posed a series of questions for them to consider in their work as writers. These included questions of whether or not literature deserves a reputation for its “discoverer function,” about the “formation of the worker personality with the formation of the often contradictory process in which the new features and character traits establish themselves,” and about “the possibility to be able to formulate the genuine contradictions and conflicts of our life,” conflicts which some labeled as “taboo,” but for art, “there should be no taboos if one starts from a solidly socialist position.”⁹⁵ Honecker’s classic

⁹⁴ “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 9. November 1977,” 9 November 1977, SV 600, 18.

⁹⁵ Gerhard Henniger, “Über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung des VIII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR: Referat auf Vorstandssitzung des Schriftstellerverbandes am 23.11.1977 in Berlin,” 23 November 1977, SV 583, 15-22.

formulation was alive and well, despite evidence to the contrary that taboos certainly existed in East German art and literature.

With this background established, Henniger turned to the events of the past year within the Writers Union. The West had tried to manipulate the conflicts in the organization, but “through the clear and unequivocal positions and decisions of the great majority of members,” they had fought off the challenge. They had discussed the various positions and questions raised through the Biermann affair, and had held firm, all because “critical for the future of our literature will not be petitions and declarations, will not be interviews and open letters, but rather the books, the works, which are created in the next few years.” Still, several colleagues remained recalcitrant, because after their most recent Vorstand meeting there had been a Western media campaign aimed at SED cultural policy, “triggered and run by several writers of the GDR,” including Becker, Heym, Kunert, Müller, and Seyppel. In the letters, they spoke “about personal things,” sometimes in such a “defamatory” and “besmirching manner, which among literati [...] is seldom the case.” Henniger then proceeded to read a series of quotes from the aforementioned authors denigrating the GDR, denying the achievements of real existing socialism, questioning the leading role of the Party and the Soviet Union, and ignoring the imperialist, belligerent actions of the West. Taking all of this into consideration, Henniger recommended that before and during the congress they needed to conduct a “political-ideological argument with such outlooks.”⁹⁶ The congress delegates, carefully selected, could be instrumentalized effectively to challenge wayward members. The

⁹⁶ Ibid., 26-33.

congress was thus an opportunity to present a united front against internal and external critics, on a grand stage no less.

There were several other topics to discuss, especially congress format and participants. The key change in format would be to expand the discussion of central topics in the plenary session. This would enable more authors to participate in debates about central questions. This would also mean that central questions would be removed from the workgroups, which instead would focus on either aesthetic questions or genre-specific topics.⁹⁷ The issue with this format was less control: “With the plethora of ways of looking at problems surely there might be only a basic orientation or the discussion and creative thoughts, ideas, and proposals set no boundaries in the discussion.” The selection of delegates became that much more important, and therefore the district steering committees were to follow the same selection protocol which had worked so well at the last congress. In addition, the steering committee would meet sometime in March or April to decide on who would be a candidate for the new Vorstand at the congress. Along these lines, they had to consider those members who had left the GDR or steering committee, especially Sarah Kirsch, Franz Fühmann, and Christa Wolf.⁹⁸

In early March, Honecker himself met with the power players in the Schriftstellerverband, namely, Kant, Henniger, Brezan, Strittmatter, Schulz, Holtz-

⁹⁷ There were to be five workgroups, all of which would meet before the congress (in March and April) so as to create “a fundamental debate,” which would then be presented at the congress and serve as the basis for further discussion. The chairs of the district branches would have until the end of January to submit proposals for participants in the workgroups to the central secretariat. These groups would be: “literature and historical consciousness,” “work and everyday life in our literature,” “literature and world” (later renamed “internationalist view and international content in the current GDR-literature”), “developmental problems in current dramatic art,” and “developmental problems in lyrical poetry.” Henniger, “Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 19. Dezember 1977,” 28 December 1977, SV 600, 5-6; Renate Drenkow, Literaturabteilung, “Bildung von Arbeitsgruppen in Vorbereitung des VIII. Schriftstellerkongress 1978,” 12 December 1977, SV 498, vol. 1, 1-5; Präsidium am 4.3.1978,” 4 March 1978, SV 601, 101-3.

⁹⁸ Henniger, “Über die Vorbereitung,” 34-43.

Baumert, and Görlich (not a single woman among them) in order to discuss preparations for the upcoming congress (Hager and Ragwitz also were in attendance). In the run-up to the 1973 congress, Honecker, though informed about the preparations, had not seen fit to bring SV officials in for a personal consultation. Therefore the March 1977 meeting was unusual, though unsurprising given all that had transpired within the organization over the past 16 months. Henniger, at the session, assured the Party chief that the congress preparations were “characterized by an atmosphere of trusting relationships of the writers to the party of the working class.” Honecker seemed pleased with the progress report, as he expressed his thanks after the “open-minded and heartfelt” discussion “for [writers] versatile creative achievements with which they contribution to the forming of the developed socialist society.”⁹⁹ He could have uttered the same phrase in 1971.

The March 1978 presidium meeting was a monumental occasion, one which forever altered the Writers Union. It was at that meeting where Gerhard Henniger read a letter to the group by Anna Seghers. “Dear friends,” it began, “I ask you to release me from my function as chairperson of the Writers Union.” In twenty-six years, she had served “with seriousness and patience,” but “[n]ow I am no longer able, because of my illness, to work, which I find good and correct.” For her successor,¹⁰⁰ whoever it would be, she forewarned that they would need “the highest possible measure of patience and fairness,” as well as “political and artistic knowledge, humanity and modesty, deep meditation before they come to a decision.” In closing, she thanked her presidium

⁹⁹ Report on meeting between Honecker and the vice presidents of the Writers Union, n.d., SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

¹⁰⁰ Kant himself reflected years later that Seghers was said to have preferred Christa Wolf for the position, but “there was for Christa Wolf neither in the presidium nor in the steering committee a chance to win majorities. Hermann Kant, *Abspann: Erinnerung an meine Gegenwart* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1991), 354.

colleagues for “the good hours of our togetherness, full discussions which emanated from serious and difficult questions.”¹⁰¹ With the upcoming congress, then, Seghers’s long tenure as head of the Writers Union would be at an end. Fittingly, the group immediately proposed to ask the steering committee about making Seghers the union’s honorary president.¹⁰² As her replacement, Erwin Strittmatter nominated Hermann Kant at the meeting where Seghers’s resignation was announced.¹⁰³ More research is needed to determine why Kant was tapped for the post, but three factors seem especially important. First, he was a talented writer. Second, he had acquitted himself very well from the SED’s standpoint during the Biermann crisis. And third, of the five union vice presidents, he was the youngest, the only one of the *Aufbau* generation. With his selection, a generational shift, building throughout the past several years, was now fully underway in the Writers Union.

In March and April the workgroups met in advance of the congress, submitting their discussion themes to the SV’s secretariat. The group “work and everyday life” focused overwhelmingly on aesthetic problems of depicting these two important aspects of socialist realist literature. In order “to formulate the everyday life of working people poetically, it is imperative to be critical in a manner that is of use to us.” This was especially important because “[e]ach society has interest in asking, with the help of literature, what has become of its ideals.” At the group’s meeting, two more topics of discussion arose as well. First was “the emancipation of women, their problems in work

¹⁰¹ Anna Seghers to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, 28 February 1978, Berlin, SV 601, 98.

¹⁰² “Präsidium am 4.3.1978,” 4 March 1978, SV 601, 101.

¹⁰³ Ursula Ragwitz to Erich Honecker, 1 March 1978, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.,

and everyday life as well as everyday, urgent questions of upbringing and popular education.” These areas in particular required more attention as there were many stories “which still must be written.”¹⁰⁴ For the group “literature and world,” they explored “internationalism in our literature as well as an understanding of the place designation of the socialist author in their country and in relation to the world.” This included not only connections with the other socialist countries, but also “solidarity with the oppressed peoples, the depiction of the liberation struggle of peoples under the imperialistic yoke.”¹⁰⁵ When the group “lyrical poetry” met, they covered practical concerns, especially the non-functioning of the steering committee’s poetry active group, and aesthetic ones such as “which function and which place can lyrical poetry have in the ensemble of the arts?”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the workgroup on drama mixed concern for practical and aesthetic problems. Good, recent plays “which get their materials and themes from the direct present, sometimes offer insufficiently staged leeway and room for interpretation.” At the same time, some plays, especially those based on allegories or adaptations of historic plays offered too much room for interpretation, “which permits no more unequivocal socialist interpretations.” All of these problems required above all better relations between authors and theater personnel.¹⁰⁷ Finally, for the “literature and historical consciousness group,” one main concern was communicating the past experiences of German communists, especially between 1929 and 1945, to the younger

¹⁰⁴ “Problemspiegel Arbeitsgruppe ‘Arbeit und Alltag’ am 19.4.1978,” 19 April 1978, SV 498, vol. 1, 46-48.

¹⁰⁵ “Problemspiegel Arbeitsgruppe ‘Literatur und Welt’ am 4.4.1978,” 4 April 1978, SV 498, vol. 1, 54-55.

¹⁰⁶ “Problemspiegel Arbeitsgruppe Lyrik am 17.3.1978,” 17 March 1978, SV 498, vol. 1, 58-59.

¹⁰⁷ “Problemspiegel Arbeitsgruppe Dramatik am 15.3.1978,” 15 March 1978, SV 498, vol. 1, 61-63.

generation, as was finding new ways to help historical literature move beyond presenting mere “conceptions of the past” to forging “historical consciousness.”¹⁰⁸ These were all familiar themes and in some cases, as with the theater group, familiar problems. The fact that congress preparations were not dominated by issues surrounding the Biermann affair illustrates a return to stability for the union, at least in the presidium.

April 1978’s member meeting of the Berlin Writers Union SED organization discussed the principles for selecting delegates, as approved by the Politburo. These included, first and foremost, “political trustworthiness,” and only then “literary achievement,” and “social activity.” With this in mind, the base organization reviewed the list of delegates to the congress from their district, a list the Party leadership had already approved. One person, however, proposed making Stefan Heym a delegate. The reasoning stated, though, was less about support for his ideas than about good public relations: “he is a well-known writer and it would damage our reputation abroad if we do not delegate him.” Many others opposed this suggestion, because of his “behavior against the policy of our Party and government in the mass media of the enemy.”¹⁰⁹ In the aftermath of 1976, political reliability was a must in congress delegates, although some authors were sensing this might create more problems than it solved.

Up until the days before the congress, the Central Committee exerted control over the content of the upcoming event. Kant, for example, had several consultation meetings with Ragwitz, not only about his keynote speech but also about addressing criticism of

¹⁰⁸ “Problemspiegel Arbeitsgruppe ‘Literatur und Geschichtsbewusstsein’ am 23.3.1978,” 23 March 1978, SV 498, vol. 1, 64-65. See also Katja Petters to Kurt Löffler, “Informationsbericht,” 23 March 1978, SV 763, vol. 2, 66; Katja Petters to Kurt Löffler, “Informationsbericht,” 25 April 1978, SV 763, vol. 2, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation/APO über das Parteileben,” April 1978, LAB C Rep. 904-97 30.

the congress. In late May, Kant wrote an “open letter” for *Neues Deutschland*, which countered criticism that several authors had been barred from participating in the congress. Before it was published, Ragwitz approved the letter in advance. Ragwitz also wrote to Honecker that the letter was “a very good answer and would shatter not only the adversarial argument, but also answer in part the questions which there are in the association and elsewhere.” She therefore recommended it for immediate publication.¹¹⁰ Kant’s keynote speech was likewise submitted to Hager for scrutiny, who conducted two meetings with the author about it during the run-up to the congress.¹¹¹

The mood was thus sober when the Eighth Writers Congress convened in May 1978, and the physical appearance of the meeting must have looked different as many prominent writers – such as Wolf, Becker, Fühmann, or Kirsch – were no longer in attendance. Moreover, the SV had new leadership, or rather it witnessed the promotion of Hermann Kant to the presidency due to Anna Segher’s failing health. The new president led the congress in a new era of cultural restrictiveness, and in many ways he was all too willing to comply. The union attempted to find a new consensus at the congress, but in excluding critical authors, the only voices heard either ignored the Biermann issue altogether or offered apologetics for their government.

Erwin Strittmatter opened the congress and the theme as framed by the leadership was telling: “The responsibility of writers in the struggles of our time.” He immediately turned to a Anna Seghers had given him to read aloud, thanking the delegates for their

¹¹⁰ Ursula Ragwitz to Erich Honecker, 23 May 1978, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/77.

¹¹¹ Kurt Hager to Konrad Naumann, 5 May 1978, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/77.

well-wishes. Otherwise, he made no mention of anything that could be construed as an allusion to the Biermann incidents. Honecker was no more forthcoming in the address to the delegates he had issued that day. The address began by praising socialist literature in East Germany, lauding, ironically, the “many different genres” that contributed to the growth of “the development of its personality and way of life.” Honecker even went as far as to declare the existence of a “creative and trustful atmosphere” that had been achieved thanks to the actions of the Party. Moreover, “all literary efforts” in the GDR, “have their place and their field that are obligated to peace and humanism, democracy, anti-imperialistic solidarity, and real socialism.”¹¹² While on the one hand evincing his deep denial of the tense cultural atmosphere in the GDR, Honecker’s silence on the Biermann incident on the other reestablished the baseline to which all socialist writers must adhere. His silence might as well have been a veiled threat, reminding the writers that the Party and not them had the ultimate power to interpret socialism.

Kant’s keynote address, was titled after the theme of the congress: “the responsibility of writers in the struggles of our time.” It was Kant in this speech who first acknowledged the taboo subject of the expelled colleagues. He launched into a full attack on “our opponents,” those “former bakers and farmers, foresters and police officers; the sons (and don’t forget daughters) of German proletariats.” He then reaffirmed the self-evidence of socialist literature struggling against war, imperialism, and racism, and then took aim at the American presidents of the past decade, deriding

¹¹² Erich Honecker, “Grussadresse des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,” *VIII. Schriftstellerkongress: Referat und Diskussion* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1979), 13-14.

“Watergate-Nixon” and “Vietnam-Johnson.”¹¹³ Kant’s speech was raising several issues related to the relationship between socialism and literature. His tone, though, had increased in sarcasm and derision, perhaps a reflection of the president’s chair he had been promised. Nonetheless Kant alone among the GDR officials to speak made any reference to the Biermann expulsions; he therefore had to get it right, and it is thus little wonder that his speech had been checked over several times by Hager.

Other writers showed similar restraint, refusing to mention by name their departed colleagues or their deeds. Most comments addressed issues similar to those raised five years earlier, acting as if nothing had happened. What was even more striking was that most of the speakers, in the absence of many of the GDR’s literary luminaries, were of lesser renown than the congress was accustomed to. Johannes Arnold, for example, explained the connection between the working class in his city (Karl-Marx-Stadt) and the craft of writing, noting the close friendship between local writers and workers, connection which allowed for better socialist writing.¹¹⁴ Poet Uwe Berger echoed some of Kant’s words, noting the importance of “the link between freedom and the progress of culture.”¹¹⁵ Günter Görlich even talked at length about his Berlin colleagues without acknowledging that this branch had been among the hardest hit by the expulsions, claiming instead “the Berlin writers feel bound to the ambitious themes of our Eighth Congress,”¹¹⁶ and thus were of one mind with the regime. The final declaration of the

¹¹³ Kant, “Die Verantwortlichkeit des Schriftstellers in der Kämpfen unserer Zeit,” *VIII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 12, 16.

¹¹⁴ Johannes Arnold, *VIII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 267-70.

¹¹⁵ Uwe Burger, *VIII. Schriftstellerkongress*, 270.

¹¹⁶ Günter Görlich, *VIII Schriftstellerkongress*, 87.

Congress struck a similar chord, declaring that it was the responsibility of the writers to show “their partisanship in the struggles of our time.”¹¹⁷ Thus while the traditional concern of drawing closer to the working class as well as the struggle for peace against the imperial enemy remained prominent, the atmosphere whereby one might question the state had evaporated. Nevertheless, by continuing to claim a voice even in matters that were long-established Communist doctrines, writers were seeking to participate in some pressing issues of the day.

Although it was positively reviewed in the press,¹¹⁸ the 1978 writers congress very much reflected the cultural climate of its time with free debate stifled and seemingly no one willing to make risky statements lest they, too, be sanctioned. Although the power of the Party was at its height, men like Kant, while demonstrating unconditional loyalty to the state, nonetheless took a more active role in shaping how writers reacted to the expulsions. It was his cajoling regarding literature’s role in socialism and promoting peace that, while doubtlessly reflecting the state’s desires, nonetheless was a careful posturing similar to his attitude in the 1973 Congress, taking great care to reaffirm the tremendous importance that writing had for the socialist project. Yet any attempts to create a space, however narrow, for the writers to speak about socialism, were overshadowed by Kant’s role as an enforcer of the Party line. During the immediate Biermann crisis he had shown himself to be a loyal soldier for the SED, and his performance at the eighth congress was similar. Was this a harbinger of his presidency?

¹¹⁷ “Erklärung der Delegierten des VIII. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” *VIII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR*, 313.

¹¹⁸ “Fruchtbare Aussprache über das literarische Schaffen,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 31, 1978, 1; “Stephan Hermlin: Ansichten zu Teilen und Aspekten des Gegewärtigen,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 31, 1978, 4.

Aftershock: The 1979 Expulsions

The expulsion of nine authors from the Writers Union in June 1979 marked the denouement of the Biermann affair. The reckoning with critical but loyal authors begun in late 1976 was finally completed nearly three years later. There could be no more accommodation within the ranks of the Schriftstellerverband as had been attempted in 1977 and 1978; now, authors who harbored divergent views on cultural and political questions in East Germany had one of two choices: expulsion or marginalization. They would no longer be permitted to remain active in the SV if they persisted in using it as a platform to proselytize.

With the Biermann expatriation fresh in their minds, many East German authors, in addition to making statements within the Writers Union and occasionally in the West German press, did what came naturally to them: they wrote. Between 1977 and 1979 several authors published texts, some thinly veiled Romans-a-clef, which gave expression to their frustration either with the Biermann situation or the state of real existing socialism more generally. In 1978 Jurek Becker's *Schlaflose Tage* (Sleepless Days) appeared in the West, a story about a schoolteacher who one day feels chest pains and decides to begin questioning authority. Klaus Poche in 1978 produced a television film, "*Geschlossene Gesellschaft*" (Closed Society), and published his novel *Atemnot* (Shortness of Breath) in Switzerland after it had been banned in the GDR. Rolf Schneider in 1979 presented his novel *November*, a dramatization of the Biermann events of the winter of 1976. Above all was the 1979 novel *Collin* by Stefan Heym, a biting

attack on the GDR's dictatorship and on censorship in particular.¹¹⁹ *Collin's* titular protagonist is the famous writer Hans Collin who is laid up in an East German hospital with the patient Urack, who happens to be the chief of the Stasi. Collin's illness stems from his fact that he is unable to critically examine his past due to a combination of censorship and self-censorship. Although Urack opposes his attempts, Collin is eventually able to reflect on his acquiescence to Stalinism.¹²⁰ It was these novels and stories, banned in the East and published in the West, and accompanying interviews given to the Western media, which precipitated another crisis within the Writers Union, one whose solution was, to use Joachim Walther's term, an "amputation."

The approach taken against these authors was multifaceted, including scathing reviews in East German literary periodicals of the works in question, press campaigns condemning the authors, and, as in Heym's case, a 9,000 Mark fine because of "violation of foreign exchange laws." In the magazine *Sonntag*, Hans Koch labeled *Collin* "anti-communist rubbish" while SV secretariat member Renate Drenkow described Schneider as "not worth discussing for me as a person of letters."¹²¹ Dieter Noll, who had just received excellent reviews for his novel *Kippenberg* in the East German press, in May 1979 published an open letter in *Neues Deutschland* to Erich Honecker in which he infamously labeled Heym, Schneider, Joachim Seyppel, and others as "*kaputte Typen*" ("broken types" or "deadbeats"), "who so actively cooperate with the class enemies there [in the West], in order to procure cheap prestige because they obviously are incapable of

¹¹⁹ Joachim Walther, "Die Amputation," in Joachim Walther, et al., *Protokoll eines Tribunals: Die Ausschlüsse aus dem DDR-Schriftstellerverband 1979* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), 8-9.

¹²⁰ Stefan Heym, *Collin* (Secaucus: Lyle Stuart, 1979).

¹²¹ Quoted in Walther, "Die Amputation," 9-10.

finding resonance and echo among our working people by constructive means, certainly do not represent the writers of our republic.” In the letter, Noll assured Honecker that “the oversized majority of my colleagues see this just as I do,” and also that “everywhere in the companies working people of our country approve the measures of our government.” The point, Noll asserted, was that “[w]e should not let ourselves be disturbed by brazen interference of the bourgeois gutter press in our republic.”¹²²

These problematic literary works provided the grounds for expulsion, but not the trigger. The trigger seems to have been a very different letter sent to Erich Honecker by Kurt Bartsch, Jurek Becker, Adolf Endler, Erik Loest, Klaus Poche, Klaus Schlesinger, Dieter Schubert, and Martin Stade (all men) at the same time as Noll’s missive. The letter informed the SED boss that they followed cultural policy in East Germany with “growing concern,” as “ever more frequently it is attempted to defame engaged, critical writers, to muzzle or, like our colleague Stefan Heym, to prosecute.” In other words, “Public controversy does not occur.” By joining “censor and penal laws” the SED was preventing the publication of critical works, when “[w]e are of the outlook that socialism takes place in public; it is not a classified document.” Therefore they opposed the “arbitrary application of laws; problems of our cultural policy are not to be solved with criminal proceedings.”¹²³ The letter was presented to Honecker and, receiving no response, the main ideas were communicated to the Western press who subsequently

¹²² Dieter Noll to Erich Honecker, 22 May 1979, *Neues Deutschland*, in Walther, *Protokoll*, 97-98. Not all members of the Berlin district branch’s Party leadership were happy about Noll’s letter. For example, Ruth Werner, Rainer Kerndl, and Claus Küchenmeister all expressed in late May that “the publication of this letter damaged the necessary argument, since it has provided a target to the enemy through its ‘foolish’ formulations.” Abteilung Kultur, “Aktennotiz, Betr.: Parteileitungssitzung der Grundorganisation des Bezirksverbandes berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes,” 29 May 1979, LAB C Rep. 904-097 29.

¹²³ Kurt Bartsch et al. to Erich Honecker, 16 May 1979, SAPMO, BArch DY30/IVB2/2.024/78.

published the essence of the letter's complaints, to the ire of the SED. Of the eight signatories, soon none would remain in the Writers Union: Becker and Stade had already voluntarily quit the association; Bartsch, Endler, Poche, Schlesinger, and Schubert were expelled at the June meeting; and Loest, who lived in Leipzig, not Berlin and was therefore beyond the jurisdiction of the Berlin member meeting, remained in the organization for another year before leaving the GDR.¹²⁴

The sequence of events began to come together very quickly. On 23 May the presidium debated what to do with the authors. Here the group drafted a report condemning the recent media attacks on the GDR and expressing disapproval on those who "abuse their membership in the Writers Union" by aiding the capitalist cause in this manner. To this end, "a member of the association, who breaks effective law, with publicly manifested intent, cannot expect that the association will align itself with him in the conflict he wanted." The authors in question were disrupting the "mutual trust" between the SV and society and endangered the "narrow alliance between the party of the working class and the writers," which was the "most importance basis for the successful participation of writers in the struggles of our time."¹²⁵

Beyond the presidium meeting, on 24 May, Günter Görlich, in his capacity as chair of the Berlin district branch, issued invitations to a full member meeting to be held on 7 June. The Party group met simultaneously to discuss issues of Party discipline. And finally the central steering committee met on 30 May to weigh the possibility of

¹²⁴ Walther, "Die Amputation," 14-15.

¹²⁵ "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 23. Mai 1979 in Berlin," Walther, *Protokoll*, 100.

expulsion from the Writers Union.¹²⁶ At the Vorstand meeting, Kant offered the keynote address, a speech which laid out the basic charges against the nine writers and served as the subsequent basis for all future discussion on the subject. So important was the speech that it was replicated in *Neues Deutschland* the following day.

Kant began with a consideration of the function of the union, clarified at the last congress. The organization had “proven itself as a socialist organization in this socialist republic,” and was aware of its societal responsibilities. The West had made clear that they had entered a period of intensified conflict with the East, and the Western media had done its part to create a false image of intellectual life in the GDR, especially in the literary community. They created two categories of writers – the “hollow metal containers” who wrote hollow literature, or the “muzzle,” who achieves “morality, decency, and overcoming.” These same Western literary critics were poor judges of talent, however, given the praise they heaped upon *Collin* or *November*, or had only noticed Loest and Poche after a twenty-year delay, implying the interest in these authors was not genuine but rather contingent upon their recent political activities.¹²⁷

Turning to the actions of the authors in question, Kant commented that while as an organization the SV had made great progress since the heady Biermann days, there were some who clearly had not learned very much given the fact that once more they had given a letter to the Western press. Could they really hope that Honecker would take their concerns seriously, Kant wondered, if they had repeated this mistake? Surely they knew that “[w]ho delivers their mail via Western agencies cannot expect that the

¹²⁶ Walther, “Die Amputation,” 11-12.

¹²⁷ Hermann Kant, “Wir lassen uns von unserem Kurs nicht abbringen: Referat von Hermann Kant,” in Walther, *Protokoll*, 101-3. A draft of the speech is also found in SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/61.

addressee will read it without suspicion.” Parsing the language of the letter further, Kant countered its charges by retorting, “Defamation, I find, is at best for those who impute our cultural policy with such a tendency.” Moreover, “muzzled” was not a term that someone should use who parlayed a high number of book copies being published in the GDR into bestseller status in the Federal Republic. And it certainly did not apply to someone who was given a chance to speak their mind before hundreds of their colleagues, or “who between Berlin and Oberlin, Ohio finds his discussion partner” (a reference to Becker, who in 1978 spent time at Oberlin College). As for the “penal persecution” of Heym, the author had brought his problems on himself. The use of the term “censor” was “busy”; if they meant the state’s guidance, planning, and publishing, then they had nothing to worry about since their cultural policy “does not want that.” In addition, “monopolizing” the term “critical writers” was problematic, given that those who wrote the letter “have acted extremely uncritically if it comes to letter-writing.” At the same time, many writers at the Vorstand meeting had written “critical works” about conditions in East Germany. Furthermore, Heym had blatantly misrepresented the union’s leaders – was that still criticism, Kant demanded?¹²⁸

In the past, Kant expounded, they had had a great deal of patience as an organization. Since Biermann’s exile, “we have done what is in our power in order to secure an atmosphere of critical collegiality and friendly objectivity for the association.” They had worked faithfully with Party and state functionaries to meet “preconditions for the development of our literature.” They would not stray from this path, and they intended “to contradict sharply those who want to disrupt us from our path.”

¹²⁸ Ibid., 105-7.

Additionally, “[m]embership in this association is not coerced, it is voluntary.” This meant that “[w]ho secures [membership], gains rights as well as duties. He gains both, and it does not stand at his discretion to observe the one and disregard the other.” These duties included those which stemmed from the role of writers in the GDR. “Our profession,” Kant reminded them, “stands in high esteem in this socialist society.” This did not happen magically, but through their hard work, one book at a time. Since the founding of their country, an “alliance” had been built between society and literature. Perhaps they had not yet achieved a “literature society,” but they certainly had attained a “socialized literature.” That literature was not free from conflicts, but that was a good thing: “Where there are no struggles and no contradictions, nothing goes.” Above all, they should not forget that, “[o]ur literature developed from the struggles of the time, it stands in the struggle of the time, it has at all times its struggles overcome.”¹²⁹ Of particular emphasis in Kant’s speech was the atmosphere created within the Writers Union. It was one of “critical collegiality,” something they had fought hard to achieve, especially after the Biermann events; membership brought privileges as well as responsibilities, and as president he aimed to maintain the integrity of both.

Joachim Walther remembered that at the day of the fateful expulsion meeting, “conspicuously inconspicuous young men” – Stasi agents – manned the doors. Many unknown faces filled the crowd, people to whom one did not say anything for fear of them writing it down. There were also many prominent non-members at this gathering, including from the Berlin district SED leadership and the Ministry of Culture. “Palpable

¹²⁹ Lost in translation is Kant’s wordplay with this last quote: “Unsere Literatur ist aus den Kämpfen der Zeit entstanden, sie hat in den Kämpfen der Zeit gestanden, sie hat zu aller Zeit ihre Kämpfe bestanden.” Ibid., 107-110.

tension” appeared on the faces of the “directors” of the meeting, though everything was well-prepared. Indeed, the speakers list had been set beforehand and was not altered during the course of the meeting, a fact which Walther found out the hard way when he submitted a request to speak before the meeting began only to have it ignored. Altogether, some 400 people filled the hall, and it “remained unclear, how many of them were really association members.” The meeting was filled with drama despite the careful orchestration, especially in the “hastily bulldozed-through voting procedure.” Some sixty hands were raised to vote against the expulsions, but they were not counted. The drama was complete – and it even featured a buffet in the well-stocked lobby! In his mind, the Western media got it right when they described the meeting as a “heretofore unequaled event of a rigid regimentation of insubordinate writers, the ruthless instrumentalizing of an artists union through the Party leadership and their accomplices, a pathetic demonstration of power and an ostracism, which neither the problems of the Party leadership nor those of the Writers Union solved, but rather intensified.”¹³⁰

Günter Görlich opened the 7 June session of the Berlin Writers Union by stating what he considered the obvious: the enemy had stepped up its attacks against the GDR in 1979, making that year perhaps among the “darkest times of the Cold War.” Spending several minutes painting the contextual picture for the audience, he emphasized numerous attempts by the West at interfering in East Germany’s internal affairs. In the face of constant threats from the capitalist world, “He who, no matter where he is and what it is, whether intentionally or unintentionally, supports this counterattack of capital, serves the reaction.” In their union they often spoke of the responsibility of writers, he continued,

¹³⁰ Walther, “Die Amputation,” 15-17.

of their “concern for the development of society and so forth.” There would be disagreements, but as long as one “is profoundly familiar with the complicated processes of our socialist world and promotes this process in socialist ways,” these efforts would lead to improvements. “Arguments among ourselves or with like-minded people,” he suggested, “are normal.” But there were those among them who believed their task was simply the “relentless search for errors and things to call this development into question.” They certainly didn’t need the West coming in, acting as an “umpire from abroad.”¹³¹

Helmut Kuchler took to the podium after Görlich’s relatively mild opening statement. Kuchler contended that the outlook of most of the Berlin district branch was exactly the same as it had been three years earlier. These facts made “the style and manner and the extent of the efforts of several colleagues of our association to deliver to the enemy ammunition for his attacks against us” all the more shocking. Kant had extended his hand to these authors a year earlier at the congress, and they had repaid the favor by refusing to participate in union activities. To make matters worse, some, like Schneider, had still found time to give statements to the Western media denigrating colleagues back home. Kuchler was openly skeptical to Schneider’s claims that everything he had said in the West was done with an eye to the promotion of the GDR. He also took issue with Heym’s claim that the fine against him and fellow dissident Robert Havemann was just the state making an example of them, when they were really trying to spin the truth so that it seemed like “his own conscious violation and defamation of the laws of the GDR are the [same] problem of the writers of the GDR.” He then turned to an interview Jakobs had given to the West German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* which

¹³¹ “Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes im Roten Rathaus am 7.6. 1979,” in Walther, *Protokoll*, 25-27.

was also broadcast on the radio, in which the author claimed that criticism was no longer permitted as a means for improving socialism and that he had had no interest in participating in the writers congress of the past year. Yet, Küchler pointed out, Jakobs instead had had interest in a book reading at that time. As for Seyppel, he had on 31 May published a pamphlet in the West German weekly *Die Zeit* in which he “has written against our statute.” Küchel took issue especially with the fact that Seyppel had sent the same criticism to the presidium earlier in the year, who had informed him that statute alterations were only possible at the congresses, and, receiving this rebuff, Seyppel had retaliated by going directly to the Western media. Seyppel had also rhetorically asked, “Do we stand before the final solution [*Endlösung*] for the literature of the GDR?” This provocative, unfortunate choice of words drew unrest from the audience and an interjection by Seyppel that the quote was taken out of context.¹³²

To Küchler, the issue was clear: quoting Kant’s speech from a week ago, he intoned that being a member of the Writers Union brought both benefits and responsibilities. If they were unwilling to agree to the requirements and duties of membership, then they should not be part of the union. “We are not prepared,” he continued, “to change the statute in order for it to draw closer to the pluralistic standpoints of a few colleagues.” Had these only been “temporary errors, which one could change through comradely, collective action, then it would only be half as bad.” They understood different viewpoints, and the Writers Union witnessed arguments about these questions quite frequently and unspectacularly – “this is normal.” But the situation here was different, and the authors in question could not expect the rest of them to do

¹³² Ibid., 30-33.

nothing “if fundamentals of our socialist development are called into question, if our socialist state is attacked in spiteful ways and defamed.” They would not stand idly by and allow someone to “infringe upon the alliance between the working class, their party, and the intelligentsia, especially their artistic intelligentsia.” In short, “He or she who is not prepared to respect the statute which we gave ourselves, they have no place in the ranks of our organization.”¹³³ He therefore recommended, on behalf of the district steering committee, the following:

The member meeting of the district association Berlin of the Writers Union of the GDR has occupied itself, as the highest organ of the Writers Union in the capital of the GDR, with the behavior of an array of members who violated their duties as members of the association and have damaged the esteem of the Writers Union [...] The facts laid out in the report of the president of the Writers Union prove that the associational members, vis-à-vis their statute-bound duties to act as active co-designers of the developed socialist society, considered it correct and advisable to act from abroad against our socialist state, the GDR, the cultural policy of Party and government, and against the socialist legal order in defamatory ways. Thereby they have not only disregarded their duties from the statute of our association, but also have placed themselves in the service of anti-communist agitation against the GDR and socialism. [...].¹³⁴

Throughout the meeting, several other authors read statements, almost all condemning the nine authors, yet some of the aforementioned writers were also allowed to offer some brief words of self-defense. Stefan Heym, for instance, complained that the suit against him was not taking place in public. Lacking this outlet, “where then can one express their opinion? Where can one defend oneself...?” This whole course of events had proven Heym’s point: Kant and others had complained about them going to the West to publish books, declarations, and letters, but what other outlet did they have? He could only call it what it was: “censor.” At least censors in other contexts had allowed some

¹³³ Ibid., 34-37.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 37.

critical work to be printed; in the GDR, however, “Which critical thinker may be printed in this country?” “Censor?” he continued, “Perhaps one cannot really apply the term to the GDR, and it would be better to speak of despotism [*Willkür*].” He had not courted the controversy with the law or the foreign publishing authorities, because “[o]ne doesn’t ultimately need to be a political genius to say to oneself that one does not, in a time when the great powers wish for détente, stage a witch hunt for writers.” In other words, Heym’s implication was that moving against authors like himself would only escalate tension internationally and, for the sake of détente, they should leave well enough alone. Instead of initiating proceedings against them, “Will one [...] rather be concerned with the conditions which were criticized, to create a remedy there?”¹³⁵

Heym then took Kant’s accusation to task, especially for his lack of fairness. At the last congress, Kant had claimed that Heym had not attended because no one had proposed him as a delegate. This was false, Heym asserted – there was in fact a written application, but the Party group had determined he should not attend. When Heym had previously confronted Kant about the issue, the president had flashed his “charming smile, which he exhibits at such occasions,” and admitted that his actions had been demagogic. Heym also resented the accusation that he had changed his disposition as opportunities presented themselves, drawing applause when he declared, “I do not need to be ashamed of my past.” Going for broke, Heym reminded the audience, and Kant in particular, that he was “not only persecuted because of my Jewish nose.” He had been pursued whilst in exile for his political activities in Czechoslovakia in 1935 along with Walter Ulbricht and he had, moreover, served in the American army in World War II

¹³⁵ Ibid., 43-45.

fighting against the fascists. Heym continued his assault on Kant, warning, “Whoever gets into the wrong uniform, under the wrong badge, in a wrong camp, had better not crusade against us who fought back then in the correct uniform, on the correct side, for the correct cause.” Invoking both his Jewish heritage and genuine record as a communist, anti-fascist soldier, Heym’s coup de grace was his none-too-subtle allusion to the fact that Kant had served as a *Wehrmacht* soldier at the end of the war. Heym certainly knew that he had been reluctantly conscripted late in the war, but the author seemed in no mood to bestow on Kant the fairness which the latter had denied him.¹³⁶

Although the previous year Kant had declared in his closing address to the Eighth Writers Congress that he encouraged self-critical reflection on the part of GDR literature in order to better serve socialism,¹³⁷ he came down hard against Heym and the others, no doubt provoked by Heym’s incendiary insinuations. Kant’s statements ranged from sarcastic to pedagogical, furious, vitriolic, and downright cruel at points, berating the nine disgraced writers, but saving his worst venom for Heym. Kant railed against Heym’s actions, mocking the latter with the words he had just uttered. Heym had foolishly suggested that he did not ask for conflict, so Kant sarcastically replied, “Well, who summoned it then?” Worse yet, he had told his story to the BBC, sending Kant over the edge, repeating over and over again what Heym had told the British news company. Heym had apparently stated to the BBC that writers “are hauled before courts, convicted, and penalized,” simply because “they refuse to let themselves be gagged voluntarily.” By making such defamatory accusations about the treatment of writers in the GDR, he

¹³⁶ Ibid., 45-47.

¹³⁷ Hermann Kant, “Schlußwort,” *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 26(12)(1978), 204.

had prevented any amicable solution: “then that is not a contribution to the clearing up of the culture-political scenery – then that is a poisoning of this scene!” He concluded, coldly and vindictively, “You have brought us into a dilemma. To ask you once again, we have asked you repeatedly: Do you now want to accept this associational statute or do you not want to accept it? The answer reads: No! Therefore: With this you have carried out the step. And please do not say that you hadn’t called for it!” Rather than equivocate even slightly, Kant’s tone was one of righteous indignation. In the end, Görlich called for a vote, and the expulsions were confirmed.¹³⁸

Of the nine expellees, Bartsch, Jakobs, Poche, Seyppel, and Schlesinger eventually left the GDR, unable to continue their careers. Heym, Schneider, Schubert, and Endler remained, each with different impediments, including travel restrictions, passport confiscation, difficulties with publishing, and even complete publication bans.¹³⁹ Moreover, those remaining were subjected to increased Stasi surveillance.¹⁴⁰

Conclusions

The expulsion of Reiner Kunze and the Biermann fallout marked the end of a particular compromise between the regime and its writers. The tensions inherent in the older compromise, offered by Honecker in 1971, had proved irreconcilable as too many authors clung to the ideals of free expression instead of upholding the SED’s narrowly

¹³⁸ “Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes im Roten Rathaus,” 87-90, 94-95.

¹³⁹ Walther, “Die Amputation,” 20-21.

¹⁴⁰ For example, see “Reaktionen und Meinungen zu den gegenwärtigen Auseinandersetzungen auf kulturpolitisch Gebiet,” 3 June 1970, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Zentralstelle, Berlin, HA XX/9/139, 215-19.

defined understanding of socialism. At issue were two principal points of contention: First was the extent to which critical writers operating “within” socialism, a malleable and murky concept whose shifting boundaries could be manipulated by the state and Writers Union alike to police unwanted criticism. Second was the way to communicate tolerable constructive criticism, through literature or public statements, both within and beyond the borders of the GDR. Both concepts hinged upon the limits placed on freedom of speech and how far the state was willing to go to enforce said limits. A new arrangement had to be negotiated, albeit asymmetrically given the power wielded by the SED, and the Writers Union was a primary site for a new compromise to be hashed out. The leaders of the Writers Union sensed this, and in the years 1976-79 there was a sense that if they played along with the state, they could occupy key positions in negotiating the new arrangement between the SED and its literary intellectuals, one which would preserve a measure of control over literary issues while ensuring that union members expressed their concerns about East Germany in a controlled environment.

While the SED certainly had a vested interest in ensuring ideological coherence, among Writers Union members there was a general consensus that ideological disagreements were permitted as long as one genuinely subscribed to socialism. The key was the medium and style through which those differences were expressed, and it was these issues, above all others, upon which the conflicts of the post-Biermann era hinged. To put this another way, while many things differentiate the period 1976-79 from Honecker’s early years, a primary distinguishing characteristic is the breakdown, building over years but accelerated by the Biermann crisis, in the belief that working through the Writers Union, or other private channels, was the best way to articulate grievances and

suggestions to the SED leadership. Literature remained the primary avenue for reaching the masses, but tightening censorship restrictions in these years further broke down the consensus that had been forged in the “no taboos” period.

Of particular significance was the relative publicity in how authors presented their (competing) ideas about socialism within the Writers Union. Their societal mission, articulated over and over and with ever more urgency once conflict erupted within the union, called for their active, public role in shaping real existing socialism. Yet when real disputes emerged over SED policy, the leaders of the Writers Union urged above all else that views be aired privately, within the confines of the Schriftstellerverband. By 1976 this was an established pattern, and was part and parcel with the Writers Union’s understanding of the GDR as an educational dictatorship. Also connected to these conditions was the professional culture that had been created within the Writers Union. Members had learned a certain way to relate to one another, certain behavioral patterns, certain social rules to observe when interacting in the space of the union. These rules provided structure to Writers Union interactions and helped condition the actions of members, especially in times of crisis. Violating these rules was tantamount to an affront to the literary community in many writers’ minds, creating great acrimony when transgressions occurred.

There was a dilemma, however, when some writers, like Hermlin, Becker, or Wolf, felt a need to exercise their critical capacity in a public fashion, only to find themselves denied that opportunity in East Germany. Thus they were left with what some considered a lose-lose situation: resign oneself to being a private intellectual in the GDR or a public intellectual through the Western media. The first choice contradicted

the professional identity the Writers Union had helped forge for authors in East Germany. The second choice violated the group norms the union had established for structuring interactions between writers within the association. The SED clearly much preferred the former, but for many writers, the choice was between fulfilling what they believed to be their societal mission or suffering profound disillusionment. These two outcomes, however, were often not mutually incompatible.

By late 1979 the period of repression within the Writers Union had run its course. The most vocal critics of the Biermann decision had either been expelled, exiled, or marginalized. The union had served as a loyal extension of the state's apparatus of control, insisting that members not criticize the regime or its policies within earshot of the Western media. Once ranks had been closed and the wagons circled, the leaders of the Schriftstellerverband, chief among them the new president, Hermann Kant, sought safe outlets for writers who had demonstrated loyalty to participate in shaping socialism's progress. In late 1979 the union received a golden opportunity (not a moment too soon) to do just that, albeit one whose consequences would affect the organization – and East Germany more generally – in unanticipated ways.

Chapter Five

Defending Peace, Defining Participation, 1979-89

In December 1979, NATO announced what came to be known as its “Double-Track Decision,” outlining a policy by which the organization would deploy intermediate-range nuclear warheads in Western Europe. The decision had been made in response to the Soviet introduction of SS-20 nuclear missiles in 1975, but the reaction by NATO provoked an international firestorm of protest and reinvigorated an international and transnational peace movement that had flagged during the 1970s. While some leading politicians and journalists in the West supported the NATO declaration, a majority of the European Left, including many politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens across both Eastern and Western Europe united in their condemnation of NATO’s decision, decrying what they considered a provocative act that might result in the nuclear annihilation of the continent given its status as a major focal point of the Cold War. Largely lost among this latter group was the Soviet missile deployment which had precipitated the NATO countermove, meaning that much of the opprobrium was heaped upon NATO, and in particular the United States, as the primary agents recklessly endangering the lives of millions.¹ At the same time, the dictatorial regimes in Eastern

¹ Peter Schneider reflected in his 1990 essay, “Some People Can Even Sleep Through an Earthquake,” on when Gorbachev had declared the original Soviet missile build-up to have been offensive. The moment was profoundly shocking: “Had I heard right? Was the highest representative of that peace-loving power echoing Helmut Schmidt, while I and many of my embattled comrades at the Berlin Writers’ Peace Forum had claimed the Soviet missiles were purely defensive? Now what? Either Gorbachev was a fool, or I

Europe effectively suppressed peace activists who criticized the Soviet Union and initiated domestic and international propaganda campaigns taking aim at the Americans and their allies. This meant that in the East, too, the predominant message was that the United States and NATO were to blame for the crisis.²

The East German Writers Union played a crucial role within its government's propaganda efforts as GDR authors appealed to both domestic and international audiences in lending socialist states moral legitimacy. To this end, in September 1981 Hermann Kant, acting in his capacity as president of the association, addressed the NATO double-track decision in a speech to the Schriftstellerverband's steering committee, a speech which would soon be publishing in *Neue deutsche Literatur* for all to read. In his address, Kant laid out a bold mission for writers in general and East German authors in particular in the quest to save the world from nuclear annihilation. He reflected on the SV, extolling, "The association has at no time been an apolitical literature society." Once again, the Writers Union needed to take a bold stand on a crucial topic of world importance: peace and disarmament. Importantly, "there has been no noteworthy anti-fascist activity of the past century without the participation of [...] writers and others who were their companions." Now their help was needed once more, because one of the "abhorrent, and for people of our profession especially abhorrent traits of the present

was." Peter Schneider, *The German Comedy: Scenes of Life After the Wall*, trans. Philip Boehm and Leigh Hafrey (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 71-72.

² On the "asymmetrical strategic interaction" between the West and East (especially in West Germany) during the euromissiles dispute, see Jeffrey Herf, *War by Other Means: Soviet Power, West German Resistance, and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). Herf argues that the Soviet Union exploited Western fears of a nuclear war and the divisions inherent in a pluralist democracy like that of West Germany in order to attempt to create opposition to the NATO deployment and in doing so, drive a wedge between the United States and western Europe that would leave the USSR the undisputed hegemon of the continent.

situation consists of the almost insurmountable silences in describing that which is threatening.” Writers must give voice to these concerns, overcoming the deafening silence. As a course of action, they should unite “against the stationing of new missiles, against cruise missiles and neutron weapons, and against the myth of practicability [*Fürbarkeit*] and limitability [*Begrenzbarkeit*] of a war waged with such weapons.” One could not blame the USSR for the crisis; indeed, one need only remember “who the advocate of the NATO missile decision was,” in contrast with “who now has proposed an armament moratorium repeatedly.” He ended the speech with a flourish, declaring “We want to hear words for peace and want to see actions from everyone, which follow from the words [...] We want peace now!”³

Just two years removed from the Heym expulsions, Kant had given testament to a new, urgent *raison d'être* for East Germany's authors. The speech reflected an influential model he had helped create for describing the peace situation, one which vilified the Americans, lauded the Soviets, and attributed a special role to writers, and especially East German writers, in supporting the forces of peace and socialism. He also linked the quest for peace with anti-fascism, thus implicitly casting the United States, as an enemy of peace, in an even more sinister light. Conversely, by connecting the GDR and Soviet Union with peace, he rhetorically placed those states on the moral high ground vis-à-vis the West. In supporting his government and the Soviet Union, Kant's statement about peace and the role of the Writers Union in promoting it is hardly surprising given the prominent exercise of state power in the cultural realm in the late 1970s. However,

³ Hermann Kant, “Schriftsteller und der Frieden jetzt,” *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 30, no. 12 (December 1981): 5-12. The speech was also published in the anthology Ingrid Krüger, ed., *Mut zur Angst: Schriftsteller für den Frieden* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1982), 114-19.

by inviting writers back onto the public stage in support of a safe issue such as peace, the regime had allowed writers to discuss a vital issue to socialism publicly.

This chapter focuses on activism by the leaders of the SV and its constituent members as part of the East German state's official peace movement.⁴ During the 1980s, the union played a central role in this movement with writers often being sent to key international meetings, organizing national events, and otherwise speaking out on behalf of the socialist camp's peaceful agenda. Though largely proceeding chronologically, the chapter focuses on four dimensions of Writers Union activities in these years so as to get a sense of the scope of activities and the importance attributed to writer involvement in the peace movement both by authors and the East German dictatorship. First, how did the SED and the leaders of the Schriftstellerverband seek to frame the role of writers in the peace movement, and how did this affect writers' understanding of their professional identity? This section investigates the ways in which these leaders sought to make peace a vital component of the self-understanding and function of authors in socialist societies in general and East Germany in particular. Second, once a rhetorical model for peace had been established by the union and Party, how did they involve rank-and-file Writers Union members in the peace movement? Here we see writers participating actively in local, national, and international events, simultaneously reifying the official discourse on

⁴ It lies beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the role of writers in East Germany's unofficial peace movement. Condemned by the government, independent peace groups emerged during the 1980s (often under the protection of churches) and served as the core of the GDR's burgeoning opposition groups. Some individual writers were involved in such groups, although the extent of their involvement has not yet been examined systematically. For the independent peace and opposition groups in the GDR, see for example David Rock, ed., *Voices in Times of Change: The Role of Writers Opposition Movements, and the Churches in the Transformation of East Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Anke Silomon, *"Schwerter zu Pflugscharen" und die DDR: Die Friedensarbeit der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR im Rahmen der Friedensdekaden 1980 bis 1982* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); and Hans-Joachim Veen, Ulrich Mählert, and Peter März, eds. *Wechselwirkungen Ost-West: Dissidenz, Opposition und Zivilgesellschaft 1975-1989* (Köln: Böhlau, 2007).

peace while at times complicating it as well. Third, how did writers appropriate the peace movement to their own ends and what impact did this have on the Writers Union as a whole? Considered here are writers' efforts to complicate the rhetorical model for peace, especially to incorporate topics, such as environmentalism, which could be used to expand criticism of SED policies. Finally, after the Tenth Writers Congress in 1987 had expanded the limits on permissible speech within the union, in what ways did writers seek to take advantage of these new opportunities? Here, the activism of the writers in the late 1980s is considered along with the reactions of union leaders to the new self-assertiveness of members.

In tracing these threads, the chapter gauges how successful the SED and union leaders were at mobilizing East German authors for the peace campaign as well as what the consequences for that mobilization were for GDR discussions on peace and socialism more generally. It allows a focus on both individual authors and the institutional framework in which they operated, and on the process through which authors conformed to, adapted, and reinterpreted the official socialist discourse on peace to include other concerns beyond a narrow focus on American nuclear missiles.⁵ In the end, what began as a propaganda campaign morphed into something far more important, and individual writers, given a legitimate space and right to speak about the vital issue of peace,

⁵ In his consideration of writers, Herf focuses on the contributions of individual writers to the peace movements such as Günter Grass and Günter de Bruyn. See Herf, 113-114, 130-131, 145-147, 155-156, 175-177. Sabine Pamperrien explores the so-called "Westarbeit" or "western work" in the 1970s and 1980s, yet her narrow focus on East-West relations loses the domestic activities of the Schriftstellerverband. See Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: Der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistischen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), especially 101-160. Other accounts of the peace movement in the two Germanys during the 1980s such as Alice Holmes Cooper's *Paradoxes of Peace: German Peace Movements since 1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) and Steve Breyman's *Why Movements Matter: The West German Peace Movement and U.S. Arms Control Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) give only passing mention to writers, either East or West German.

complicated the rhetorical model while couching their arguments within the context of socialism, in the process expanding the limits on speech imposed on them by the SED.

Crafting an Official Rhetorical Model for Peace

It was crucial for the SED from the outset of the anti-NATO campaign to control the message that authors would be asked to disseminate. In this regard, the leaders of the Writers Union along with members of the SED's Central Committee were tasked with establishing a rhetorical model for peace and then ensuring that the members of the Writers Union were exposed to that message. It helped that "peace" had been a concern of the union since its creation in 1950 when it was called upon by the SED to help propagate the myth that East Germany represented the culmination of Germany's humanistic and peaceful traditions whereas West Germany had inherited Germany's militaristic and fascist traditions. Indeed, on many occasions since 1950 the Writers Union had taken a stand against what was perceived as Western threats to peace, issuing statements condemning the Korean, Algerian, and Vietnam Wars, for example, and also opposing the 1973 American-supported coup d'état in Chile which overthrew the socialist government there.⁶ However, the goal of promoting peace assumed a particular urgency with the NATO double-track decision of 1979. Prodded by the SED, in the 1980s union President Hermann Kant and First Secretary Gerhard Henniger established the contours of a rhetorical model to which writers were expected to adhere, namely that peace was threatened by NATO nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union was a force for global

⁶ Hermann Kant summarized these actions nicely in his September 1981 speech to the SV steering committee. It goes without saying that the Writers Union was silent or pro-Soviet when confronted with aggressive actions by the USSR such as the Prague Spring and the war in Afghanistan. Kant, "Schriftsteller und der Frieden jetzt," 7.

peace through its disarmament efforts, and writers – in particular East German writers – had a special role to play by spreading consciousness of threats to peace through their literary works and public actions.

In many ways the key figure in the Writers Union's efforts as part of the official peace campaign was Hermann Kant,⁷ and it primarily fell to him to establish "peace" as a central element of the professional identity of East Germany's writers. One of the first official statements of the Writers Union came from Kant at the central steering committee's first meeting in early 1980, just weeks after the NATO discussion. In the address, Kant declared, "One knows, a great war today would almost unavoidably become a nuclear war, and one knows a nuclear war would almost unavoidably annihilate a gigantic part of humanity or shatter almost the entire earth, and one knows war appears less avoidable today than as recently as a few years ago." "The greatest sin," Kant admonished, is "when one denies the threat." Indeed, "[t]he world stinks of war," and whosoever wished to improve the situation "must indiscriminately name it." Thankfully,

⁷ Kant had a tremendously rewarding decade, receiving numerous privileges and awards for his works. He toured several European countries and the United States, giving popular lectures in many places. He also received dozens of awards and honors, including an honorary doctorate from Greifswald University in 1980, the Fatherland Order of Merit in Gold (given for his contribution to GDR literature and his service to the SED's cultural policy) in 1986, and the Goethe Prize in 1987. Moreover, in 1986 he joined the Central Committee of the SED. During this time Kant was highly praised by the government precisely because he advocated strong anti-Western beliefs, passionate appeals for peace, and anti-fascist legitimization for the GDR. Yet Stasi documents reveal that Kant's stories were beginning to raise a few eyebrows and his calls for greater openness were intended to consciously change the system. For example, in 1984 Kant published a story (eventually included in his 1986 short story collection *Bronzezeit* (Bronze Age)) in which his stories, all humorous, poked fun at a variety of targets, significantly including the USSR, GDR, and United States. One of these stories was "Plexa" which rendered the bureaucratic inefficiencies and ridiculously vigilant nature of security forces in the Soviet Union laughable. The Stasi report was filed in the same year Kant became a Central Committee member, so obviously his ideological position was not regarded as subversive, but it nonetheless indicates a growing ambivalence in some circles regarding Kant. Thus, the Writers Union president increasingly demonstrated a soft dissidence, one that never challenged most aspects of the regime, but did prod its leaders with provocative questions and suggestions regarding cultural openness. For the Stasi report on "Plexa," see "Information: Über Hermann Kants Erzählung »Plexa« (13.6.84.)," in *Die Akte Kant: IM "Martin", die Stasi und die Literatur in Ost und West*, ed. Karl Corino (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1995), 488-89.

as writers they were well-prepared to do so, as “[i]t is a task of literature to call the truth by its name.” Books could not erase the threats, but they could confirm the existence of those threats. Particularly, East German literature “has always been a declaration of intent for peace and more than that: a contribution to the securing of peace.” Kant then proceeded to a more general discussion of the value of literature in East Germany, boasting “[o]ur political and cultural-political value must be recognizable, and we must remain recognizable as GDR writers.” This important process was facilitated by the Writers Union: “our association is without difficulty recognizable as a socialist association in a socialist society.” The union had recently been “shaken,” and it “had to accept losses,” and yet “it obeys its societal mission and it does its societal duty.” Was all of this too much to ask of literature? Kant thought not, and those of a similar mindset knew that they were not alone in their task. “We are a part of the alliance,” he intoned, which defends peace.”⁸ Peace was not the only focus of Kant’s speech – the address was more about the general role of literature in East Germany than anything else – but it was the most important point. Kant would spend the rest of the decade perfecting the official peace rhetorical model for writers that he began in 1980.

The role of literature in the quest for peace was also articulated several times by representatives of the East German government and SED over the course of the 1980s. Typical were statements made by Ursula Ragwitz in a January 1983 consultation session for the SV’s district branches in which she and Gerhard Henniger detailed East Germany’s official peace policies and how they should be translated into local action.

⁸ “Referat von H. Kant auf 1. Vorstandssitzg.,” 1980, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (hereafter cited as SAPMO-BArch) DY30/IBV2/9.06/61.

Ragwitz first described a recent “Political Declaration of the Participatory States of the Warsaw Pact,” characterizing the declaration as “a further essential step in the struggle for peace” and as an “expression of the permanent offensive of socialism and as confirmation of the certainty of the possibility of mastering the threatening situation of the present.” She continued that “the problem of peace is unattainable with defeatism and pessimism. A fighting spirit is called for.”⁹ Here the ironically militant character of the socialist peace movement lay revealed: “defeatism and pessimism” had no place in the movement; what was needed was a “permanent offensive,” a “fighting spirit,” a war for peace. Above all, aggressive activism was called for, activism to which writers must aspire as part of their societal mission.

The importance of literature in promoting peace was also evident in the planning for the Writers Union’s monthly literary periodical, *Neue deutsche Literatur*. As the union’s flagship publication, it was important that it set the tone regarding the SV’s peace activism. In 1980, presidium member Rudi Strahl articulated critical remarks about the attention of the periodical to the peace issue, especially in its failure to include anything about a recent meeting of the leaders of socialist writers associations, where they had unanimously adopted a resolution on an “appeal for the preservation of peace.”¹⁰ Responding to such criticism, the work plans for the periodical over the next several years reflected an increased focus on the peace struggle. These work plans, prepared by

⁹ Abteilung Kultur, “Information über eine Beratung mit den Parteisekretären der Bezirksorganisationen des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 13. Januar 1983,” 24 January 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707, 2.

¹⁰ “Präsidiumssitzung 8.1.1980,” Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR 603, 7, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV).

the publication's editorial staff and approved by the presidium, listed the most important themes to explore over the course of the year and within each issue.

After 1980,¹¹ peace was regularly among the most important themes presented in these work plans. In 1981 NDL's editors were instructed by the presidium to publish a peace appeal drafted by the recent Soviet Writers Congress to the "Culture Creators of the World,"¹² and later that year it was instructed to publish a list of peace initiatives by writers over the past several years.¹³ In the 1982 plan, after it explained that NDL aimed to further popularize and develop socialist literature in the GDR while following the SED's dictates, it listed the overriding theme for the year, namely "the active insertion of socialist writers into the international struggle for peace."¹⁴ The work plan for 1985 evinced similar priorities. Laying out the primary themes for the magazine's content (based on the "basic Party- and state-given orientation as well as the guidelines developed from the 9th Writers Congress"), the first item listed was "the part of literature in the safeguarding of world peace." Another theme in the report was "the word of writers in activating the people for the struggle to maintain world peace." Here, peace trumped all other concerns in the Writers Union's main literary publication, even more important than "the relationship of the individual writer to his socialist state" and "the

¹¹ In the February 1980 consultation over NDL's work plan, the presidium appears not yet to have registered the full significance of the double-track decision, as their top priorities for NDL for the coming year were to be the 35th anniversary of the "liberation from fascism," a special volume dedicated to Anna Seghers, and "dialogue and workshop." "Präsidium am 1. Februar 1980," SV 603, 31.

¹² Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 8 Juli 1981," SV 604, 66.

¹³ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 8. September 1981," SV 604, 50.

¹⁴ "Neue Deutsche Literatur – 1982," 19 December 1981, SV 604, 10.

marking of the GDR as a part of the socialist community of states.”¹⁵ The 1987 work plan likewise listed as its top ideological priority “the share of literature in the struggle for the preservation and safeguarding of world peace” along with “the particular responsibility of the socialist writer as an active fellow combatant” to promote “ideas of peace and socialism” with his or her work.¹⁶ During the 1980s, ensuring world peace, in the estimation of NDL’s editors and the central presidium, was more important than either individual or national concerns, truly a priority of global importance. The public face of East Germany’s writers organization would thus prioritize peace above all else.

Finally, peace was also a crucial theme in the literature produced in East Germany in the early 1980s, although one of its most prominent variations, feminist literature, employed a different understanding of the term than Kant envisioned. Defining women’s emancipation in terms of full employment, socialist countries like the GDR had actively promoted female employment beginning in the 1950s. By this definition, East German feminism was a rousing success, resulting in a 91% female employment rate by 1989.¹⁷ Yet especially by the 1980s, many East German women began turning away from the official rhetoric privileging productive labor as the key emancipation and instead exploring the contradictions between socialism’s emancipatory rhetoric and its patriarchal reality. Many of the leading voices of this “independent” feminism were writers, such as Irmtraud Morgner and Christa Wolf, who contributed to “peace-themed”

¹⁵ “Die NDL 1985,” 26 November 1984, SV 511, vol. 2, 5; also located in SV511, vol. 3, 151-53.

¹⁶ “Neue Deutsche Literatur: Arbeitsplan für das Jahr 1987,” 5 November 1986, SV 512, vol. 1, 19.

¹⁷ Despite these high statistics, there was a gendered division of labor in East Germany, and women were underrepresented in the top leadership positions across the country. Dagmar Langenhan and Sabine Roß, “The Socialist Glass Ceiling: Limits to Female Careers,” in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 177-82.

literature through their works exploring patriarchy and violence.¹⁸ In Morgner's *Amanda* (1983), violence is depicted as the outcome of patriarchy, with matriarchy held up as the solution. The heroine from Morgner's previous novel, *Troubadour Beatriz*, is reincarnated as a siren in *Amanda*, but under patriarchy they have lost their voice and thus are deprived of their ability to use their voices to persuade others of the necessity of peace.¹⁹ Wolf's *Kassandra* also delves into mythology, re-narrating the Trojan War from a feminist perspective, one in which a utopia created by women is destroyed in the process.²⁰ "Peace" in feminist literature meant something different than when Kant used the term, signifying that while the latter's rhetoric model dominated inside Writers Union functions, literature was already complicating that image.

Getting Involved: Local, National, and International Events

It was one thing for the leaders of the Writers Union and the SED to establish a rhetorical model for peace. It was another to get ordinary members of the Schriftstellerverband to buy into the rhetorical model and to disseminate it in their localities, in the GDR, and across the globe. Doing so meant, above all, making peace the main theme in the majority of events sponsored by the union, whether a member meeting, consultation with government officials, or public reading, and drawing participation in those events from writers from across Germany. Participation at the highest, international level was reserved for prominent authors, but the sheer volume of

¹⁸ Lorna Martens, *The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 8-12.

¹⁹ Irmtraud Morgner, *Amanda* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1983).

²⁰ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. trans. Jan van Heurck (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1984).

events around East Germany in the 1980s with peace as the principle theme suggests that participating in such peace events was very easy for union members. Therefore peace-themed events, on the local, national, and international level provide evidence of the pervasiveness and involvement of writers in the peace movement.

Though receiving less attention than higher-profile national and international events in which the Writers Union participated or organized, the association's district branches carried out a litany of smaller events which enabled authors of lesser-renown to perform in what amounted to a local propaganda campaign, spreading the gospel of Soviet-inspired peace and NATO aggression among the East German populace. Detailed reports from these events are often lacking, but the titles alone are suggestive, and the sheer number of these events testifies to the important both the central and district branches of the Schriftstellerverband placed upon the peace issue as an organizational and professional priority.

Especially earlier in the decade, some authors complained that they were not being given enough opportunities to sound their voices in the fight for peace. In late 1981, for instance, Hermann Kant and Georgi Markov, the chair of the Soviet Union of Writers (not to be confused with the eponymous Bulgarian dissident author), had issued a joint "peace appeal," signed by members of each organization's presidium.²¹ Some rank-and-file members of the Berlin district branch, however, complained at a meeting of their party organization that the SV had conceived of the appeal as "a matter of the leadership"

²¹ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 4 Mai 1981," SV 604, 90.

and not, as they preferred, “used it for a discussion with all writers.”²² SV members apparently wanted to be more involved in the quest for peace, to take proactive positions rather than passive ones.

The following spring, the leaders of the Writers Union took steps to address this deficit of popular participation in peace events. In March 1982 the Berlin district branch hosted an event designated “Writers for Peace,” whereby Görlich coordinated several related events in factories and institutions so as “to reach the workers who fulfill the decisive contribution in the peace struggle with their daily work.” This series was crowned by an event in which 900 people attended and 49 authors participated.²³ So successful was this Berlin initiative that the SV’s central presidium recommended other district organizations copy it, aiming “possibly to give many writers the chance to demonstrate their will for peace and to shape peace policy actively.”²⁴ Active participation of members in the peace movement was the goal, and the Berlin events series had proven an effective model for drawing in members into official activities.

Sure enough, an array of local events transpired in the months and years that followed, all centered on the theme of “peace.” At a Writers Union presidium meeting in April 1982, for example, a representative of the district branch in Dresden recounted local activities, noting that “in the foreground of the talk stood problems of the struggle

²² Sepp Müller, “Information über die öffentlichen APO-Versammlungen im November 1981,” 9 December 1981, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 904-097 30.

²³ H. Kießig to Konrad Naumann, Abteilung Kultur, 1 February 1982, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 5266; Abteilung Kultur, “Betr.: Vorbereitung der Veranstaltung ‘Schriftsteller für der Frieden’ am 23. März 1982,” 17 March 1982, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 5266; Abteilung Kultur, “Information über die in Belriner Betrieben und Einrichtungen durchgeführten Begegnungen im Rahmen der Initiative ‘Schriftsteller für den Frieden,’” 19 March 1982, LAB C Rep. 902 5266.

²⁴ “Beschlussprotokoll,” 19 January 1982, SV 605, 103.

for peace, the promotion of the young generation, and the literary creative work of the members of the district association.”²⁵ A report from the organization to the SED reported that in March 1983, the Dresden SV district branch teamed up with local book sellers and libraries for an event entitled “Poetry and Prose for Peace” in which 22 authors read “short stories, poems, prose-drafts, excerpts from manuscripts, [and] song and cabaret text.” Importantly, participants in this event adopted “a general declaration of intent against the stationing of new American intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe,” thus codifying on a local level the national-level policies of the regime and Writers Union.²⁶ In the same month as the Dresden event, a public reading took place in the city of Rostock entitled “Commitment for Peace – A Sentence for Peace.”²⁷

Another event occurred that same month in Frankfurt an der Oder, whose content was recounted in a report to Honecker about activities in the district. The report detailed activities of the SV district branch from that city, activities carried out “in order to determine their personal contribution in the struggle for the preservation and safeguarding of peace and for the all-around strengthening of the German Democratic Republic.” Aping official doctrine that these events served to demonstrate the inescapable connection “between a secure peace and a strong socialist state,” the report noted, “[M]any of their societal activities help to shape the spiritual and cultural life of our district.” One activity, organized by the SV in cooperation with the local branch of the Composers Union, was a reading and music event entitled “Karl Marx-Year Must

²⁵ “Beschlussprotokoll,” 1-2 April 1982, SV 605, 93.

²⁶ “Arbeit der Bezirksverbände 25.2.-30.3.83,” 6 April 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707, 8.

²⁷ Lost in translation is the wordplay within the title: “Einsatz für den Frieden: Ein Satz für den Frieden.” “Arbeit der Bezirksverbände,” 8.

Become the Year of Assured Peace,”²⁸ an event where, by the local SED official’s estimation, most of the works presented were “evocative acknowledgements of the active struggle for peace.”²⁹ This event thus echoed official positions, or at least this was the message the official wanted to communicate to Honecker.

Yet more activities continued over the next several years. In late March 1985 the district SED leadership in Leipzig held a meeting with representatives with the local Writers Union branch, where the main topic of discussion was “the tasks of the struggle for peace,” followed by the GDR’s economic strategy and aesthetic questions in the writing process.³⁰ The next month, the steering committee of the Writers Union’s Halle district branch reported on an event at a local chemical factory entitled “Writers Read for Peace,”³¹ bringing the peace campaign directly to the GDR’s working class, just as the original Berlin event had done.

For most of these cases, it is not clear exactly what transpired at these events, whether all participants (writer or otherwise) faithfully championed the official position on peace, or even how many people participated. The reporters for these meetings might have had a vested interest in giving the appearance of accord between writers and the state, even if that meant smoothing out actual differences of opinion between the lines of

²⁸ 1983 marked the 100th anniversary of the Communist pioneer’s death.

²⁹ SED Bezirksleitung Frankfurt (Oder), “Informationen an Erich Honecker über regionale Probleme in den Monatsberichte des Ersten Bezirkssekretärs der SED in Frankfurt/Oder,” 29 March 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/2232, 21-22.

³⁰ “Information zu einigen Problemen aus dem Bericht des Genossen Jochen Hertwig, Bezirksleitung Frankfurt/Oder,” 3 April 1985, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/2232.

³¹ “Hans-Jürgen Steinmann zur Präsidiumssitzung in Halle,” SV 511, vol. 3, 116.

their descriptions of the meetings. The question thus remains: How successful were these activities in bringing writers into the peace movement on the SED's terms?

Evidence suggests that while the results of these initiatives were, from the SED's standpoint, largely positive, the track record was nonetheless mixed. These local events also seemed to bear fruit, at least as far as convincing a number of union members of the necessity of supporting the official peace movement. At a presidium meeting November 1981, Helmut Richter, chair of the local district branch in Leipzig, reported on the various discussion topics of a recent members meeting in his district. According to Richter, at the meeting "above all the participation of writers in the struggle for the protection of safeguarding of peace, the necessity of strengthening the support of the younger generation through the association, the international work of the association, and the acceptance of new members in the association were discussed."³² Thus it seems that many Leipzig authors were at least initially predisposed to sympathy for the position advocated by the SED and Soviet Communist Party.

An even more problematic trend was recounted in an April 1983 report to the SED Central Committee's Culture Department, the secretariat of the Writers Union detailed its ongoing preparations for its upcoming ninth congress, including election meetings of its district branches. One of the topics discussed frequently at such meetings was the peace movement, yet it was clear to the report's authors that more work was

³² Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 16.-17. November 1981," SV 604, 21. For a similar perspective on the Berlin district branch, see "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation/APO Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, über das Parteileben," September 1980, LAB C Rep. 904-097 30; "Monatsbericht der Grundorganisation/APO Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, über das Parteileben," October 1981, LAB C Rep. 904-097 30; Sepp Müller, "Information über die öffentlichen APO-Versammlungen im November 1981," 9 December 1981, LAB C Rep. 904-097 30; Sepp Müller, "Information," 15 December 1981, LAB C Rep. 904-097 30.

needed in this area. Key tasks for writers would be the “continuation of peace activities through new texts, through readings, public statements, participation in manifestations, etc.” “It must be considered,” however, “how the powers of the district organizations could be used more strongly than with earlier central events.” The “urge to participate in the struggle for peace on a larger scope” could be perceived at these meetings, meaning that the Writers Union’s leaders would need to find a better way to integrate its rank-and-file members into peace activities.³³ It seemed as if the union’s leaders, eager to mobilize important writers to participate in key national and international events, were at a loss for how best to organize participation along regional lines.

From the perspective of the central Writers Union, the participation of rank-and-file union members in peace activities had exceeded expectations by mid-decade. Typical is a report issued by Henniger in December 1986 in which he recounted the efforts of the union to realize the decision of the previous Party congress. He noted with pride that in all district branches, “[t]he new initiatives of our Party and the socialist community of states for peace and disarmament were unconditionally welcomed.” He did concede, though, that while new economic reforms in the Soviet Union would help strengthen the “peace power” of global socialism, “the different conditions between the Soviet Union and the GDR are today better recognized, which in some discussions were, in the beginning, too-little noted.” Still, the high number of SED members in the Schriftstellerverband served as a basis for “the determining influence of Party forces on the political-ideological situation in the association.” As for the specific contribution of

³³ Abteilung Kultur, “Zwischeninformation über den Verlauf der Vorbereitungen des IX. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” 5 April 1983, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707, 4. See also “Information über eine Beratung mit den Parteisekretären der Bezirksorganisationen,” 3.

the Writers Union to the East German peace policy, Henniger devoted four pages of the report to detailing numerous activities sponsored by the union or in which union members had participated. They could, however, do more to counter “tendencies of fear of life and political resignation in the struggle for peace and disarmament.” At the same time, they pledged, as an organization, to expand initiatives “to create a wide alliance with progressive writers in the international framework for arms limitation and disarmament,” holding up a recent effort by Kant to engage writers outside the Soviet bloc to join a “dialogue of reason” on the peace issue.³⁴ Henniger came across as confident and satisfied with the union’s efforts in the peace arena, providing copious evidence for the partisan message emerging at the district level. He admitted some shortcomings, however, once more implying that not all union members were participating in the peace struggle in optimal ways.

Much national-level discussion of the peace issue occurred in the preparation for and execution of the union’s ninth congress, held in late May-early June 1983. As the double-track decision’s plan for installing NATO missiles was scheduled to go into effect later that year, the congress would serve as an important platform for critiquing American foreign policy while also championing the peace and disarmament initiatives of the USSR. While there were a small number of voices complicating the accepted rhetorical model for peace, the overwhelming message emerging from the congress was support for the Soviet position in the peace struggle.

³⁴ Gerhard Henniger, “Bericht über die Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des XI. Parteitages der SED durch den Schriftstellerverband der DDR,” SV 525, vol. 2, 110-14. For Kant’s efforts to contact Western authors, see, for example, Hermann Kant to Günter Grass, February 1986, Literaturarchiv: Günter Grass Archiv (hereafter cited as GGA) 7148, Archiv der Akademie der Künste.

In preparation for the Ninth Writers Congress, the leaders of the Writers Union made sure to frame the upcoming event in terms of the most pressing issues of the day. To this end, one year before the congress was scheduled to begin, Henniger laid out what would be the guiding principles for the event's preparation, instructing, "The two main questions of the congress should be: writers and peace and the work of the GDR writer in the further formation of socialist society in the 80s." Next on Henniger's guidelines was that "a part of the congress (on June 1) should be implemented in the form of work groups on the theme 'literature and peace,' 'literature and youth,' [and] 'literature and readers.'"³⁵ Peace, in this list of priorities, trumped both young people and readership. Finally, "On the evening of June 1," the report noted, "there should take place in the congress hall a public event at which GDR writers and foreign guests of the congress would speak under the motto 'Writers for Peace.'"³⁶ In other words, the crowning achievement of the Writers Union's marquee national event would be an evening with international authors showcasing their common desire to promote peace.

The September 1982 presidium meeting, attended by Ursula Ragwitz, further elaborated on the conception for the congress. Key points to stress at the congress were the "anti-fascist tradition of our association and our literature," the place of East German authors in the class struggle, and "the contribution of writers of the GDR in the struggle for peace." Of especial importance in this latter regard was the fact that the congress was to take place only a few months before the double-track decision was supposed to go into

³⁵ The eventual workgroups were built around "problems of young authors," "problems of criticism," and "societal effectiveness of our literature."

³⁶ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 21 Mai 1982," SV 605, 76.

effect. Therefore, “preventing its realization must be the main focus of all efforts in the struggle for peace.” Along these same lines, the “Writers for Peace” event planned for the congress would be an important contribution to this goal. Moreover, particular importance was to be placed on the plenary sessions. To this end, Kant would once more give the keynote address and they were to make sure that the most important points of discussion would not be relegated to the workgroups. This was the case “in order to achieve [...] a compact and effective political statement on the fundamental questions of our time.”³⁷ The message emerging from the congress was to be unified and consistent, and these priorities came through in the organizational planning.

Preparation for the congress was moving along very well, but it ran into a major problem mere days before the event was to commence: a severe gender imbalance in presidium. For twenty-six years Anna Seghers had served as the president of the Writers Union, but women had nonetheless always constituted a relatively small percentage of Writers Union members, and they were even less represented in its leadership bodies, a fact which drew the attention of some authors and even SED officials. In 1983 the association featured 832 members, of whom 208 were women (25%).³⁸ The presidium between 1973 and 1978 and again between 1978 and 1983 had contained just one woman each (of fourteen and fifteen total members, respectively) – Seghers until 1978 and thereafter Irmtraud Morgner. Only one of fifteen district organizations was headed up by a woman (Cottbus’ Dorothea Kleine). Besides Segher’s presidency, between 1971 and

³⁷ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 8. September 1982,” 41-42. See also “Präsidium am 8.9.1982,” SV 605, 49-51.

³⁸ Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, “IX. SCHRIFTSTELLERKONGRESS DER DDR: Rechenschaftsbericht an den IX. Schriftstellerkongress,” 23 March 1983, SV 560, 66-67.

1983 (and indeed until the collapse of the GDR), not a single vice president of the organization was a woman. This problem did not go unnoticed within the organization, and when the proposals for the new presidium to be elected at the ninth congress were distributed, many took great offense to the fact that not a single woman was listed on it.

In late May 1983, the Party group within the Berlin Writers Union district branch debated this very question, issuing a petition to the presidium after their deliberations. In it, they took issue with the proposed list of presidium members, expressing concern “that the role of literature penned by women indeed plays a coequal role in the society of the GDR, but not in this very important cadre question.” They made clear that they were not rejecting the proposals for the presidium, but demanded that it be expanded by at least three members. To fill these additional slots, they proposed Brigitte Birnbaum, Renate Drenkow, Gisela Karau, Wera Küchenmeister, Waltraut Lewin, Rosemarie Schuder, and Gisela Steineckert. The petition closed by declaring, “We believe that in such a politically important question a rapid change of the decision must be possible.” Signing the document were thirteen names, both men and women, although the vast majority were the latter. Some of these signatories also appended messages to their names, such as Eva Lippold who added, “The concern is justified,” or Jo Schulz who expressed, “I consider the presence of women in the highest committee of our association to be indispensable.” Günther Rücker stated that “without any women it appears to me that the presidium is not at the height of the association and its purpose.” Monika Ehrhardt conveyed her shock that Gisela Steineckert had not even been approached, Walter Kaufmann noted that the quality of literature written by women “makes their presence in

the presidium indispensable, and Anneliese Löffler commented that the names proposed were less important, but “the problem, however, is.”³⁹

The group found an ally in Ursula Ragwitz, who urgently appealed to Kurt Hager, conveying her own concerns that with the pending retirement from the presidium of Irmtraud Morgner, there would not be a single woman left in the leadership group. Ragwitz therefore expected a debate about this very question during the election portion of the congress, a debate she probably feared would interfere with their ideological agenda, i.e., extolling the peace initiatives of socialist states. Ragwitz informed Hager that she had already spoken with Kant and Henniger on the issue, and they had agreed to approach Rosemarie Schuder about submitting herself as a candidate. The Cultural Department heads closed her missive by requesting Hager’s opinion on how to proceed.⁴⁰ Sure enough, Rosemarie Schuder agreed and became the only women in the presidium between 1983 and 1987, joining the fifteen male colleagues who had already been proposed for the job.⁴¹

With this crisis narrowly averted for the time being, the ninth congress opened on schedule on 31 May 1983. Erich Honecker and Hermann Kant seemed of one mind in

³⁹ Letter to the Presidium of the Writers Union of the GDR, “Betr.: Zusammensetzung des künftigen Präsidiums,” 31 May 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707. See also, German Historical Institute, “Dokumente - Geschlechterrollen und Familienbeziehungen im Umbruch: Das Problem der Kaderfrage (31. Mai 1983),” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed 12 February 2010: http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1106&language=german.

⁴⁰ Ursula Ragwitz to Kurt Hager, May 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707.

⁴¹ At the actual congress, 23% of congressional delegates were women, the vast majority of whom (60%) came from Berlin. Indeed, as usual, Berlin dwarfed all other delegations, with the next largest coming from Leipzig at only 19 members. Suhl’s three was the smallest; it and three other districts (the Sorbian workgroup, Frankfurt/Oder, and Gera) had no women delegates. Attendance lists for Ninth Congress, 1983, SV 560, 70-92.

their opening statements to the congress, each calling on the delegates to discuss over the next few days how best socialist literature could contribute to defusing the international situation. Honecker issued a “greeting” from the Central Committee of the SED in *Neues Deutschland* the day the congress began, an address which was read at the congress by the opening speaker, Max Walter Schulz. In the address, while describing the “imperialist policy of confrontation,” Honecker called upon the assembled writers, hailing their “peace activities” and “combative work with the artistic word and political action” as having an “especially great significance.” “The writers of our country,” he declared, “prove their value as trustworthy and loyal comrades-in-arms of the working class and their party in that they defend peace with all their means and help to strengthen socialism.”⁴² He even trotted out his stance at the 1973 Congress, stating that because East Germany needed writers more than ever, the SED supported any efforts by the SV to work through “conflicts of opinions about world-view and philosophical questions.”⁴³ This implied that such differences of opinion must be settled at the congress.

Kant’s opening speech addressed the serious threat to peace as well as the need and the ability, as socialist writers, to counter it.⁴⁴ The goal of literature, he asserted, was to create understanding: “If we can succeed with the means at our disposal in ensuring that whoever reads our work understands a little more about life, holds it in a little higher

⁴² Erich Honecker, “Gruß und Dank den Schriftstellern der DDR: Literatur – Kampfgefährte für Frieden und Sozialismus: Zentralkomitee der SED an den heute beginnenden IX. Kongreß,” *Neues Deutschland*, 31 May 1983, 1. The text was also published in the Writers Union’s anthology of the congress. See “Grussadresse des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,” *IX. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR: Rede und Diskussion* (Leipzig: LVZ-Druckerei “Hermann Duncker,” 1984), 10-11.

⁴³ Honecker, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 11.

⁴⁴ Like with his previous keynote addresses, the speech Kant delivered at the ninth congress had been subjected to SED editorial oversight. See for example Ursula Ragwitz to Kurt Hager, 24 May 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707.

regard and is a little more prepared to protect it from destruction, then we can be extremely satisfied.” Kant then addressed the claim that they were biased in supporting the USSR, responding that in the Soviet Union the leaders continued to press for peaceful coexistence while Ronald Reagan “speaks of the other [government] as the seat of evil,” alluding to Reagan’s “Evil Empire” speech regarding the Soviet Union, given in March of the same year. The precarious missile situation was one of global importance and it was therefore important that the world peace movement adhere to humanist and anti-fascist traditions. In fact, “Socialism is the most reliable force of peace. Defending it means protecting life.”⁴⁵ Thus once again he reasserted the inextricable link between socialism and anti-fascism. The major threats to the world were militarism, war, and the possible resurgence of fascism in the West, and thus the only adequate solution to this dilemma was to follow socialism.

Kant also offered a classic antifascist justification for the actions and responsibility of writers for peace. He dwelt first on Hitler in explaining their focus on peace: “We understand this meeting as one of the attempts to prevent a possible future war,” he commented, “and we do not participate in any undertaking which should revise the results of the Second World War.” There were, over the years, some 1.5 million copies of “Hitler propaganda” produced in the FRG, he informed the crowd, and the Kohl government could only praise this “freedom of the press.” Over there they also had freedom of opinion, but “within limits,” he continued, without a hint of irony. He himself had recently given a talk in the West Berlin Academy of the Arts where he had

⁴⁵ Hermann Kant, “Rede auf dem IX. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” *Neue Deutsche Literatur* 32, no. 8 (1983), 7-21; idem., “Rede,” in *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 12-38; Hermann Kant, “Von der Kraft einer Literatur, die für Frieden und Sozialismus eintritt,” *Neues Deutschland*, 1 June 1983, 3-4.

praised a proposal by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Erich Honecker to create a “nuclear-free zone” in Europe. At the talk, he had been “shouted down” with calls of “strike it dead!” and “hang it!” detectable. Hearing this, Kant had felt very disillusioned, and those catcalls reminded him of a “roar” from an earlier time. Recalling the Nazi book burning in Bebelplatz, he observed that there had been “repugnant jeering” there as well. He could not help but think of all that had happened between that date and 1945, and one needed to do little more than reflect on what occurred in those years “to show why we hate war and desire peace and are for socialism.”⁴⁶ With his keynote address, the anti-fascist, pro-socialist peace model that Kant had helped build over the past several years had reached its most perfect iteration to date.

Many other congressional delegates echoed the need for peace, expanding on the themes raised by the union’s leaders. Stephan Hermlin recalled the frequent involvement of authors in the international peace movement and praised the contribution of that movement to ending the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Algeria, and also bolstering détente between the superpowers. The belligerent world powers had long accused the peace movement, especially its communist participants, of opposing only Western nuclear weapons, but in fact “we were and we are against all nuclear weapons,” a statement with which the SED leadership might not have agreed. Yet he also explained that socialism and peace “are inseparably connected to each other.” He thus reminded the assembled group of authors that “the participation of writers in the peace movement has a tradition,” encouraging them now to try to “influence their readers [and] congregate together in order to provide an example.” Their most important task would be to encourage readers,

⁴⁶ Kant, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 35-37.

especially young people, to believe that they had their own contribution to make to the peace movement.⁴⁷ Hermlin's statement offered a more nuanced, self-critical perspective on the peace movement, but he still hit the familiar notes of socialism's inherent connection to peace and the responsibility of socialist writers in achieving it.

Highly decorated author Eberhard Panitz likewise spoke of the virtues of the cause de jure. He expressed that though there were many disagreements among them, the writers of East Germany agreed on at least one thing: "Peace is our first human right! It is the first duty of literature, its highest office and most urgent task." The GDR's authors needed to continue meeting with West German counterparts, especially since the latter were beginning to express disillusionment with their ability to affect change through literature. In contrast, in East Germany, though they may feel vexed from time to time, "we don't feel powerless" as "[n]either word nor deed lose themselves in hopelessness in this country." The difference was their socialist system, especially as "[t]he peace policy of our socialist republic is our policy." Yet they had had losses, too, in the form of several writers who "have left us." "It isn't worth it," he expounded, "to speak about those who recently have turned out to be hate-filled anti-communists and defamers." Why should they waste their energy on those former colleagues, especially when what they discussed at the congress had a "great effect on socialism; it benefits peace, it strengthens and solidifies it"?⁴⁸ Panitz used his time not only to defend peace, but to go after those who had "chosen" to leave the GDR and now criticized the state from afar.

⁴⁷ Stephan Hermlin, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 62-65.

⁴⁸ Eberhard Panitz, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 85-88.

Children's book author Gisela Karau invoked orthodox Marxism to underscore the threat to peace posed by the Americans. To this end she quoted the *Communist Manifesto* where it describes global class struggle, which "every time ends with the revolutionary reshaping of society or with the common downfall of the struggling classes." This last phrase struck her as especially ominous; did it reflect "a vision of the threatening position in which humanity is today?" She became angry reflecting upon her recent witnessing of a few of the survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, decrying the "criminal unscrupulousness" of the Americans. Now every one of the cruise and Pershing missiles was more potent than that first atomic bomb, and many of those missiles "are intended for us." The problem was chiefly psychological, she added, stemming from the fact that "one must at least be as convinced as the Texas oil kings and Californian armament industrialists are convinced that the arms build-up is their only chance to win the struggle with communism with the most profit," even if millions died in the process. In contrast, "[o]ur class standpoint is marked by a higher morality, by deeper meditation, and with all that we write we have disseminated it." All of this returned her to the task of literature: those exploring themes of peace in their literature "are people who completely defend this country, as it is expected of them, perhaps still a bit more since writing is an ideological profession and lays claim to societal interest and the influence of more and more readers."⁴⁹ Karau's polemical attack on the American use of nuclear weapons added moral weight to her defense of socialism and its commitment to peace.

Historical novelist Rosemarie Schuder, who had at the last moment been approached about joining the presidium in its next term, followed in a similar vein,

⁴⁹ Gisela Karau, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 98-101.

invoking Jesus to demonstrate the moral high ground their peace activism stood upon. “The crucifixion body,” she asserted, “the resurrection body were considered at least since the letters of Paul the Apostle as an admonition for peace and love of humans.” She referenced Ephesians 2:17-19 (“And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near...”), noting the perverse irony of an American nuclear submarine carrying the name “Corpus Christi,” a ship which, like its namesake, had the power to destroy the world. In the face of this “unbearable corrosion of the term,” East German authors must not be so tolerant so as to allow their enemy to “extinguish” humanity. Luckily, “in our proven and tested alliance, Christians and Marxists, we, who have common reverence for life, want and must defend life. Therefore, “so long as the enemy stands there armed, the peaceable people may not put down their weapons,” but the peace lovers must learn to tolerate one another as well. She ended her statement by describing her idea of utopia: “the world without weapons . . . may still be a utopia for Marxists and Christians, but it is blueprint in which our hearts live.”⁵⁰ Schuder’s common cause with “Christians,” presumably both within the GDR and in the West, perhaps was an oblique reference to the independent peace movement in the GDR, much of which was organized under the quasi-protective shield of the East German churches, or perhaps was reflective of the relatively recent 1978 agreement between the Protestant Church within Germany and the SED.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Rosemarie Schuder, *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 139-41.

⁵¹ In 1978 in a historic meeting between Honecker and Church leaders, the SED granted major concessions to the *Kirchenbund*. At the same time, the Church affirmed that their humanistic goals were in line with those of socialism, and increasingly many Church leaders came to define their institutions as not against but *within* socialism – a *Kirche im Sozialismus*. Robert F. Goeckel. *The Lutheran Church and the East German State: Political Conflict and Change Under Ulbricht and Honecker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 201-2; John P. Burgess. *The East German Church and the End of Communism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12-13, 47-48.

A more complex contribution emerged from Reimar Gilsenbach, one of the original signers of the Biermann petition six-and-a-half years earlier. He began by quoting Marx, who had written, “Man lives off of nature, meaning: nature is his body, with which he must remain in continual process in order not to die.” Given this integral connection between man and nature, Gilsenbach posited, “Today we know still more exactly how endangered nature is and how vulnerable the earth.” He later recalled his experiences on the Eastern front as an 18-year-old German soldier during World War II when he had defected to the Red Army. There he witnessed firsthand the aftermath of the German “scorched earth” policy – “[t]he charred Balkans, the caved-in roofs, the ruptured walls – that was one of the images, irredeemable and unforgettable, that marked and overshadowed my youth.” But he had also realized that the military had not yet perfected techniques for destroying entire ecosystems. However, the Americans had dropped an atomic bomb on two Japanese cities and in Vietnam had employed weapons “in order to annihilate *nature*.” Thankfully Vietnam had been a “limited war, conducted with limited means”; in a Third World War nature would not be so lucky. They must not wait to act but must themselves be the active agents in historical change, as Marx had commanded. Indeed, Gilsenbach concluded: “Do something, write, poetize, struggle, be that actual person who determine the course of history, be that animated person who improves the relationship of society to nature and to himself, the *humane* society, your society in which you live and move and are!”⁵² Gilsenbach had succeeded in connecting concern over nuclear missiles to environmental destruction and he had admonished his colleagues to do more in their literature to contribute to the solution to this problem. Yet

⁵² Emphasis in original. Reimar Gilsenbach, IX. *Schriftstellerkongreß*, 121-26.

he perhaps wisely stopped well short of implicating the GDR in his contribution, focusing exclusively on damage caused by the Nazis and Americans, implicitly connecting their wanton destruction of nature in the process.⁵³

Discussions were cut short after the announcement was made on the third day of the congress that Anna Seghers had died at the age of 82. Most thoughts turned to her legacy, especially her contributions to peace, but the congress nonetheless ended with joint declarations that concentrated on the peace question. The final declaration of the delegates stressed harmony with the regime in the face of greater threats. Writers were important parts of “the world peace movement that combines against the imperialist threat and nuclear annihilation.” Stressing that peace had always been a concern for the union, it added urgently that this foundation “today is a prerequisite for the survival of our continent.”⁵⁴ In their joint letter to Honecker, the delegates claimed that their union “is bound to the humanistic traditions of its foundation: anti-fascism and struggle for peace determine our work.” Their mission, derived from their historical consciousness, was “to strengthen socialism, to implement peace and détente on our continent, and to prevent the installation of NATO first-strike capability.” They could and should do so

⁵³ Gilsenbach on multiple occasions lobbied the Writers Union to get more involved in the environmental movement, his requests usually falling on deaf ears. A few weeks before the Ninth Writers Congress he had led a meeting in the small town of Brodowin of writers and scientists on environmentalism in the GDR. Gilsenbach, who simultaneously served on the work committee of the central steering committee of the Society for Nature and Environment (*Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt* or GNU) within the Cultural League, wanted to create a broad front of activists, and at the meeting the participating writers had expressed their desire to see the writers Union “to occupy itself with this problem area of national, international, and global significance.” In particular, they hoped to see the Writers Union sponsor similar meetings to the Brodowin meeting every year. Reimar Gilsenbach, “2. Brodowiner Schriftstellertreffen des Zentralvorstands der Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt am 14. und 15. Mai 1983,” SV 517, vol. 1, 147-49. See also Reimar Gilsenbach to the Participants of the 2nd Brodowin Writers Meeting, 14 June 1983, Brodowin, SV 517, vol. 1, 154.

⁵⁴ “Erklärung der Delegierten des IX. Schriftstellerkongresses der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, IX. Schriftstellerkongreß,” 267.

via the function of literature, which aimed “to encourage people in their active position for peace and for life.” Doing so would underscore the basic principle upon which they operated: the “alliance of politics and art is and remains the basis of our work.”⁵⁵

Finally, as a testament to the high value placed upon peace as a priority of the Writers union, in 1983 representatives at the organization’s 9th Writers Congress amended the SV’s statute to better reflect the new hierarchy of values. A change in the document’s first section, entitled “Character, Goals, and Tasks of the Association” is particularly telling. In 1973 the statute had been amended to define the organization thusly: “The Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic is the societal organization of the writers of the GDR who in their creative work are active co-designer [*Mitgestalter*] of the developed socialist society.”⁵⁶ In 1983, however, the description was altered to read: “The Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic is the social organization of the writers of the GDR who with their person and their work have an effect on peace and socialism.” Only then did the new statute add “Their art helps to form the thinking, feeling, and acting of the people who shape socialist society.”⁵⁷ By adding this section, the Writers Union had reframed its central mission. Whereas a decade earlier the main work of the organization was to help East German society further develop, in 1983 the top goal was affecting peace first and socialism second.

⁵⁵ “Grusschreiben der Delegierten an das ZK der SED, IX. Schriftstellerkongreß, 268. Both the declaration and the letter were penned by the presidium before the congress. See “Erklärung der Delegierten des IX. Schriftstellerkongresses” and “Entwurf: Brief des IX. Schriftstellerkongress an den Generalsekretär der SED, Genossen Erich Honecker,” SV 511, vol. 1, 50-51.

⁵⁶ “Vorschläge für Änderungen des Verbandsstatuts,” 1972, SV 705, 109.

⁵⁷ “Entwurf: Statut des Schriftstellerverbandes der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” SV 510, vol. 1, 53

The aftermath of the 1983 congress revealed its relative success in the eyes of the Party elite. In a report written for the Culture Department of the Central Committee in June 1983, the congress was described as an “effective societal event of high political emanation and an outstanding high point in the life of the Writers Union of the GDR.” The congress was said to have had three focal points, chief among which was the undisputed assessment of “the present international situation, the uncompromising condemnation of the imperialistic policy of building up arms, and the readiness for active support of the peace policy of the GDR with word and deed.” Moreover, another key theme was the recognition of the SV’s “anti-fascist and humanistic traditions” and the related responsibilities for the political and literary functioning of writers in the struggle of our times.” Kant’s keynote address at the congress, the report added, further underscored the “contribution of the GDR writer in the struggle for peace.” In the discussion, too, the report noted, the main theme had been “in what ways the writers could still contribute more actively and more effectively for the strengthening of socialist society and the safeguarding of peace.”⁵⁸ In the end, SED officials praised the ninth congress as an “effective societal event of high political emanation and an outstanding high point in the life of the Writers Union of the GDR.”⁵⁹ The first wave of instrumentalization had been completed, and evidently the Central Committee wanted the Writers Union to dare more outspokenness when it came to the official peace movement.

⁵⁸ “Information über den IX. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR vom 31. Mai bis 2. Juni 1983,” SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707, 1-7.

⁵⁹ Abteilung Kultur, “Information über den IX. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR vom 31. Mai bis 2. Juni 1983,” SAPMO BArch DY 30/32707, 1-7.

Those authors considered important and/or trustworthy enough by the SED and Writers Union leaders might earn the privilege of representing East Germany at any of a series of international peace events held during the early 1980s. Doing so not only enhanced the prestige of the individual author, it enabled them to help build solidarity in the wider international community of writers for the anti-NATO peace movement. Yet at the same time, Writers Union members were often placed in uncomfortable situations at these meetings, especially those in which Western authors offered critical comments about the Soviet bloc. Thus international meetings were a double-edged sword for the SV – on the one hand, they could provide much-coveted publicity for the peace campaign, but on the other, they could not always control the message in the way they could if it occurred on East German soil.

The risks involved were mitigated, however, when delegations were limited to socialist states or sympathizers. Such was the case with the annual meetings of the leadership of writers associations from socialist states. For instance, in October 1980 in Moscow at the first such meeting since the double-track decision, the very first point on the agenda was “[t]he contribution of writers of socialist countries in the struggle for the securing of peace, for détente and disarmament.” On this point, it was unanimously agreed that socialist writers needed to step up their efforts on these fronts, and all parties agreed that writers bore a special responsibility in the peace question and made it a focal point of their meeting.⁶⁰ At the next such conference, held in Mongolia, the delegations discussed “[t]he international work of writers unions of socialist countries and the stake

⁶⁰ Gerhard Henniger, “Bericht über das Leitungstreffen der Schriftstellerverbände sozialistischer Länder in Moskau,” 29 October 1980, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/64.

of writers in the struggle for peace.”⁶¹ The 1983 meeting of the socialist writers unions in Hanoi, Vietnam saw participants issue an appeal to the writers of the world, calling “to combine the efforts of all peace-loving forces in order to avert nuclear war, in order to guarantee peace, security, and détente in the world.”⁶² In 1984, the leaders met in Prague, where they issued a peace resolution beseeching all writers around the globe “to jointly do with us everything for saving peace, which is indispensable for the life of humanity.” They would thus “unite forces with all peace-loving people of the world and demand the elimination of American first-strike missiles in Europe.” The declaration also championed recent peace initiatives by the Soviet Union.⁶³ These meetings would continue throughout the decade, often with similar joint declarations adopted by the socialist writers associations.

The next level up were congresses with authors from across the world bound together by a common sympathy for socialism and desire for peace. Chief among this type of event were the Sofia International Writers Meetings, typically held every other year starting in 1977. Peace had become a new field of competition with the West, and the Sofia meetings became a place to organize and publicize the efforts of socialist writers in this competition. At the Sofia meetings, the Bulgarian writers association hosted a conference on writers and peace (the motto was “Peace – the Hope of the Planet”) to which they invited authors from around the globe, including a regular

⁶¹ Marianne Schmidt, “Bericht über das XVIII. Leitungstreffen der Schriftstellerverbände der sozialistischen Länder vom 26.1. bis 2.2.1982 in Ulan Bator,” 12 February 1982, Kleinmachnow, SV 950, vol. 1, 100-2.

⁶² Vera Engelke, Report on the XIX. Leadership Meeting of Socialist Writers Associations, 30 March 1983, SV 950, vol. 1, 56. See also Press statement on the XIX. Leadership Meeting of Socialist Writers Associations, 11 March 1983, Hanoi, SV 950, vol. 1, 57.

⁶³ “Resolution der Teilnehmer des 20. Treffens der Leitungen der Schriftstellerverbände der sozialistischen Länder,” SV 950, vol. 1, 3.

delegation from the East German Schriftstellerverband.⁶⁴ In 1980, the third Sofia meeting met, the first since the NATO double-track decision, with 150 writers representing 50 nations. Gerhard Henniger reported to the presidium that the meeting, in which he, Beate Morgenstern, Werner Neubert, Eberhard Panitz, Rudi Strahl, Hans Weber, and Paul Wiens had been delegates, had “professed anew the determination of many progressive writers from the entire world [...] to champion peace and disarmament.”⁶⁵ News reports for the meeting emphasized how the attendees had underscored “the responsibility of the individual in the struggle and the preservation and securing of peace in the world.”⁶⁶ Additionally, the leader of communist Bulgaria, Todor Zhikov, had spoken at the congress, reminding the attending writers that they “were incapable of alone taming the belligerent powers,” as were the politicians. Peace could only be achieved “through the united efforts of 100 million people.”⁶⁷

The other Sofia events of the 1980s (held in 1982, 1984, and 1986) featured similar refrains. In inviting participants to the 1982 Sofia Writers Meeting, the president of the Bulgarian writers association, Lyubomir Levchev, stated that “never before the

⁶⁴ The president of the Bulgarian writers association, Lyubomir Levchev, traced the idea for the congress back to nineteenth-century meetings of peace advocates as well as those preceding World War II, the most important impetus was the 1975 Helsinki Accords. According to Levchev, “The great potential of human hope gives us some idea of the profound changes in mankind’s life which could be ushered in by the transition from the hitherto history of wars to a history of peace as a world of creative competition, of intellectual and social harmony.” This renewed hope stimulated the organizing of the first writers meeting in Sofia in 1977. At that time there were only a handful of authors, but by 1986 they could boast over two hundred authors from more than sixty countries. “6th World Writers’ Meeting – Press Bulletin No. 3: Human Civilization Must Have a Future,” n.d., SV 947, vol. 2, 54-55.

⁶⁵ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 9. Oktober 1980,” SV 603, 146-47.

⁶⁶ “Internationales Schriftstellertreffen in Sofia beendet,” 1 October 1980, SV 947, vol. 1, 120.

⁶⁷ Paul Wiens, “Plenartagung der Friedenrates der DDR,” 10 October 1980, SAPMO-BArch DY30/IVB2/9.06/93.

voice of the writer's conscience has not been so much required as now when we are faced with the problem not simply of peace and war, but with the problem of destruction of mankind, of the ruin of the human civilization."⁶⁸ The group issued a final appeal at the meeting, urging that "We want to give warning that the world is threatened with nuclear annihilation, and the destruction of human civilization" as well as "A regressive return to the cold war threatens the expectations which were so hopeful in the promise of détente, the signing of the Helsinki accords, and the peaceful yearnings of nations."⁶⁹ At the 1984 Sofia meeting the writers received a direct greeting from Konstantin Chernenko, the leader of the Soviet Union since February, who underscored his commitment to peace by referencing the upcoming fortieth anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, a victory which made them more determined than ever "to defend peace which has been won in the blood-shedding battle in which millions of human lives were lost and at the price of countless privations and sufferings." The writers had an important place in these endeavors: "the writers, the voice of all men of culture can contribute to a large extent to mankind's understanding that peace is the only hope of the planet and we have to fight for it and fight together at that," he closed.⁷⁰ The final Sofia meeting occurred in October 1986, attended by Rudi Strahl, Horst Beseler, Walter Nowojski, and Gisela Kraft from the GDR. These authors were instructed beforehand to make contributions declaring their full support for the disarmament proposals of the USSR (which Gorbachev was pushing in Reykjavik). They were also to counter all attempts "to see the

⁶⁸ Official invitation report, Fourth Sofia International Writers Meeting, n.d., SV 947, vol. 1, 7.

⁶⁹ "Appeal of Ours," n.d., SV 947, vol. 1, 38-40.

⁷⁰ "Peace – the Hope of the Planet: Fifth International Writers' Meeting Press Release," 2 October 1984, SV 947, vol. 2, 270-71.

causes for armament and tensions in an ‘equal guilt of the superpowers’ or ‘in the aggressive character of man.’”⁷¹

The Writers Union of the GDR also hosted several international peace events over the course of the 1980s, usually involving socialist authors or socialist sympathizers. Shortly before their ninth congress in May 1983, for example, prominent members of the union participated in an event to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi book burnings across Germany.⁷² Fifty thousand people gathered at Bebelplatz for the event, entitled “To Peace the Word and Deed.” Participating in the event were members and candidates of the Politburo, including Kurt Hager, Konrad Naumann, and Egon Krenz, along with Cultural Minister Hans-Joachim Hoffmann. The main part of the program consisted of GDR and foreign authors (mainly from socialist countries) reading anti-fascist and peace-oriented literature, including Hedda Zinner, Hermann Kant, Stephan Hermlin, Eva Lippold, Frank Weymann, and Heinz Kamnitzer (president of the GDR’s PEN Center).⁷³ Kamnitzer gave the opening remarks, arguing that from the flames of Bebelplatz emerged the horrors of Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Rotterdam, and Coventry

⁷¹ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “VI. Internationales Schriftstellertreffen in Sofia ‘Der Frieden – die Hoffnung des Planeten,’” 14 October 1986, Berlin, SV 947, vol. 2, 9-10.

⁷² As early as May 1980 the presidium had debated doing something to mark the anniversary, eventually receiving permission to place a plaque in the square about the book burning. In September 1980 the Berlin city council approved a Writers Union proposal to place a plaque in Bebelplatz about the book burning. A year before the anniversary, the presidium voted to host a large book bazaar for the anniversary of the burnings as well. Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 21 Mai 1980,” SV 603, 74; Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 9. September 1980,” SV 603, 129; Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 21 Mai 1982,” SV 605, 77.

⁷³ Zinner, Lippold, and Kamnitzer had all been active communists during World War II.

and as a result peace was the “first imperative.”⁷⁴ The assembled guests also adopted a declaration of purpose, proclaiming “We – writers and journalists from European states and the host country German Democratic Republic – remember today with many thousands of readers [...that] here in the same location by the imperialist Germany under Hitler, books and publications were burned, which were written for peace, humanism, scientific, artistic, and societal progress.” Therefore, “End the arms race and away with the NATO missile decision.”⁷⁵ The writers of the world, led by East Germans, had stated declared their commitment to peace, born from their abhorrence of Nazism. In the process, they implied that the Americans, the chief purveyors of aggression in the present day, were cut from the same cloth as Hitler’s henchmen.

The union sponsored several more international events over the course of the 1980s. On the night of 1 June 1983, the evening of the second day of the Ninth Writers Congress, the SV staged an event entitled “Writers for Peace” where foreign guests were invited to read selections of their work so as to unite against “imperialist policies of war and NATO-arms build-up and advocate for the safeguarding of peace,” an event at which 25 writers participated, almost all of whom came from socialist states.⁷⁶ In April 1985 the SV organized an international colloquium on the theme “Literature in the Struggle against Fascism and War” to mark the fortieth anniversary of the defeat of Nazi

⁷⁴ “50 Jahre nach der faschistischen Bücherverbrennung: Unser Wort und unsere Tat Waffen im Friedenskampf – Lesung mit Autoren aus sechs Ländern auf dem Berliner Bebelplatz, Kurt Hager, Konrad Naumann, Egon Krenz wurden herzlich begrüßt,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 May 1983, 1-2. See also “Information über den Stand der Vorbereitung der Veranstaltungen anlässlich der 50. Wiederkehr des Tages der faschistischen Bücherverbrennung,” n.d., SAPMO-BArch DY30/9667.

⁷⁵ “Willenserklärung der Teilnehmer an der Veranstaltung am 10. Mai 1983 auf dem Bebelplatz in Berlin anlässlich des 50. Jahrestages der faschistischen Bücherverbrennung,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 May 1983, 1.

⁷⁶ “Schriftsteller für den Frieden: Manifestation im Maxim Gorki Theater,” *IX. Schriftstellerkongreß*, 218.

Germany. When the Writers Union presidium evaluated this meeting, it was concluded that the colloquium connected “impressive historical developments and results with current tasks in the struggle against imperialism and war.”⁷⁷

As early as autumn 1985 the Writers Union, responding to an SED instruction to propose something connected with Berlin’s 750th anniversary in 1987, suggested an event where international authors would discuss the role of literature in ensuring peace. Originally intended as an international conference with writers from across Europe, the proposed theme of the conference would be “Writers in the Struggle for Peace and Disarmament.” The goal of the meeting, according to Henniger, was “to demonstrate the responsibility of writing artists for the preservation of peace.” Henceforth, “Berlin would be established as a city of peace, of international understanding.”⁷⁸ A further iteration of these plans came in June 1986, when it was asserted that the goal of the event would be “to place this commonality in the foreground and elaborate on this goal on the basis of the Soviet disarmament proposals as a real historical perspective.”⁷⁹ This would be a propaganda event in many ways, aimed especially at demonstrating broad international support for the Soviet Union’s peace proposals. In a March 1987 report from the SV to local Berlin SED officials, the union leaders indicated the event was to take place on a symbolic date – May 8, the day World War II ended in Europe. The place was also significant: Bebelplatz. Hermann Kant would open the event and over the next two hours

⁷⁷ Presidium Meeting, 15 May 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 90; Steering Committee Meeting, 12 December 1984, SV 510, vol. 2, 113.

⁷⁸ Gerhard Henniger to Kurt Löffler, Komitee der DDR zum 750jaerhigen Bestehen von Berlin, 7 December 1985, Berlin, SV 428, 25. See also Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Betr.: Bericht über die Arbeit der Bezirksverbände für die Zeit vom 26.3. bis 24.4.1987,” SV 749, 60.

⁷⁹ “Konzeption des internationalen Schriftstellergesprächs anlässlich ‘750 Jahre Berlin,’” n.d., SV 512, vol. 1, 66-67.

thirty international authors would read selections of their work, with translations of those works being read by East German authors afterwards.⁸⁰ The basic idea for the event was thus that “[i]n this place the progressive literature should have been burned and annihilated” but now the progressive authors of the world would assemble at the same place and “raise their voices for peace and humanity in our times.”⁸¹

The event, eventually titled “Berlin – a Place for Peace” was held in May 1987. Kant opened by reminding the audience of the symbolic time and date of the event. “It is a historical reason,” he declared, “for which we stand, historical in horror and magnitude.” They stood where books had been burned by the Nazis, where a “terrible war” had occurred, where the “roar of bombs” had been heard, but also where “the battle at whose end liberation came” had been fought. Here in this place where reason and humanity should have been extinguished, “a gathering of reasonable people” had assembled “and in more than twenty languages the word of peace is perceptible.”⁸² After the event, Kant would later reflect in an interview with the editor of *Neue deutsche Literatur* that “above all the meeting was influenced by the Gorbachev disarmament initiatives, and it took place on the soil of a state that understands itself not only as a peaceful state but also is contributing powerfully to that peace.”⁸³ Through this and related events, the Writers Union was able to promote the prestige of East German

⁸⁰ Dr. Joachim Hannemann, Report on May 1987 Peace Event, 27 March 1987, SV 428, 17.

⁸¹ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 13. April 1987,” SV 512, vol. 2, 102.

⁸² “International Schriftstellerlesung ‘Berlin – ein Ort für Frieden,’” 8 May 1987, SV 428, 86.

⁸³ Hermann Kant, “Berlin – ein Ort für den Frieden,” *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 36, no. 8 (1987): 5. In the presidium’s internal evaluation of the event, Kant further described it as “positive.” Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 30. Juni 1987,” SV 512, vol. 2, 84.

literature by building a community of writers around the common cause of peace. Doing so also enhanced the importance of the union in East Germany, all in a largely supportive environment surrounded by other authors of similar ideological outlooks.

Yet not all events were so predictable or easy to control. One of the more important tasks of the Schriftstellerverband in the early 1980s was to seek out sympathetic West German authors and encourage their public opposition to the planned NATO missile deployments. To this end, the leaders of the East German Writers Union hoped to find a partner in the West German *Verband deutscher Schriftsteller* or Union of German Writers. Founded as an interest group for West German authors in 1969 (at the initiative of prominent leftist writers such as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll), in the 1980s the VS attempted to play a public role in influencing the debate on the euromissiles in West Germany. As many prominent authors such as Grass, Böll, and Bernt Engelmann (chair of the VS between 1977 and 1984), were already inclined to decry the threat of nuclear war, the East German Writers Union's task became making sure that critique was directed at NATO and not the Soviet Union, a task in which the East German association found only partial success.⁸⁴

The first collaborative steps occurred in early 1981 when Kant and Henniger traveled to West Germany to consult with Bernt Engelmann in Munich, especially on the possibility for an "appeal for peace and disarmament against the new American 'armament' plans."⁸⁵ In early August 1981 the leaders of the two unions spoke again

⁸⁴ For peace initiatives by the VS and Günter Grass in particular, see Herf, *War by Other Means*, 130-131, 145-147, 155-156, 175-177. For a more detailed history of the interactions between the Writers Union and the Association of German Writers, see Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch*, especially 87-160.

⁸⁵ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, "Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom, 9. Februar 1981," SV 604, 108.

about a “peace appeal of European writers.”⁸⁶ A month later, Kant was invited to attend the VS national delegates conference, held in Hannover. Upon returning, the SV president could happily report to his presidium that “[i]n the foreground of the conference and a public event stood the efforts of progressive writers against nuclear armament and preparations for war.”⁸⁷

These efforts bore fruit in 1981 when Kant and Engelmann initiated an “Appeal of the Writers of Europe” addressing the role of literature in the peace process. “Humanity,” it began, “should now be accustomed to the criminal notions that a circumscribed nuclear war could be waged.” They, in contrast, sharply disagreed, because “[w]ith atomic weapons [...] it would annihilate the entire world.” Therefore, “[a]bove all borders of states and societal systems, above all differences of opinion we address to responsible persons the urgent appeal to refrain from the new arms race and immediately enter once again into negotiations with each other on further disarmament.” Speaking beyond the politicians, the appeal’s creators “call on the world public not to resign but rather to stand up for peace with increased energy.” By acting jointly, they could prevent the unthinkable, ensuring that “Europe does not become an atomic battlefield of a new and then final world war.” Consequently, the appeal closed, “Nothing is as important as the preservation of peace!”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 8. September 1981,” SV 604, 50.

⁸⁷ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 21 Oktober 1980,” SV 604, 40.

⁸⁸ “Appell der Schriftsteller Europas,” Ingrid Krüger, ed., *Mut zur Angst: Schriftsteller für den Frieden* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1982), 20.

From success immediately sprang controversy, when in December 1981 Stephan Hermlin initiated a conference entitled the “Berlin Meeting for the Promotion of Peace,” held in East Berlin.⁸⁹ Dozens of authors from East and West Germany, along with a handful from other European countries, attended the meeting, not all of whom made comments which went over well with the Writers Union leaders. At the meeting, Günter de Bruyn praised the peace movement in the West, referring to it as “an encouraging sign that the millions, that is, they who would be the ones to suffer in the next war are not about to be unopposed to it.” In contrast, the SED “greeted the antiwar struggle of Christians, pacifists, and conscientious objectors on the other side of the borders, but the antiwar struggle of Christians, pacifists, and conscientious objectors within its own borders is impeded.” Indeed, while East Germans might praise the Western peace movement, their sincerity would remain “questionable [...] so long as the impression arises that what is acclaimed over there is unwanted over here.”⁹⁰ Franz Fühmann’s comments likewise caused a stir, asserting the need to transcend national interests dividing the peace movement. If peace was the “greatest good,” nothing could be excluded in seeking it, nor could any efforts be subordinated or used as an “instrument

⁸⁹ Max Walter Schulz, one of the attendees, later described the meeting as “an ‘intellectual peace maneuver’ of writers of communist worldviews and of the right.” “Information,” He also later distanced himself from de Bruyn’s comments and expressed his lack of desire to discuss the meeting further since the peace issue was larger than one Berlin meeting. 23 April 1982, Halle, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Zentralstelle, Berlin (hereafter BStU), Halle Abt. XX 3088, 2; Abteilung XX, “Information,” 28 April 1982, Halle, BStU Halle Abt. XX 3077, 1. For the full transcript of the Berlin meeting, see *Berliner Begegnung zur Friedensförderung: Protokolle des Schriftstellertreffens am 13./14. Dezember 1981, Der vollständige Text alle Beiträge aus Ost und West* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1981).

⁹⁰ Günter de Bruyn, “Moral wird zur Überlebensstrategie: Beitrag zur ‘Berliner Begegnung zur Friedensförderung.’” in Krüger, *Mut zur Angst*, 120-23. See also Herf, *War by Other Means*, 147.

for another goal than those which it represents itself.”⁹¹ Strongly implied in his statement was a critique of instrumentalizing the peace movement by the East German government.

Many East Berlin authors were less than thrilled about the meeting, according to a report for the capital’s base SED organization. They expressed agreement with the general goal of the meeting: bringing together literary intellectuals to aid in the peace struggle. But they had less sympathy for the “invitation politics” of the meeting, whereby the organizers invited those authors “with whom disputes were conducted years ago and whose dishonest intentions are known.” This feeling of uselessness, in part apparently fed by professional jealousy as well as a sense that those authors selected to attend were not deserving of such an honor, thus threatened to break apart the shaky unity that had been forged in the post-Biermann years.⁹² Klaus Höpcke likewise told the union that he viewed the event as an “important contribution for the development of wide alliance relationships in the peace struggle,” but chafed at the behavior of certain authors “who have separated themselves from the association years ago.” Peter Abraham, too, agreed with the thrust of the meeting but criticized it for giving people like Stefan Heym, “a platform for their erroneous perceptions.”⁹³ In a separate report, Party-loyalist Dieter Noll informed Ursula Ragwitz of his disapproval for comments made by de Bruyn and Fühmann. When asked if he wanted to speak at the upcoming ninth congress, he hesitated, worried that these two authors would repeat their remarks from the Berlin

⁹¹ Franz Fühmann, “Weltinnenpolitik von unten: Thesen zur ‘Berliner Begegnung zur Friedensförderung,’” in Krüger, *Mut zur Angst*, 149-52.

⁹² Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 5 January 1982, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 5266.

⁹³ Siegfried Wein, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 29 January 1982, Berlin LAB C Rep. 902 5266.

Meeting, remarks Noll considered outrageous in that they “wanted to lump together the Soviet missiles with those of NATO.”⁹⁴

Nevertheless, the Writers Union’s leaders evaluated the Berlin meeting as useful and charted a course to involve ever greater numbers of “loyal” writers in the official peace movement. For instance, in January Henniger and Kant wrote to Kurt Hager, suggesting that in the wake of the December session they invite Engelmann to discuss further steps for the peace appeal to European writers. Particularly important was that they develop new initiatives, which should “involve as many members of the association as possible and simultaneously create a very good basis for talks and proposals vis-à-vis potential alliance-partners in Western European countries.”⁹⁵ The Berlin meeting, though not without controversy, had nonetheless provided the SV with an opportunity to build ties with the like-minded Engelmann while also providing an impetus for greater involvement of less-prominent members in the peace campaign.

The collaboration between the two unions, stemming from the good working relationship between Kant and Engelmann, continued over the next several years. Kant, for instance, invited Engelmann in January 1982 to continue work on the peace appeal for European writers.⁹⁶ In February 1982, Kant accepted an invitation by Engelmann to a meeting in May in the Hague which was to plan an international peace event of writers, tentatively scheduled for that June.⁹⁷ In August 1983 Kant and Engelmann issued another

⁹⁴ Dieter Noll, “Zur Diskussion Parteiaktiv 7.4.1983,” 7 April 1983, SAPMO-BArch DY30/32707, 3.

⁹⁵ Gerhard Henniger and Hermann Kant to Kurt Hager, 8 January 1982, Berlin, SV 526, vol. 3, 74-75.

⁹⁶ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 19 Januar 1982,” SV 605, 104.

⁹⁷ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 24 Februar 1982,” SV 605, 99.

joint appeal from the West German town of Rottach. Though their 1981 petition had been successful, the threat of nuclear war had since increased, especially because of the “unaltered intention of the USA to begin in the fall with a new missile generation, and indeed nowhere else than in the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany.” Thus on that day, the 44th anniversary of the Germans being driven out of Poland by the Red Army, “we, the chairs of the writers associations of both German states,” appealed to all citizens to do all in their power to prevent a war from occurring, as “it threatens the annihilation of our continent.” All who lived there were urged to join them.⁹⁸

This excellent working relationship came to an end when Bernt Engelmann was replaced by author and historian Hans Peter Bleuel as chair of the Verband deutscher Schriftsteller in 1984, in part due to the former’s relationship with the East German union.⁹⁹ As a result, the VS’s relationship with the East German Writers Union deteriorated. In January 1986, for instance, Kant complained that the VS had not followed through on peace initiatives they had recently discussed. Moreover, many of the VS leaders had referred to their relationship with the East German union as an “ice age” of sorts. Finally, Kant viewed the selection of West Berlin as the next site of the VS national congress (set for March) was detrimental to future relations with the Writers Union, and “does not permit participation of representatives of our association.”¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, that March the presidium of the SV extended an invitation to their West

⁹⁸ Hermann Kant and Bernt Engelmann, Appeal, 4 August 1983, Rottach, SV 548, vol. 1, 82.

⁹⁹ At least this was the read from the East German Schriftstellerverband. The presidium assessed that these attacks stemmed primarily from the fact that Engelmann had broken one of the West German SPD’s “mortal sins,” in working with communists, even if the cause were as noble as peace. “Präsidium am 8.9.1982,” SV 605, 47-48.

¹⁰⁰ Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 22. Januar 1986,” SV 512, vol. 1, 137.

German colleagues to discuss new peace initiatives and opportunities for further cooperation.¹⁰¹ They remained cautious, however, believing that Engelmann had been somewhat unique among West German authors. Bleuel, in contrast, was “another kind of person in relation to politics and literature.”¹⁰² The period of relatively strong cooperation with the VS was nearing an end, but the Writers Union had succeeded in enlisting some West Germans in the official peace policies of the GDR in the process.

Complicating Peace: The Path to the Tenth Writers Congress

Despite heavy top-down pressure on GDR authors to conform to the official rhetorical model for peace, during the 1980s some authors insisted on muddying the water. Though stifled at first, these writers were ultimately successful because of two-interrelated developments. First was growing environmental consciousness within the GDR, especially about the deleterious effects of the SED’s economic policies on the natural environment in that country. Many writers began reframing the peace movement so as to break the narrow focus on NATO missiles, expanding it to include “wars” against the environment. Doing so redirected the critical potency of these members away from the West and towards their own country, helping to trigger wider critiques of other aspects of the dictatorship. The second development was the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to the leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985. Gorbachev had a profound and inadvertently destabilizing effect on the subsequent history of European communism, but

¹⁰¹ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 19 März 1986,” SV 512, vol. 1, 109.

¹⁰² Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 15. Oktober 1986,” SV 512, vol. 1, 35.

when in 1987 he introduced the radical policies for perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (political openness), the Soviet premier was hailed by many living behind the Iron Curtain as a long-awaited champion of much-needed reforms within socialism. The hope that he inspired in many East German writers, coupled with the tepid response that his policies met among SED leaders, in turn helped radicalize political discourse within the Writers Union, not least of which about the peace issue. Because the Writers Union played such a crucial role in engaging its members in the peace campaign, the Schriftstellerverband likewise unintentionally provided its members opportunities to challenge both the union's leaders and the policies of the SED.

Environmental consciousness had been growing in the GDR since the 1970s as evidence mounted of the tolls of East German economic policies in the form of staggering levels of pollution and adverse affects on health. Despite the SED's decision in 1982 to ban the publication of data relating to environmental degradation, East Germans could witness firsthand the destruction of the environment in a way that they couldn't experience an atomic bomb going off. A nuclear attack was difficult to conceptualize; a local strip mine, a friend or relative afflicted with a terrible disease, a polluted creek, however, are instantly comprehensible. The formation of the Umwelt-Bibliothek (environmental library) in 1986 as an illegal clearing house for environmental data only confirmed the worst, and the Chernobyl nuclear accident that same year raised concerns about the environment to a fever pitch across Eastern Europe.¹⁰³

Environmental protection was a theme raised early on by some SV members in literature. Helmut Schulz's novel *Das Erbe* (The Earth, 1981), Wolf Spillner's

¹⁰³ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 225-34.

Wasseramsel (Dipper, 1984), and Lia Piskawetz's *Der stille Grund* (The Quiet Ground, 1985) are preoccupied with environmental destruction in the GDR. Especially noteworthy assessments of the environment are found in Monika Maron and Christa Wolf. Maron's first novel, *Flugasche* (Flight of Ashes, 1981), follows the journalist Josepha Nadler to an industrial city simply called B., a city so saturated by pollution that she derides it as the "filthiest town in Europe."¹⁰⁴ Wolf's *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* (Accident: A Day's News, 1987) links peace, feminism, and environmentalism in her story of one person's reaction to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Blaming the "men of science" from both world systems for making nuclear war and environmental destruction frighteningly possible, the narrator communicates a loss of hope when she exclaims, "That goal in the distant future toward which all lines had run till now had been blasted away, was smoldering, along with the fissionable material in a nuclear reactor."¹⁰⁵ In the 1980s, the environment thus became a major theme in GDR literature.¹⁰⁶

Already in 1981, years before Gorbachev became the Soviet Union's leader, many writers were grasping the connections between the SED's peace proclamations and environmentalism. At an Erfurt district branch meeting in Weimar in November 1981, for example, the members discussed a work by Czech-born poet, author, and central steering committee member Hanns Cibulka¹⁰⁷ entitled "Swantow," recently published in

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Thomas C. Fox, *Border Crossings: An Introduction to East German Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 283.

¹⁰⁵ Christa Wolf. *Accident: A Day's News*, trans. by Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 4.

¹⁰⁶ For an overview of environmental literature in the GDR, see Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 2000), 314-17.

¹⁰⁷ Cibulka, because of his environmental critiques, was a source of concern for the Ministry of State Security. For example, in 1986, a Stasi report on intellectual activities in the Erfurt district argued that he

excerpts in NDL. The little book leveled hefty accusations at the GDR's responsibility for environmental destruction, bringing into question the myth of the Soviet bloc's unending progress through industrialization and atomic energy. Taking the form of a fictitious diary belonging to Andreas Flemming, *Swantow* recounts several months spent along the Baltic Sea where Flemming registers the impact of nuclear power and pollution on the local environment, such as mutated fish caught by local fishermen.¹⁰⁸

The Writers Union's official stance on the work, presented by Wolfgang Held, a novelist and children's book author from Weimar, was that it represented a "deep penetration of societal events, also in view of the construction of nuclear power plants." Other writers at the meeting expressed greater misgivings that Cibulka's book was pessimistic and had not mentioned efforts by the East German government to protect the environment. Still others countered that environmental protection was hardly ever discussed in the GDR press, that in general there was a "deficit of information" about ecological problems, and that an open discussion was in fact critical for the "stability of our society as well as societal opinion." Several authors also asserted the role of writers in socialist society was to speak truth, for, as one attendee put it, "the majority would be manipulated if the words of the poet [*Dichterwort*] were no longer valid." The discussion soon became a debate on the role of nuclear energy in East German policy. A lieutenant

and a few of his colleagues represented "bourgeois, aesthetic and accordingly socially critical literary outlooks" and as a result "can as far as possible be brought under control and channeled in their activities within the district association [of the Writers Union] through differentiated measures." Stark, "Bericht zur Lageentwicklung im operativen Sicherungsbereich Kunst und Kultur," 6 November 1986, Erfurt, BStU Erfurt BDL 1377, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Hanns Cibulka, "Swankow: Die Aufzeichnungen des Andreas Flemming," in *Umwelt-Lesebuch: Green Issues in Contemporary German Writing*, ed. Axel Goodbody, (Manchester University Press, 1997), 141-42; Erhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 1949-1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998), 347-48; J.H. Reid, *Writing Without Taboos: The New East German Literature* (New York: Oswald Wolff, 1990), 205-6.

colonel from the border patrol expressed that the nuclear question was for him primarily a question of peace, and that “only a secure peace guarantees the possibility of environmental protection.” A member of the district SED leadership reminded the attendees that while Cibulka was correct in advocating environmental protection, they should not lose sight of the more pressing issues at hand, namely that “safeguarding peace [...] is more important than any other problem,” including environmentalism. A representative of the SV’s central presidium agreed, arguing that while humanity “must be friend and protector of nature,” there was reason to fear that ecological problems would receive more focus than the more important issue of peace, and that works like Cibulka’s could be used for anti-Soviet propaganda.¹⁰⁹ In the early 1980s, the connections between peace and environmentalism were apparent, but the leaders of the Writers Union as well as the SED did their best to impose a hierarchy on the issues whereby peace, as defined by the SED, trumped all else.

A similar complication arose in January 1985, when the base SED organization within the Berlin SV branch conversed about environmental concerns. The monthly report of the organization related that there had been more and more conversations within the organization about “societal conception Party and government have for solving problems in nature and environment which result from scientific-technological progress.” The catalyst for these discussions, so the report indicated, were recent “smog alerts” in West Berlin and some states within West Germany.¹¹⁰ While this was a plausible justification for discussing environmental policies, it is also possible that at least some

¹⁰⁹ “Asker,” “Bericht,” 1 December 1981, BStU XX ZMA S 86, 149-154.

¹¹⁰ “Monatsbericht über das Parteileben der Grundorganisation Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin für den Monat Januar 1985, LAB C Rep. 904-097 33.

Berlin Party members used the pretext of West German pollution to obliquely critique the failures of not doing more in the GDR to solve ecological problems.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the USSR's Communist Party. In attempting to save the Communist system, reinvigorating it after years of stagnation under Brezhnev, Gorbachev in 1987 unveiled his plan for radical economic restructuring, perestroika (essentially allowing for greater decentralization of economic decision-making), and the concomitant political openness, glasnost, which would allow him to implement that radical restructuring both through a more accurate reporting of economic data and problems and as a means of creating a public opinion counterbalance to conservative foes within the Communist Party reluctant to embrace such drastic measures. Glasnost or "new thinking" in particular had an electric effect on the Soviet populace. Free to discuss formerly taboo subjects such as Stalinist crimes the population shook off its previously state-imposed silence on such issues.¹¹¹ While glasnost would ultimately and unintentionally contribute to the eroding of the Soviet government's legitimacy, for the time being Gorbachev's ideas seemed to be just what disillusioned socialists had hoped for: genuine socialism with a human face, and in the center of world Communist system. Many East German socialists came to support Gorbachev's reforms but Honecker unequivocally refused a massive overhaul of the GDR system.¹¹²

Spurred on by Gorbachev's policies, writers in the second half of the 1980s even more clearly took an interest in environmentalism. Yet when authors did try to raise

¹¹¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58-86.

¹¹² Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 155.

serious environmental concerns they were often met with distortions or dismissals of their fears. In a base Party organization in the Berlin district association in March 1987, Reimar Gilsenbach and another colleague voiced alarm at the “evaluation or non-evaluation and non-information about many after-effects of Chernobyl,” the Ukrainian nuclear disaster which had occurred in April 1986. In response, the speaker for the day, a certain Prof. Hörz, “formulated optimism as the undertone of an answer.” Children’s book author Benno Pludra, asked in another meeting about smog in the GDR. Two of the local Party leaders advised him that if he disliked smog, he should simply avoid the state border. The report on these various meetings reminded the authors that they should take environmental protection seriously, but much of East Germany’s pollution, especially air pollution, came from West Germany and West Berlin, where they caught a strong northwest wind. It was the Western media who distorted the truth about East Germany’s environmental record, which actually was better than in the Federal Republic, or so the statistics the reporter trotted out would have authors believe.¹¹³

These rebuttals did not deter union members from using the association as a forum for discussing environmental issues, however. The Berlin branch, by far the largest district organization, hosted a large number of events connected with peace. In March 1987, for instance, peace was discussed at a regular monthly meeting of the district association. Questions raised there included “the inseparable connection between the preservation of world peace and the protection of the environment” and “the including of a problem-oriented general public in environmental protection activities.” Moreover, in the subsequent discussion, several authors expressed that “the destruction of

¹¹³ “Rechenschaftsbericht zur Wahlberichtsversammlung der APO III am 18. März 1987,” LAB C Rep. 904-097 34.

the environment as well as its protection are global problems” and “that in both societal systems different objective conditions exist for the solution of the related problems.”

Yet, “in our society, however, the planning of environmental protection must be integrated more strongly into the planning in all economic areas.”¹¹⁴ In a country where government denials of terrible environmental conditions was routine and candid discussion of such problems taboo, the writers at the Berlin district meeting had offered a balanced yet critical assessment of the GDR’s environmental policies. Problems existed in both East and West, but in particular, the SED must take environmental impact into account in planning its economic activities (implying none-too-subtly that they had not yet done so). Moreover, the government should be open, honest, and inclusive toward the East German people regarding its environmental practices.

In the early summer of 1987, candidates of the Berlin branch met with Dr. Günter Tschacher, member of the Academy for Social Sciences in the Central Committee, about recent developments in the USSR. Especially addressed were the economic reforms undertaken by Gorbachev, although even more questions were reserved for its complementary policy of glasnost: “questions of democracy and the ‘new openness’ as stimulation for the activity of workers and the work of the social sciences.” Also at the meeting was Dr. Ivor Nagy of Karl Marx University in Leipzig, who discussed with the candidates the “current problems of peace policy,” the Reykjavik summit, and East Germany’s peace policies. In the conversation, the authors asked about reducing nuclear weapons, the “mutual trust between states of various social orders,” and “cooperation

¹¹⁴ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Bericht über die Arbeit der Bezirksverbände in der Zeit vom 27.2. bis 25.3.1987,” SV 749, 78.

with natural scientists and their specific contribution in peace policy.”¹¹⁵ Here the candidates were explicitly linking Gorbachev’s domestic policies with both peace and environmental protection. Environmentalism had become a regular topic at many Writers Union functions and while not considered as important by the association’s leaders, many individual members were growing self-confident in their assertions of the intimate connections between the two.

These trends came to a head in the Tenth Writers Congress, held in late November 1987, by far the most radical event ever conducted under the aegis of the Writers Union in GDR history. The preparations did little to presage the tumultuous scenes that would transpire at the meeting, however. By February 1987 the presidium had approved a “Conception for the Preparation and Execution of the Tenth Writers Congress of the GDR,” which was approved. According to the conceptual plan, the congress’ goal was for participants to ascertain what authors could and should “give for the further formation of the developed socialist society and in the struggle for peace and disarmament.” The focal points for the congress were first, supporting new initiatives of the SED for the peace and disarmament issues, as well as the “constructive dialogue of reason, initiated by us.” Only then was it a goal of the congress to explore how to best achieve “socialist-realist literature which is marked by partisanship, connectedness to the people, and high socialist idea content.” A final goal would be the issue of forming “socialist patriotism” and “proletarian internationalism.” With these things in mind, it would be a special task of the congress “to generalize the experiences in the peace

¹¹⁵ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Betr.: Arbeit der Bezirksverbände in der Zeit vom 27.5.-24.6.1987,” n.d., SV 749, 29.

movement and to show that only through the further strengthening of real socialism can peace and humanity be secured.” The congress should further aim to oppose “attempts of ideological diversion,” especially “attempts of intellectual justification of the SDI program and with attempts to misuse the cultural accord between the GDR and FRG in terms of the thesis of the ‘unity of German culture and literature.’”¹¹⁶ After 15 years, the Abgrenzung efforts were still going strong, now deployed for the peace movement in East Germany. Indeed, the themes expressed in this conceptual plan would have worked for any of the previous congresses since 1973.

Preparatory efforts continued into the months immediately preceding the congress. Those giving the lead reports for each work group were brought into the presidium meeting in September 1987, two-and-a-half months before the congress where they were instructed to present their ideas for their presentations. Also in September, the presidium approved the nomination list for the new Vorstand, following a series of meetings between secretariat members and representatives of district organizations. This also gave the secretariat an additional opportunity to help plan the district election meetings.¹¹⁷ Planning proceeded apace, and Henniger was happy to report a month later that recent delegate election meetings in each district branch had demonstrated that

¹¹⁶ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Vorlage für das Politbüro des ZK der SED, Betreff: Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” 16 February 1987, Berlin, SV 526, vol. 3, 58-60; “Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” 12 February 1987, Berlin, SV 512, vol. 2, 129-33. The draft was approved by the Politburo 17 March 1987. Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Vorlage für das Politbüro des ZK der SED, Betreff: Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” 12 March 1987, SV 525, vol. 2, 80-81. Henniger echoed these same sentiments at a consultation with the chairs of the Writers Union district branches that April. H. Schmolinski, “Betr.: Beratung mit den Vorsitzenden der Bezirksverbände und den Bezirksbetreuern am 1.4.1987,” SV 749, 158. See also Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 12. Februar 1987,” SV 512, vol. 2, 120.

¹¹⁷ Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 29. Juli 1987,” SV 512, vol. 2, 68.

highest of all virtues in East Germany: “They were an expression of political stability, of literary productivity, of associational activities.” As for personnel changes, all of the proposed candidates for the new Vorstand had agreed to serve by October, save Erik Neutsch, Birgitte Struzyk, and Helga Königsdorf, though the reasons were not listed. New presidium members would include John Erpenbeck, Waltraut Lewin, and Maria Seidemann.¹¹⁸ The new composition of the organization’s leadership also addressed the uproar that had emerged four years prior, when not a single woman had been proposed for the presidium. After the tenth congress, three of the nineteen presidium slots would be filled by women (16%), though this was still far below their proportion in the organization and all of the vice presidents remained men.

Things were proceeding smoothly, from a leadership standpoint, but the election meeting for the Berlin district in late 1987 offered foreboding signs. For instance, the first point listed in a report on the meeting for what was discussed was “[t]he declaration of our position on problems of global character,” including “the preservation of humanity before nuclear destruction, the use of scientific-technical progress in the interest of people, and the preserving and regeneration of the natural environment.” Additionally, the group also discussed the “continuous development of associational democracy as essential prerequisite for worthwhile associational work, for the cooperation of colleagues, and for the effectiveness of the association as a societal organization.”¹¹⁹

These were not necessarily critical remarks aimed at the GDR, but they indicated an

¹¹⁸ Volker Braun was also later added as a presidium member. Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 14. Oktober 1987,” SV 512, vol. 2, 25-26.

¹¹⁹ “Betr.; Bericht über die Arbeit der Bezirksverbände im September und Oktober 1987,” SV 749, 23.

increasing concern with the environment as well as a call for further democratization within their organization, all topics which would be broached at the congress.

From the outset, the Tenth Writers Congress differed in key ways from its predecessors. One crucial difference that separated the 10th Congress from all others this was the presence of a new group of guests: the Western media. The SED had decided to allow the West German press to observe the plenary sessions and to talk with delegates about their views.¹²⁰ It is unclear why the SED leadership allowed them, but one can plausibly speculate that on the one hand they wanted to showcase their writers at a time of growing turmoil in the Communist world, and on the other they perhaps needed to grant some concessions toward freer speech given their staunch refusal to adopt glasnost on a large scale. In any event whatever they had hoped to gain by allowing Western press agents to observe the Congress, by the end of the first day the SED and Writers Union leadership alike were regretting their decision.

The tenth congress was supposed to have opened much the same as its predecessors: a brief opening ceremony and a largely ceremonial vote on the themes to be discussed over the next few days, followed by the reading of a welcome from SED-General-Secretary Erich Honecker and a speech from SV-President Hermann Kant. Stephan Hermlin, by this time 72-years-old, opened the congress by recalling the First Writers Congress, held forty years earlier.¹²¹ He remembered the many literary

¹²⁰ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Vorlage für das Sekretariat des Zentralkomitees, Betreff: Teilnahme der in der DDR akkreditierten internationalen Presse am X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR vom 24.-26. November 1987 in der Kongresshalle am Alexanderplatz in Berlin," 9 November 1987, SV 525, vol. 2, 96-97.

¹²¹ See Chapter Two.

luminaries in attendance, but gave special mention to those who had remained in Germany during the Nazi period and had opposed the Hitler regime, often with strong punishments. While workers were in the streets clearing the rubble of Berlin, they at that congress had had their own “intellectual ruins to clear,” striving “to lay the foundations of a new democratic culture.” He proceeded on a somewhat foreboding note, addressing the sensitive subject of their literary colleagues who had gone to the West in recent years including “several essential writers.” This was “certainly connected with bureaucratic or dogmatic obstacles, but I don’t believe,” he added, “that the responsibility is only found on one side.” He elaborated that they all needed patience; Rosa Luxemburg, after all, had declared patience to be the “virtue of the revolutionary.” He refrained from critiquing these writers too severely, stating only that “not every writer is a revolutionary but I believe that the word has validity for everyone.”¹²² Hermlin’s opening was not the strong condemnation of former colleagues that many would have liked, but rather a thoughtful consideration of the differences that had driven the sides apart. The congress was open, but the onset had been a little shaky.

Gerhard Henniger spoke next, asking the assembled delegates if they had any comments on the already printed schedule and list of discussion topics. This act was a pure formality, but on this day Horst Matthies, a 48-year-old, moderately successful playwright from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, asked to be heard. He voiced his concern that key problems of literature and environmental protection would not be discussed in the plenum, arguing that the current meeting “take[s] too little into consideration that there are burning problem areas for us all whose meaning for our work simply forbids

¹²² Stephan Hermlin, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Plenum* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1988), 7-9.

that they might come up only in one of the workgroups.” He then shrewdly used the circumstance of Honecker’s attendance to strengthen his case, declaring,

I am not really mistaken if I accept that these comrades have not therefore come to us because they want to ensure our approval and thanks for the clever policies for the welfare of the people, but rather because they require the input of all the creative forces of our people, including writers, in the search for the most clever solutions for our policies, and to some extent would like to inform themselves firsthand about our worries, our problems, and our foremost thoughts.

The SED leadership had come to listen, after all, not command. The “burning questions,” so important that they could not be relegated to the privacy of the workgroups, included, “the political culture of our information and propaganda mechanisms” which cut against “the growing need of the citizens of our country for more open, franker, and also more differentiated information.” Matthies asked the delegates to consider a new list of topics to be discussed, including “the role of literature in the process of development of new thinking” (a reference to glasnost), “literature and the development of intellectual-cultural needs as an indispensable component of strong socialism,” and finally “literature, environment, inner world, stocktaking, and outlook” (challenging the SED’s claim that East Germany had no environmental problems).¹²³ Although his proposals were rejected in an open vote by the delegates,¹²⁴ by openly acknowledging these forbidden issues the playwright seemed to have had a dramatic effect on more than a few participants.

Honecker’s address to the congress, read by Walter Flegel, acted as a calming agent for the meeting, reminding the delegates of literature’s important role in the development of socialism. The statement heaped praise on the assembled writers, exclaiming, “Our Party always assumes that the socialist society needs, demands, and

¹²³ Horst Matthies, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 12-14

¹²⁴ Gerhard Henniger, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 15.

promotes the combative, emboldening, arousing, exciting, and stimulating, as well as the joy-and-relaxation-giving word of literature.” “Socialist literature,” he proclaimed, “and literature in socialism are indispensable for the cultivation of thoughts and feelings in people, for their orientation toward the ideals and value of socialism, above all for encouraging all energy for the great ideal of humanity to initiate a world-transforming peace, which carries friendly cooperation of peoples.” He then praised the writers for their contributions, acknowledging “the writers of the GDR have done a lot for this.” He then fell back upon heavy ideological rhetoric, noting that the Writers Union and its members were “reliable partners and active comrades-in-arms of the working class and its Marxist-Leninist party.” These efforts were especially appreciated, as “[n]ever before were the necessity and possibility for the cooperation of all peace-loving and progressive forces so great as at present,” and East German literature could really “affirm its voice in the choir of the progressive literature of the world.”¹²⁵ Honecker’s greeting followed a well-established pattern, one which praised the contributions of writers to socialism and urged them to take seriously their societal duties, especially in promoting peace.

Hermann Kant, while expressing his usual solidarity with the government, did little to stop the discussion of controversial topics with his keynote address. He began as usual, reminding the delegates of their commitment to peace. The writer “speaks about it,” Kant explained, “because it ranks among the duties in his profession to be on the lookout and to declare abysses and shallows audibly.” He lauded the historical consciousness of the organization’s members, who had seen war and peace all across

¹²⁵ Erich Honecker, Grussadresse des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,” *X. Schriftstellerkongress*, 18-19; Erich Honecker, “Gruß und Dank den Schriftstellern der DDR: Aktive Kampfgefährten der Arbeiterklasse und ihrer Partei – Zentralkomitee der SED an den heute beginnenden X. Kongreß,” *Neues Deutschland*, 24 November 1987, 1.

Europe, something the younger union members had no experiences with. The Writers Union's values and goals were the same as the wider society, he observed, meaning "worker and peasant power, internationalism, humanist solidarity, brotherly connectedness with the land of Lenin, yearning for peace, and also the preparedness to struggle for peace, those are basic content of the life of one as well as the other." He also addressed "attempts to alter the character of the association." To that, he recounted something he had said at the Berlin district branch's election meeting earlier in the fall. At the time, he had stated, "We have struggled with each other here about literary death and literary life, we have experienced our own accidents and those of other people. We have bled internally." They were not free of conflict, but looking backwards, one had to admit, "What we decided back then, the parting with an array of colleagues, their expulsion, which must not apply for eternity." This surprising statement regarding the 1979 expulsions was then repeated: "In my view, we have conceived no decisions which must separate us in perpetuity. I believe it belongs in this time that we say: The association has an open door, it has a door that is as wide as its statute." The door was open for these former colleagues, but not unconditionally – implied in Kant's rhetoric was that these authors must agree to accept the union's statute once more. He was clear, however, that he had not changed his disposition, but only wished to ensure that "associational policy is not guided by the noble principles of Sicilian vendetta."¹²⁶

Later on, Kant introduced an anti-fascist element to his speech. To broach this subject, he conveyed his great pride in the diverse list of talented writers in their ranks, especially "the enormous number of writing women" of both older and younger

¹²⁶ Hermann Kant, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 21-55.

generations. This was even more striking in contrast to the Nazi period, when the “attributed appeal of the Fatherland Writing Union [presumably referring to the Reichsschriftumskammer] [...] finds ‘fighting the excesses of the women’s movement’ as the most concrete of six program points.” He indicated it should even be a source of pride that these “Fatherland people” would file the literature written by East German women under the heading “excesses.” Kant was differentiating his writers association from that of the Nazis, and female authors and their literature were in this instance the official barometer for measuring these differences. The Schriftstellerverband, he implied, was proud of the women in its ranks, even if in reality they were underrepresented in the association’s leadership. Finally, he turned to the Soviet Union, specifically glasnost and perestroika. The problem they were encountering in the GDR was that, they agreed that “it is not good to live with gaps in consciousness, ignorance, lack of knowledge.” Yet the writers for *Neues Deutschland* were sometimes guilty of “terrible simplification” of complex topics like “Stalin, tragedy, and remorse.” However, “Gorbachev, all of him, we already take from the central organ and add him to our work which, like his, aims at socialism.” Here Kant seemed to suggest that they were in fact using Gorbachevian reforms in the GDR, despite claims to the contrary. Indeed, Honecker understood these ideas well, he contended, as the former had claimed not long ago that “without the people of culture, without writers and other artists it would not yet stand as it stands today on disarmament matters.”¹²⁷ Throughout his speech, the president exuded confidence and optimism for the efforts of writers within socialism and the peace movement. Yet he also

¹²⁷ Emphasis in original. Ibid., 21-55; Hermann Kant, “Zum Schriftstellerberuf gehört, stets auf Posten zu sein in den Kämpfen der Zeit: Referat von Hermann Kant, Präsident des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR,” *Neues Deutschland*, 25 November 1987, 3-5.

did not shy away from openly discussing sensitive topics – including glasnost and perestroika as well as the 1979 expulsions.

In the next few days, several others followed the lead of these speakers, pushing with varying degrees of aggressiveness into taboo subjects. Helga Königsdorf, a mathematics professor turned short story writer, articulated familiar themes in her contribution to the first day's plenary discussion, but cast them in a critical light. They were living in an "excessive time, so excessive in its challenge that one can really stop breathing," she informed them. The world was growing smaller, resources were less easily attainable, and damage to the environment was "more and more global and irreversible." Faced with these circumstances, "original thinking [...] was never so vital for the species." When it came to literature, "in our country very much is expected, too much one could say," yet she believed the "most distinguished task of literature today is to encourage." To her, this meant exercising a new "Cassandra function," not in the sense of foreseeing things no one believed but in offering truthful descriptions of problems so as to encourage readers to overcome "disaster." Moreover, though it was comforting to identify with one's readers, "in such times as ours there inevitable comes a moment in which one must say 'I.'" "Sure," she elaborated, "it is easier to feel as a representative of an institution, an organization, or even a country, than once to say 'I.'" Of course it was "tempting to abandon one's own identity and plunge it into a collective," but "[w]hat is a collective identity without an identity which brings in 'I!'" Saying "I" would confront and possibly alter collective identity; this was an "uncomfortable process," she admitted but there must be "uncomfortable literature among the people, in

uncomfortable times as well. Then all the more.”¹²⁸ Channeling Christa Wolf, Königsdorf had captured the difficulty of saying “I” in socialist literature, but literature, at its best, was uncomfortable precisely because it was supposed to stir consciousness and encourage others to action.

Christoph Hein, frequent persona non grata to the SED and rising literary talent at the age of 43, made one of the biggest splashes at the congress by taking direct aim at one of the biggest taboos of all – official censorship of literature. On the second day of the congress, Hein gave the keynote speech for his workgroup (“literature and effect”), setting the tone immediately by suggesting that while on the first day of the congress they had largely patted themselves on the back for their accomplishments, now “we want today to turn more to the problems of the effect of our work.” He issued praise for East Germany’s publishers: “all these publishers are people who understand their business, work sacrificially with brains and heart for their books, struggle, and advocate.” Not one of them, he continued, needed a supervisor, so why did they have a state overseer? Simply put: “The approval procedure, the state oversight, more shortly and not any less clearly said: the censor of the publishing houses and books, of the publishers and authors is antiquated, useless, paradoxical, misanthropic, unpatriotic [*volksfeindlich*], unlawful, and punishable.” Censorship had made sense after World War II to facilitate de-Nazification, but it had now outlived its purpose and was thus antiquated. It was useless in that it could not prevent literature from being written; it could only temporarily delay its propagation. It was paradoxical in that censorship, rather than silencing a work, turned it into a political issue. Censorship could be deemed misanthropic in that “[t]he censor is

¹²⁸ Helga Königsdorf, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 95-97.

[...] hostile to the author, to the reader, to the publisher, and to the censor itself.”

Furthermore, such censorship was misanthropic because it had been a primary reason for causing many “irreplaceable” authors to leave East Germany over the past few years.

The censor also insulted the “oft-named and vaunted wisdom of the people” to judge a book on their own, making it unpatriotic. Censorship was unlawful in that it violated the constitution, and it was punishable because “it damages in high degree the reputation of the GDR.” Hein further warned that the value of literature is often not discovered until later generations, but the censorship system preemptively decided which books not to publish, when in fact they might be banning a future classic.¹²⁹ Though not delivered in front of the media, news of Hein’s statements spread like wildfire through the congress, prompting strong reactions both in favor of and against his controversial opinions.

Günter de Bruyn’s contribution on the second day’s plenary session, held after the workgroup sessions, proved memorable for a number of reasons. Not only did he echo Hein’s criticisms voiced earlier that day in the workgroup sessions, but he also read out words penned by the most prominent East German writers not in attendance at the congress. In his own contribution, he offered a simple observation: “enlightenment through literature is highly praised by us, but practiced less.” What were the reasons for this state of things? An obvious reason, de Bruyn asserted, was “what I otherwise call censorship, but here, in order to avoid a fruitless dispute about terms, the approval procedure.” This practice was especially problematic as it “unfortunately also limits the informative effect of GDR literature.” Therefore any society practicing this kind of approval procedure “damages its reputation, fuels doubts about its ability to reform, and

¹²⁹ Christoph Hein, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Arbeitsgruppen* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1988), 224-47.

despoils the driving force of criticism.” De Bruyn next leveled an attack on the established method of resolving disputes within their union, decrying the practice of “literary criticism behind closed doors” as having a tendency to “poison the atmosphere.” He was careful to note that this result had been unintentional, but all the same it had damaged the “dignity and the self-confidence of authors (especially the younger ones).” The upshot of all this was that “the reader is infantilized, the writer incapacitated, and many are prompted to leave the country, which often not only hurts them and literature and the readers, but also the country.” Now they should turn their attention to censorship, and the first step would be to make the entire process public. The association, after all, he reminded them, was obligated to attend to the “artistic concerns of its members, and to these absolutely belongs the question of approval for publication.”¹³⁰ De Bruyn’s contribution was similar to Hein’s, but he went a step further not only in articulating it in front of the Western press, but daring others to do the same. In the process, he challenged a time-honored norm within the Writers Union whereby disputes were settled privately. Such a procedure, the author underscored, was now counterproductive and must be amended. He also raised fundamental questions about the function of the union, insisting it should be beholden to member concerns about publishing.

Having read his own statement, de Bruyn conveyed his wish to “do a friendly turn” and read a contribution for the meeting prepared by Christa Wolf. Wolf and two other writers – Peter Hacks and Erik Neutsch – had either declined to attend the congress altogether or had withdrawn at the last minute possible. The reasons given were superficial – Wolf, for instance, was in Switzerland promoting a book and could have

¹³⁰ Günter de Bruyn, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 128-30.

easily come to the meeting had she so chosen. Kant allowed de Bruyn to read Wolf's letter, although he insisted on the right to respond afterwards. In the letter, the author expressed that recently "there are approaches emanating from socialist countries for a new thinking, consequently the first concrete steps of disarmament, the first grounds for hope in a viable future." Many colleagues had seen the value in these processes and subsequently sought to effect changes "which would make the relationship of authors in the GDR to each other and literary life more disputatious, literature more effective." In order for the Writers Union to be more productive, there were events in its past that needed to be addressed, namely, "the aftermath of the signatures against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976 and the unjustified expulsion of an array of colleagues from the Writers Union in 1979." Disillusioned by this series of events, she had curtailed her activities in the SV. In the meantime, many authors had left the GDR, including younger writers whom the union was unable to effectively integrate into its ranks. Now Wolf missed "friends, conversation, and work partners" and their "part in our intellectual life." Those authors in question had "received hardly any evidence of understanding or readiness for dialogue by the organization, which also is supposed to represent them." She acknowledged that many positive changes had occurred in the GDR in the past several years, especially in cultural policy. The union therefore should do a better job supporting these changes, above all by initiating a dialogue with those who had left the GDR. Instead of "ostracism," the key word would now need to be "integration."¹³¹ Wolf, privy to none of the scandalous comments made at the congress, nonetheless made known publicly her intense disagreement with the union over the Biermann affair,

¹³¹ Günter de Bruyn, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 131-33; Christa Wolf to the Writers Union, 22 November 1987, SV 525, vol. 2, 69-70.

appealing, like de Bruyn, to the SV's obligations to its members as justification for a new course of action to atone for these past sins.

Later that afternoon, the Sorbian writer Jurij Koch spoke out against the devastation of his homeland from man-made pollution, drawing on the increasingly popular trope linking peace to environmentalism. Koch began by extolling the soon-to-be signed arms reduction treaty between the USSR and United States but this optimistic mood was soon punctuated by sober reflection on environmental degradation in his home district. There, local SED officials promoted projects like strip mines, yet their enthusiasm for such endeavors ignored "the nationwide, if not continental, possibly even planetary damage" to the environment. By the year 2000, Koch warned, "almost a quarter of the total territory of my district will be devastated." To close his statement, Koch returned to the topic of peace, stating that "man has the power to prevent the apocalyptic atomic demise" but "it will require the same if not a greater human endeavor in order to meet the threatening ecological demise."¹³² In Koch's view, it was but a short leap from the world's destruction through NATO nuclear missiles to the world's destruction through pollution and strip-mining, problems which also implicated the GDR.

Rounding out the more outspoken participants was author and environmental activist Reimar Gilsenbach. Gilsenbach had submitted a request to speak, but his contribution was not heard because of "time limitations." Nonetheless, his contribution was published a year later in the congress protocol book. In his prepared statement, Gilsenbach like others at the meeting, intended to discuss the issue of ecological degradation and the responsibilities of writers therein. He designated environmental

¹³² Jurij Koch, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 153-57.

degradation in communist states as a major issue for writers to explore, especially in view of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion of April 1986. In his view, ecological damage had now reached a crisis point, and he rattled off a list of chemicals and pollutants springing from East German industries. Authors must take responsibility for correcting these problems, he implored, serving as “healers at the sickbed of nature.” Doing so would be in keeping with Gorbachev’s calls for open discussion of environmental problems after the Chernobyl disaster, and would lead to the creation of a genuine “ecological culture.” Environmental protection went to the heart of being a socialist, Gilsenbach contended: “Do we act towards nature,” he rhetorically asked, “as communists or as thieves, as anti-social elements, as criminals?”¹³³ In the case of Chernobyl, nuclear power, rather than serving peace, had endangered it through environmental destruction, and it was their obligation as socialists and writers to combat such problems.

To accomplish these goals, one needed open, honest information about the extent of pollution and damage to the environment in the GDR. To illustrate the absurdity of the present situation, Gilsenbach recounted that on his property there was a well, where local authorities had recently completed a test on the quality of the water. When he expressed an interest in finding out the results of said inquiry, he was told the information was classified. Astonished, Gilsenbach remarked, “My own well a state secret!” He then reached the main point of his argument, declaring “I have said it again and again and I say it once more now: constricted openness is constricted morality, and, it goes without saying, constricted democracy as well.” It would be impossible for citizens to take responsibility for fixing these problems if they were unaware of the extent of those

¹³³ Reimar Gilsenbach, “Wortmeldung zum X. Schriftstellerkongreß der DDR, 24.-26. November 1987 in Berlin,” November 1987, SV 548, vol. 2, 30-34.

problems. Without such information in the media, literature became that much more important in exploring these conditions truthfully. Therefore he proposed creating within the Writers Union a commission on “literature and environment,” though he cautioned against this body becoming an apologist for the government. To bring his speech home, Gilsenbach turned to the overriding concern of the Schriftstellerverband over the past eight years, asserting, “humanity needs peace with itself and it needs peace with nature.” “Both tasks,” he assured, “are one, they are as connected with each other as the intellectual and natural sides of people.” Destroying one, he underscored, destroyed all humans “and with them the future of the earth as an inhabitable planet.”¹³⁴ Koch and Gilsenbach were of one mind, though the latter pushed even further, demanding the SV create a group with the specific task of honestly and openly exploring environmental problems in East Germany.

Some participants, especially SED officials and members of the Writers Union presidium, offered defensive reactions in the face of this openness. Kant got the first crack at de Bruyn and Wolf’s statements on the congress’ second day. He expressed shock and disbelief at the absences of Wolf, Neutsch, and Hacks, quickly trying to shame them by stating they had left those who attended in a lurch. What de Bruyn should have done, Kant scolded, was to have phoned Wolf on the first day of the congress and informed her that “the bulk of what she – to the presidium, by the way – wrote in her letter already was discussed at this congress with acuteness, intensity, depth, and passion, so that her letter from a distance in hindsight – I don’t say - rushes things a little.” He felt “extreme discomfort,” as for months he had been trying to get Wolf to agree to come to

¹³⁴ Ibid., 220-25.

the congress as a delegate. She had begged off, claiming she was scheduled to be in Switzerland, which Kant was sure to point out was only a short plane-ride away.¹³⁵

Turning to the content of Wolf's letter, Kant addressed the events of the 1970s. It was true, he admitted, that in the ten years after the Biermann incident, they were "not lacking in disagreements between us." They had tried several times to secure clarifications from the affected writers, and with Wolf in particular they had sought on more than one occasion to include her in "our very demanding work." He would have been "delighted," he claimed, "to get so many weighty literary people in the association, or in cooperation, if only possible." He had tried, for "selfish associational reasons" to bring her in, but she had not answered his request to participate in the congress.

Choosing not to attend was one thing, but when the congress began, there was a big difference between those "who participate in the congress and don't eschew the work and troubles, and those who don't want these troubles for this or that reason." For that reason, "it is simply not possible, out of democratic considerations, on the one hand to communicate with such a congress that one isn't interest in or for various reasons is prevented, on the other, however, to appear as its discussion participant at the last moment." "For me that is," Kant chided, "openly confessed, a backdoor, and this author is for me a little too big for a backdoor." Angered by this violation of procedure, he eventually proposed an intermediary measure – to meet with Wolf and others from the district SV branch in Berlin where she could express her grievances to a member meeting there. "I am," Kant added, "all for this discussion." He then added that he wanted to include "much more controversial views," because "only through them do we move

¹³⁵ Hermann Kant, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 135-36; Hermann Kant, "Rede," *Neue Deutsche Literatur* 3 (1988): 90-94.

forward” before concluding that “associational democracy” [*Verbandsdemokratie*], like all democracies required participation.¹³⁶ While Kant professed his willingness to entertain opposing viewpoints he made it clear that violations of procedure would not be acceptable. He seemed keenly aware that the space he felt he had won for the union was being taken advantage of and might be lost unless the non-conformists were reined in.

To Klaus Höpcke, the publishing tsar, fell the task of addressing attacks on censorship during his contribution late in the second day’s plenum. The disclosure of how publishers made decisions about printing a manuscript, he lectured, “is [already] one of the first of their work rules,” something Elmar Faber, director of Aufbau Verlag, had already described in detail earlier that morning. Moreover, he considered it to be a “false characterization of this literature” to say that its “informative function is restricted by us.” In reality, he claimed, they (publishers, the Ministry of Culture, and the Writers Union) “work on reducing encumbrances, which stem from vague or uncertain positions vis-à-vis a manuscript,” a policy he vowed would remain unaltered. He did admit that in some cases the procedure for second or third publication runs of books was dictated by the same process that accompanied first runs, something he professed would be corrected “as quickly as we can.” Yet he also emphasized that the HVVB was for writers the “most tangible” and “most accessible” arm of the state, and most of what it did regarding publication plans was conducted in “democratic, volunteer committees as advisory bodies and literature consortia, and not least in discussing these and other questions with the organs of the Writers Union, before the presidium of its steering committee.” The deputy minister of culture then switched gears to the issue of the actual process of publishing

¹³⁶ Kant, “Rede,” *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 90-4; Kant, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 136-8.

books, lamenting that despite efforts of publishing houses to update their production facilities, they had been unable to keep up with public demand for books. He proceeded to spend several minutes discussing issues of paper quality and other technical details of book publication.¹³⁷ In other words, Höpcke, after only briefly addressing de Bruyn's accusations, seemed to dismiss concerns about publication policies as dependent more on technical problems than censorship.

The other government official to speak at the congress was the Minister for Environment and Water Management (a post that had existed since 1972), Hans Reichelt, who on the last day of the congress delivered a speech which repeated the familiar, tired denials of environmental problems in the GDR. He set out to lecture them on the “relationship between man and nature, between material production, development, and protection of natural resources.” He lauded authors who had shown interest in these topics in the past, calling attention to numerous meetings they had held with authors and publishers, all of which was “exciting and stimulating.” What they had created in the GDR was an economy “which connects growing prosperity with an ever more thoughtful use of nature and its resources, with an ever more careful utilization of raw materials, likewise of regenerative natural riches, of soil, of water, of the animal and plant world.” He then offered a laundry list of examples and statistics of increasing energy efficiency and ecological friendliness in East Germany – indeed, “One could report on such initiatives for a long time.” He also tried to justify what pollution there was in the GDR by making recourse to geography; whereas in places like Scandinavia, states possessed vast water resources, in the GDR their primary natural resource was brown coal. As a

¹³⁷ Klaus Höpcke, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 165-70.

result, “great attention is directed towards using these resources ever more thoughtfully and economizing with energy ever more rationally.” There was still much to do in the long-run, but they were making progress.¹³⁸ These unconvincing numbers and examples, however, were met with increasing agitation from the delegates to the point where Reichelt could not properly finish his speech. The frustrated minister collected his notes and stepped down from the podium in a huff, prompting Dieter Schlenstedt, a well-known literary critic, to muse, “In the middle or late period of the GDR I don’t remember having ever seen anything similar.”¹³⁹

The final declaration of the congress participants masked the discord that had publicly emerged at the meeting. In times of tension, it was best to return to common points of agreement, and to this end the very first sentence of the declaration read, “We avow ourselves to peace.” Humanity had “dared the first step of the utopia of disarmament to its realization,” and had moved away from imminent “self-destruction.” In this “encouraging moment,” the delegates affirmed their commitment to the GDR, “whose highest state policy imperative is peace.” They furthermore avowed themselves to socialism and the Soviet Union, “who pioneered the way to the social liberation of people and the construction of a just society.” Finally, they declared the role of literature to giving voice to the world, “as it is and as it can be.” They therefore also affirmed the

¹³⁸ Hans Reichelt, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 184-91.

¹³⁹ Dieter Schlenstedt, “Der aus dem Ruder laufende Schriftstellerkongress von 1987,” Robert Atkins and Martin Kane, eds. *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR 1976-1990* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 18-19. Reichelt had actually met with the Writers Union in 1985 on “current problems of environmental protection in the GDR,” although that meeting had apparently gone smoothly enough to have him back at the congress. Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 9.-10. April 1985, SV 511, vol. 3, 110. The Writer Union had also played host to a representative from the government ministry for environmental protection in early 1986. Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung vom 15. Mai 1985,” SV 511, vol. 3, 138.

“proletarian-revolutionary and antifascist tradition of our association and the indispensable claim of each humanistic culture to serve man and his environment, his prosperity and his possibilities to discover, to understand him in his fortune and in his misfortune, and to depict in his creative pursuit.”¹⁴⁰

Thus the tenth Writers Congress adopted a tone quite different than its predecessors, with several delegates directly pointing a finger at many of East Germany’s officially unacknowledged social, political, and environmental problems. Writers had seized the opportunity offered them in the congresses to speak publicly – this time to West German media as well as their own countrymen – about socialism and their concerns with its implementation. The SED and government officials in attendance were at a loss to defend themselves, clearly caught off guard by the statements of some delegates. Even Kant himself, normally a pillar of support for the regime, added cautious support for Gorbachev’s policies and the idea of admitting the expelled writers back into the organization. At least for those three days in November, the balance of power had temporarily shifted to the writers who finally had their public platform to express themselves freely.

Negotiating Change and Continuity after the Tenth Writers Congress

The Tenth Writers Congress had been an unprecedented event in East German cultural history, one in which several authors forcefully injected their views into a previously closed debate on their obligation to speak critically about glaring problems both within their union and in the wider society. In the months and years that followed

¹⁴⁰ “Erklärung des X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR,” *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, 249.

the congress, the leaders and members of the organization tried to accommodate the changes wrought by the congress while negotiating three especially pressing and interrelated issues in the aftermath of the tenth congress: the 1979 expulsions, glasnost, and environmentalism. In these altered circumstances, path dependency proved hard to shake, especially for the “old guard” among the SV’s leaders, who acknowledged the need for internal reform but also clung to established organizational practices in key ways. Even many more outspoken members of the organization continued to accept the logic that one of the best way to achieve desired change was through the Writers Union, solidifying its place as a key locus of debate on the policy alterations needed in the cultural realm and beyond, but perhaps circumscribing what authors could achieve.

Before tackling the issues raised by the congress, the SED and Writers Union leadership had to take stock of what had transpired. After the congress, members of the presidium consulted with leading SED figures on the congress, including Kurt Hager, Ursula Ragwitz, and Erich Honecker himself. According to the scant meeting notes, Kant acknowledged that the congress had been a complicated affair, seeming to chalk it up to the “exacerbated [...] ideological struggle.” Hager emphasized that the congress had overall demonstrated agreement with the policies of the SED, although some (he mentioned specifically Hein and de Bruyn), had led attacks on said policies. He also took umbrage with the “accent” of Hermlin’s opening address, particularly as it related to those who had been expelled from the union. Ragwitz noted that some districts had not shown a clear understanding of the actions of Matthies and Koch. Egon Krenz for his part was opposed to rehabilitating those who had left for ideological reasons and

recommended strengthening the “ideological work” of publishers. Another attendee greeted the “effect of the congress,” in that while attacks had been made against the Party at the congress, they had all been refuted, while another noted that the level of expertise on the environment at the congress was low. Honecker pronounced that the congress was a “complete success” and a sign of the “political maturity” of the union. He also saw no need to rehabilitate anyone who had left. He praised Kant’s impromptu response to Christa Wolf, a trait he found lacking in Reichelt, of whom he noted, “he who demands tolerance should not be so intolerant.” As for the censorship issue, he claimed that there had been a censorship system at the time of the Soviet occupation in the 1940s, but now the idea of a censor in the GDR had become a cliché.¹⁴¹ Overall, then, the highest echelon of SED officials were more or less pleased with the congress, especially in how the trusted authors in the presidium and Vorstand had fended off the “attacks” by delegates such as Koch, Hein, and de Bruyn. The specific issues the critical delegates had raised were largely dismissed by Honecker and the other SED leaders, almost not worth being taken seriously.¹⁴²

It was a slightly different story within the new presidium, where despite the scandalous statements issued at the Writers Congress, the group returned to work in January 1988 with a corresponding new sense of purpose, busying itself in congress evaluation. The new blood in the body (Waltraut Lewin, John Erpenbeck, Maria Seidemann, and Volker Braun) injected something of the spirit of the congress into the goals and work plans for the group, and the old guard (still the easy majority of the

¹⁴¹ Handwritten meeting notes, n.d., SV 555, 66-68.

¹⁴² A similar tone was taken in Harald Bühl’s evaluation of the congress for the FDGB. See Harald Bühl, “Auswertung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR,” 25 January 1988, SAPMO-BArch DY34/13437.

presidium) seemed to take seriously the challenges expressed a month and a half earlier. Gerhard Henniger, the staunchest Party member of them all, commented that the congress had been marked by a “new style of openness and concreteness as well as the kind of dealing with criticism [which] must lead to the strengthening of the socialist democracy in associational life.” Rainer Kerndl raised de Bruyn’s challenge about the “procedure for allowing publication,” candidly observing that “the legal prerequisites are created, the procedural method does not always correspond with them.”¹⁴³

But not everyone was so ready to change with the times. Günter Görlich, for instance, remained agitated about the Christa Wolf situation, bemoaning the fact that he was “not in favor of a new discussion round on the 1979 expulsions. The statute has its validity.” Max Walter Schulz suggested instead personal meetings with those expelled, but Henniger sided with the long-time Berlin chairman, citing “the reasons which lead to the expulsion of individual authors” as well as to contemporary statements by Stefan Heym and Günter Kunert which evinced no repentance on their part. Gerhard Holtz-Baumert held forth a compromise, creating a documentation about the expulsions so the presidium members could better inform themselves. On another membership front, Rainer Kerndl and Rudi Strahl briefed the group about a talk with Heiner Müller before the congress in which his re-admittance to the union was discussed.¹⁴⁴

The group also discussed other controversial aspects of the congress. Kant for his part proposed sending a letter to Wolf, informing her that they had read her letter out loud as she had wished and extending a formal invitation to attend a district member meeting

¹⁴³ “Beschlussprotokoll (Entwurf),” 13 January 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, 68-69.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 69-70. See also “Beschlussprotokoll,” 13 January 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, 64-65.

to discuss her letter, a proposal the presidium approved. Kant further informed his colleagues about the evaluation of the congress in the SED Central Committee's secretariat. The district SED secretaries for culture, he reported, had given the congress a "comprehensively positive evaluation." Jurij Brezan spoke to Hein and de Bruyn's critique of the "procedure for approving printing," himself contending that the process should be revised with the interest of the union members in mind. John Erpenbeck, in his first presidium meeting, greeted the congress as a "preliminary exercise in glasnost." Fellow first-timer Volker Braun perhaps unsurprisingly was the most enthusiastic presidium member about what had transpired at the congress. The atmosphere at the event he took for a mandate of sorts, and as a first order of business he proposed to reaccept Heiner Müller into the SV "with the least possible effort." He agreed with Schulz's proposal to make contact with other former Schriftstellerverband members. As for the Western media coverage of the congress, Rudi Strahl described it as "moderate"; if anything, it was the East German media that had provided distorted coverage, he claimed. Finally, the presidium agreed to create an active group on "literature and environment" and to suggest to Reichelt that they pursue future meetings with each other.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to the attitude expressed by Honecker and his cronies, the presidium, infused with new members, at least was paying lip service to the concerns raised at the congress. Various members proposed concrete steps to address the 1979 expulsions, censorship, and the environment, and the group as a whole seemed receptive to implementing some of these proposals.

¹⁴⁵ "Beschlussprotokoll (Entwurf)," 70-73.

Evaluation of the congress continued on the central and district levels for the next several weeks and months. For example, the February 1988 central steering committee meeting, the first since the congress, further dealt with the ramifications of that event. Kant began by proposing that each Vorstand meeting begin with an information session, presumably to improve communication within the group, a suggestion John Erpenbeck seconded. The group also voted to re-admit Heiner Müller to the Writers Union. They then voted on Henniger's proposals for the composition and heads of the various commissions and active groups within the steering committee.¹⁴⁶ In the process, the steering committee created, as per Reimar Gilsenbach's dogged plea,¹⁴⁷ an active group on "literature and environment." Importantly, the proposed list did not shy away from including the most critical authors. Although Joachim Nowotny, a union vice president, was selected as the chair of the group, it also included Hanns Cibulka, Reimar Gilsenbach, and Jurij Koch, among others.¹⁴⁸ Thus the central steering committee, too, sensed that changes were afoot within the Writers Union and at least the group as a whole seemed willing to try to embrace some changes for the time being.

¹⁴⁶ "Vorstandssitzung am 18. Februar 1988," SV 510, vol. 3, 76.

¹⁴⁷ Days after the congress ended, Reimar Gilsenbach, smarting from his unread contribution, sent a letter to Kant. He had been asked to speak at the congress by the secretariat, and he had agreed, but obviously that had been "in vain." His contribution, he repeated, called for the creation of a commission on "literature and environment" – the least they could have done was to let him make this proposal at the congress. This was unfortunate, especially since the discussion on the third day of the congress lacked the buoyancy of the first two days. They perhaps should have put him on after Reichelt's speech, since that might well have "once again brought momentum into the debate." Reimar Gilsenbach to Hermann Kant, 1 December 1987, Brodowin, SV 548, vol. 2, 29.

¹⁴⁸ "Vorschläge für die personelle Zusammensetzung der Aktivs und Kommissionen," 13 January 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, 89.

Proposing changes in these three key areas – glasnost, the 1979 expulsions, and environmentalism – was one thing; following through with concrete action was another. All of these issues were raised in March 1988 when Christa Wolf agreed to attend her first general member meeting of the Berlin district branch in nearly a decade. The idea of readmitting the banished colleagues had been gaining ground among several union members since the congress,¹⁴⁹ and as the March meeting began, these thoughts were very much in the air. Of note was the fact that neither Kant nor de Bruyn was able to attend the meeting, in some ways defeating the purpose of the showdown the president had called for several months earlier and prompting fears within the union’s leadership circles that having none of the “old” members of the presidium in attendance would make the union appear in a negative light.¹⁵⁰ In the absence of this old guard, the meeting’s participants appeared for the most part highly sympathetic to Wolf, although SED officials were wary of turning the afternoon into a “Christa Wolf event” and explicitly instructed not to attack her polemically, lest she draw sympathy.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ For example, mere days after the end of the congress, one of its participants, literary studies expert Dr. Annemarie Auer sent a missive to the steering committee on one of the questions raised at the congress. She unequivocally expressed her resolve that she favored such re-enrollment of all those who still lived in the GDR. The expulsions had been “in no way beneficial; they were and remain an error, which brought us cultural losses and disparaged the reputation of our association.” Now was the time to act, to jettison old methods and for the association to add once more this creative potential.” In the past, they had practiced “dogmatic narrowness” in the realm of culture, all of which “retarded the development in a literary sense.” These practices had cost them “significant talent, whose loss we can only regret.” Therefore the dismissed members should be brought back into the fold—doing so would only strengthen their position, “and it would set a forward-looking example if we make use of our democratic rights as an association for an act of atonement. Dr. Phil. Annemarie Auer to the Steering Committee in the Writers Union of the GDR, 28 November 1987, SV 517, vol. 1, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Helmut Kuchler, Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Information für Genossin Ellen Brombacher,” 9 March 1988, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6780.

¹⁵¹ Klaus Wiezorark, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 9 March 1988, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6780.

At the meeting, Lia Pirskawetz, an environmentalist poet, commented that “[t]heoretically it is clear in the association, the problems of the environment have no less significance than the problems of securing peace.” She had been hopeful that environmentalism would have “played the same role as the peace question did in the congress five years ago,” but she had been disappointed in that aspiration, especially because some “brilliant” statements had been offered on the environment, singling out Jurij Koch’s comments. She was furthermore convinced that “[a] first great environmental war has already been conducted in Vietnam and there are devastating conceptions how one can easily paralyze another country entirely without nuclear weapons through impacting the environment.” A final problem was that the national media did not consider the environment a serious question and had even made it into a taboo. What was needed was awareness in the press, and they should help create it.¹⁵²

Next was the highly anticipated statement by Christa Wolf. The presidium, she began, had considered her letter to be a “kind of attack or provocation,” prompting Kant to speak for twice as long as it took to read the text in order to refute it. His polemical attacks on her were surely effective but were “in my opinion, in parts also demagogic.” Her preamble aside, Wolf proceeded to her main concern: the history of the Writers Union between 1976 and 1979, especially the fact that several writers left the country in those years. What they needed, above all, was “a collective contemplation, a far-reaching analysis of the causes of resignation and discouragement which for many preceded the decision to leave the GDR.” Instead of trying to understand this process so as to counteract it, the Writers Union had in fact exacerbated the problem through the

¹⁵² “Protokoll der Diskussion der Mitgliederversammlung der Bezirksorganisatin Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes vom 10. März 1988,” LAB C Rep. 902 6780.

expulsions. She addressed the issue frankly: “In June 1979 the Berlin Writers Union, in an ill-fated meeting, in my and several other colleagues’ opinion, unjustifiably expelled nine colleagues from the association with a large majority.” She had herself naively believed that “with the new district leadership of the Party, a meeting of this type of spirit and style would no longer be conceivable.” As such, she had realized then that further work with such an association was impossible, as “here something decisive had happened, which thus called into question the spirit of a district association.”¹⁵³

Yet she had shown up that day, almost nine years after the fact, to try to ensure that “the outstretched hand, of which Hermann Kant spoke, does not remain an empty gesture.” To this end, she proposed reaching out to Heym with the aim of bringing him and the three other expellees who still lived in East Germany back into the union. Doing so would demonstrate the willingness of the association to rethink earlier positions and “wherever possible and necessary to learn.” But they should not stop there – they should also seek out those former colleagues who had now gone to the West, beginning a dialogue with them. Such a process had already begun via Stephan Hermlin’s “peace meeting” in Berlin in 1981, but no one had continued these measures in the Writers Union. In addition, she implored the union to fight for a change in the process of approving books for publication, as de Bruyn and Hein had voiced at the congress. Finally, she called on the association to orient itself toward younger authors, to take their concerns seriously, and to fairly represent their interests. As an association, they needed to come to terms with the errors of their past in order to progress: “The ideas, proposals, the protesting, the criticism of others which we don’t allow, but rather exclude, suppress,

¹⁵³ Christa Wolf, “Diskussionsbeitrag von Christa Wolf,” 10 March 1988, SV 535, 1-3.

we really repress them likewise in ourselves.”¹⁵⁴ Wolf’s contribution articulated the main points of her letter to the congress, echoing the concerns of her colleagues as well and calling for an open, honest process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within the association vis-à-vis the Biermann years.

The remaining statements made at the meeting were by and large supportive of Wolf. Thomas Reschke, a slavacist and translator who had been recently elected to the Vorstand for the first time, expressed support for Wolf’s statements while hoping that they had reached a point where such topics could be discussed, much like the Soviet Union was finally coming to terms with Stalinism thanks to glasnost. In that spirit, he took aim at two important problems in East German. One was the relative lack of freedom of travel in the GDR. As it stood, there were only three surefire ways to get to the West: first, write a letter to Honecker and then publish it in the West; second, go to a demonstration, get arrested, and then after a few days “wave at the TV camera of the so-called class enemy and wave and proudly show the long-term passport”; third, when you visit a relative in the West, make it known to the media that you’re sick of the GDR, but simultaneously write a letter to the GDR saying you want to remain a citizen so they send you a passport. The other problem he wished to talk about was perestroika. The problem is, so he was told by someone working in television, that especially on TV the term “perestroika” had become taboo in the GDR. Turning to the “brilliant speech of Christoph Hein” at the congress, he quoted a few lines: “But missing or insufficient coverage and the absence of public debate on our public affairs in the press and media damages and destroys the political culture of our country.” Reschke paraphrased, “If

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 3-7.

debate and decision take place behind closed [*verschlossenen*] doors, one cannot count on a receptive [*aufgeschlossenen*] audience for decisions struck in this way.” In such a system, even good decisions would appear suspect to people who had been barred from participating in decision-making. A press which only reported a “desired reality” does nothing but “robs itself of effectiveness, makes agitation and propaganda inauthentic, must have the experience of having a paradoxical effect.”¹⁵⁵ To Reschke, the key issues were travel restrictions and lack of frank, open discussions on key societal problems, both of which followed the spirit of the tenth congress.

Harald Hauser, a septuagenarian author of numerous anti-fascist novels and plays, offered a more measured statement. While not always a supporter of Kant, he did note that at the congress he had allowed de Bruyn to read Wolf’s letter. As for glasnost and perestroika, whether he used those terms or not “of course we need clarification, openness, and truth.” These were ideas that had not originated with Gorbachev, but also drew from Lenin, Engels, and Marx himself. He had some critical remarks about the congress, mainly that they “must have wasted an entire day with statements,” prepared in advance, which consequently did not engage what anyone else had said. In the future, the congress should be given a theme but “then it must be discussed, for this theme, and be discussed controversially and comradely, but with all decisiveness and frankness and without acknowledging every whiff of taboos, of taboos or anything else.” He simply found it wonderful that they came together with “very controversial opinions,” in front of Honecker and Hager, and expressing views that not all East German officials would agree

¹⁵⁵ “Protokoll der Diskussion der Mitgliederversammlung der Bezirksorganisatin Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes vom 10. März 1988,” LAB C Rep. 902 6780.

with.¹⁵⁶ Hauser came across as uncomfortable with the tenor of the meeting but nonetheless supported the idea of open, unscripted debate. Like most speakers at the meeting, he advocated Gorbachev's new policies and wished to see their fuller implementation in the GDR; after all, these really weren't Gorbachev's ideas at all, but those of Karl Marx.

The continuing struggle over the acceptance of "new thinking" or genuine openness in East Germany was vividly demonstrated by an incident in late 1988, when a rebellion of sorts broke out in the Magdeburg district branch after the SED banned the Soviet journal *Sputnik* in East Germany. *Sputnik*, a popular magazine, was banned ostensibly because of its "distorted depictions of the social achievements of the Soviet people," and in any event was not an official organ of the Soviet Communist Party. However, in reality the ban was an attempt to forestall pressure for adopting perestroika and glasnost measures in the GDR.¹⁵⁷ In this atmosphere, the entire steering committee and membership of the BV Magdeburg penned a letter to Hermann Kant. "With disconcertment and concern," the letter began, "we discuss the measures, since their having taken effect, to pull Soviet magazines and films from circulation." They considered this "a form of infantilization [*Entmündigung*], which troubles us deeply." They took the official reasoning for the ban to task, suggesting that if *Sputnik* had been prohibited because it was not an official organ of the Communist Party, then this criteria

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ The ban was met by a great many letters objecting to the move; over the next six weeks the Party received some eight hundred letters and petitions just from the Leipzig district, half from SED members. Quoted in Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 50-58, 54.

would lead to the hypocritical position of banning a great many Soviet publications “which reflect the present democratization process in the brother country,” while East Germany at the same time did allow the publication of some works from the Federal Republic. Thus the Magdeburg authors declared that they “consider these measures not confidence-building. It considers them correctable.”¹⁵⁸

Magdeburg wasn’t the only corner of the association to register complaints against the *Sputnik* ban. Wolf Spillner, a member of the steering committee since the 1987 congress, sent a similar message to Kant in late November 1988, conveying that he was “concerned, dismayed, and shocked.” Spillner beseeched Kant to respond to the ban on behalf of the writers Union, as he considered it an error to remove the journal, “whose contributions were written and selected by Soviet journalists, by Communists.” Removing it was thus simply degrading. Importantly, Spillner stressed that this would not “be in line with the spirit and essence of our congress!” He therefore requested for them “to consider very seriously which possibilities our association is given to correct this – in my understanding – absurd decision as soon as possible.”¹⁵⁹ Spillner drew on the congress and its relative openness in justifying his call to action, even couching his request in terms of an obligation of the union to do something about the *Sputnik* scandal, to take direct action in a scandal of broader societal significance.

It is unclear if the top leaders of the association responded to any of these pleas for action, although an incident at the October member meeting of the base organization of the SED in the Berlin Writers Union, when several of the discussants expressed alarm

¹⁵⁸ Steering Committee and Members of the District Association Magdeburg of the Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic to Hermann Kant, 1988, SV 548, vol. 2, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Wolf Spillner to Hermann Kant, 20 November 1988, SV 548, vol. 2, 2.

over the Honecker regime's obvious chafing at the reforms championed by Gorbachev. Secretariat member Christian Löser, for instance, took issue with the lack of trust in the Soviet Union that had suddenly burgeoned in the Soviet bloc, especially since they had no other alternatives for solving their many problems. Walter Nowowski chimed in that "[o]ur relationship with the Soviet Union can only be characterized by the greatest agreement with everything which is thought and done there; all other formulations are false." Karla Dyck, another secretariat member, commented that there were unmistakable signs that an array of changes were needed in the GDR, regardless of what top SED leaders had recently claimed. The East German press, she continued, created an image of the "revolutionary events in the SU" which were "too negative." Werner Klingsporn, also of the secretariat, similarly took issue with leaders like Kurt Hager who had recently admitted that changes were needed in the GDR but had not said "where" and "how" to find or fix them, a fact he considered "not productive." The *Sputnik* ban was something he considered "alarming," and he urged a public discussion on the "pros and cons" of that and other recent decisions by the Party. For him, "public discussion belongs to the everyday life of a partisan communication." Hearing all of this, Henniger jumped into the fray. Cautiously, he "basically" agreed with what had been said, but added, "that we may not place *everything* in question, which we have achieved up until now." Every achievement of the GDR was "partially to be examined," but "never to become relaxed in the current international situation." By this he meant that the Western media aimed to blow these "small problems" out of proportion, so that they would ignore the really significant issues.¹⁶⁰ In other words, Henniger was strongly suggesting to his

¹⁶⁰ Grundorganisation, Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Protokoll der Berichtswahlversammlung vom 31. 10. 1988," LAB C Rep. 904-097 34.

colleagues not to look too deeply into problems at home, since, although problems existed, they were nowhere near as pressing as those facing the West, nor were they as important as international relations issues.

This old guard of the union leadership and the leaders of the Party organizations within the Writers Union, though seemingly receptive to reforms, nonetheless continued in the years following the tenth congress to exert control over how criticism of the regime was framed. By late 1988 they had struck upon a more effective countering of the rhetoric used by various Writers Union members to subvert or complicate the SED's ideological agenda. This came in the form of a virtuoso statement of accounts report delivered for the election meeting of the Berlin Writers Union branch by the Party leadership within the organization. In the language of the report, these leaders carefully and cleverly evolved their own rhetorical strategy so as to re-appropriate the issues facing East Germany which had served as easy fodder with which to challenge them at the Tenth Writers Congress. The framing device of the report was an old friend of the Party leadership – the peace agenda, especially all that they had done to effect détente and disarmament. But peace was not the only thing which threatened humanity: “hunger, illness, illiteracy, devastation of the environment, [and] underdevelopment” wreaked havoc on mankind as well, stealing a page from the likes of Koch and Gilsenbach. Climate change was affecting entire sections of the globe, and no one country could solve these problems alone. Luckily these problems had found ample discussion within the Writers Union, both at the recent congress and within their district organization, where in June 1988 they had held a member meeting on the theme “ethics and environment.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Parteileitung, Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Rechenschaftsbericht zur Berichtswahlversammlung am 3. November 1988,” LAB C Rep. 904-097 34, 3-15.

The report had transitioned seamlessly from the nuclear to the environmental threats facing humanity. Importantly, though, the report did not deny environmental problems in the GDR; instead it globalized them, transforming the issue from a problem for which the SED bore primary responsibility to one where the problems were too big for one country to solve – and thus too big for one country to create. The SED had done its part to combat these problems, the report had claimed, in part by providing a forum to discuss ecological issues within the Writers Union.

The sophisticated self-justification continued as the report expounded on the SV's environmental efforts. For instance, the Berlin district branch, after the congress, had created its own regional workgroup on "literature – environment – scientific-technical revolution." Moreover, in East Germany hundreds of millions of marks were spent each year for environmental protection, but these funds were not enough. Therefore it was imperative for them all to realize what was possible and what was not possible in their current circumstances, meaning "[a]n essential increase of our expenditure for ecological security is only then possible if there are such political preconditions that we can reduce our defense expenditure."¹⁶² The report had thus reasserted a hierarchy of threats facing East Germany – the threat to peace would have to be mitigated first before a sufficient reduction of ecological damage could even be considerable. And in reality, because the threat to peace was a seemingly endless existential crisis for the GDR, the SED was building a case to postpone environmentalism perhaps indefinitely.

What good did it do to raise questions without being able to provide answers? Their task as writers was to make these "urgent problems" more visible, to provoke

¹⁶² Ibid., 18-19.

thinking, and to probe with their literature various proposals for overcoming these problems and assisting societal development. Such a colossal task required “understanding [*Mitdenken*] and collaborating [*Mitarbeiten*],” meaning that “in this way we practice new thinking.” Indeed, the tenth congress had been nothing if not an example of this Gorbachevian new thinking, the report asserted. This congress was “an exchange of ideas on the global situation of radical change of our time and for important problems of our societal development.” In other words, the congress had given them an opportunity to articulate a more sophisticated approach to pressing problems. But were these problems only exposed at the congress? Certainly not. “All essential questions,” the report proclaimed, “which were discussed at our congress, were, in the last several years in the Berlin district association under the direction of the Party leadership, determining themes of Party work.” This included not only peace and disarmament, but also “new relationships between man and technology,” “wins and losses which are observed in the further development of socialism, science, and technology in the GDR,” and even discussions of censorship and publication as well as how to make sense of what happened in the association during the Biermann affair.¹⁶³ If union members thought they had been bold in broaching taboo subjects at the congress, the report emphatically informed them that the SED had done so first.

These discussions on urgent problems, raised (anew) at the congress, had born fruit. As for de Bruyn and Hein’s concerns, Klaus Höpcke had announced that effective 1 January 1989, no manuscript would have to be first vetted by the HVVB, effectively abolishing censorship. The congress had also seen complaints about younger authors’

¹⁶³ Ibid., 25-27.

difficulties in getting published, but in the meantime the GDR's publishers had quickly introduced a wide array of new publishing opportunities especially for those beginning their careers. They had also increased benefits for writers as well, including pension, social, and health insurance along with a new fee structure for fiction works.¹⁶⁴ Far from gaining these benefits in spite of the SED, "[t]hese social-political achievements for the authors of the GDR would not have been possible without the comprehensive work of the Berlin Party organization." Coming full circle, the report concluded that "[t]he struggle for peace," in this sense, "is for us also the struggle for the preservation and further development of a way of life, which we – despite numerous teething problems – have learned to love: the way of life in socialism."¹⁶⁵ What were the authors complaining about, the report wondered? The SED was well aware of author's professional and political concerns and the congress had taken concrete steps to rectify them. They should embrace these efforts as evidence of the superior way of life under socialism.

Of all the issues championed at the Tenth Congress, environmentalism had found the most vocal supporters at that event. The new active group on literature and the environment was thus an important tool for addressing those concerns, and the presidium laid out the tasks for the new group in its work plan for 1988 (approved in February of that year). First on the proposed list of activities was a talk with Hans Reichelt, hopefully early that year. They would also take an excursion to Cottbus to observe strip mining taking place there. They were also supposed to meet with the labor organizations for the

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter Three.

¹⁶⁵ "Rechenschaftsbericht zur Berichtswahlversammlung," 27-49.

chemical industry and science and consult with the Kulturbund's Society for Nature and Environment as well.¹⁶⁶ Journeying back into the lion's den was probably not the highest of priorities for Reichelt, and by September, almost a year after the congress, the presidium had to ask Kant, Henniger, and Nowotny – none of whom had been involved in the altercation – to contact the environmental minister once again about the “further design of cooperation.”¹⁶⁷

Despite these drawbacks, the “Aktiv Literatur und Umwelt” met for the first time in May 1988 under the direction of Joachim Nowotny, who in addition was instructed by the presidium to provide regular updates on their work.¹⁶⁸ One of their first activities stemmed from a proposal by Reimar Gilsenbach to initiate talks with the Protestant Academy of Tutzing (in Bavaria) about a joint environmental protection event. Nowotny informed the presidium of Gilsenbach's designs, prompting the latter to contact the academy itself to explain that they would host an event in the GDR in 1990.¹⁶⁹ Here were the vestiges of the post-Engelmann in the West German literary community; although contact with West Germans for trans-border solidarity on environmental issues was permitted, it should remain under the aegis of the SV's leaders.

The active group finally got their opportunity to meet with Reichelt in the summer of 1989. In many ways the culmination of the efforts by those who had spoken out

¹⁶⁶ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Entwurf: Arbeitsplan 1988,” 18 February 1988, SV 510, vol. 3, 92. The new list of commissions and active groups was approved by the Vorstand in their February 1988 meeting. Only one woman was selected as the chairperson of one of these groups, presidium member Rosemarie Schuder who headed the Solidarity Commission. “ADN-Meldung,” 18 February 1988, SV 510, vol. 3, 75.

¹⁶⁷ “Beschlussprotokoll der Präsidiumssitzung am 7. September 1988,” 2.

¹⁶⁸ “Beschlussprotokoll,” 25 May 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, 44.

¹⁶⁹ “Beschlussprotokoll,” 7 September 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, 31.

during the 1980s against environmental degradation, was a meeting of the SV's central steering committee, the active group, a representative from the Ministry of Coal and Energy (Hans-Jürgen Bönicke), and Hans Reichelt, Minister for Environmental Protection and Water Management. Also attending were Dr. Manfred Fiedler (national secretary for the Kulturbund) and Klaus Höpcke. Given the acrimony that had emerged at the last experience with Reichelt at the congress, it is little wonder that Kant helmed the 1989 meeting. According to the meeting summary report, in his opening statement he made sure to emphasize that their meeting that day "joins the handling of important problems, which played an outstanding role at the X. Writers Congress." He also set the tone for the meeting by immediately drawing connections between environmentalism and the peace movement. Other introductory remarks were offered by Jurij Brezan. Brezan laid stress to the "responsibility of literature and of writers vis-à-vis life and the environment." Indeed, to him, concern for nature was very much a part of the wider responsibility of people for humane living."¹⁷⁰ These opening platitudes were nothing new; it was by this point a tried and tested strategy of many presidium members to present the organization as actively seeking to address critical problems while at the same time seeking to frame the debate, emphasizing key points such as the fact that peace and environmentalism were deeply connected with socialism.

With the opening remarks done, the first substantive discussion contribution came from Joachim Nowotny, SV vice president and chair of the active group on "literature and environment." Many of his comments were orthodox enough, touting, for instance,

¹⁷⁰ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Information über die Sitzung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR zum Thema 'Literatur und Umwelt' am 21. Juni 1989," 23 June 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 26-27.

the “promotion of environmental consciousness through literature and the work of the active group ‘literature and environment.’” He next explained how the active group viewed itself and its main goals, especially in terms of “what literature can and must do in order to handle, socially and individually, ecological questions as global problems – of equal value to the securing of peace for the survival of humanity – above all through the mastery of ethical questions of environmentally conscious action.” Yet Nowotny also asserted a degree of autonomy, rejecting the idea that their active group served as an “alibi function in the association,” and instead adopting an active agenda with numerous planned activities while cooperating with the *Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt* to forge dialogue between scientists, artists, and the ministry for environmental protection.¹⁷¹

In the subsequent discussion, several used their time with these leading environmental officials to voice their grave concerns. Matthias Körner, for instance, favored the group with a personal anecdote from his experiences as a local delegate for the Democratic Farmers Party of Germany (one of the GDR’s “bloc parties”) tasked with implementing environmental policy in his area. He had seen numerous violations of the Law on the Conservation and Protection of the Environment, especially when it came to trash and landfills along with “never yet sufficiently implemented democracy, especially with regard to the involvement of elected delegates in the decision-making and timely information for affected citizens.” He also called into question the “effectiveness of state environmental inspection, its chances within the framework of the law and its cooperation with citizens.” To presidium member John Erpenbeck, it was simple:

¹⁷¹ “Information über die Sitzung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR zum Thema ‘Literatur und Umwelt’ am 21. Juni 1989,” 23 June 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 27-28.

Without promotion of dialogue between scientists and artists with economists and Party and state functionaries, without the inclusion of the public in this dialogue and the open debate on differentiated conceptions and opinions, without dealing publicly with all globally relevant questions socialist democracy is not developing as a foundation for the promotion of subconscious action.

Lia Pirskawetz, while stressing the “cohesion between the struggle for peace and environmental protection,” urged them to create working relationships with Western Europe’s green parties. She also was disappointed to not have an environmental magazine in the GDR “and the still-too-one-sided positively dealing with environmental questions in the mass media or about specific claims of writers who want to incorporate environmental problems in their literary work more strongly.” Meanwhile Jurij Koch restated an earlier proposal of his, one which had the endorsement of the active group, to remove three Sorbian villages from protected mining areas (where mining was permissible until 2020) so that the “local, unique ethnographic particularity of the Sorbian nationality secure.” Earlier when he had proposed this course of action to the Vorstand, they had decided to present the request for further consultations to the council of state.¹⁷² In other words, Koch had appealed to the Writers Union to effect changes in environmental policies harming the Sorbian people. Of particular concern to all of these authors was the lack of transparency and honesty in the reporting of environmental data as well as the inclusion of the public in the process.

Yet there were also those seeking to defend the status quo at the meeting. Jürgen Bönicke, a member of the ministry of coal and energy, presented a list of problems and tasks in planning coal mining along with the “democratic and long-term” efforts of their ministry to help citizens or entire villages prepare in the event that mining would begin in

¹⁷² Ibid., 27-30.

the area. In his opinion, a policy such as proposed by Koch would probably have too many complications in trying to achieve the SED's energy policy. Rudi Strahl likewise "emphatically supported all efforts of the socialist states for the decrease in defense expenditure, in order to set free material means for the environmental protection in much stronger measures." Finally, Hans Reichelt declared the meeting to be "important for the mutual becoming acquainted with opinions and problems and for the communication of findings." He underscored that the "socialist environmental policy is broader than just environmental protection, and regaled the group with a litany of "facts" and data to demonstrate the "achieved successes in the past years of socialist environmental policy." He lastly promised more discussions about Koch's proposal.¹⁷³ Reichelt's statements seemed little different from those he had made a year-and-a-half earlier at the congress. He appeared intent mainly on satisfying the need for the writers to be heard, though he seemed unconvinced that environmental problems required his urgent attention. Yet the fact remained: even if the SED officials did not take these concerns seriously, they nonetheless had felt obligated to dispatch their top responsible minister to a consultation meeting with the organization, perhaps a minor victory for the union after all.¹⁷⁴

Conclusions

The years 1976-79 had been hard for the Writers Union and its members; the organization had in those years purged the most outspoken critics and marginalized other

¹⁷³ Ibid., 30-32.

¹⁷⁴ For evaluations of this meeting, see Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Information über die Sitzung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR zum Thema 'Literatur und Umwelt' am 21. Juni 1989," 23 June 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 32-33; Kulturbund, "Vermerk über die Beratung des Vorstandes des Schriftstelerbandes am 21.6.1989 zum Thema 'Literatur und Umwelt,'" SAPMO-BArch DY30/6871, 10-12.

dissenting voices in their midst. With these events behind them, over the course of the 1980s, the SED invited writers back onto the public stage as proponents of the official peace movement directed against the deployment of NATO missiles in West Germany. The numerous statements by authors about the importance of peace advocacy coupled with the local, national, and international peace-themed events sponsored by the Writers Union attest to the degree to which writers were mobilized successfully in the SED's propaganda campaign. Through such actions, peace came to be a defining feature of the corporate identity of East German authors, a characteristic encouraged and even demanded by the regime. To be an author in the GDR meant, among other things, to promote peace and, by extension, critique the West through literature and activism. Yet by affixing a prominent place to peace as a component of a socialist writer's identity, the state, through the Writers Union, invested authors with the authority to speak on what the state itself defined as a vital, even existential concern to East Germany.

Moreover, by expecting the active participation of writers in the service of a state-sponsored peace agenda, the SED and Writers Union leaders created opportunities for writers to reassert their roles as public intellectuals immediately after a three-year period of overt state repression against dissenters. Despite the intentions of the Schriftstellerverband's leadership, writers increasingly used these new discursive openings to challenge remaining restrictions by making reference to related themes. This broader conception of threats to peace extended beyond Western militarism; in this broader conception, peace included protecting human rights, freedom of speech, and especially preventing environmental destruction. Some authors thus used the system's inherent logic against itself; the regime prioritized peace and the issues they raised were

connected to peace, so how could the regime deny them the right to speak? By cracking down on such speech, the regime would be calling attention to its own internal contradictions, thus exposing the bankruptcy of the system and unmasking the entire peace campaign as a sham. Peace was an issue upon which all could agree, but by enabling writers to speak more openly about fundamental concerns, the Writers Union had facilitated authors' participation in official political discourse and, in the process, inadvertently extended the borders of permissible speech under the dictatorship.

These events climaxed with the Tenth Writers Congress in 1987. In many ways the congress, like the Biermann affair, was a watershed moment in the history of the Writers Union. With the Biermann expulsion, the union took years to reach a suitable settlement of the issue, and in many ways it continued to haunt the organization into the 1980s. The same proved true with the 1987 congress. Though an important barrier had been broken and pressure had clearly built up within the organization for genuine political openness and candid discussion of real problems in the GDR, the union's leadership and the SED continued to contest these new challenges, although they had clearly ceded the momentum to disputatious forces within the Schriftstellerverband. With a new presidium filled with less hard-line Party members (including the irrepressible Volker Braun), both leaders and rank-and-file members alike continued to hold the union's feet to the fire on issues raised at the congress, especially environmentalism, the 1979 expulsions, and glasnost.

These endeavors sent the old guard searching for new forms of accommodation, forms which, while conceding these challengers the opportunity to discuss their concerns, nonetheless aimed at keeping them under wraps. They were aided in these efforts by

national and local SED leaders. Whereas writers like Koch, Gilsenbach, and Braun had drawn on the state's official rhetorical model of the peace struggle and reinterpreted it to call attention to other threats to global destruction, the Party leadership within the Writers Union now used the environmentalist model championed by those authors as a way back into the original hegemonic discourse on peace. They were left with a cagier, more complex idea of peace activism and environmentalism than they had previously conceded, but the patterns they were presenting to their members had the virtue of shifting the rhetorical balance back, once more, to the SED. A year-and-a-half after the congress, these old guard leaders felt they had found a workable compromise in the form of a controlled, but critical meeting between environmentalist authors and SED officials, including the irascible Hans Reichelt. The meeting was not a sweeping victory for environmentalists within the Writers Union, but in many ways represented the latest attempt to channel the discontent of authors into acceptable forums.

From another perspective, however, the meeting with environmental officials was in many ways the culmination of a decade's effort by concerned members to utilize the union to effect meaningful change in socialist policies. The SED, and especially the old guard of the Writers Union leadership, had begrudgingly admitted the genuine importance of authors in solving this begrudgingly admitted problem, and although the meeting could be framed by the leaders of the union, several members still engaged the officials in candid, highly critical discussion. Indeed, the model established at the June Vorstand meeting could have been a new beginning – the union's old leaders allowed the SV members to offer criticism of the status quo, so long as it was facilitated through official Writers Union channels. They would still guide the process as best they could,

but they were no longer exercising discursive control. The year 1989 could have marked a new compromise, a new stability for the union, a new era of no taboos.

Chapter Six

Coming Full Circle during the *Wende*, 1989-90

The base SED organization of the Berlin union met 23 October 1989 to discuss the present situation in the Party. For weeks, thousands of East Germans had been fleeing the country via a now open border between formerly communist Hungary and Austria, and hundreds of thousands had participated in popular demonstrations within the GDR. Faced with this revolutionary pressure, Erich Honecker was forced to resign his post as General Secretary of the SED on 18 October, and other hard-liners like Kurt Hager followed suit, ceding control of the Party to more flexible, reform-oriented politicians.

Berlin's literary comrades, meeting days after this stunning announcement, issued a series of demands which reflected the liminal situation in which they found themselves. These demands fell under two categories. First were general reforms for the GDR, including: no SED or state functionary should hold their position for longer than two election cycles; the nomenklatura system (the privileged class of elite functionaries) in the SED should be abolished as it contradicted the state constitution; privileges and "arrogated special rights" should be eliminated; *Neues Deutschland* should become an independent paper rather than the Party's mouthpiece; a new voting process should be created for state and Party representatives, whereby delegates were required to consult with their constituents on critical issues; GDR press, radio, and television should present a "controversial interpretation of societal processes," excluding "anti-humane expressions

in questions of peace, race, and religion”; the opposition groups that had emerged in the past weeks should be permitted to hold live discussions on radio and TV; and the decisions of the Council of Minister’s 1989 environmental conference should be realized. Second were concerns specific to their union’s own interests, including the necessity of an open account of paper allocation to publishing houses and the “clarification of the ownership structures of the Forum Export Trading Company Ltd.”¹

What was especially interesting about this set of demands was first, that it had been made public, and second, that it had been initiated in opposition to base organization leaders who had advocated a more cautious approach in the aftermath of the SED shake-up. The demands also covered a variety of topics, from the most far-reaching reforms in East German society to narrower professional concerns about paper allocation. Included were many of the reforms demanded at the Tenth Writers Congress, such as more honesty in the press, greater freedom of expression, and increased environmental protection. Yet the first changes demanded went beyond what had ever been publicly articulated through the Writers Union, in particular the insistence on term limits, greater responsiveness by the Party to popular pressure, and an end to excessive privileges held by elite SED members. The demands of these Writers Union members, SED members all, had become radicalized over the past month. Swept up in the revolutionary fervor, these authors were inserting their voices into the debates transpiring around them, attempting to make good on their special societal role in a time of crisis. That they would

¹ *Forum Aussenhandelsgesellschaft mbH* or Forum Export Trading Company Ltd. administered the government-run Intershops where East Germans could purchase higher quality, foreign goods. Vera Friedländer to unknown recipients, 24 October 1989, Berlin, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB) C Rep. 902 6783.

act on this self-understanding through the Writers Union was a well-established pattern, but openly defying union Party leaders signaled a new development altogether.

This chapter delves into the revolutionary mood gripping East Germans in 1989-90 and the role writers sought to play, via the Writers Union, in the events unfolding around them. The Schriftstellerverband, backed by the SED, had made it a leitmotiv of its existence to tout the importance of its members in improving socialism in the GDR, to play an active role in shaping the course of societal development, to articulate and contribute to solutions for the most pressing matters of the day. The revolutions of 1989-90, popularly known as the *Wende* (turn) provided an opening for the union to do what it had always claimed to do – weigh in publicly on vital societal problems and help solve them. At first, members advocated a reformed socialism, but as the popular mood turned toward unification with West Germany, the union as a group placed less emphasis on ideological debates and more on practical reforms as well as securing social protections for themselves. Consequently, the greatest change in the Writers Union wrought by the *Wende* was the depoliticization of the association,² a change wrought in no small part due to the changing public perception of writers and the fortunes of the SED. In losing this ideological identity, however, writers struggled to find a new basis for group cohesion.

² This trend was mirrored by the other Eastern European writers associations in 1989. At the annual meeting of the leaders of these organizations, held in December 1989 in Sofia, Bulgaria, these trends were fully apparent. The Hungarian organization announced that after self-reform it now had “no direct political function,” dedicated solely to “the struggle for artistically worthwhile books.” The Czechoslovakian representative announced that they would be forming a new, successor organization, headed by Vaclav Havel. The Polish situation was the most altered, as there were now six rival writers unions that had sprung to life, with the original, socialist one worrying about its viability due to underfunding. The Soviets, too, were facing a split in their union, and the Bulgarians reported on their “abnormal congress” of the past March whereby authors voiced very “bold and critical comments.” A common theme for all groups was the prominence of glasnost and perestroika among writers in their countries. In Bulgaria, for example, the representatives of the union complained “With us there was and is still ‘half-glasnost.’” “25. Treffen der Leitungen der Schriftstellerverbände sozialistischer Länder am 5. Dezember 1989 in Sofia,” Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR 950, vol. 2, 1-4, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV).

The timing of revolutionary events is crucial to understanding these dynamics. This chapter therefore proceeds chronologically, asking a series of thematic questions about the activities and ideas of writers and their union during these months. First, how did the union and its members react initially to the changing nature of the revolution? Included here are members' interpretations and reactions to the mass flight and demonstrations occurring in the late summer/early fall 1989, the 11 October statement by the SED announcing intentions to reform itself, the 18 October announcement of Honecker's resignation, the 9 November opening of the Berlin Wall, the unification feelers put out by Helmut Kohl and others in November and December, and the parliamentary elections of March 1990 in which proponents of unification won a strong majority. Second, how did union members utilize the association to contribute to the revolutionary events, both in reforming East Germany and the Writers Union itself? Discussed here are reflections on writers' specific roles within East Germany as well as their beliefs about what they were owed by the state and society in return. Finally, how did the union's leaders and members try to adjust to new circumstances in unified Germany, where the association suffered the double blow of loss of prestige and funding? The months between September 1989 and January 1991 brought to light many of the conflicts and concerns that had plagued the union for years, even decades, and in the end, the union was unable to resolve them successfully before it was dissolved.

Reacting to Mass Flight and Demonstrations, September through Early October 1989

Though it is impossible to adequately convey the complex processes at play during the East German revolution, a brief overview of some key events is necessary to

contextualize the actions of writers and their union in 1989.³ Earlier in the year, Poland and Hungary had thrown off their communist yokes, providing examples to East Germans. Of equal consequence was the dismantling of the Hungarian border with Austria, enabling East Germans to cross much easier from East to West, and they did so by the thousands in the summer and fall of 1989. The SED was clearly destabilized, and its reluctance to adopt Gorbachev-style liberalizing reforms did nothing to ease discontent. Responding to those leaving the country, popular protests emerged within the GDR centered on church vigils and services, particularly in the major cities of Leipzig and Berlin. With shouts of “We’re staying” (“*Wir bleiben hier*”), by 9 October hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and demanded greater human rights and substantial reforms at home. Celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, held in early October, were marred by police brutality against peaceful demonstrators in several cities and hence further destabilized the SED’s legitimacy.

Writers Union members attempted to make sense of and participate in these events. The role of the Writers Union in the Wende can be seen most clearly through the association’s district branches. Instead of following the dictates of the central union, the exodus and popular protests emboldened reform-oriented union members within the district branches, continuing a trend inaugurated in the late 1980s of finding their own voice; in fact, if anything the central leadership of the Writers Union played a largely reactive role during the Wende, struggling to keep up with the pace set within the

³ For more comprehensive explorations of the East German revolution, see Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Jens Schöne, *Die friedliche Revolution, Berlin 1989/90: der Weg zur deutschen Einheit* (Berlin: Berlin Story, 2008); Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Endspiel: Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009).

regional assemblies. Especially in Berlin, by far the largest of the district branches, individual members formed factions and challenged the more conservative elites within the organization to finally push through the changes promised in the aftermath of the 1987 congress, changes the old guard leaders were receptive to but slow in implementing.

The leaders of the central Writers Union were hardly aloof from current events, and in many ways were active as individuals. Hermann Kant, for instance, played an active role in political issues during the Wende. In early October 1989, Kant wrote an open letter which was published in the GDR youth group's newspaper, *Junge Welt* (Young World) after Honecker had made well-publicized comments that the GDR might employ a crackdown similar to that which China had used earlier that year in Tiananmen Square. Kant demanded that the government allow free discussion of the GDR's problems and that it should not shy away from labeling the flight of many East Germans to the West as a major setback. "A defeat is a defeat" he explained, and these circumstances required being "critical and self-critical."⁴ The union's president also joined a committee that was formed to investigate police brutality that fall, stating, "It is a question of hygiene – not just of cleaning up people, but whole structures, not just this man or that but whole systems."⁵ In all likelihood, the goal of Kant, a Central Committee

⁴ Hermann Kant, "Offener Brief von Hermann Kant, Präsident des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, an die 'Junge Welt,'" *Neue Deutsche Literatur* 39, No. 1 (1990): 161-66.

⁵ David Binder, "Upheaval in the East; Political Turmoil in East Germany is Keeping Writers Too Busy to Write," *New York Times*, 9 December 1989, 8. In addition, in December Kant gave a speech to the Volkskammer stressing that East Germans should be wary of succumbing to a "new nationalism," which would spring by implication from a reunified German people. This nationalism might discriminate against non-Germans and especially Poles. Alluding to the Holocaust, Kant elaborated, "We must be careful that we don't attach an invisible 'P' to the jackets of our Polish friends." Anna Tomforde, "East Berlin ends party monopoly," *The Guardian*, 2 December 1989.

member, was to blunt the protests by leading them, although he did appear interested in some genuine reforms.

As an organization, however, the decision-making bodies within the Schriftstellerverband largely failed to be proactive during the Wende's first several months, although German literary scholar Stuart Parkes's characterization that "[i]t goes without saying that those who [spearheaded the 1979 expulsions] played no conscious part in the transformation of the GDR," is an oversimplification.⁶ As a result, the leadership bodies increasingly ceded control over key organizational decisions to determined groups of individual writers within the union. In these months, the old guard leaders gradually permitted much-delayed democratic reforms within the organization, struggling to retain influence through eleventh-hour concessions.

One of the most distressing issues for many authors was the mass exodus of thousands of East Germans via the now-open Hungarian border. In the face of large numbers of people leaving East Germany, on 14 September a member meeting of the Berlin district branch produced a declaration on the issue, initiated by seven members (almost all of whom were women), including Helga Königsdorf, Rosemarie Zeplin, and Christa Wolf. The declaration called urgently for a "course correction" as it was "unbearable how the responsibility for this situation is shirked, although the causes lie in the contradictions yet to be dealt with in our own country." This exodus had a simple cause: "pent-up fundamental problems in all areas of society." What was lacking was not analysis or ideas, the declaration assessed, "but rather the possibilities to agree on them

⁶ Stuart Parkes, "Intellectuals and the Transformation of East Germany," in *Voices in Times of Change: The Role of Writers, Opposition Movements, and the Churches in the Transformation of East Germany*, ed. David Rock (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 32.

publicly and make them effective.” This “democratic dialogue” must begin immediately on all levels of society, the declaration added.⁷ To accomplish these goals, the Berlin authors agreed to construct a “workgroup [on the] press” tasked with “analysis and criticism of the present condition of our press, proposals flowing from it for improvement, concrete offers for collaboration, and the communication of colleagues, who are suitably knowledgeable and engaged to write about certain topics, to certain press organs.”⁸ Of particular interest is that the declaration was opposed by prominent union leaders, such as Gerhard Holtz- Baumert, district chair Günter Görlich, and Hermann Kant.⁹ Rather than merely diagnosing the problems facing East Germany, the Berlin writers, were actively inserting themselves into the revolutionary process, side-stepping the authority of the union’s leaders in doing so.

In a report for the district secretaries of the union’s local SED organizations from late September or early October, an author discussed the general attitude of East Berlin’s writers towards external events, as seen through talks with members. Here, writers who were Party members had expressed both “principled positions” and “comprehensive critiques” of its policies and overall effectiveness, and “[t]he overwhelming majority of comrades are filled with deep concern over the present situation.” Most of the discussants at these talks were also concerned about the “wave of illegal immigrants via Hungary, the occupation of the FRG embassies in socialist countries, of the high number of those applicants in favor of leaving altogether.” As a result, they had set about

⁷ Daniela Dahn, Sigrid Dahn, Helga Königsdorf, Helga Schütz, Gerti Tetzner, Christa Wolf, Rosemarie Zeplin, Declaration, 14 September 1989, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁸ “Beschlüsse der Mitgliederversammlung des Bezirksverbandes Berlin des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 14.9.1989,” LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁹ Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 3 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

ascribing and analyzing the causes of these “unsatisfactory conditions” and how best to make problems visible. Among other problems diagnosed was fear that the Party was losing its revolutionary zeal, misinformation and apologetics on the part of SED leaders, and the lack of practical measures to solidify the unity of “democracy and centralism as a stimulus of necessary changes and guarantee of cohesion of the Party.” Some also believed these actions were the result of a “long-arranged, exactly planned and executed action of the class enemy.” Other writers saw the cause of these events in the contradictions between the depiction of real existing socialism in the media and the reality of life in the GDR. Still others contended that “[i]nstead of socialist democracy, the citizens often experience the representatives of socialist state power as indifferent, heartless, bureaucratic, at best helpless in front of the plethora of problems.” This frustration was compounded by the feeling that popular input on key issues was regarded by the SED as an “intrusive nuisance.” Some authors even expressed grave doubts about the feasibility of socialism in view of the stagnation setting into all communist states, although many viewed perestroika and glasnost “not only as the Soviet path out of stagnation, but rather as a fundamental path for a dynamic development of socialism generally.”¹⁰ While some members blamed the West, the exodus and protests prompted many to take a sober look at East Germany’s own shortcomings as causes for the revolutionary upheaval. As this report indicated, the local branch of the union had become one primary venue for candidly discussing current events.

As the immigration issue continued to affect the Writers Union’s members, signs of a growing rift in the union were also becoming more apparent. An SED report by

¹⁰ “Für Information d. Sekr. BV,” n.d. LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

Klaus Wieszorek, a functionary in the Department of Culture in the Berlin district SED leadership, from 7 October 1989 indicated the alarm felt by Party leaders within the union regarding the mass flight from East Germany occurring via the Hungarian border. Because of this turn of events, “among the comrades and those without party affiliation there is a strong need to agree to the fundamental questions of socialist development,” Wieszorek emphasized. What was clear was that the class enemy had succeeded in its efforts to jump-start an inner opposition in the GDR by misappropriating “the desire for change and democratic renewal.” He indicated that there was uncertainty among writers about how the SED’s leading role would fit into the process of democratization in the GDR, given the repressive manner in which the Party had dealt with the nascent opposition groups¹¹ offering their own ideas about socialist development. The report noted that there were many expectations from the Berlin writers’ base organization about the upcoming SED Party congress, scheduled for December, including “an essentially broader elaboration of socialist democracy.” Moreover, many writers felt that their contributions to East Germany were not being considered by the SED, and that important differences existed between everyday experiences and the image of the GDR projected by the official media. Still, the core leadership of the Party organization, Wieszorek appraised, believed that “further discussion on the perspective and further development of socialism in the GDR can only be lead through the Party and with the Party” and that

¹¹ One by one, opposition groups emerged with a variety of platforms and degrees of organizational coherence, yet with all calling for reforms, especially permitting freedom of speech and dialogue with the regime to effect change. Among these groups were *Demokratischer Aufbruch* (Democratic Awakening), *Demokratie Jetzt* (Democracy Now), *Neues Forum* (New Forum), *Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte* (The Initiative for Peace and Human Rights), the *Vereinigte Links* (the United Left), the *Gruene Partei* (The Green Party), and the *Sozialistische Demokratische Partei* (Socialist Democrat Party). John Sanford, “The Opposition on the Eve of Revolution,” in *The End of the GDR and the Problems of Integration: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth New Hampshire Symposia on the German Democratic Republic*, ed. Margy Gerber and Roger Woods (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 22-23.

“each attempt to lead an independent discussion beyond the Party [...] damages the cause.” To counteract this widening chasm, Wiezorek recommended, as a compromise between the need for openness and the need for SED control, “public discussion led by the Party on the main questions of the further development in the media.”¹² Wiezorek’s report tacitly acknowledged the growing rift within the Berlin writers between SED hardliners and those expressing grave doubts about the Party’s continued monopoly on power.

On 10 October, one day after a crucial demonstration in Leipzig where cultural figures such as conductor Kurt Masur had brokered a deal preventing a violent crackdown on the peaceful protesters, the SV presidium hosted a consultation with the chairpersons of the district organizations, conducting an “extensive discussion about the political situation in the association in connection with current events.”¹³ At that time they unanimously agreed on a declaration to be distributed to key SED leaders (such as Günter Schabowski and Kurt Hager) and to the East German press.¹⁴ The declaration acknowledged that several district branches had already issued their own statements which “evinced their deep concern for our country.” The declaration further observed, “Ideological, economic, and social stagnation increasingly endangers what has heretofore been achieved.” Compounding the situation was the fact that “[t]he ignorance of the media is unbearable.” To overcome their present troubles, the declaration recommended that “[t]he public democratic dialogue must begin immediately on all societal levels about

¹² Klaus Wiezorek, “Grundorganisation der SED im Berliner Schriftstellerverband, Grundorganisation der SED in der Generaldirektion für Unterhaltungskunst,” 7 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

¹³ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 09.10.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 51.

¹⁴ See Gerhard Henniger to the Member of the Politburo and Secretary of the CC of the SED, 1st Secretary of the District Leadership of the SED, Comrade Günter Schabowski, 12 October 1989, SV 513, 68; Gerhard Henniger to the Member of the Politburo and Secretary of the CC of the SED, Comrade Prof. Dr. Kurt Hager, 12 October 1980, SV 513, 71.

indifference, irresponsibility, mismanagement, and tutelage [*Bevormundung*].” It was especially critical that “[c]oncerned positions and expressions should not be suppressed and criminalized.” The declaration was also careful to note the GDR’s “profound contribution to disarmament” while praising its “anti-fascist position,” which some in the West were trying to dispute. However, what was needed now was “revolutionary reform,” because “reform is not to be feared, but rather the fear of it.” Also needed was “the transition to the ‘association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (Communist Manifesto).”¹⁵ This central declaration from the Writers Union, no doubt responding to the pace of events in places like Leipzig, was openly critical of the errors made by the SED, but was also quick to praise the steps it had taken to address their mistakes. Moreover, the declaration both implicitly and explicitly championed the significance of authors to this process of renewal in East Germany, both in identifying problems and working to fix them.

The Reformers Triumphant? Mid-October through Mid-November 1989

The revolutionary events of September and early October, including the utter failure of the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the GDR to stabilize the regime, emboldened reform-oriented SED members to challenge the party’s more conservative leadership. On 8 October, Egon Krenz, representing a younger generation of Politburo

¹⁵ The group also declared their solidarity with the open letter of Hermann Kant to *Junge Welt*. On 12 October, they further amended the declaration to add their support to a statement by the Politburo supporting reforms, discussed below, although they argued that this statement by the SED leadership should be seen as a “first starting point for the necessary renewal and [we] will collaborate in its consequent implementation to the best of our ability.” “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 11. Oktober 1989,” SV 513, 65-66; “Im Auftrag des Vorstandes vorgelegt vom Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR Abgeschlossen am 15.1.1990,” SV 509, 31-32; Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Declaration, 11 October 1989, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

leaders, pushed the Party to accept a reform program. His ideas met with opposition from the older generation of leaders, including Honecker, but on 11 October the Politburo agreed to an awkward compromise declaration signaling a willingness to reform in the face of popular pressure but also blaming the West German “imperialists” for fomenting demonstrations in and immigration from the GDR.¹⁶ A week later, Krenz and his conspirators ambushed Honecker at the next meeting of the Politburo by demanding the latter’s resignation. Finding widespread approval within the SED, the reformers forced Honecker’s removal, replacing him with the more moderate Krenz.¹⁷

Professed willingness of the SED for internal reforms seemed to help quell some doubts among Berlin authors. An SED report of 16 October 1989 had positive assessments of the mood within the Berlin writers association vis-à-vis current events and especially regarding the declaration of the Politburo from 11 October. In the report, Klaus Wiezorek conveyed the assessment of the Berlin branch’s Party secretary, Sepp Müller, who related that many members of the base organization agreed with the “mood and attitude of the publication of the Politburo’s declaration.” To further probe the mood of the base organization, Wiezorek explained that they would begin holding individual talks with members while the branch’s Party leaders would try to consult directly with Günter Schabowski, who had replaced Konrad Naumann as First Secretary of the Berlin SED leadership in 1985, before the next district steering committee meeting of the Bezirksverband, scheduled in a few days. If the leaders were unable to meet with

¹⁶ For the text of the declaration, see “Politburo Declaration, 11 October 1989,” in *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1933*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch and Volker Gransow, trans. Allison Brown and Belinda Cooper (Providence: Berghahn, 1994), 60-62.

¹⁷ Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, 53-55; Maier, *Dissolution*, 156-58.

Schabowski before then, they were to at least reach an understanding among themselves on the SED's stance on reforms. To this end, Wiezorek reported that it would be appropriate to work out an agreement with Görlich about deploying Berlin authors in the *Berliner Zeitung* daily newspaper about the current situation. This would be not only an important gesture, but “would surely also reduce the pressure in the district association in this direction (building a workgroup [for the] press).”¹⁸ Once more, the SED aimed at taking the steam out of truly critical sentiments by selectively co-opting some authors through token gestures of reform.

Yet a closer look at the Party leadership of the base SED organization in the Berlin Writers Union reveals a more complex picture there. On the same day (16 October) as Wiezorek's report, Sepp Müller convened a meeting of said Party leaders. At the meeting, he offered a positive take on the Politburo's declaration. Calling it “a first important step,” he added, though, that “practical steps must follow.” The Party leaders in the Berlin branch agreed, although some members expressed “a certain skepticism” about the subsequent implementation of other, more practical steps. The ensuing discussion was “animated” and “in part also impulsive.” Essayist and Germanist Ursula Püschel, for instance, suggested the group present Honecker with a position paper she and others had worked out entitled “Alternative Socialism: For the Fortieth Anniversary,” a proposal the group rejected although she was encouraged to submit it to Honecker on her own behalf.¹⁹ The paper stressed, among other things, “We find ourselves in a situation, which makes it urgently necessary to organize the broad public.” As a result,

¹⁸ Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, Memo on the Situation in the Berlin District Association, 16 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

¹⁹ Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 17 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

we encounter [Lenin's] concern to organize the 'apparatus' in such a way that it is capable of learning from the masses, making contact with them productively." They therefore had great expectations for the upcoming Party congress to pass resolutions "corresponding to this Leninist directive: 'According to our perceptions it is the consciousness of the masses which makes the state strong. It is then strong if the masses know everything, can judge everything, and do everything consciously.'"²⁰ Püschel's paper urged greater responsiveness to popular will and an end to misleading media coverage. In the aftermath of the 11 October Politburo declaration, the choice not to adopt her paper as a basis for further action showed a lack of unity within the district branch's Party leadership.

The Berlin district steering committee meeting of 19 October was dominated with the announcement of Erich Honecker's resignation as head of the SED the previous day. The meeting began with Günter Görlich detailing the most recent meeting of the Central Committee (of which he was a member), emphasizing "the common responsibility of all for the successful continuation of the initiated turn." These comments apparently met with "spontaneous applause" among the steering committee members. The ensuing discussion was "objective," but also "controversial." Author Werner Herzberg, representing the newly formed "Workgroup [for the] Press," "expressed himself very subjectively on the affected cadre decisions," while slavacist Thomas Reschke railed against police brutality during the 7-8 October fortieth anniversary celebrations of the GDR's existence. Görlich, Party secretary Sepp Müller, and children's book author Lilo Hardel (an avowed communist since the 1930s) openly opposed Herzberg's statements,

²⁰ Ursula Püschel, "Alternative Sozialismus: Zum vierzigsten Jahrestag," October 1989, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

as did Helmut Kuchler (the longtime First Secretary of the Berlin Writers Union), children's book author Gisela Karau, decorated author Eberhard Panitz, and poet Heinz Kahlau. But among many writers there was also a perceptible skepticism "whether the evident will to change would transform itself into enduring concrete actions." It was also apparent to many that, given "the escalation of the events on the streets" (the Leipzig demonstrations had grown to their largest size ever in October), time was limited. The group agreed to hold a previously unplanned general member meeting 2 November to discuss the current situation in East Germany, at which they would present a position paper, drafted by Kuchler, Görlich, Karau, and story-writer and essayist Renate Feyl (all Party loyalists). This meeting was needed especially because "the majority of members seek such a forum and in part already regret the absence of it."²¹

As a last point of discussion at the meeting, Herzberg, former philosopher Rita Kuczynski, and Kuchler reported on the first meeting of the district union's new workgroup, a meeting which was described as "very controversial." The group had been unable to reach a coherent position, with several objecting to Herzberg's position paper.²² Of particular interest was a request the group had prepared to submit to the Volkskammer demanding a public investigation into the causes of the violence marring the anniversary celebrations so as to ameliorate "the present climate of rumors, conjectures, uncertainty,

²¹ Klaus Wiezerok, Abteilung Kultur, "Information," 20 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

²² In the paper, Herzberg complained that "as an especially seismographic part of our public," they had for decades felt "an extraordinarily large dissatisfaction, aggravation, and responsibility for the condition of our mass media." They were especially concerned with the "unworthy, unrealistic image of our society, of the socialist as well as the capitalist world in our media, which does not convince but rather disgusts, that does not interest but rather bores, that does not solicit confidence but rather destroys confidence." He therefore demanded a revision to this "unbelievable glossing over things" and the candid depiction of real problems facing the GDR, including ecological damage, travel restrictions, and the relationship between the two German states. Wolfgang Herzberg, "Thesen für eine Reform der Massenmedien der DDR, Pressekommission des Berliner Schriftstellerverbandes," 12 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

in part even fear.”²³ Controversy was becoming a regular feature of Berlin district meetings, even among the leadership who were increasingly disagreeing among themselves as uncertainty gripped the Party in the wake of Honecker’s resignation. The beginnings of factions were emerging between hard-liners willing to concede some reforms (Görlich, Holtz-Baumert, Panitz, Küchler, Karau, Feyl, Hardel) and those wishing to go even further (Herzberg, Kuczynski, Reschke).

The district leadership of the Berlin branch issued a draft of a position paper of its own, prepared by the hard-liners Görlich, Karau, Feyl, Küchler, and also literary critic Marianne Krumrey on 26 October 1989 evaluating both the changes within the SED leadership and actions the Writers Union had taken over the past week. They regarded the recent changes within the Central Committee as having begun an essential process of removing obstacles to further socialist development. The paper also laid emphasis on a letter penned by the Bezirksvorstand at their 19 October meeting to the People’s Chamber, in which they reacted to reports from members of “breaches of socialist legality in the action of order forces on the 7th and 8th October 1989 in Berlin.” In the face of these and other transgressions, they demanded that the Volkskammer immediately investigate these events, forming a commission with which members of the union were prepared to collaborate. The paper continued that “we accept anew the ideas of the X. Writers Congress of November 1987 and advocate for its realization,” implying a renewal of the criticism voiced at that gathering. Yet they lamented that the union had been unsuccessful in accomplishing a pressing task set before them at the congress, namely “filling in the rift between us and the colleagues who in 1979 were expelled from

²³ Wiezerok, “Information,” 20 October 1989.

the association.” In view of these lingering issues, they reached a series of conclusions: those expellees who were still East German citizens would be asked if they were prepared to rejoin the union. Beyond this, they supported the goal “that art and literature move again to its appropriate place in this country,” because “[l]iterature is an irreplaceable and indispensable voice in society.” Consequently, they proposed the creation of a workgroup dedicated to providing ideas about “literature policy in a modern socialist society.” The elected officials of their union were further obligated “to determine anew the role of the Writers Union in society according to the requirements of our time, [and] to think through its statute and its operating principles critically.”²⁴ These SED loyalists clearly agreed that change was required in the GDR and that the worst aspects of the dictatorship needed to be investigated and amended, including within their own ranks. More than anything, though, the position paper evinced an anxiety about the role of the Writers Union and its members in the altered circumstances of East Germany, especially given the shakeup within the SED. Thus the overriding concern was not addressing their country’s problems per se, but the importance of writers to the problem-solving process.

The position paper was presented at the 26 October BV steering committee meeting, a meeting which featured a “long, objective, but controversial discussion.” The discussion concerned, first, “the legalization of ‘New Forum,’” and second, “the proposed resolution for those excluded in 1979.” In the former case, some members demanded the union speak out on behalf of New Forum, although the majority of attendees voted against approving of the organization until they knew more about the group’s goals. What they did agree on was that the Ministry of the Interior should permit

²⁴ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Entwurf: Standpunkt des Bezirksvorstandes zur gegenwärtigen Lage,” 26 October 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

the group's members to speak with one another. As for the 1979 matter, the discussion "proceeded emotionally." Nearly all those who had participated in that fateful June meeting worried that their decision, "by which they still stand today, is defamed as wrong." At the same time, they accepted that all previous efforts had failed to fix the problem, a problem that "in any case, will therefore strain further discussions directly connected with the processes of change getting under way." For those authors no longer living in the GDR, the issue was relatively simple: the conditions for membership were no longer being met, and so joining the union anew was out of the question. Otherwise the most important thing was to prevent defamation of the 1979 decision. Either way, the group hoped that "after taking a decision and the expected rejection of membership by the respective authors on the basis of the statute, the problem then nevertheless is finally resolved."²⁵ The majority of members of the Berlin steering committee had agreed to rescind the 1979 decisions, a major about-face from earlier positions. However, the conditions placed on this revision – namely that only those remaining in the GDR (only four of the nine) – suggested a reluctance to fully amend the expulsions. This was no admission of a mistake, but rather an acknowledgment that circumstances had changed which rendered the decision no longer applicable for those still living in East Germany. Moreover, these leaders seemed aware that others in the union would not move on to more important issues unless the 1979 events had been dealt with. In other words, theirs

²⁵ In addition, they agreed to add the rehabilitation of Walter Janka to the text of their position paper. Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, Meeting of District Steering Committee, Berlin, 30 October 1989, Berlin, LAB

was a stance born out of necessity rather than desire for atonement, one stopping far short of the demands made by some union members for restitution.

The growing intensity of the Wende was matched by ever greater activities within the Writers Union, as witnessed by the presidium meeting on 31 October, the second such meeting in three weeks. Forces within the presidium had clearly become swept up in the revolutionary mood, and members built on the declaration they had issued several weeks earlier in supporting a new beginning in East Germany. At their gathering, the presidium members conducted a “comprehensive discussion about the present situation and the work that ensures for the association in order to help implement the policy of the Wende and the renewal.” As a result, the group made several key decisions about the Writers Union’s activities, all of which were to be presented to the Vorstand at its upcoming November meeting. First was proposed that the union “should be a site of broad conversation about current societal developments in the GDR [...] from which no writer should be excluded.” They also demanded the media give space to writers so that they “can achieve in their specific way contributions to the societal development.” Now was the time to finally solve long-standing professional issues as well, and they concluded it was necessary to submit ideas and proposals, “in multiple forms (through press publications, through the representatives in the parliament, through conversations with the appropriate ministries),” about how delays in publications and second runs of books could be resolved. Along these same lines, the promise by the HVVB made after the tenth congress to shift decisions about manuscripts exclusively to the publishers “must be carried further.” This also meant that manuscripts which had been rejected years ago should now be reconsidered unless the works dealt with “the ideas of fascism, racism,

and the hatred of peoples.”²⁶ Of chief concern here was the role of writers in the revolutionary events, especially in using those changes to safeguard their livelihood in the form of expanded opportunities for publication. Moreover, the presidium was resolved to make the Writers Union a central locus of debate on the Wende, and that its members be given space in the media to expound on their views.

At the same meeting, the presidium also agreed to press forward boldly on other issues as well, all of which spoke to the societal role of writers as public intellectuals. They addressed the proposal of Jurij Koch, endorsed by the union, to protect three Sorbian villages from mining; on this matter, the group assessed that the answer they had received from the Ministry for Mining was “disappointing,” and so therefore they would renew their proposal to the ministry, laying stress on the “urgency of the proposal” while making similar appeals to the Volkskammer.²⁷ They also concurred with a proposal of the Union of Theater Personnel “to redefine the function of the artistic associations in the socialist society.” Once the details of this proposal had been finalized, it would be presented to the Twelfth SED Party Congress (scheduled for December). Likewise, they would submit a proposal to the Ministry of the Interior “to abolish the bureaucratization of travel formalities.” They would also empower a conference to articulate “the position of the writers of the GDR for further societal development” and to discuss proposals for the SED. The group ended with two internal matters: First, they agreed to hold a new writers congress in 1990 (they eventually settled on early March) so that the union

²⁶ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 31. Oktober 1989,” SV 513, 60-61.

²⁷ In their 14 November 1989 meeting, less than a week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the central steering committee also declared their intention to focus on “economic and ecological questions.” This included a declaration of support for the Sorbian people in their quest to preserve their national culture. From this declaration followed a renewed call for the protection of three Sorbian villages from strip mining. Steering Committee Meeting Notes, 14 November 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 17.

members could draft a new statute for the organization²⁸; Second, following the lead of the Berlin district leadership, it was decided that Hermann Kant “will submit in the member meeting of the BV Berlin on 02.11.1989 [eventually postponed to 23 November] the proposal to rescind the decision of June 1979, through which several colleagues were expelled from the association.”²⁹ In all of these actions, the Writers Union’s leaders were trying to take the initiative, making principled stands on pressing issues such as the environment, travel, the place of artist associations in the GDR, and the 1979 expulsions. That these issues were the concern of authors was hardly surprising; individual members had been calling for many of these things for years, especially after the tenth congress. What was more unexpected was the fact that, after years of foot-dragging, the presidium was finally demanding rather than asking for concrete action.

Similar issues were debated at the 6 November meeting of the SED base organization’s Party leadership in the Berlin district branch. Once again, the discussion

²⁸ For the planning of the congress by the secretariat, see Literaturabteilung, “Vorlage: Betr.: Vorschlag zur Bildung von Arbeitsgruppen bzw. Kommissionen zur Vorbereitung eines ausserordentlichen Kongresses (Delegiertenkonferenz),” 10 November 1989, Berlin, SV 508, vol. 5, 38-39; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 07.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 43; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 15.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 33-34; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 21.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 31; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 5.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 22; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 12.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 10-11; “Sekretariatsvorlage zum 12.12.1989, Einladung Ausserordentlicher Schriftstellerkongress der DDR, 1. bis 3. März 1990,” 8 December 1989, SV 508, vol. 5, 20-21; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 19.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 1; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 09.01.1990,” SV 509, 54; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 16.01.1990,” 22-23; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 22.01.1990,” SV 509, 18; Abteilung Internationale Beziehungen, “Vorlage für das Sekretariat: Ausserordentlicher Schriftstellerkongress 1.-3. März 1990,” 2 February 1990, SV 509, 11-14; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 13.02.1990,” SV 509, 8-9.

²⁹ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 31. Oktober 1989,” SV 513, 61. The presidium further elaborated on these proposals at a meeting on 13 November, its third meeting in just over a month. Here, too, the leaders prepared for the Vorstand meeting set for the next day, in the process setting about the task of coming to terms with the Biermann years as they reviewed the cases of the nine authors expelled in 1979. They also revisited several other authors who had left or were expelled from the Schriftstellerverband after 1976, specifically Jurek Becker, Sarah Kirsch, Erich Loest, Martin Stade, Reiner Kunze, and Günter Kunert “Information für das Präsidium,” n.d., SV 513, 59.

was appraised by Wiezorek as “objective” but also “controversial.” There was general agreement at the meeting that the 1979 decision should be rescinded, but some argued that it should occur “without ‘kneeling down’ or ‘apology’ before the affected people.” Here it was even more plain that although these authors sensed pressure to alter the decision, they still fundamentally disagreed with it; they were only begrudgingly forced to repeal it and they were not about to give the affected authors the satisfaction of knowing that they had been right all along. Others at the meeting differed, however, seeing in the decision “an error for which one must apologize.” It became clear in the discussion that a consensus needed to emerge from their ranks, lest Kant and the entire Vorstand be forced to resign and risk splitting the union. Thereafter the district leaders were instructed to submit a proposal to the next full member meeting, planned for 23 November. As for other urgent issues, the comrades agreed that present debates about East Germany were really about the role of the SED in society, and if the Party had not lived up to its responsibility, not only it but socialism itself was at risk. Therefore the SED had initiated an internal renewal, although these changes had not all been noted yet in the wider society. Still, some writers spoke of an “identity crisis in the Party” and demanded “quick, consistent decisions,” all of which had led to the decision to call a Party congress as soon as possible. This heretofore absent coherence had left the Berlin writers needing clarification on key questions, such as “For and with which conceptions of socialism does the Party (program) work,” “Which measures are necessary for an irreversible democratization of the Party,” and “What does the leading role of the Party actually mean?” These questions elicited diverse answers from the writers, indicating confusion and a lack of coherent perspective within the Berlin writers union on the future

course of the SED. In many ways this made sense, given the perceptible uncertainty among the authors at the meeting, although most committed themselves to “constructive work in and for the Party.”³⁰

Of course, the Berlin district organization was not the only Bezirksverband to engage in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within the Writers Union during these fateful months; the Berlin authors weren't the only ones getting swept up in the revolutionary moment. On 16 November, Herbert Otto, chair of the Potsdam BV, and Konrad Schmidt, the local SED secretary for the union, submitted a letter to the Potsdam district council. In it, they communicated that at their last member meeting, held 8 November, they had made several demands of state security organs. First, they approved of a proposal to create a new law on state security which mandated that security forces were not solely controlled by the Volkskammer but also local and regional congresses. They also demanded state security forces' work tasks be revised; whereas these security organs had been concerned with “ideological diversions,” they should now be directed solely at “protection and security of GDR citizens.” This also meant an end to operations against those who thought differently as well as the “immediate ending of telephone and mail surveillance.” Finally, they insisted on the elimination of Stasi detention centers.³¹ These decisions, issued the day before the fall of the Wall, were a bold strike at the fearsome state security apparatus, a first for a Writers Union district branch.

³⁰ Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, “Informationn,” 7 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902, Nr. 6783.

³¹ Herbert Otto and Konrad Schmidt to the Council of the District Potsdam, Office of the District Congress, 16 November 1989, Potsdam, SV-BV Potsdam 16.

Also in Potsdam on 16 November, the district steering committee met with the Party leadership group within the Writers Union Bezirksverband. Here, the group discussed possible collaboration with the other artistic unions' district branches in Potsdam while also evaluating a disconcertingly perceptible hostility towards artists and intellectuals among the public that had recently developed. The Potsdam district leaders also demanded the public rehabilitation of Walter Janka (a move which eventually occurred in January 1990), with efforts to achieve this goal to begin immediately in the form of applying for honorary citizenship on behalf of Janka, by then a septuagenarian, in the Kleinmachnow community.³² At a meeting of Potsdam authors in December the group also opted to create a new workgroup which would "introduce the basic considerations about further work" of the union. They also discussed an apparent rift that had developed within their Bezirksverband between the steering committee and the base SED organization leadership.³³ These developments within Potsdam were strikingly similar to those within Berlin: the rehabilitation of former political enemies, an acute awareness of souring public perception of authors, and an anxious desire to find a new role for writers within an altered East German society. In Potsdam, as in the other union district branches, members utilized the union to participate in the revolution.³⁴

Beyond activism within the union's branches, many writers participated in the events of the autumn as individuals. Many of them came to support a growing movement

³² "Protokoll der Vorstand- und Parteleitungssitzung am 16.11.1989," SV-BV Potsdam 16.

³³ "Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung am 14.12.1989 von 14. bis 16.30 Uhr im Eduard Claudius Club," Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR-Bezirksverband Potsdam 16, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as SV-BV Potsdam).

³⁴ In December 1989, the Gera district association voted to rescind the expulsion of Reiner Kunze from the union on 29 October 1976, a decision the central presidium likewise approved. "Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 8. Januar 1990," SV 513, 34.

known as the “Third Way,” a movement that became especially popular among intellectuals and the new opposition groups which had sprung up during the upheaval. The movement championed a path for East Germany somewhere between Soviet communism and Western bourgeois democracy, thus retaining the commendable aspects of socialism while jettisoning its Stalinist features. This essentially meant a democratization of socialism, rejecting dictatorial aspects while retaining its benefits such as relatively generous social services, and also avoiding capitulation to what many still viewed as a “corrupt” bourgeois society in the FRG.³⁵ Thus socialism was to be redefined, or rather the humanist elements that had always been present needed to be salvaged, resuscitated, and championed as “true” socialism.

One primary example of this “third way” activism on the part of writers was the 4 November Alexanderplatz demonstration. On that day, the largest sanctioned demonstration in GDR history occurred in Berlin’s Alexanderplatz, organized by the opposition group New Forum and several artists, intellectuals, and even SED officials. Half a million people (perhaps closer to a million) crowded this Berlin square to hear some two dozen speakers, including SED apologists, opposition figures, and critical intellectuals, speak about the past, present, and future of East Germany, while countless more participated in solidarity rallies or watched the event on television. Several writers

³⁵ The biggest problem for the dissident intellectuals and other third way proponents was lack of clarity in their vision. Dreaming of a better society was one thing; making it happen logistically was quite another. Certainly human rights would be guaranteed and environmental protection laws would be enacted, but beyond this there were disagreements. Some groups such as Neues Forum called for “grassroots democracy,” where others, such as the SDP and DA supported a more traditional representative government. The nature of the future economy was also cloudy for many pundits. Debate revolved around questions such as how much marketization should be allowed and what sectors the government should and should not regulate. Thus in its vagueness the Third Way came to embody a number of possibilities, sometimes even contradictory ones. This confused platform therefore had little chance of political success given the lack of clarity in their vision for the future GDR. Jarausch. *The Rush to German Unity*, 77-79.

participated in this landmark event, namely Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, and Christoph Hein, all calling for a “revolutionary renewal” of socialism in the GDR.³⁶

Christa Wolf provided one of the most memorable speeches during the demonstration, calling attention to the lack of free expression in East Germany and the liberating yet anxiety-provoking effect of the past several weeks in terms of shaking the people of East Germany out of their SED-imposed slumber. Indeed, “Never has so much talking been done in our country as in the past few weeks; never have we talked so much with each other, never with so much passion, with so much anger and sorrow, and with so much hope.” The new socialism would be one infused with the very resource upon which it was built: “the people” in action. She concluded by praising the phrase that had become the rallying cry for the Leipzig and other demonstrations: “We are the people! A simple statement of fact. Let’s not forget it.”³⁷ In sum, Wolf demanded what in her mind was genuine socialism – socialism which permitted individuals to express themselves freely and work collectively for the common good.

At the Alexanderplatz demonstration, the role of the Schriftstellerverband was negligible, and so the significance of that organization to the Wende should not be overstated. However, not every author had the public stature of Christa Wolf or Stefan Heym, and so many turned to their professional organization to help create the platforms from which to contribute to the revolutionary process, especially from the perspective of

³⁶ For more on the Alexanderplatz demonstration, see Stuart Parkes, *Writers and Politics in Germany, 1945-2008* (New York: Camden House, 2009), 134; John C. Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 155; and especially Robert Grünbaum, *Jenseits des Alltags: Die Schriftsteller der DDR und die Revolution von 1989/90* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002), 108-14.

³⁷ Christa Wolf, “The Language of the Turning Point,” in Christa Wolf, *The Author’s Dimension: Selected Essays*, ed. Alexander Stephan, trans. Jan Van Heurck (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1993), 316-18.

the Third Way. Moreover, internal debates and public statements made on behalf of the Writers Union and individual district branches cut to the heart of the self-identity of East Germany's writers as a professional group of public literary intellectuals. Conversations and rival viewpoints on how best to actualize these societal roles came to dominate union meetings during the fall of 1989, and in doing so, members opened the door for even further reforms within the organization, both in terms of its governing principles as well as re-conceptualizations of its wider societal role

From Reform to Reckoning, Late November through December 1989

Despite this activism, most East German citizens eventually rejected third way proposals in favor of unification. For too long they had heard promises about a better life through socialism only find harsh realities, and with the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, the popular mood in the country became even more radicalized than earlier. By December and January many had effected a "*Wende in der Wende*" (turn within the turn), evolving their cries from "*Wir sind das Volk*" to "*Wir sind ein Volk*" ("we are the people" to "we are *one* people"). Now that they had found their voice, many citizens no longer looked to intellectuals to articulate for them the course the GDR should pursue. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's initiatives regarding formal unification talks as well as offers by Hans Modrow (GDR Prime Minister after November) for treaty negotiations with the FRG also stoked reunification fires.³⁸ Writers reactions to these events were varied, but two significant trends became evident. First, the deepening crisis strengthened the resolve of reform-oriented union members to seize the initiative from

³⁸ Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, 80-92.

the Schriftstellerverband's leadership and push for a thorough reckoning concerning the association's past abuses. Second, as the media began attacking the privileges East German writers had received from the SED over the years, many members used the forum created by the SV to defend their individual and collective reputations.³⁹

At the 14 November 1989 central steering committee meeting, five days after the opening of the Berlin Wall, the group spent most of the meeting conversing about the events unfolding around them. The urgency of the new conditions was palpable as the group's first order of business was to decide that "the association must determine as quickly as possible its place in a renewed socialist society." To this end, a new steering committee and a new revisions commission needed to be elected, and because this "far-reaching change" could only be effected through a congress, they approved the presidium's proposal to hold an "extraordinary writers congress" to which all members and candidates would be invited. Likewise, they needed to build a statute commission which would by the end of the year draft a new statute and submit it to all members and candidates for discussion. Especially needing revision was the section in the statute's preamble about the leading role of the SED and socialist realism as well as combating "political diversions." This particular proposal signaled a trend toward depoliticizing the union, the first sign from the central union that the SED was losing its significance in

³⁹ One of the best known attacks came from the ex-GDR author Monika Maron. Maron, who had left East Germany in 1988, published a series of commentaries in the West German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* in February 1990. Among other things, she took issue with many writers' only thinly veiled disgust at fellow East Germans who desired unification, intoning, "The heroic act of revolution is hardly over, and already the poets are forced to recognize that the people did not hit the streets for the correct reasons: the poets' reasons." These statements had exposed the distance between intellectuals and the masses, Maron insisted, calling East German writers "a particularly spoiled group." Many had not earned their high reputations: "And frequently a mere half-truth was sufficient to lend its announcer the reputation of a prophet in a milieu full of stupid and shameless mendacity." Monika Maron, "Writers and the People," *New German Critique* 52 (Winter 1991): 36-41.

East Germany's cultural realm. The Vorstand also opted to create a commission to investigate the union's past, especially the Biermann-era events. A separate commission was to investigate the fate of East German writers who had been prosecuted or driven into exile as dissidents, with about half under the age of fifty, i.e., too young to have been very involved in the Biermann affair.⁴⁰ The stated goal for these latter measures was "to end the smoldering situation around this problem without, however, splitting the association or forcing the authors who supported the decision of 1979 and in large part also stand by it today into political genuflection." Changes were required to appease those demanding justice for the events of a decade ago, but not at the cost of actual contrition on the parts of those who voted for the expulsions. Also tied to these decisions was Hermann Kant's announcement that at a special steering committee meeting to be held in December, he would submit his office to a vote of confidence.⁴¹ Given the steering committee's general refusal to admit wrongdoing in the 1979 episode, it is unlikely Kant's position was ever seriously at risk, meaning he most likely intended the vote of confidence to satisfy those urging greater democratization within the union and to acquire a mandate for shaping the changes the SV would adopt in the coming weeks.

Beyond internal matters, the 14 November Vorstand meeting also included writers debating the place of their association in a post-Berlin Wall East Germany. Some members proposed to explore a possible merger of the SV with a trade union because social conditions for writers could become much more difficult over the next several

⁴⁰ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, November 1989, LAB C Rep. 902 6783. The commission consisted entirely of non-presidium members and included Peter Brasch, Jürgen Engler, Elke Erb, Manfred Jendryschik, Heinz Knobloch, Heinz Kahlau, Helmut Richter, Günter Rücker, Bernd Schirmer, Uwe Saeger, Klaus-Dieter Sommer, and Gerd Prokop. "Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 15.11.1989," SV 508, vol. 3, 34.

⁴¹ Bezirksverband Berlin, November 1989.

years, so that “a certain deterioration of the general social situation is probably unavoidable.” It was also unclear “whether we alone are in a position to be able to defend our just recently hard-won fee regulation and our favorable provision in sickness and in old age,” especially given the fact that “[t]he privileges of artists are everywhere a popular topic of conversation.” In the end, though, it was decided that “[t]hrough clear formulation of our interests and the public rationale of our demands we will in the future be able to better represent our concern than any trade union.” In other words, if they could just explain themselves to the public clearly and logically, their reputations, having taken a beating in recent days, would be restored. The group also agreed with the suggestion of the Berlin district branch to form a workgroup on future literary policy in a “modern socialist society,” because they needed to be careful to avoid a scenario where “art and literature once again are forced to the margins, through economic conceptions, from their place as irreplaceable and indispensable voices in society, are treated as a substitute for agitation and propaganda, and are censored.” Whatever they decided to do, it was imperative that the union participate in the discussion on reforms in East German society, with particular emphasis on accurate information, public dialogue, democratization, and education.⁴² Again, the union’s leaders seemed most preoccupied with restoring or maintaining their societal influence, especially in view of growing attacks on their relatively privileged lives under the dictatorship.

The 23 November 1989 member meeting of the Berlin district branch promised to be memorable given the primary topic of discussion would be a proposed resolution on the nine authors expelled by the union in 1979. In advance of the meeting, the Berlin

⁴² Emphasis in original. Ibid.

district steering committee had drafted a resolution, based on their earlier discussions, reinstating the membership of those authors expelled in 1979 still remaining in East Germany.⁴³ Yet some Berlin writers refused to defer to the authority of these leaders, and so simultaneously, a faction of 30-40 authors gathered to prepare for the meeting independently. The group prepared their own set of resolutions to counter those submitted by the district leadership, hoping to present them as alternatives at the member meeting. Their proposed resolution on the 1979 expulsions demonstrated a much greater level of contrition than the proposed Bezirksvorstand resolution. This alternative resolution intoned that the original 1979 decision had been made in “an atmosphere of confrontation” and had “inflicted considerable harm on both the affected colleagues and also the cultural-political climate in the GDR, literature, and the association itself.” Furthermore, the decision had had a “crippling effect on associational life, delayed openness, and impaired the reputation of the association.” In the end, the resolution expressed that “[w]e regret the painful losses and the damages which emerged at the time, and the burden for many others.” Therefore they opted to re-admit the authors expelled ten years earlier.⁴⁴

The actual 23 November meeting in Berlin featured two hundred authors in attendance (less than half of the total membership). It got off to a rocky start when Helmut Küchler introduced a resolution, which “in objective and balanced ways opposed the police deployments during the demonstration in Prague.”⁴⁵ Though most writers

⁴³ Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 24 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁴⁴ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Beschluss,” 23 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁴⁵ On 17 November a peaceful student-led demonstration in Prague was violently broken up by police, sparking a national protest movement which became the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia.

agreed with its sentiments, this officially sanctioned resolution provoked “animated controversy.” The proposed resolution was consequently rejected by the authors in attendance, and in its place a resolution by the independent group was adopted which went well beyond KÜchler’s proposal. This new resolution demanded from the East German government and Volkskammer an apology for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the Warsaw Pact. These writers were intent on a reckoning with the past, one which went beyond a mere declaration of support for the Velvet Revolution to one which addressed the historical causes of oppression in Czechoslovakia, causes which implicated East Germany. The next proposal by the district steering committee, this one to create a workgroup exploring (ideological) demands on literature in the “process of renewal,” met a similar fate as the first “official” resolution.⁴⁶ These unprecedented challenges to the union’s district leadership were only the beginning, however.

Next, the district leaders submitted their resolution for the 1979 expellees, but here, too, the independent group presented their rival bill for consideration. With this alternate proposal, the room erupted into an “extremely controversial, emotionally characterized, in part subjectively conducted discussion.” A large group of authors, led by Christa Wolf, dug in their heels, refusing to compromise in their assessment of the expulsions, which they considered as “Stalinist interference in associational work.” Only Hermann Kant and the older-generation communists Harald Hauser and Ruth Werner rose to defend, in an “objective, but equally certain manner, their contrary standpoint.” The discussion ended when Kant bluntly conceded that “he, in interest of the unity of the association for the expected future important political debates, approved the second

⁴⁶ Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 24 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

resolution brought in by the group of authors.” The authors then voted on the new resolution, adopting it with *only three* voting ‘no’ and three abstaining. The final, published version of the district branch’s resolution called what had occurred with the nine writers a “not to be repaired injustice for which we apologize.” The expulsion for all nine was annulled and the members were welcomed back in, if they so chose.⁴⁷

In the ensuing break, a good many authors left the meeting, much to the consternation of the district leadership. After this episode, the rump plenum passed two more resolutions. One resolution condemned the violence in Romania, demanding GDR state prizes which had been awarded to Nicolae Ceausescu be rescinded.⁴⁸ The other resolution expressed solidarity with theater colleagues who were being criticized for participating in the 4 November Alexanderplatz demonstration. In response, “[w]hoever today depicts artists as a defiant little group of privileged people and reproaches them, undermines the workers through the course of renewal in our country.” Simply put, “We’re for tolerance, but no tolerance for the intolerant!”⁴⁹ This latter declaration of solidarity was a curious footnote to the usurpation of the meeting agenda regarding the 1979 expulsions. In contrast to the reluctance of the district branch leaders, the vast majority of authors in attendance had proven very willing to rethink their actions a decade earlier, but they were also highly defensive about their place in East Germany. Sensing growing criticism of their privileges, they sought to insulate themselves from

⁴⁷ Walther, 131.

⁴⁸ Romania was the only Soviet bloc country where the government used systematic violence to try to disperse popular protests. Klaus Wiezorek, Abteilung Kultur, “Information,” 24 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁴⁹ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin, “Erklärung,” 23 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

criticism by atoning for past mistakes and rhetorically aligning themselves with the interests of the working class.

The aftermath of this extraordinary member meeting was highly consequential. The very next day, reeling from the insurrection within the district branch, Günter Görlich submitted his resignation as chairperson, ending his two-decade tenure. The chief reason he cited for his resignation was the reproach embedded within the adopted resolution for the 1979 events. Playing the martyr, he declared his hope that stepping down would ‘contribute to the preservation of our important professional association.’ He closed with a parting shot of bitterness, though, complaining that the resolution the Bezirksvorstand had prepared on the expulsions had not even come to a vote.⁵⁰ Committed members within the union had taken on the district leadership and won – decisively – now that the top brass of the Schriftstellerverband had fallen out of step with the events transpiring across East Germany.

The tense mood of the Berlin meeting was also reflect in the “Für unser Land” (For Our Country) petition, published in newspapers on 26 November 1989. Although not officially associated with the Writers Union, Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf, Volker Braun, and Ulrich Plenzdorf, along with several theologians, all played leading roles in its creation and dissemination.⁵¹ The petition, garnering hundreds of thousands of signatures within weeks (eventually even including Egon Krenz), called for a path between capitalism and communism, passionately supporting the continued existence of a

⁵⁰ Günter Görlich to unknown recipients, 24 November 1989, Berlin, LAB C Rep. 902 6783.

⁵¹ For more on the “Für unser Land” petition, see SAPMO-BArch DY2/1; John Sanford, “The Opposition that Dare not Speak its Name,” in *Finding a Voice: Problems of Language in East German Society and Culture*, ed. Graham Jackman and Ian F. Roe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 27; Parkes, *Writers and Politics*, 134-35; Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent* 156-60; Grünbaum, 115-20.

separate East German state as a socialist alternative to the FRG. Decrying the “Stalinist structures [which] permeated all spheres of life” under the SED, the petition insisted that the country was faced with a choice: either support a sovereign GDR committed to “develop a society demonstrating solidarity and guaranteeing peace and social justice, individual liberty, freedom of movement for all, and environmental protection,” or “sell out” their “material and moral values.”⁵² Different in tone than the Alexanderplatz demonstration three weeks earlier, the petition’s defensive support of East Germany reflected Third Way advocates’ fears of unification.

In the wake of the Berlin district meeting and the petition, the central presidium held its fourth meeting in seven weeks on 28 November. Here, they affirmed the decision to hold yet another steering committee meeting in December so as to inform the group about preparations for the congress, but more importantly to hold the vote of confidence on Kant. They also affirmed that all members would be invited to the upcoming congress, with Berlin members requested to offer accommodations to out-of-town colleagues. The new statute commission, created by the steering committee would convene the next day and distribute their draft of the document to all members via the December associational newsletter for feedback and alternative suggestions. The statute group was to be led by several presidium members including Gerhard Henniger, indicating some attempt at guiding the process by the old guard leaders, although the commission also featured several critical authors such as Joachim Walther.⁵³

⁵² “Appeal ‘For Our Country,’ 26 November 1989,” in Jarausch and Gransow, *Uniting Germany*, 85.

⁵³ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 28. November 1989,” SV 513, 55. The statute commission would consist of presidium members John Erpenbeck, Klaus Jarmatz, and Gerhard Henniger, along with Werner Creutziger, Gerti Tetzner, Joachim Walther, Charlotte Worgitzky, Manfred Wolter, Karlheinz Steimüller, Joachim Wohlgemuth, Richard Pietraß, and Dorothea Kleine. Erpenbeck was to take the lead in this endeavor and Walther was to introduce the statute at the congress. The commission met 29

The draft of the new statute was issued to union members in December 1989. The tone of the new statute was much altered from its earlier incarnations in key ways. It began with a self-definition: “The Writers Union of the GDR is an autonomous and independent societal organization of the writers of the GDR and of writers who are not GDR citizens but have their permanent residence in the GDR.” Membership in the union obligated authors to uphold certain “core values”:

to gaining freedom of personality through democratically determined societal progress in peace, with social justice and ecologically compatible behavior; to a strict consensus preserving the anti-fascist and all humane values of human history; to the care of the intellectual, in particular of the literary heritage of humanity; to active solidarity with all peoples and countries struggling for their democratic emancipation.

Importantly, the union declared its “sympathy and cooperation” for all writers and artists “independent of their worldview and religious convictions” so long as they upheld these same values. On the basis of these values, the SV pledged to represent “the artistic, legal, and social interests of its members.”⁵⁴ Gone was any reference to socialism or the SED; what held them together was a commitment to general issues of social justice, part of an organization dedicated to serving not an ideological goal but the socioeconomic and professional interests of members.

November, 11 December 1989, and 12 February 1990. “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 15.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 33; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 21.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 31; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 13.02.1990,” SV 509, 8. It was later determined that improvements and alternative proposals for the statute, it was later determined, would be accepted until February (three weeks before the congress) would be accepted until February (three weeks before the congress). “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 12.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 10; “Im Auftrag des Vorstandes vorgelegt vom Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR Abgeschlossen am 15.1.1990,” SV 509, 29. It was also agreed in January that the statute would not be discussed in either the presidium or the steering committee, a move designed to perhaps present the appearance of impartiality on the part of the statute commission. “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 09.01.1990,” SV 509, 54.

⁵⁴ Vorstand und Präsidium, “Statut des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR (1. Entwurf),” 29 November 1989, Berlin, Literaturarchiv: Ulrich-Plenzdorf-Archiv 241, 3, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as UPA).

Also different were the grounds for expulsion from membership. No doubt seeking to avoid the debacles of the 1970s, the new statute stipulated that membership could only be rescinded if the author died, left the GDR, or was expelled, although members could only be expelled in two circumstances: if the conditions for membership were no longer valid or they had failed to pay dues in over a year. Unlike the Berlin meeting of June 1979, expulsions, though still determined by the district organization, would be adjudicated through secret balloting after the author in question was given a chance to defend themselves.⁵⁵

Subtle changes were perceptible as well. For example, now instead of the presidium proposing chairs for commissions and active groups (who would then be approved by the Vorstand), each of these bodies had the right to elect, by secret ballot, their own leaders. The same was true for the chairs and local steering committees of each district organization along with the central steering committee, union president, and four vice presidents. Moreover, rather than a delegate system, all members would now be allowed to attend national writers congresses. The Vorstand would be drastically reduced to no more than twenty members, not counting the chairs of each district branch. The presidium was to be replaced by this smaller steering committee, which instead of the usual three would now meet at least six times each year.⁵⁶ The new statute envisioned an association organized along democratic lines, one designed to answer the complaints many had about how the union had conducted itself in the past, and one distinct from the control of either the SED or elite union members.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5-9.

With the new draft of the statute submitted for members' consideration, the union turned to the issue of its leadership. The steering committee meeting on 7 December 1989 had a solemn task in holding a vote of confidence on Hermann Kant's presidency. Kant easily survived the vote, however: Of the 62 ballots cast, 60 voted "yes," with only two "no" votes, an overwhelming majority in the president's favor.⁵⁷ The reasons behind this easy victory are unclear, although it is likely that the Vorstand's members belonged to a more conservative ilk, perhaps fearful of the changes occurring within the union. It was soon apparent, though, that, like the Berlin district leadership, the members of the central steering committee were out of touch with many union members. This became obvious several days later when on 18 December a group of Berlin authors published an open declaration in the press striking at Kant's leadership. Their declaration began, "We have neither time nor desire to let ourselves risk preparing overdue, grave alterations in this professional association in subordination to heretofore valid, statute-conditional official acts of the Writers Union." In view of these considerations, they questioned the legitimacy of the Vorstand vote: "We see ourselves in no way represented through the steering committee of the association, which recently has confirmed Hermann Kant," they elaborated. In their view, "Hermann Kant is no longer the spokesperson of the writers of the GDR, since he voted against the resolution, aiming at change in the GDR, of the Berlin association of 14.9.89." There were no major literary figures among the list, but some notable critics were present, including Joachim Walther, Rita Kuczyinski, Reimar Gilsenbach, Elke Erb, Thomas Reschke, and Helga Schubert.⁵⁸ This open act of

⁵⁷ The actual paper ballots can be found in SV 510, vol. 3, 16; "Im Auftrag des Vorstandes vorgelegt vom Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR Abgeschlossen am 15.1.1990," SV 509, 29.

⁵⁸ "Erklärung Berliner Autoren," 18 December 1989, SV 508, vol. 5, 6.

defiance, more serious than the 23 November defeat of the Berlin Bezirksvorstand's resolution on the expulsions, demanded the union accede to the will of Kant's opponents.

Like Görlich before him, Kant accepted this public challenge for what it was: the writing on the wall. He consequently announced at the 20 December presidium meeting that in view of the 18 December declaration by members of the Berlin district association, coupled with increasing attacks against him, he would step down as president effective 22 December. After a lengthy discussion, the presidium agreed to issue an open letter to all union members enumerating the reasons why Kant had made his decision as well as to convey their opinions on the matter.⁵⁹ The open letter expressed "extraordinary" regret for Kant's resignation, because "Hermann Kant belongs to the personalities who rendered outstanding services to the association and publicly supported and promoted renewal in our country for a long time." Despite receiving near unanimous trust from the Vorstand a fortnight earlier, however, "the physical and emotional pressure, to which he feels exposed, is for Hermann Kant no longer bearable." Singled out was the group of Berlin members and candidates and their allies in the media, who had acted without "democratic legitimation because they turn against the interests of the great majority of members." This was especially egregious given the professional anxieties they were all feeling in "a time where all professional and social security measures, which the association carved out over decades, are endangered." Many colleagues, especially the elderly, infirm, and low-income-earners, would be particularly

⁵⁹ "Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 20. Dezember 1989," SV 513, 41; "Im Auftrag des Vorstandes vorgelegt vom Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR Abgeschlossen am 15.1.1990," SV 509, 32. At least one Vorstand member, Harald Hauser, nominated Christa Wolf or Volker Braun to be the new presidents of the association even before Kant's resignation. Steering Committee Meeting Notes, 14 November 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 18.

endangered if a split occurred within the union.⁶⁰ The message was clear: given the perilous position of writers in the new world East Germany was entering, this was no time for drastic changes at the top of organization, at least not through extra-statutory means. Kant, the letter implied, had faithfully served the interests of the GDR's authors, and so his resignation marked a grim day.

Not mentioned in the letter, though, was Kant's connection to the 1979 expulsions or his hesitance to embrace reform fully during the Wende. The old guard leaders of the Writers Union had pushed for reforms within the union and in the SED, but not far enough, at least in the minds of some SV members. Kant in particular had shown some flexibility during his tenure as president, especially during the Wende when he had acceded to demands regarding the union's history. His timely critique of Honecker and his involvement in investigating police brutality probably also bought him time, and he outlasted both Honecker and his successor Krenz, who had resigned 3 December amidst failure to inspire popular trust in his reform program. Yet by December, with the SED in utter disarray and the critical younger generation of writers in full ascendance, dissenters within the Writers Union saw their opportunity to strike at the president, perhaps incensed by the rubber-stamp given to his leadership by the Vorstand, a vote which seemed to have come from a different age than the one East Germany was now entering. For the organization to truly reform itself, these authors believed, Kant would have to go.

Spring Awakening? Radical Reform in Early 1990

⁶⁰ Open Letter to All Members of the Writers Union of the GDR, 20 December 1989, SV 513, 50.

As the new year dawned, the Writers Union, without its longtime leader at the helm, turned its attention to congress preparations and especially to protecting the social, economic, and intellectual interests of its members. The early months of 1990 saw hope comingling with sober reflections, especially as it became ever more clear that most East Germans desired unification with the Federal Republic instead of East Germany's continued independent statehood. The fears of Third Way authors were realized when the elections for the Volkskammer (People's Chamber, East Germany's parliament and the de facto seat of power by the winter), gave victory to not to those parties formed by opposition groups, but rather to parties favoring a quick unification: Kohl's CDU and the newly reformed SPD, polling a combined 62.7% of the votes.⁶¹ By the summer the two Germanys had worked out the details of unification, and on 3 October 1990 they were united as a single German state.⁶² It was one thing to be in a reformed socialist state where writers could still count on some level of socioeconomic protection from the government, but the thought of being cast adrift in a free market like in West Germany was a frightening prospect for many union members.

One barometer of the anxiety felt by union members were continual budget cuts, begun in 1989 and continued throughout early 1990. Already in January 1989 the union was forced to slash its international relations budget, especially for hosting foreign writers and subsidizing trips by SV members to both socialist and non-socialist states. In total, the union cut over 100,000 Marks from these funds, slightly more for activities in

⁶¹ The SED reformed itself as the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) but only won 16.3% of the vote. The alliance of the opposition groups known as *Bündnis 90* received a mere 2.9%. Maier, 211-14.

⁶² For more on the treaty negotiations between the two German states, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

the West than the East (52,388 Marks vs. 48,905 Marks, respectively).⁶³ In March the union had to refrain from sending a delegation to an international meeting of crime novelists in Mexico “since there are no funds available for it.”⁶⁴ Worse news arrived in December, when the Ministry of Finance informed that they would need “to extensively do away with” contributions for mass organizations starting in 1990.⁶⁵ Later in December, the Ministry of Finance issued a series of suggested ways to increase the self-financing of the union, including raising membership dues, charging for use of the union’s library, changing the price of NDL, fuller use/renting out of the writers’ convalescence home in Petzow, and cutting back international work.⁶⁶ The budget crisis, already serious in 1989, quickly escalated as East Germany entered 1990. In January 1990, for instance, the secretariat was informed that it would need to reorganize itself to accommodate new budgetary constraints.⁶⁷ For the planned March 1991 congress, members were informed that they would need to pay for their own meals and most of the travel/lodging costs.⁶⁸ The rest of the costs for the congress, some 125,000 Marks, would be made up via cuts in the union’s international work.⁶⁹

⁶³ Abteilung Internationale Beziehungen, “Vorlage für das Sekretariat,” 13 January 1989, SV 508, vol. 1, 97-100.

⁶⁴ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 7.3.1989,” SV 508, vol. 2, 149.

⁶⁵ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 05.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 23.

⁶⁶ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 19.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 1.

⁶⁷ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 8. Januar 1990,” SV 513, 35.

⁶⁸ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 21.11.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 31; Sekretariat, “Einladung Ausserordentlicher Schriftstellerkongress der DDR, 1. bis 3. März 1990,” 8 December 1989, SV 508, vol. 5, 20; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 22.01.1990,” SV 509, 18; Sekretariat, Abteilung Internationale Beziehungen, “Vorlage für das Sekretariat,” 2 February 1990, Berlin, SV 509, 11.

⁶⁹ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Erläuterung zum Jahres Finanzabschluss 1989,” 26 February 1990, SV 509, 1-2. The situation was not so dire as to prevent members from contributing to the union’s “solidarity

One way of combating these economic pressures was to bond together with other artists also worried about their livelihood in uncertain times. To this end, the presidium already expressed its agreement on 20 December, at the last meeting helmed by Kant, with a declaration prepared by the Union of Visual Artists in response to a Ministry for Culture statement on “market-based principles in artistic production.” Faced with these indications of impending changes, the artists of East Germany agreed to a declaration of their own, expressing “the great anxiety of writers and artists” in “giving up professional and social rights.” Kant was instructed to attend in late December a coordination meeting of the presidents of all of the artistic associations, with the intention of creating an “umbrella organization for artistic associations for the defense of artistic interests.”⁷⁰ Of chief concern was “the artistic and social existence of artists in a society in which art is declared to be a ‘commodity’ and ‘market mechanisms’ should decide what art is.”⁷¹ This “Protective Alliance” eventually agreed upon by all artistic associations in East Germany, was to come into existence in 1990, with Max Walter Schulz designated to represent the writers.⁷² The need for such an association was further underscored when in late January 1990 representatives of the “*Schutzverbund*” met with members of the cultural committee of the Volkskammer and the Minister of Culture. Here, the minister

commission” work. In December 1989 alone, for instance, members gave over forty thousand Marks to buy medication for Romanians, and over the course of 1989, the association’s members gave two hundred thousand Marks to aid victims of a bad earthquake in Armenia. “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung am 12.12.1989,” SV 508, vol. 5, 12; Report on Solidarity Commission Work for Extraordinary Congress, n.d., SV 509, 34.

⁷⁰ “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 20. Dezember 1989,” SV 513, 41; “Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 02.01.1990,” SV 509, 58.

⁷¹ “Im Auftrag des Vorstandes vorgelegt vom Sekretariat des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR Abgeschlossen am 15.1.1990,” SV 509, 33.

⁷² “Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 8. Januar 1990,” SV 513, 34.

made clear that budget restrictions would limit the funds made available by the government to the artist associations.⁷³ Facing the uncertainty of the free market, East Germany's artists drew together to protect the protections won over the past forty years.

The reaction to these pressures within the district associations of the Writers Union reveals the depth of anxiety felt by members as they sought to reframe the SV's mission. In January 1990, for instance, Potsdam's district branch held their election meeting and continued their discussion of these issues. At the session, the group listened to reports about the social situation of members as well as efforts to help younger writers. They were also briefed on ongoing deliberations over the union's statute. The subsequent discussion centered on democratizing "associational life" within the SV, social and legal questions, and the "preservation of an independent cultural identity" for East Germans. Members expressed fear of "social insecurity through market-based tendencies [...] created through a strong competition of publishers with each other; therefore the founding of a 'protective alliance of artists of the GDR' is supported." Other discussion participants commented that the union should make sure to continue assisting younger authors as they began their careers. Finally, the assembled writers agreed to issue a position paper to all other district organizations making clear their views and encouraging comments from these other groups.⁷⁴

In that paper, the Potsdam district branch appealed to all district branches, expressing its "concern for the meaningful continuance of our association, which is

⁷³ "Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 29. Januar 1990," SV 513, 18.

⁷⁴ "Protokoll der Wahlversammlung am 24.01.1990 in Eduard-Claudius-Club," SV-BV Potsdam 16. Similar statements were made at the March member meeting in Potsdam as well. See Wieland, "Protokoll der Mitgliederversammlung am 27.03.1990 im Eduard-Claudius-Klub," SV-BV Potsdam 16.

endangered, on the one hand, through the insistence on old centralistic structures and on other, through dissolution efforts.” This was disquieting especially because “[t]he more market mechanisms take effect in our country, the more urgently we need the association.” To drive the point home, the memo asked the recipients to picture life without the union, of the “rights earned under difficulties” which “do not automatically transfer to one or several successor organizations.” They needed the union “for the enforcement of our social and creative concerns” and as “lobbyist vis-à-vis the state and other organizations.” Therefore it was not even a question of dissolving the union, but rather of democratizing its structures and tasks. To achieve this, “[a]ny ideological interference must be eliminated.” Each district association should also work independently of the others (perhaps wary of Berlin’s predominance), with the branches bound only to the central statute, congressional decisions, and “financial opportunities of the association.” They further demanded that the union leaders “not meekly accept the cutbacks of financial resources of the association but rather struggle against the concerned ministries for the preservation of subsidies.” Of particular concern was also retaining SV control over the union’s convalescence home in Petzow. Likewise, the allocation of spots in vacation resorts and spas should be maintained, as should the dispensing of assistance, pensions, stipends, and aid for research trips. Work with the younger generation should also continue within the union, whereby newer authors could receive support from the association and individual members. Finally, the Potsdam authors championed the proposed Schutzverbund of East German artists to represent their interests “in the highest possible measure.”⁷⁵ These Potsdam writers had little interest in

⁷⁵ Writers Union of the GDR, District Organization Potsdam to All District Organizations, 24 January 1990, SV-BV Potsdam 16.

solving East Germany's problems beyond a general democratization within their ranks. Above all else, they were anxious to retain the social and economic privileges they had accrued, and demanded the Writers Union's primary task be ensuring their continuation.

Longtime chairman of the Magdeburg BV Martin Selber's reply to an invitation to attend an upcoming Vorstand meeting was perhaps typical of many of his colleagues, reflecting the anxieties of a new era dawning as well as a mourning that which had passed. On 8 February 1990 Selber penned a letter to Gerhard Henniger informing the latter that he would not be attending the steering committee meeting or the congress. He emphasized his political engagement over the past forty-plus years, including in the FDJ, Cultural League, the Liberal Democratic Party (one of East Germany's block parties), and the Writers Union, among others. Forty years invested in these endeavors – that was a great deal of time, and he expressed that Henniger would understand how he felt, “to stand after so much time practically at the beginning again.” Faced with these altered circumstances, “I cannot yet bear it that everything, but also everything which we have made, is said to have been wrong, that we were exploited and lied to and now stand before a heap of rubble.” In such circumstances he couldn't bring himself to write, and besides, he didn't even know if his latest book, which was under contract for publication, would ever appear. All of these things left him “awfully tired,” especially since he was now a pensioner, and as a result, “I have however simply no more desire in the foreseeable future to be active socially.” He had left the steering committee of his political party and now wished to do the same with the Writers Union's Vorstand and the upcoming congress.⁷⁶ Selber's resignation, both of his union post and in a broader sense,

⁷⁶ Martin Selber to Gerhard Henniger, 8 February 1990, SV 510, vol. 3, 6.

reflected a life's work that he feared was slipping away. His was a perspective likely shared by many authors and he thus offered insight into why many members, especially older ones, had no desire to participate in the union's reimagining, despite the common professional obstacles he and others now faced.

The "extraordinary congress" of March 1990 was different from the previous ten in striking ways, starting with the planning. The orchestration of speakers, themes, and candidates for the leadership bodies was completely absent, as, for example, the presidium ceded to the district organizations the responsibility for selecting candidates for the steering committee, with the opportunity for other nominees to declare their intentions at the congress itself. Likewise, the congress' leadership group would be elected at the actual meeting rather than predetermined, although the presidium proposed this group consist of leaders of the district organizations elected at pre-congress sessions.⁷⁷ All members, unlike previous congresses, were invited to attend, reflecting the seriousness of the task which they set out for themselves: creating a new statute "that defines function and structure of the association in the process of democratic renewal of GDR society."⁷⁸ Public invitations to former union members were also extended. The foreign press, like with the tenth congress, were also permitted to attend.⁷⁹

The "extraordinary congress," held 1-3 March, codified the distinct break with the Writers Union's past that had been initiated in the Fall of 1989, although in important

⁷⁷ "Beschlussprotokoll der Sitzung des Präsidiums vom 8. Januar 1990," SV 513, 36-37. See also "Wahlordnung für den Außerordentlichen Schriftstellerkongreß 1.-3. März 1990," January 1990, SV 513, 22; "Geschäftsordnung für den Außerordentlichen Kongreß vom 1.-3.3.1990," January 1990, SV 513, 23.

⁷⁸ Steering Committee Meeting Notes, 14 November 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, 17.

⁷⁹ "Beschlussprotokoll der Sekretariatssitzung vom 09.01.1990," SV 509, 54.

areas continuities were consciously maintained. According to the introduction to the congress' write-up in the union newsletter, the meeting drew from the same spirit of the 1987 congress, which had "already critically engaged the GDR society." Now in March 1990, they had met to appraise "which support literature requires as a means of societal communication under future conditions." Their meeting testified to the "will to renewal of modes of working by the simultaneous preservation of its existence without already knowing the concrete conditions it will encounter in a mercantilist society of all people." Interestingly, the congress voted to maintain the organization's name as the "Writers Union of the GDR," though its connections with that state were diminishing. They also, "in a directly democratic process," hammered out the new statute and elected new union officials. The new Vorstand was drastically reduced from over a hundred members to only fourteen, smaller than the latest presidium had been. Among the group were very few noteworthy authors and only three women. Moreover, only four had served in the previous steering committee's term and none had been presidium members.⁸⁰ Stefan Heym was elected the honorary chairperson of the union with Rainer Kirsch as the actual chair. His two deputies were male authors, poet and essayist Bernd Jentzsch and editor Joachim Walther. All three of the new leaders as well as the honorary chairperson had suffered in some capacity at the hands of the Writers Union and the SED during the 1970s, so their election had deep significance within the Schriftstellerverband. Moreover, the new leadership consisted of authors who had grown up mainly in the GDR, marking a generational shift in the union as well. The other body created by the

⁸⁰ The entire Vorstand consisted of Peter Brasch, Werner Creutziger, Friedrich Dieckmann, Klaus Jarmatz, Manfred Jendryschik, Adel Karasholi, Helga Königsdorf, Gisela Kraft, Werner Liersch, Richard Pietraß, Wolf Spillner, Landolf Scherzer, Jutta Schlott, and Jean Villain.

congress was a five-person “Financial Control Commission.” Elected shortly after the congress by the new steering committee as business manager, a replacement for the First Secretary position, was Dirk von Kügelgen.⁸¹

The statute adopted at the congress differed somewhat from the version that had circulated in December, marking even more of a break from the previous statutes of the union. The mission statement for the organization appeared in the statute’s first section:

The association is a democratic, independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of writers. It represents and promotes the social, legal, and cultural interests of its members. It also champions equal rights of writers not organized in the association. It fosters and defends the cultural and regional identity of literature. It promotes multicultural, international exchange.

Much of the sentiment of the December statute proposal remained in the emphasis on nonpartisanship, representing the interests of members, and promoting shared values. The most glaring absence was the lack of any mention of East Germany, with the notable addition of the union committing itself to helping even those authors not members of the SV. As far as membership was concerned, all German and Sorbian speakers could be members along with those who lived in the “organizational area” but were citizens of foreign countries, so long as they met the “artistic prerequisites.” The only explicit ban on membership was for those who advocated “racist, fascist, Stalinist or other ideas harming human dignity,” an equivalence the union had been unwilling to make in the past. In addition, leaders were to be elected via a secret vote. In the event of conflicts, either with each other or with leadership groups, an internal arbitration commission would be created to arbitrate the disputes, a decision probably made to avoid the internal

⁸¹ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Ausserordentlicher Schriftstellerkongress,” *Mitteilungen* 3/4 (March/April 1990), Literaturarchiv: Rainer-Kirsch-Archiv 1163, vol. 1, 3-4, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as RKA).

strife which racked the union throughout its existence. The only conditions for losing membership were death, voluntary exit, or failure to pay membership dues. As for the structure, the district or state organization (*Bezirksverband* or *Landesverband*) would still be the main unit of the union. Above them would stand the central steering committee, which was to represent “the interests of the entire association externally.” Members to this body would be elected at least every four years, and only for a maximum of two terms. Finally, the new statute ended with a nod toward the Schutzverbund, emphasizing, “[t]he association strives for the alliance of all artist associations and seeks the connection to a trade union umbrella organization.”⁸² In all of these provisions, the union made clear that, while it promoted humanistic values, it was first and foremost a professional organization. Even its specific country affiliation, now in doubt due to growing support for unification, was de-emphasized.

The actual congress was taken up by numerous statements by authors and other literary professionals, especially in ironing out the details of the statute. Some participated in the congress remotely, issuing letters to be read to those in attendance. Ironically, one such letter arrived from Hermann Kant, who had infamously derided Christa Wolf for just such a violation of associational norms just two-and-a-half years earlier. Blaming his absence on his heart problems, he regretted not being able to give his opinion in person. But in his absence he wished to communicate, “The association has been in the past decade that part of the GDR in which the understanding of democracy, critical consciousness, diversity of opinions, and union-like self-assertion were marked more clearly than in comparable areas of society.” To this end, “[w]riters

⁸² Ibid., 5-8.

of the GDR participated decisively in the efforts for détente and readiness for dialogue; behavior showing solidarity and ecological rationality had had their spokesman in them.” Moreover, “[i]f the history of publishing was a history of opening, it traced back above all to the action of writers; if the truth stood incomparably clearer in books than in newspapers, that had of course to do with the professional conception of authors.” In literature, there had been arguments about “morality, policy, ideologies, actual and imaginary threats, necessary and obsolete boundaries, conceptions of socialism of outdated and recent nature, actual freedom and inalienable rights.” In all of these arguments, “which should have taken place in the entire GDR society, there were several in the Writers Union.” Like other “proxy wars,” these disputes had been “rigorous and unjust,” with both writers and readers suffering as a result. The old leadership could not take credit for the union’s successes if it was unwilling to take responsibility for its failures, he surmised, so he claimed responsibility for both. Yet he would also “contradict emphatically all those who would like to reinterpret our country as an illiterate wasteland, eminent literary successes as a continual persecution of books, and the Writers Union as a literature police.” In the end, he considered the presidency to be an honorary post, “and I have handled it in the most comprehensive sense of this word.”⁸³

Kant’s boastful, defensive statement was notable in its selectivity. In his mind, the Writers Union had been a site of open discourse, tackling the most serious problems facing East Germany and fighting the injustices of the SED in order to improve the country’s socialist course. There was, of course, some truth in Kant’s assertion, and he was correct that the union leaders had contributed to this atmosphere. But Kant’s rosy

⁸³ Ibid., 9-10.

assessment all-but canonized the union, painting it as a leading oppositional force against the SED dictatorship. His defensiveness at assertions that the association had been a “literature police” was perhaps understandable. Yet, although the union was not a pure disciplinary instrument, to deny its role in repressing authors was purely apologetics.

The congress’ plenary session was opened by Volker Braun, who began by referencing the 4 November demonstration at Alexanderplatz. On that day, he had sensed that the time had arrived which many had worked for; “literature’s consciousness of the horizon was no unconscious dreaming, and it had shown itself again: it is no other horizon than of the revolution.” Now months later, they gathered as “an old association in order to connect ourselves with a new one.” Braun became the first of several authors to allude to the impending parliamentary elections, noting that they stood at a crossroads of “revolution or restoration.” The “garment” being offered to them through union with the FRG had been accepted in haste, “without a fitting” as it were, the “fool’s dress” instead of the “dress of democracy.” East Germans were being had, he implied, and it was the duty of writers to draw attention to what he might have seen as the Kaiser’s new clothes. To this end, they had moved up the date of the extraordinary congress in order to make it a “theoretical contribution to the renewal of the country, as with the X. Congress in November 1987.” But despite these positive accomplishments, they could now only move forward by breaking with their union’s past: “Achievements and transgressions of the Writers Union,” he asserted, “are one indivisible history, which comes from the structures and customs of repression and of solidarity.” The history of the union therefore needed to be “decoded”: “[T]he mysterious script was the statute,” he explained, “which codified depravation through a command, [through the] interfering of

the Party.” They ought not simply “paint over” these connections to the past when considering a new, different statute, because capitalism, like communism before it, would try to interfere in their association; thus honestly confronting the past, he intimated, would prevent similar errors in the future. His statement also implied a rough equation of capitalism and communism, at least in their attempts to manipulate the artistic community to their advantage. The poet, author, and playwright closed his speech by underscoring some of the key differences between their present congress and congresses past, not least of which was the absence of Hermann Kant. Kant, he sympathized, “had held the position in difficult years, and I don’t want to deny him my attention.”⁸⁴ Braun thus mixed candor and understanding, emphasizing the need for critical appraisals of the union’s history while simultaneously acknowledging the difficulties faced by the very union leaders who had actively participated in the “structures and customs of repression” he had earlier derided.

Syrian-born essayist and poet Adel Karasholi, who had moved to Leipzig in the 1960s and joined the Writers Union in 1980, used his discussion time to draw attention to the costs of the Wende. In Berlin, he related how his nine-year-old niece now could no longer play with the children used to, because people had begun to tell her that these games were “only for Germans.” He told of another foreign woman who had not been allowed to buy her groceries because she did not have her ID on her, despite the fact that she had frequented that market for years. Someone else had strung a banner near a student house where foreigners lived, claiming “democracy only for Germans.” He himself had once received a lovely “Christmas present” – on the rear window of his car

⁸⁴ Ibid., 13-15.

one Christmas night he discovered that someone had scrawled “foreigners out.” These occurrences were thus nothing new, he explained, and could not solely be blamed on recent events, but whereas previously these signs of racism were “subliminally latent,” they were now “observable in increasing measure in many areas of this society.” He passionately noted that he had made his home in Germany for a quarter of a century; he had had two children there and now had a granddaughter there. He felt a connection to his city of Leipzig, “despite its foul air and dilapidated houses.” He thus implored his colleagues to consider his descriptions of racism “as substantive and existential.” In such circumstances, dialogue was urgently needed between peoples and cultures, with the hungry and oppressed of this world, with their great-grandchildren, and “with the air and the trees, with the rivers and the seas.”⁸⁵ Karasholi’s statement, a novel one in the history of GDR writers congresses, pointed to a problem area in East Germany that the organization as a whole had previously given little attention to: racism and xenophobia in their country, especially as a result of the autumn revolution. Karasholi did not explicitly condemn the unification process, but his implication was that while there had been problems of this nature in the GDR, they were much worse now.

Ronald M. Schernikau, a 29-year-old West German author who had become a GDR citizen only in September 1989, also spoke at the congress and captured some of the acrimony felt by many colleagues towards the Federal Republic, especially as unification loomed. Shernikau declared himself an avowed communist and brashly suggested that “I consider the stupidity of communists no argument against communism.” Honecker had tried to be a “good king” but had failed at forging an effective consensus.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 17-19.

The “king” had also used “the enemy” as an excuse for all of his failures, and now people no longer believed that real enemies existed. The real danger of the West therefore lay hidden, doubly concealed by the clever manipulative tactics of the Federal Republic, which emphasized its moral superiority in order to avoid discussing concrete political ideas. What had surprised Schernikau most about this entire farce was the “utter defenselessness with which the West was granted admission, the independent, entirely taken-for-granted retreat, the self-destruction of the communists.” Indeed, it was only a very short time after Honecker was overthrown, and “here the universities dismantle Marxism, here DEWAG [the GDR’s official advertising agency] advertizes for David Bowie (mind you), here the FF-Dabei [an inexpensive weekly listing of radio and television programming] prints horoscopes, and the writers establish information centers for readers or an SPD alike.” He was dumbfounded by these events: “Where have they left their history books? The communists gave away their publishing houses, the Hungarian government erected a CIA radio transmitter in their country, and the Writers Union of the GDR protest against subsidies which it receives from the state. They have all gone insane.” These “stupid communists,” were all in for a shock: those who demanded a trade union would only get an “entrepreneur’s association” (*Unternehmerverband*); those wanting “the colorfulness of the west,” would only end up with “the desperation of the West”; those desiring bananas would only “let negroes starve.”⁸⁶ Schernikau’s views were alarmist and hyperbolic, but they no doubt found some resonance among union members fearing the worst in German unification. Probably dreading a return to the country he had so recently left, Schernikau savaged the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 19-21.

West's destructive capitalism while accusing East Germans of lacking the intelligence to resist what in his mind were obvious ploys.

Christa Wolf also spoke at the March 1990 congress, making her first appearance at an official writers congress in almost two decades. The author opened her speech to the congress with an epigram from Heinrich Heine: "How should a person write without a censor, who always lived under censorship?" The quote was meant to warn against replacing a "probing self-awareness" with nostalgia, both in Heine's day and the present. Turning to the Writers Union, she wished that members of the "old presidium or steering committee had fought back against the spoken and unspoken criticism of them or in any case of the role which was intended for them in the old structures, and which they in part fulfilled, against which they in part fought back." This differentiated evaluation of the successes and failures of the union's leaders led her to conclude that individual blame in the latter case was unproductive: "it is more important to create an atmosphere in which it isn't made too difficult for anyone to learn and in which they can bring it upon themselves to express themselves publicly about the necessity and advances of this learning process." To this end, "We must all certainly accept responsibility and should not project it onto others." Wolf here steered towards rapprochement within the union, insisting the association "would need to look self-critically as much as possible and must at the same time attempt to escape the self-destroying tendencies which in these weeks are widely disseminated among us."⁸⁷ She struck a decidedly centrist tone; she wanted a reckoning with the past, but not to the extent that it tore the Schriftstellerverband asunder.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22-23.

She lamented that they had only begun the process of renewal, and in doing so had wasted too much time on the new statute. She made clear she did not want to minimize the statute's importance given their past difficulties with statutes and various ordinances "which have been instruments for censorship and other types of obstructions and harassment." But endless speeches about the statute left them little time for the real discussions about societal issues. They and the public would need to realize that "[t]his is no longer a politically or cultural-politically uniform association, which can speak politically or cultural-politically with one voice." They would need to consider this idea seriously, perhaps with the recognition, though, that they had withdrawn their collective voice too much. Many of them foresaw difficulties making a living in the near future; therefore the congress needed to see its main task as "dealing with the social situation of associational members."⁸⁸ Wolf was openly questioning the direction the union was headed, worried that while it was good that the union had relaxed restrictions on different opinions, perhaps they had thrown the baby out with the bathwater in terms of the collective power that such forced uniformity had provided, especially when it came to securing their livelihood.

The final portion of Wolf's speech dealt with the role of writers in a new East Germany. As writers, they had reached the end of a stage in which they had been often asked "to speak in place of others – because otherwise no institution printed the contradictions which always cut this country more deeply, and because it would have cost others more dearly than us, if they had spoken." At the same time, there had been several "good, critical, oppositional" books produced by authors who were not or did not want to

⁸⁸ Ibid., 23.

be part of the Writers Union, naming the Prenzlauer Berg poets as an example. She sensed that in the past several weeks there had been “targeted, comprehensive action” among some West and East German media outlets “which, in connection with the general total dismantling of the GDR, also wants to dismantle the literature which was written in the GDR, and similarly as many of its authors as possible with it.” The reasoning behind Wolf’s earlier conciliatory tone were now apparent, as she now felt compelled to defend her life’s work to growing choruses of critics calling it into question. She implored that the new Writers Union demonstrate solidarity while also seeking “a new relationship to our readers, who perhaps also a little through our benefit, no longer need us as representatives for their interests because many of them have learned to speak for themselves.” The readers would hopefully accept this new relationship, if only authors would communicate that they had weaknesses and made errors, that they needed the “indulgence” of the readers and their help, that they wanted to hear from readers on “what they actually now expect from us.” Whatever happened next in terms of laws, defamations, and opportunities, “we belong to the privileged and rare German writers who in a part of Germany witness the awakening of a revolutionary renewal through and through; some also joined in [...] who from this experience can, but also must, create the force to resist the advancing restoration.” “Why,” she asked, “should we all collectively lose our heads, abandon ourselves, our history, our courage, and our self-confidence, also our much tried experience in exploiting contradictions with the rulers – just because the powers change, with whom we must argue?”⁸⁹ These last lines betrayed Wolf’s concern, well-established at that point, about the coming of unification. But she also seemed

⁸⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

hopeful that despite these drastically altered circumstances, despite the need to renegotiate the relationship with their readers and their state, they could still hold on to their ideals which drove had driven their work for decades. Of course, it was easier to be hopeful when one had Wolf's international renown. Writers of lesser stature, many of whom were involved in the new union leadership, probably felt greater anxiety.

The chairman-elect Rainer Kirsch concluded the congress by summarizing the main work ahead of the union. In his mind, the union's future work would embody several key tasks. First and foremost was a "decisive representation of professional interests." Only second was "a place of exchanging ideas about literary and socially driving questions among colleagues who write in the German language and with writers of other languages and countries." The most important task of the steering committee was to ensure that the association could survive financially in order to fulfill these functions. Kirsch justified that they could accomplish nothing without money; as a result, money had to be their main focus, "and I find it peculiar and unworldly, when one is indignant about that." In practical terms, this meant a reorganization of the central secretariat while ensuring the district branches were able to continue their work. This also meant finding ways to hold onto their convalescence home in Petzow and also to keep NDL afloat. Finally, it struck him as imperative that they work closely with the FRG's Union of German Writers, although he personally believed that in case of a rapid unification process, they should keep the SV independent for the time being. This was because the union "stands for many regional traditions, to which the Sorbs also count, and has a particular historical background, so that an amalgamation would hardly be

appropriate.”⁹⁰ Here Kirsch tacitly agreed with the sentiments of Wolf; the union was built on distinct national traditions and values, and the formal accession of the GDR into West Germany did not necessarily mean they should follow suit with their own FRG counterpart. In general, Kirsch firmly declared the Writers Union to be chiefly concerned with the socioeconomic and professional wellbeing of its members; all efforts needed to be directed to this goal, especially as financial crisis intensified.

Finally, the congressional attendees issued several declarations. First was one “for the maintaining of the Sorbian minority,” claiming, “With the destruction of Sorbian villages not only the history and culture of this people expires; the cohesion and continuity of this ethnic minority is also endangered.” Second was a declaration “against new environmental dangers,” urging the preservation of the remaining unpolluted areas of the country. Specifically, they targeted “speculative timbering, uncontrolled development, [and] asphalt coating for unrestrained individual traffic.” This meant building more national parks and nature preserves, land utilization plans, improved nature laws, environmentally friendly or energy saving technologies, and generally doing more to “counteract a predominance of consumption thinking.” Finally, the press declaration of the congress detailed the main accomplishments of the event for the public. First among the points emphasized was that “[t]he congress reflected, [...] the new societal, associational, and literary policy situation, with its big challenges to orient completely anew and to define future work clearly.” The second component of the press declaration drew attention to the “democratic renewal of the association” via “collective development and adoption of a new statute.” In this regard, the association drew a “critical

⁹⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

delimitation to its former party political monopolization,” pledging to move forward as an “independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit organization” committed to representing the social, cultural, and legal interests of members. The penultimate paragraph of the declaration implored authors and readers alike “not to suppress their own past now through the overwhelming present.” Their “painful experiences” needed to be worked through, “self-critically and also self-consciously,” but “[t]hey are a part of our identity in this country, with the weaknesses and strengths.” The GDR might be heading towards reunification, “but our biographical experiences with their historical roots remain!”⁹¹ These various declarations continued in the trajectory set after the tenth congress, accelerated during the autumn upheaval. Concerns over the treatment of the Sorbian minority, environmental degradation, and self-criticism were nothing new, but the added plea to remember their “biographical experiences” and “historical roots” in the GDR belied a sense of normalcy. Writers were obviously anxious about the questions raised by unification, and in the face of these uncertainties, they looked to the past.

Crisis and Dissolution, Summer-Winter 1990

After the March congress, the Writers Union’s new leaders set about trying to address the many challenges facing their members. In doing so, Kirsch et al. faced a series of uphill battles, especially as budget cuts continued to impinge upon what the Schriftstellerverband could actually accomplish, even operating in streamlined form and under democratic principles. As the summer wore on, the SV found itself fiscally insolvent, and despite efforts to cut costs and procure state assistance, leaders began

⁹¹ Ibid., 26-28.

seriously floating ideas of dissolution. By the time of unification in October 1990 it was clear that the Writers Union was no longer viable; in the association's remaining months union members wrangled over what to do next while, in the process stoking one final controversy within the organization.

As one of his first official acts as chairman of the Writers Union, Rainer Kirsch set about lobbying the People's Chamber for socioeconomic protections. In April he issued a letter to the Volkskammer expressing the concerns of the union members as the GDR moved toward unification. His first concern was for the transition from the East to the West German Mark, as freelance authors lacked regular income. He also asked that rent be subsidized up until a certain level for authors' workspaces. He wanted freelance artists to be included in unemployment regulations, especially in view of the numerous contracts which "through no fault of their own" had been abrogated as publishing houses adjusted to the new economic circumstances. Attention also needed to be paid to freelance authors who had reached retirement age and consequently were no longer as productive. Furthermore, Kirsch insisted that looking after the artistic unions should be a top priority for the Volkskammer, as the associations "represent their professions not out of the pursuit of profit, but rather in the interest of core cultural values, which are indispensable for the entire German nation and for Europe." The new president was already universalizing the importance of East German writers, establishing them as worthy of protection despite the looming merger with the FRG. As a postscript, the letter indicated that Kirsch had received several letters recently from authors relating their

financial situation in the revolutionary circumstances, implying the great need among writers for the protections he was demanding.⁹²

The SV's leaders were not content to place all their eggs in the Volkskammer's basket, however. In late May the union's representatives met with counterparts from the VS for a seminar on West German contract law for authors and translators, with West German colleagues commenting on their typical publishing contracts. At the meeting, the Schriftstellerverband's old friend Bernt Engelmann detailed the progress they had made towards procuring professional and social protections for members since the association was founded in 1969, although he lamented that their efforts had frequently met with the refusal of publishers to reach binding collective agreements. Unfortunately, they had still not been able to conclude such agreements, though the VS had been successful negotiating a standard, albeit non-binding contract. Still, there were great problems, as many FRG authors saw minimal returns in book royalties, making the further standardization of contract forms a key priority. To this end, "Through extremely arduous and long legwork [the VS] is finally successful developing a framework that, to be sure, contains no numbers, but creates clear conditions." By concluding this standard contract between the VS and The German Book Trade Association, "publishers can no longer risk going to court with a cutthroat and deceitful contract for the author." Short of legal protections, which were lacking in West Germany, the VS would continue to strive for the "standardizing of good customs [*gute Sitten*]." ⁹³ These were important gains in

⁹² Rainer Kirsch to the People's Parliament of the GDR, 23 April 1990, Berlin, RKA 1163, vol. 1.

⁹³ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Informationen," n.d., RKA 1163, vol. 1.

the West German context, but the lack of concrete agreements must have been unsettling for Writers Union members.

The Writers Union's new leaders took stock of their situation in late May. Despite hardships, not all had been entirely grim in 1990. Between January and May, union membership actually increased by 147 literary professionals, reaching 1041 members by May Day. Nevertheless, cuts were needed within the union's apparatus to keep the association financially viable. It was estimated that the central secretariat would need to be reduced from 46 to 22 members (a loss of 52% of its personnel), although the district secretaries would stay on in the same numbers as before. Cuts were also mandated for other areas, including dissolving the union's library, transferring their archive to the Academy of the Arts, minimizing international commitments, and reducing the expenditures of the central leadership groups. These steep cuts were necessitated especially because the union found it difficult to reduce bridge money and unemployment assistance to members. The budget cuts broke down as follows:

TABLE 2: Financial Plan 1990⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Source: Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Zur Situation und zur Prognose II. Halbjahr 1990," 28 May 1990, RKA 1163, vol. 1.

	Original Plan (Thousand Marks)	Adjusted Plan		
	2nd Half 1990	2nd Half 1990	Difference	Dif. Per Month
Loans/Salaries	675.0	540.0	(135.0)	(22.5)
Rent	112.5	114.0	1.5	0.3
Districts	48.5	36.0	(12.5)	(2.1)
Preservation, Expansion				
Basic Funds	30.0	30.0	-	-
Energy	5.5	5.4	(0.1)	(0.0)
Material/Postage/Other	7.0	7.2	0.2	0.0
International Work	100.0	54.0	(46.0)	(7.7)
NDL Subsidy	112.5	120.0	7.5	1.3
Central Events	95.0	120.0	25.0	4.2
District Events	62.5	63.0	0.5	0.1
Social, Supplementary				
Pensions	27.5	27.6	0.1	0.0
Stipends, Youth				
Development Work	35.0	30.0	(5.0)	(0.8)
Writers Home Subsidy	72.0	72.0	-	-
Expense Allowance	40.0	39.0	(1.0)	(0.2)
"Communications"	12.5	19.8	7.3	1.2
Central Consultations	12.5	9.0	(3.5)	(0.6)
Publicity Work	6.5	6.0	(0.5)	(0.1)
Library/Archive	2.5	1.2	(1.3)	(0.2)
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	1,457.0	1,294.2	(162.8)	(27.1)
Contributions	50.0	50.0	-	-
Rent	4.0	4.0	-	-
Writers Home	45.0	45.0	-	-
Inst. for the Preservation of				
Performing Rights	58.0	-	-	-
State Support:	1,300.0	1,038.0	(262.0)	(43.7)
TOTAL REVENUE	1,457.0	1,137.0	(320.0)	(53.3)
Revenue-Expenditures	-	(157.2)	(157.2)	(26.2)
Current Account Total	157.2	157.2	157.2	-
NEW BALANCE		-	-	-

The biggest spending cuts would come from personnel and international work (181,000 Marks), and the largest drop in intake came from the state, with a loss of 262,000 Marks (82% of the total income lost). Altogether, these cuts represented an 11% decrease in spending by the association. This was much lower than the whopping 22% reduction in income, although thankfully the SV held 157,200 Marks in reserves to cover the

difference. By the end of the year, though, the union looked to be bankrupt with no immediate prospects for state or other funding on the horizon.

Many of the subsequent communiqués between the union leaders and members comprised explanations of changing social and economic protections amidst a shifting legal system. In mid-1990, for example, the SV's secretariat offered updated details on a new, weaker social insurance law affecting independent artists. The new law stipulated that from July 1 1990 on there would be new legal rules regarding pensions and health insurance, although freelance authors were still automatically insured. The contribution rate for pension insurance would be 18.7% of income that was liable for contributions, and for health insurance it was 12.8%, for a total of 31.5%. The health insurance costs did not cover accident insurance, however, and one could only make a claim on health insurance after seven weeks of illness. Accident insurance or coverage for the first six weeks could only be provided via a private insurer.⁹⁵ The newsletter regarded these new regulations as an "extraordinary burden for all freelancers," and called for an increase in contributions from the Culture Funds so as to reimburse authors. In the meantime, all contributions paid in the first half of 1990 were expected to be 50% refunded (as usual) from the Culture Funds. Beyond this time period, however, union officials expected rules on compulsory insurance to follow the model in the Federal Republic for artists. Here, independent artists and writers would pay about half the insurance contribution with the other half coming from the combination of a fee paid by the person or firm who made use of the artistic activities and subsidies from the Schutzverbund and individual federal

⁹⁵ The Vorstand later corrected that in fact, with a payment of 0.3% of taxable income to state financial authorities writers could indeed procure accident insurance. Schriftstellerverband der DDR, "Informationen 3/1990," RKA 1163, vol. 1.

states. As for unemployment and early retirement assistance, nothing had yet been put in place; it had merely been procured that independent artists be included in the dispensation of social help and would be categorized as “job seekers” with employment officials.⁹⁶ That was perhaps the best they could hope for.

Despite cutbacks, slashing the budget any further proved unfeasible, and in July the steering committee conducted a sober evaluation of the alarming state of affairs. Reeling from a “massive reduction of state subsidies for the artist associations,” the group instructed that district chairs and secretaries should strive to maintain the union’s legal capacity until at least the coming year, using whatever remaining funds necessary to do so. However, accomplishing this goal would need to take drastic measures, including seeking external partners to take over the Petzow home while finding an external funding source for *Neue deutsche Literatur*. At the same time, the SV would undergo fundamental structural changes as well to accommodate changes in finance, shifting from district organizations to a federal structure based around the new state structure of the GDR. To this end, the already decimated secretariat was to be further reduced from 21 members (as of 1 July) to just five (a business manager, legal adviser, social assistant, financial accountant, and clerk or secretary) by the end of 1990. The number of full-time district-level employees would go from 23 to zero, although seven would be retained at the state-level. Altogether, dating back to March, they were to jettison 77 of 89 full-time employees (87%) by year’s end. They also moved forward with plans to transfer the union’s archives to the Academy of the Arts and dissolve the association’s library,

⁹⁶ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen Nr. 2/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1. See also Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen 3/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1.

although they still hoped to sponsor two fall events – an international “literature and environment” meeting in Dresden and a “Poet Meeting” in Weimar.⁹⁷

As for the future of the association, the Vorstand had originally envisioned the organization coexisting and collaborating with the West German VS for a few years, all while shifting activities that had been centrally coordinated to the state branches and gradually increasing membership contributions so as to attempt to become self-financing. Now, however, this course of action seemed impossible. Instead, they suggested to all members “the possibility of already acceding to the Association of German Writers (VS) in the IU Media (West),” with the further possibility of dual membership during the transition period. The steering committee subsequently empowered Kirsch and deputy chairmen Walther and Jentzsch to enter negotiations with the VS on this issue, though “under the stipulation of preserving the interests of all literarily active people in the area of the GDR as much as possible.” The Vorstand clarified that this would take the form of transforming the state branches of the Writers Union into state groups within the VS. State-level elections for the local and national steering committees of the Union of German Writers planned for the following year, and until that time three members of the Schriftstellerverband’s own Vorstand would be co-opted into the leadership of the VS. Beginning in 1991, each state would have “at least one state secretary from the IU [*Industriegewerkschaft* or Industrial Union] Media for artistic professional groups and for a transitional time a branch of the VS (2nd business manager, legal adviser, clerk) in Berlin for the specific issues of the state groups of the VS and the members in the states of the former GDR.” Because, according to the statute, it was impossible to enact a

⁹⁷ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen 3/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1.

complete incorporation of the SV into its West German counterpart, only the movement of individual members could initiate the new constitution of the Schriftstellerverband within the state branches of the VS.⁹⁸

Kirsch elaborated on these sentiments in a letter to all SV members in August 1990. He repeated many of the same points, explaining that the Vorstand had originally hoped to operate the union independent of the VS for years but now that option was no longer viable. So what was left to do? Speaking for the steering committee, Kirsch offered three proposals. First, the union should retain its legal capacity until the end of the year. Second, with unification fast approaching, “one author organization, strong in numbers, is more assertive than several fragmented ones; this is true especially for pending copyright, insurance, and tax questions and in view of the difficulty for local authors to gain approximately equal market chances.” Finally, “An en bloc accession of the association to the VS in the Union Media is neither possible in the statute nor politically desirable.” Instead, they should each seriously reflect on whether such an accession was really what they wanted, something they would decide in a month or so. If enough colleagues opted for this step, they had arranged with the VS that “our state associations therefore remain in existence for now, and from them could emerge, at a deadline – perhaps 1 January 1991 – state committees of the VS.” It was true, he emphasized, that the VS “does not have any particularly good press” and many important authors were not members, but by the same token, “we, to put it mildly, don’t have any good press either.” And in the end, what did they want other than to be “normal writers

⁹⁸ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen 3/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1; “Beschlussprotokoll der 5. (Ausserordentlichen) Vorstandssitzung am 12. Juli 1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1.

in a normal country? And to be allowed to work, in use of our brains?”⁹⁹ Kirsch’s letter was trying to put a positive spin on a bad situation; in the face of financial ruin, there seemed little choice but to have members join the West German VS as individuals, with the hope that enough accede so as to make possible regional branches roughly analogous to the state associations of the Schriftstellerverband. This transition, he claimed, would at least provide writers a “normal country,” as if this is what the union members had wanted all along, as if widespread anxieties about unification were misplaced.

Meanwhile, that fall the Writers Union hosted its final two events, an international colloquium on “literature and environment” in September and a “poet meeting” in Weimar in October. At the meeting, they debated the best ways to present environmental problems through literature. Some authors, including Polish writer Julian Kawalec and Russia’s Oleg Pozow argued that one needed “shrill tones,” because “only through terror can the reader be reached.” Munich author Carl Amery disagreed, asserting that in order to make connections with readers, one needed to use the indicative, not the imperative case. Other participants blamed both capitalism and socialism for environmental damage. Representatives of East Germany’s “Still-Existing Writers Union” also made their presence felt at the meeting, such as when Jurij Koch described once more the

⁹⁹ Rainer Kirsch, Chair of the Writers Union of the GDR, to All Members, 5 August 1990, Berlin, BArch DY27/3918. Later in the year, the Vorstand reported that in meetings with the steering committee of the VS and IU Media that there was agreement that transferring membership from the Schriftstellerverband would proceed automatically without the usual acceptance process. Furthermore, the years an author spent as a member of the Writers Union would be fully credited toward membership in the new union. Of course, members would have to abide by the statutes of these organizations but there would be no expulsions based on “disposition,” only for “active pursuit or spreading fascist or neo-fascist goals.” An East German writer could join the VS at any time, with their membership taking effect immediately upon German unity (3 October), effectively ending their Schriftstellerverband membership. Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen 4/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1.

victimization of Sorbs via brown coal. Matthias Körner, an author who had studied agriculture at Humboldt University, described the growing environmental consciousness in the GDR as a result of the Wende, while Berlin-based poet Heinz Kahlau read from an anthology of German environmental poetry, edited by Richard Pietraß, who, like Joachim Walther, had been fired from the editorial staff of the youth-oriented literary journal *Temperamente* during the Biermann affair. An evening public reading event “found much appeal, [and] furnished a starting point for a long, occasionally tempestuous discussion.” Indeed, science fiction author Karlheinz Steinmüller observed, “The environmental consciousness, which developed before the Wende, is not dead.”¹⁰⁰ It is significant that one of the last Writers Union events concerned environmentalism, especially given the focus of the meeting on literary representations of ecological damage. No longer did writers need to concern themselves with false environmental data and misleading press reports; all they needed was to focus on their craft.

A trial run of cooperation between the two German writers associations came in the form of a “Poet Meeting” in Weimar in late October 1990. Here thirty authors from East and West were to gather for readings and discussion, both in public and in private. As a sign of the times, instead of receiving travel assistance (as had been common earlier with the SV) to attend the meeting, the meeting’s planners within the Vorstand adamantly communicated that such funds would not be available for the event.¹⁰¹ At the actual meeting, held 23-25 October, several prominent East German poets participated in readings, including Volker Braun, Heinz Czechowski, Rainer Kirsch, Bernd Jentzsch,

¹⁰⁰ Schriftstellerverband der DDR, “Informationen 5/1990,” RKA 1163, vol. 1.

¹⁰¹ “Informationen 4/1990.”

Gisela Kraft, Rainer Schedlinski (a member of the Prenzlauer Berg writers group), Joachim Seyppel (one of the 1979 expellees), Joachim Walther, and Wolfgang Hilbig (who had left the GDR in the 1980s).¹⁰² The inclusion of these authors, many of whom had met with criticism or punishment by the SED, proved to be the kind of final act reformers within the Writers Union hoped for in terms of major events.

Despite these successes, the Schriftstellerverband's financial crisis became terminal during the autumn of 1990. Already by October, the VS and its parent organization, IU Media, had assumed crucial functions of the Writers Union. For instance, in that month representatives of these groups met at a special trade union congress to discuss key initiatives vis-à-vis East Germany's authors. They debated the rehabilitation of writers who had been oppressed by the SED, differing over whether such measures should apply only to those who were subjected to court sentences or not. The Writers Union representatives to the meeting made clear that in their minds that such rehabilitation should extend beyond this narrow understanding to include administrative acts.¹⁰³ The VS was aware that a full restitution for the SED's victims would not be

¹⁰² Schriftstellerverband der DDR-Verband Deutscher Schriftsteller, "Dichtertreffen in Weimar, 23.-25. Oktober 1990," RKA 1163, vol. 1.

¹⁰³ In July 1990 the Schriftstellerverband had sanctioned two related projects to address victims of SED persecution in their ranks. First, Joachim Walther was tasked with creating a volume documenting the 1979 expulsions (leading to the edited volume, *Protokoll eines Tribunals: Die Ausschlüsse aus dem DDR-Schriftstellerverband 1979* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991). "Beschlussprotokoll der 5. (Ausserordentlichen) Vorstandssitzung am 12. Juli 1990," RKA 1163, vol. 1. Similarly, poet Heinz Kahlau was instructed to head a workgroup on the history of the union. The workgroup wished to cause "neither disagreement nor unease," but simply sought "to make the history of our professional organization understandable." Writing to union members shortly thereafter, the group asked union members to answer several questions so as to gauge whether members considered their work to be "sensible," or whether members would support their work. First, they asked, "Have you been impeded, harmed, or subjected to extortion attempts in your literary work through bans, disciplinary measures, employing intrusions, threats, etc.?" If so, they were prompted to include which persons or institutions were responsible. Another question queried whether they had turned to the Writers Union for help and whether or not it was given to

possible; at the very least they should try to ensure that they made use of the full extent of the law. Also at the meeting, IU Media announced its “energetic” protest against the intentions of intendants from television and radio media publishers “to expand by implication the individual fee contract of authors of the Ex-FRG to the all-German area.” They likewise noted with alarm the “loss of cultural substance” in the former GDR in the form of the closing of cultural and media institutions, the discontinuation of private cultural funding, the cancellation of orders, and the termination of copyright contracts. As a result, “many authors have already lost the basis of their existence.” This was especially dire as “for the time being, the new federal states will not be able to comply with their cultural obligations.” This situation needed to change, and the IU Media pledged to tackle the problem through a series of steps such as founding new publishing houses and galleries via business development aid, a larger literature fund and cultural endowment in the new states, and the expansion of “supra-regional literature stipends.”¹⁰⁴ With the VS and IU Media assuming these lobbying functions, the continued existence of the Schriftstellerverband had become superfluous in many ways.

The situation came to a head in late November when Kirsch sent a letter to all union members on behalf of the Vorstand. In it, he recounted a meeting they had conducted earlier that day on the future of the association. Since their July decision, he recounted that the situation “has not fundamentally changed.” After that time many members had already made the leap to the VS, and he was certain that “the

them. In addition, they wanted to know, “Did the association have knowledge of your case of censorship from other sources, etc. and act from its own impetus for or against Party?” Finally, they probed, “Did it in the above connections come to judicial or extrajudicial proceedings” and did the union intervene in any way? Heinz Kahlau to the Members of the Writers Union, n.d., RKA 1163, vol. 2.

¹⁰⁴ “Informationen 5/1990.”

communication with one another, the social and the legal support remain.” In the spring they would hold the first all-German Writers congress since 1947 (to be held in the north German city of Lübeck), but in the meantime, their path was clear: “The Writers Union must be dissolved.” Technically, such a decision could only be made by a congress of union members, and since the means for that were lacking and time was short, he requested a written response from all members to the question, “Do you agree with [this decision]?” If they did not receive a two-thirds majority approving this measure, the union would be left with no choice but to file for bankruptcy. The result of both courses amounted to more or less the same thing, but with the latter course of action they would terminate all agreed-upon contracts whereas dissolving the union would leave a liquidation steering committee to secure the further use of these contracts for members. Such a liquidation procedure necessitated changes to the statute, which were likewise only technically possible through a congress, so again Kirsch asked for members’ written approval. Even if it would only survive a few more weeks, Kirsch proposed to the members that the SV, retroactive to 3 October (unification day) change the name of the organization back to its founding title: the German Writers Union, a gesture severing ties with the now-defunct GDR. In addition, a contract had been reached with the “Cultural Funds Foundation” giving authors priority use of the writers’ home in Petzow despite it having been surrendered, and the Academy of the Arts had agreed to retain their archives. The chairman made clear that “[f]rom 1 January 1991, the association ceases its activity.” All memberships would expire at the end of the liquidation phase, and “until then all rights and duties are exclusively restricted to the concerns of liquidation.”¹⁰⁵ The final steps in the dissolution of the Schriftstellerverband were underway.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Emphasis in original. Rainer Kirsch, Chairperson, to All Members of the Writers Union, 27 November

Not all union members were happy with the chosen course of action by the Vorstand. Volker Braun, for instance, wrote a letter to the union officials in early December responding to Kirsch's proposal for dissolving the association. His aim in writing was to make clear his "distrust" of the steering committee. Their task had been to conduct themselves with "self-confidence and dignity" in their agreement with the VS, taking care not to conform to "the prevailing mode of annexation." Kirsch had been elected as chairman only by a narrow margin, Braun reminded him, and so it was surprising that he now had the audacity "to enter into this other association and recommend the same to the membership which elected him; the just-now-won sovereignty of our association was squandered and a discourses of equal partners prohibited." He further reproached Kirsch, asserting that "[t]he association was more than the apparatus (which is no longer paid, especially should our future contributions flow into the coffer of the VS), it was a diverse cohesion, which now likewise is disavowed." Kirsch, in other words, had broken the trust entrusted in him to maintain the SV's independence and deal with the West German association as coequals, destroying the special group bond they had forged in the process. While holding nothing against the

1990, Berlin, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

¹⁰⁶ The Berlin district steering committee reacted to the imminent dissolution of the union in a similar manner. Faced with these circumstances, the Bezirksvorstand proposed that beyond the central steering committee, a lawyer or other expert be named to the union's liquidation committee. Moreover, all of the overseers of the liquidation process should make every effort "to preserve Petzow as a site of meeting and as work possibility for German-speaking and foreign authors." The group also reached an understanding about the construction of a professional group within the VS's Berlin district branch, a replacement as it were for the group they headed in the Writers Union. An election would occur for the steering committee of the new Berlin branch of the Union of German Authors in early 1991, and once it did, it would assume responsibility for representing the interests of members in the transitional phase. Additionally, several local SV members had already expressed their willingness to work in the group. Schriftstellerverband, Bezirksverband Berlin, "Einige Informationen über die Sitzung des Bezirksvorstandes am 28. November 1990," RKA 1163, vol. 1. For more on the contracts over the use of the Petzow home, see Dirk v. Kugelgen, Business Manager, to Dr. Theo Waigel, Federal Minister for Finances, 17 December 1990, Berlin, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

VS, Braun declared Kirsch had made it impossible for him to join. Now the “monomaniacal administration reaches a lonely climax: with the request by post to decide the renaming and (!) dissolution of the association.” He also took aim at the fact that a liquidation committee, “which I don’t remember electing,” would now replace the steering committee. It was also “shameful” that he had given a great sum of money to the association, explicitly for use by the active group on “literature and environment,” and now “with the decision of the steering committee [these funds] serve the completion of the last things, the winding up of the association. I object to this misappropriation.”¹⁰⁷ The entire matter had struck Braun as distasteful, unethical, and even a tad authoritarian, certainly not the end of the union that he had hoped for.

At the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1990, the East German Writers Union, having garnered sufficient votes from its members, dissolved itself. A controversial epilogue struck the association’s members just months later, however. In a symbolic act, in February 1991 the Union of German writers barred the immediate accession of 23 former Schriftstellerverband members, forcing them to wait at least three years before their membership applications would be accepted.¹⁰⁸ These names included Hermann Kant, Günter Görlich, Dieter Noll, Richard Christ, Eberhard Panitz, Gisela Steineckert, and Walter Flegel, all authors who had played an active role in the post-Biermann repressive phase of union history. The action came in fear of damage to the soon to be

¹⁰⁷ Emphasis in original. Volker Braun to the Writers Union of the GDR, 6 December 1990, Berlin, RKA 1163, vol. 2. Business manager Dirk von Kügelgen replied to Braun almost two weeks later, asserting that of the 30,000 DM Braun had given the organization for “environmental funds,” 21,611.37 DM had been used for the September meeting in Dresden on “literature and environment.” That left 8,388.63 DM; they would either refund him this remainder or place them at the disposal of another environmental group. Dirk v. Kügelgen to Volker Braun, 19 December 1990, Berlin, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

¹⁰⁸ See the draft letter by VS chairperson Uwe Friesel from 25 February 1991 to the affected writers. RKA 1163, vol. 2.

elected all-German board of the VS if East German authors “who according to recent publications participated in the repression of colleagues or advocated it, would be accepted without objections into the VS.”¹⁰⁹ The press reported “massive protests” against the membership applications of many of these East German writers, resulting in what Joachim Walther described as a “crucial test” for the VS, especially regarding the status of Hermann Kant. Several new VS members had even threatened to leave their new association if “GDR authors who caused colleagues demonstrable damage are accepted [for membership].” Therefore the federal steering committee of the Union of German Writers selected these 23 authors and blocked their entrance. According to Joachim Walther, this was not “an expulsion forever,” but it ensured that “a decent interval of three years should be observed.”¹¹⁰

The organization later issued a statement emphasizing that these moves were “neither an ‘expulsion’ nor a ‘professional ban,’” distancing itself from the measures

¹⁰⁹ Hauptvorstand, “Presseinformation der Industriegewerkschaft Medien,” 1 March 1991, Stuttgart, RKA 1163, vol. 2. The action roused the ire of many former Writers Union members, provoking a letter campaign in newspapers condemning the decision and defending those affected, especially Kant. Many also noted the irony of barring members given the pain caused by the Heym expulsions in 1979. See, for example, Peter Abraham, “Aufforderung von PETER ABRAHAM an den VS: ‘Grenzt mich aus!’” *Neues Deutschland*, 8 March 1991, 6; Uwe Kant, “UWE KANT zu den ‘Blauen Briefen’ des VS,” *Neues Deutschland* 9-10 March 1991, 6; KDS, “...damit’s nur keiner merkt,” *Neues Deutschland* 9-10 March 1991, 6; “Der ‘Blaue Brief’ für Autoren vom VS,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 March 1991, 1; Rudi Benzien, “Kunkeln im Dunkeln,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 March 1991, 6; Elfriede Brüning, “Noch übertrumpft,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 March 1991, 6; Helmut H. Schulz, “Die Nadel meiner Großmutter,” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 March 1991, 6; Claus Küchenmeister, “Vergessen?” *Neues Deutschland*, 11 March 1991, 6; Andre Brie, “Nur anderes Vorzeichen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 13 March 1991, 6; Hermann-OttoLauterbach, “Auch um meine Würde geht es,” *Neues Deutschland*, 13 March 1991, 6; Wolf Spillner, “WOLF SPILLNER zu den ‘Blauen Briefen’ des VS an unerwünschte Ostautoren: ‘Alles nur wegen der Leut, wegen der Leut...’” *Neues Deutschland*, 14 March 1991, 6; Hans-Ulrich Lüdemann, “HANS-ULRICH LÜDEMANN zu den ‘Blauen Briefen’ des VS,” *Neues Deutschland*, 15 March 1991, 6.

¹¹⁰ ADN, “Joachim Walther: Bei Aufnahme von SED-Autoren steht Schriftstellerverband vor Zerreißprobe,” February 1991, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

taken by the Schriftstellerverband twelve years earlier.¹¹¹ VS chairperson Uwe Friesel justified the decision by indicating that in the Federal Republic, all authors were free to publish and travel, regardless if they were association members or not, and all writers were likewise entitled to the same legal provision of health and pension insurance.¹¹² This (temporary) membership ban thus did not carry nearly the same consequences as the actions of the Berlin branch in 1979 when it expelled Heym and eight others, but it still was a bold, symbolic move by the VS to draw a line in the past, cutting out several authors who had participated in repression of their colleagues and starting anew. Of course, more than 23 SV members had “caused colleagues demonstrable damage,” so this was incomplete justice, the most controversial figures were gone.¹¹³

Hermann Kant did not let the slight go unanswered, giving an interview to *Neues Deutschland* two weeks after the announcement. Regarding the 1979 expulsions, Kant viewed Joachim Walther’s efforts to publish the transcripts for the June meeting from that year as “correct and necessary, even if the commentaries are no less tendentious as several of our speeches at the time.” When asked why the nine expellees had received such a harsh sentence, Kant replied that he had been against the resolution in the meeting to “sack” the colleagues, but knew what they were supposed to do if the accused did not alter their position. The statute was an “either-or” matter, and short of making drastic changes to the document, he was left with no choice: “If the association, which yes was

¹¹¹ Hauptvorstand, “Presseinformation der Industriegewerkschaft Medien,” 7 March 1991, Stuttgart, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

¹¹² Hauptvorstand, “Presseinformation der Industriegewerkschaft Medien,” 1 March 1991, Stuttgart, RKA 1163, vol. 2.

¹¹³ Only about 600 of the thousand Writers Union members had retained membership in the 3,000+ member VS as of 1994. “Schriftsteller - NEUE BESCHIEDENHEIT,” *Der Spiegel* 17 (1994), 184.

anything but loved by all GDR authority holders, did not abide by its own valid rules it could be shattered either from within, in terms of ‘above,’ or from outside. Examples in other socialist countries were available.” Kant implied that he had reluctantly taken action against the nine to protect other critical voices inside the union from state interference. The ex-president even asked rhetorically if the interviewer knew of any other organization “which would have been a legal platform for criticism as much as ours?” The author further complained about being promised discretion in the letter barring his VS membership and yet his name was now all over the press in connection with the issue, meaning that it was hypocritical of the Union of German Writers’ steering committee to accuse him of “breach of trust.” But beyond that, he asked if, more than the “unavoidable” conflict with the VS leaders, “shouldn’t we occasionally ask ourselves, who really delights the most about quarreling authors?” implying that they were being distracted from tackling real issues through their dispute.¹¹⁴ Kant cast himself as a protector of East Germany’s writers against state oppression, forced to sacrifice Heym et al. so that others could continue the good fight. This was an oversimplification of a more complex relationship between Kant, the union, and the SED, but it was indisputably a relationship which had now come to an end. The ex-president’s statements were thus part of a first wave of a post-mortem reassessment and reframing of the role of the Schriftstellerverband and its members in East German history now that that state, and its official writers association, had ceased to exist.

Conclusions

¹¹⁴ “Im Gespräch mit HERMANN KANT: ‘Wer der Herren zweien dient, kriegt es mit der Herren zweien zu tun,’” *Neues Deutschland*, 16-17 March 1991, 6.

The Wende was not especially kind to the Writers Union; in the liminal environment it spawned, the revolution exposed fissures within the association and transformed it irreversibly. While many East Germans fled the country and many more took to the streets at home, these events generated in writers both anxiety about the future and hope for finally achieving long-desired reforms within the union, SED, and wider society. Several authors participated individually in various demonstrations and movements of the fall, but for many, the Writers Union was a natural place both to discuss the course of events and to assert their collective right to weigh in on the process publicly. A series of declarations, issued by both district branch members and the central bodies of the SV, represented attempts by East Germany's authors to participate in the revolution and shape the forthcoming reforms, often emphasizing that writers and their professional union had been at the forefront of efforts to reform East Germany for years. Now, with the SED faltering, the leaders and members of the Writers Union saw an opening to articulate fully and publicly their ideas for the future of the GDR.

The Writers Union's members had a professional interest expanding what could be said and published in East Germany, and so for a while most authors went along with the Wende, especially from a Third Way stance. As the GDR's existential crisis intensified, fissures below the surface of the SV began to emerge in full force, however. Differences over the reforms needed for East Germany appeared at member meetings and within the union's leadership circles. Some authors viewed the revolution as an unprecedented opportunity to carry out the changes they had demanded as part of their tenth congress, especially in terms of freedom of expression, environmentalism, and redressing the 1979 expulsions. Others, especially in the district and central leadership,

agreed that changes were needed, but sought a more cautious reform process through the SED. In these weeks authors were also confronted with the fact that, as the right to ever freer expression was conceded by the SED, ordinary East Germans began speaking for themselves instead of relying on literature to speak for their concerns, fears, and hopes. As a result, as September turned into October and beyond, many of the statements issued from the Writers Union along with discussions inside its halls featured an increasing emphasis on finding new roles for literature and its creators in a changed East Germany. It was as if loyal critics within the organization had gotten what they wanted in terms of eliminating restrictions on free expression, but now they found themselves out of a job, victims of their own success.

With the leadership shake-up in the SED in mid-October and even more with the opening of the Berlin Wall, more critical groups of authors within the Schriftstellerverband began openly challenging the union's leadership, especially over internal affairs. These authors no doubt were reacting to growing calls among questioning the privileged position that writers had occupied under the SED dictatorship. Many literary intellectuals seemed to realize that if their organization was going to continue to hold public legitimacy, it would need an open reckoning with its own authoritarian past, and this meant usurping control of the organization from old guard leaders like Hermann Kant and Günter Görlich. The repudiation of these leaders' moderately worded declarations, especially over the 1979 expulsions, proved to be the catalyst for dramatic changes within the union. The marginalizing of hard-liners enabled members to begin democratizing the SV's internal processes, depoliticizing the association's mission, and emphasizing those (socialist) values worth preserving as glue

binding the union together. At the same time, these months also witnessed a spike in self-justifications emanating from the Writers Union, defending their social protections and privileges from would-be detractors while still trying to assert influence over the reforms sweeping the country.

As another “turn” emerged within the Wende, popular momentum shifted away from reforming socialism in East Germany towards joining the Federal Republic. Writers as a whole were unwilling to turn with the revolution, getting stuck in a Third Way mindset which precluded this merger. As a result, meetings of the union, including an “extraordinary” congress held in March 1990, were filled less with proposals for societal reform and more for addressing fears bred by unification. One gleaned from these sessions a general aimlessness among East Germany’s writers, unsure of their place in the new conditions and frightened of the transition from a command economy, with liberal amounts of state support, to a perilously free market. Thus more than anything else, the socioeconomic functions of the Writers Union came to dominate discussions within the organization in 1990. Some demanded the SV lobby the cash-strapped caretaker East German government to shore up social security protections as well as to collaborate with other groups (including the other GDR artist associations and the West German VS) in effecting similar concessions from a unified government. These actions required a great deal of work, and it was not at all clear that they would bear fruit. As a result, not all members were willing or able to begin again the task of creating a union. Some had worked for decades to make the SV what it was, and the prospect of starting over seemed unappealing or overly taxing.

The efforts to prolong the life of the Schriftstellerverband foundered on the realities of unification and insufficient funding. As the union attempted to press forward with business as usual, organizing international meetings of environmentalists and poets, newly elected leaders tried desperately to keep the SV afloat financially. Drastic budget reductions were matched by radical restructuring of the Schriftstellerverband's district and central bodies, but in the end, nothing proved capable of preventing insolvency. Thus in the final months of its existence, union leaders negotiated with the VS for the accession of its members and scrambled to secure any social provisions they could extract from the unified German government. In these weeks, the union turned almost exclusively to socioeconomic concerns, fully retreating from the ideological mission upon which it had been founded. Yet even without ideological differences, the decision to dissolve the union could not prevent bitter controversies from emerging. Some authors disagreed with the dissolution and decried a violation of trust by the union's leadership; others, reeling from the VS's decision not to admit twenty-three writers, misguidedly attacked what they viewed as an eye-for-an-eye act of retributive justice.

The relationship between writers and the Wende escapes easy characterization. What is especially striking is that most authors seemed initially enthusiastic about the promises of renewal in East Germany and their union, although they disagreed over the form that renewal should take. Likewise, the turn of the revolution toward unification placed most writers against the tide of popular opinion, although they had different reasons for opposing unification. Some harbored long-standing anti-fascist beliefs that the Federal Republic was a neo-fascist state, some opposed what they considered to be the crass materialism which had emerged there, some simply feared the unknown. And

increasingly, many grew concerned about the potential disappearance of social security benefits, especially health and pension insurance, that would likely result from unification. Writers thus had a complex relationship with the revolutionary process, but through it all, the Schriftstellerverband was central in the efforts of authors to make sense of the changes around them and to assert their roles as public intellectuals. As circumstances dictated that East Germany's writers needed to redefine their relationship to their readers and country, they turned to their professional association to do so, just as they had done so many times in the past. When the union dissolved itself in 1991, the writers of East Germany therefore lost not only their professional interest group, but also the primary mechanism through which they had defined their collective identity and societal function for nearly forty years.

Conclusion

Reappraisals of the Writers Union's role in East Germany started even before the organization disbanded itself. Much of this occurred within the context of the first phase of what became known as the *Literaturstreit* (literary dispute), a controversy which began with a Christa Wolf short story and quickly expanded to a heated debate over whether East German culture had had any value beyond propaganda purposes.¹ In the summer of 1990, Wolf published *Was Bleibt* (What Remains), a story that had been originally written in 1979 but personally withheld from publication in fear of the negative reaction it might provoke from the SED. Wolf had reason to be concerned: the story follows a day in the life of a prominent East German author (and an obvious stand-in for Wolf) dealing with the mental anguish caused by living in a police state. The story had been written during Wolf's deepest disillusionment with the SED in the immediate aftermath

¹ The *Literaturstreit* developed a second wind in 1993 when a series of revelations were made about the high-profile East German writers who had served as Stasi informants. Wolf was once again the main target as it was revealed that between 1959 and 1962 she had been an "IM" (unofficial informant), although the information she had reported at the time was of such little value that the Stasi dropped her from this position quickly (Two of the people she informed on, Walter Kaufmann and Wolfgang Schreyer, actually wrote letters to *Der Spiegel* in 1993 in her defense). Other authors who were revealed to have had Stasi connections include Hermann Kant, Heiner Müller, Sasha Anderson, Rainer Schedlinski, and Monika Maron, among many others. For more on the *Literaturstreit*, see Thomas Anz, ed., *"Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf: der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland"* (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991); Karl Deiritz and Hannes Krauss, eds., *Der Deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit, oder, "Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge": Analysen und Materialien* (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1991); Peter Graves, "The Treachery of St. Joan," in *Christa Wolf in Perspective*, ed. Ian Wallace (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1994), 1-12; Bernd Wittek, *Der Literaturstreit im sich vereinigenden Deutschland* (Marburg: Tectum, 1997). On the Stasi connections of East German authors, see Joachim Walther, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur. Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1996).

of the Biermann affair. Under constant Stasi observation in real life, in the story, Wolf openly describes the deeply distressing impact of this surveillance on her.

With the publication of *Was Bleibt* a volcano of criticism erupted. Many critics, especially West Germans such as Ulrich Greiner and Frank Schirrmacher, viciously savaged Wolf for her “self-centered” concerns, for the life of privilege she had been given by the SED, as well as the role her literature had played in obscuring the brutal realities of the East German dictatorship. To these critics, publishing a book which insisted on Wolf’s own victimhood smacked of immense hypocrisy. Greiner summed up this disdain toward Wolf in a June 1990 article in *Die Zeit*, incredulously asking, “The state poet [*Staatsdichterin*] of the GDR was supposedly spied upon by the state security service of the GDR? Christa Wolf, the National Prize winner, the most prominent author of her country, SED member until the last moment, a victim of the Stasi?”² Against this perspective, West Berlin author Peter Schneider shrewdly observed that the same critics who were now dragging Wolf’s name through the mud had not hesitated to heap praise upon her years earlier, seeing in her work the germs of an East German opposition. Concerned about the present “self-righteousness of west Germany’s literary judges,” he surmised, “An honest appraisal would show how entangled the accusers were [...] in the web of conformity and cheerleading [...] Those who now strike postures of self-righteous reproach are only proving how much they, too, fear the past.”³

In this context, many voices in East and West chimed in with their assessment of the Schriftstellerverband. Renate Feyl (b.1944), a Berlin-based novelist, registered the

² Ulrich Greiner, “Mangel an Feingefühl,” *Die Zeit*, 1 June 1990.

³ Peter Schneider, *The German Comedy: Scenes of Life After the Wall*, trans. Philip Boehm and Leigh Hafrey (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 88.

changes in the union, noting that when it was first formed, it had a more practical function as a space to discuss problems in literary creation. But with the Berlin Wall's erection in 1961, it had functioned as an ersatz public sphere, "a small form of publicity behind closed doors." By the 1970s, to her "the union became more and more of a travel agency," although she explained that Party members and especially steering committee members had had priority. She also made note of the fellowships offered by the union, denouncing the Vorstand members as having had "no material needs" because of their position.⁴ Poet and translator Richard Pietraß (b.1946), a member of the SV's final Vorstand, remembered the opportunities the union provided to interact with colleagues, including genre-specific groups. To him, "If we were able to do anything in the union, I guess we got some promising things started. Unfortunately, it just as often came to blows." He, too, mentioned the fellowships the union offered and the social provisions, but noted that in its last years, the union's main function was, as Feyl had emphasized, to enable travel for its members.⁵ Psychotherapist-turned-writer Helga Schubert (b.1940) in September 1990 assessed that the two biggest benefits of membership had been a tax identification number which enabled her to work as a freelance author as well as the ability to travel to the West, with pension assistance also mentioned. In general, she viewed the bestowing of privileges as a means for the state to attain influence over the writers.⁶ The common emphasis of these relatively younger authors was on privileges,

⁴ Interview with Renate Feyl, 18 February 1991, East Berlin, in *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR*, ed. Robert von Hallberg, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170-72.

⁵ Interview with Richard Pietraß, 11 February 1991, West Berlin, in von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals*, 180-82.

⁶ Interview with Helga Schubert, 18 September 1990, Neu Meteln, in von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals*, 186-87.

especially the right to travel, used to exert control over writers. Feyl had noted the critical discussions which emerged from the association, and Pietraß had mentioned the start that they had made for achieving genuine changes, but to these authors the lasting memory was privilege and disappointment at having accomplished little else. Given the context in which they were speaking, during the *Literaturstreit* and amidst the tumultuous transition to a unified Germany, their critical assessment of the union makes sense.

Hermann Kant likewise lent his own stamp to these assessments. In an August 1990 interview, he expressed that the union had played a “very significant role, not only in the realm of literature, but generally for the whole GDR society.” As for those decrying writers’ ability to travel, he answered that he had hoped it would serve as a catalyst for broader changes: “We were always of the opinion that we could show by our example that it would be OK, that the state wouldn’t lose by it, but rather would profit from it.” He further took pride in the fact that their congresses had garnered press coverage, providing East German newspaper readers with challenging content at least once every four years. He also praised the fact that “[i]f you were to draw a graph of criticism in the history of the union meeting, it would, for as long as I have known it, be a constantly and inexorably *rising* curve of critical attitude.” Not wishing to describe himself as a “tragic figure,” he admitted he had entered into a close relationship with the state, but had done so “for the sake of the union, and I could only get something for my colleagues if I was accepted.” Indeed, “I would have achieved nothing for others if *they* had been suspicious of me,” thus distancing himself from the SED leaders, despite the fact that he himself had been a Central Committee member. In other words, he had

cynically ingratiated himself with SED authorities to help the union, aided by the fact that “being critical was almost a motto for me.”⁷

Kant elaborated on these thoughts in a self-serving anecdotal memoir in 1991, entitled, *Abspann: Erinnerung an meine Gegenwart* (Closing Credits: Remembrance of My Present, 1991). Contemplating the Biermann affair, Kant still was not entirely sure why none of the conspirators had asked him to join their cause; after all, anyone who knew anything about the union had known, he claimed, that he was “hardly a stubborn dogmatist or menial wooden nickel [*Dumpfnickel*].” He concluded that the affair had been an error, but one made by Honecker, not himself: “[W]as it [Honecker’s] entirely astonishing assumption that the lockout of a problematic artists brings about the lockout of problems?” Kant further defended the union’s role in criticizing the SED, insisting it had challenged the censorship system in the GDR. The presidium, he boasted, “knew very well what it was doing and what it wanted when before the X. Congress it proposed Christoph Hein give the introductory talk in one of the four commissions.” It had been up to him to make use of this opportunity, “but we gave it to him – and ourselves.” He admitted that he had too often been “rude” within the Schriftstellerverband, but he passionately defended his organization against charges of possessing a “Stalinist structure,” noting that their union had had no “bosses” or “subordinates.”⁸

In both the interview and memoir, it was clear that in Kant’s eyes, he had fought the good fight, sacrificing his reputation in order to achieve genuine progress and greater openness in the GDR. There was a kernel of truth to his statements: Kant, like Seghers

⁷ Interview with Hermann Kant, 28 August 1990, East Berlin, von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals*, 143-52.

⁸ Hermann Kant, *Abspann: Erinnerung an meine Gegenwart* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1991), 445-63.

before him, was no Party hack. There was a price to be paid for working within the system, and the presidents of the Writers Union no doubt were well aware of their need to cozy up to the right people in order to buy any latitude at all for autonomy within the literary community. But Kant pretending that they had invited Hein's attack on censorship, when he himself had gone after the latter's statements at the 1987 congress, was, at best, selective memory, and, at worst, purposeful deception. Kant had worked to help expand benefits and publishing rights for his union's members, but when push came to shove, he had typically sided with the SED.

Peter Schneider, one of the more astute commentators on the meaning of Germanness before and after the Wende, offered his own take on East German writers and their professional union in his essay, "Some People Can Even Sleep Through an Earthquake," appearing in his collection *Extreme Mittellage* (literally "Extreme Center Position" but translated as "The German Comedy," 1990).⁹ The essay as a whole explores what Schneider identified as a troubling tendency among politicians and intellectuals of both East and West Germany to shift positions as the political wind blows, denying the inconsistencies between past and present stances in the process. Schneider put it eloquently: "I am far from criticizing a change of mind or conviction: my remarks are aimed at the silent maneuvering, the blurring of contradictions between past and present positions, the calculated, covert slide into the present tense." If ever there were a moment to reassess their views, to strive for genuine analysis and learning, the "earthquake" rocking East Germany in 1989 was it. Turning specifically to East Germany's writers, Schneider credited a few "independent" writers for "expos[ing] the

⁹ See Peter Schneider, *Extreme Mittellage: Eine Reise durch das deutsche Nationalgefühl* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1990); idem., *The German Comedy*.

Stalinist ossification of socialism,” yet the Wende had revealed that in almost all cases these “dissidents” had never questioned the legitimacy of the one-party dictatorship: “They criticized the Socialist Unity Party’s abuse of power, not its monopoly of it; their demands for more democracy were meant not to secure free elections and a (‘bourgeois-reactionary’) multiparty system, but to eliminate censorship and build a plurality of opinion within the socialist power structure.”¹⁰

To further parse this troubling phenomenon, Schneider considered the union’s Extraordinary Congress of 1990. Here, instead of joy at the outcome of the Wende, Schneider perceived only melancholy, “as if a mass suicide were being planned.” No one either applauded the collapse of one-party rule or betrayed feelings of guilt at socialism’s demise. He also commented critically on the lack of desire among members to look into the SV’s Stalinist past, as seen in Kant’s letter to the congress, which Schneider assessed as a clever but ultimately hollow rhetorical ploy to ennoble the actions of the union. In doing so, Kant “thereby rechristened as a resistance organization a union that had earlier pledged itself ‘to the role of leading the working class and its party.’” Schneider also depicted Braun’s opening speech as voicing respect for Kant, quoting his line about how the ex-president had “held office during trying times.” As for Rainer Kirsch, he had “approvingly quoted Volker Braun, who had approvingly quoted Hermann Kant, and then made himself popular by once again warning against accusatory investigations of the Union’s history.” Equally troubling was the fact that the new “democratic” Writers Union, “the wealthiest of its kind in Europe,” had chosen to defend the benefits and privileges it had been given by the dictatorship. Thus the Schriftstellerverband busied itself with selfish concerns instead of asking itself important questions, such as why East

¹⁰ Schneider, *The German Comedy*, 69-81.

Germany never produced an opposition figure like Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, or Gyorgy Konrad, or “Why did East German dissent always stay within the system?”¹¹

Schneider’s take on the Extraordinary Congress is insightful, capturing the complexities of East German intellectual life while reproaching union members for their un-self-critical conduct in recent months. What he had hoped to see was not unwavering commitment to some ideal but the willingness to admit and reflect upon past mistakes in order to grow intellectually. He overstated the degree to which union members were unwilling to look into their own past, although he was probably correct that many and perhaps most members were reluctant to take this step.¹² Instead, the Writers Union’s members had been concerned about preserving benefits at the expense of self-inquiry. The question he wanted them to at least ask themselves was “Why?” Why had they chosen this path? Why had they, as a whole, never questioned the legitimacy of SED rule? Why had they failed to produce a great literary dissident unlike other Soviet bloc states? All of these were valid questions, and answers were not forthcoming from many active union members, although the comments by Feyl, Pietraß, and Schubert were beginning that inquiry by exploring the privileges associated with membership and the costs that this entailed in terms of conformity.

This study has in many ways been an attempt to answer the questions Schneider raises, in the process seeking to understand East German writers as part of a wider system of cultural regulation within the GDR. The insights provided through this examination of

¹¹ Ibid., 83-86.

¹² Heinz Kahlau, who was eventually picked to head the workgroup examining the union’s past, indicated later that of the 306 members voting on the creation of the workgroup, only a 146-vote-plurality had approved the measure (47%), with 107 voting against it (35%) and 53 abstaining (17%). Heinz Kahlau to the Members of the Writers Union, n.d., Literaturarchiv: Rainer-Kirsch-Archiv 1163, vol. 2, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (hereafter cited as RKA).

the Writers Union are many, but five main conclusions are particularly important. First is the importance of generational experiences for understanding how the East German literary community functioned. Second is the persistence of gender imbalances within the union. Third is the symbiotic relationship between literature and the associational activities of union members. Fourth is the dynamic process of professional identity formation and the societal function of literary intellectuals in the GDR. Last is the window the SV opens for understanding the nature of the SED dictatorship. In view of these conclusions, it is safe to say that the Writers Union played a central role in the lives of many of its members, a role which enables us to better understand both the social and professional dimensions of intellectual life under the East German dictatorship.

Generations of Writers

The generational dimension of East German intellectual life was a regular feature of Writers Union activities, both in terms of efforts to better integrate younger members into the association, and in more general reflections upon the predominance of certain age cohorts within the organization. Socializing the younger generations, especially those born in East Germany, into the GDR's norms and values was a constant preoccupation of the SED throughout the country's history.¹³ It was no different for the Writers Union, especially under Honecker. An important portion of the union's energy was employed in

¹³ Annegret Schüle, Thomas Ahbe, and Rainer Gries, eds., *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive. Eine Inventur* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag Leipzig, 2005). See also Dorothee Wierling, "How Do the 1929ers and the 1949ers Differ?" and Mary Fulbrook, "'Normalisation' in the GDR in Retrospect: East German Perspectives on Their Own Lives," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The 'Normalization of Rule'?* ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 194-203 and 278-320, respectively; Dorothee Wierling, "The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR: Insecurities, Ambitions and Dilemmas," and Ralph Jessen, "Mobility and Blockage during the 1970s," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch, trans. Eve Duffy (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 307-324 and 341-362, respectively.

youth development work, starting with the *Nachwuchskommission* of the steering committee and its logistical counterpart, the *Nachwuchsabteilung* of the secretariat. In 1974 the union restructured its program for working with young authors, replacing the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren* with a candidature system, aiming to make this work more effective by decentralizing the primary responsibility for young authors to the district branches. Working with younger writers was a pressing theme at every national congress called by the SV during in the 1970s and 1980s, and the union leaders were particularly keen on sponsoring events for these younger colleagues to travel on research trips, to present manuscripts for discussion, and to promote published works.

These efforts peaked during the 1980s, when, in the post-Biermann years, they were in part an attempt by union leaders to restore stability through incorporating younger authors into associational life and preventing them from becoming dissidents. Moreover, in the 1980s the Writers Union was also competing for young writers with alternative groups such as the literary circle associated with the Prenzlauer Berg district of East Berlin, which consciously rejected any association with official structures in the GDR, especially in the literary community.¹⁴ The continued calls for greater integration of junior writers into the ranks of the Writers Union testifies to the persistent difficulties in this task, despite the numerous initiatives of union members to accomplish this goal.

Generational dynamics can also be seen beyond a narrow focus on integrating younger authors from whichever age cohort. A closer examination of the writers most

¹⁴ That two of the leading figures in the Prenzlauer Berg movement, Sascha Anderson and Rainer Schedlinski, were later revealed to have been unofficial Stasi collaborators illustrates the difficulty of attempts to completely distance oneself from the state in the GDR. See Gerrit-Jan Berendse, ed., *Grenz-Fallstudien: Essays zum Topos Prenzlauer Berg in der DDR-Literatur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1999); Christine Cosentino and Wolfgang Müller, eds., *“im widerstand/in mißverstand”? Zur literature und Kunst des Prenzlauer Bergs* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

active in the events of the union during the 1970s and 1980s, both as its leaders and as its antagonists, reveals the predominance of the “1929ers,” those who were between 15 and 20 years old in 1945 (thus living much of their childhood during the Nazi years) vis-à-vis other generational groups, including those who already were adults during the Nazi period, and those born in the first postwar decade, the youngest generation who was typically eligible for membership in the Writers Union by 1989. These chart break down generational patterns among the union’s presidium members:

FIGURE 1: Average and Median Years Born of Presidium Members

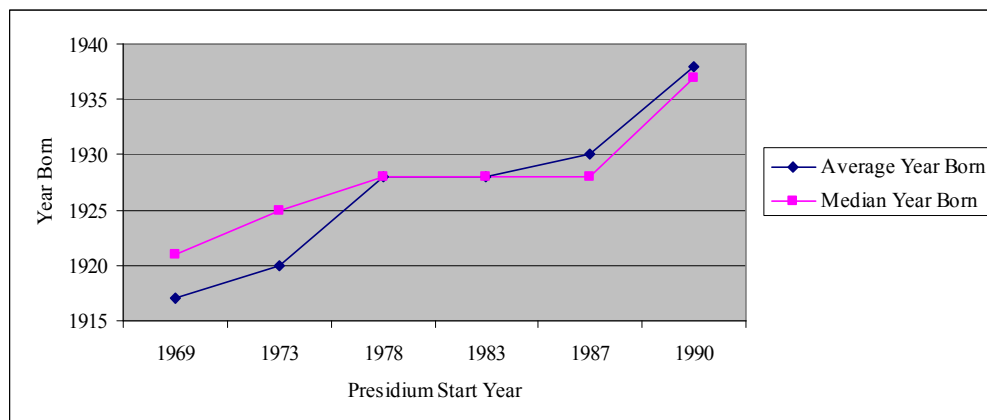
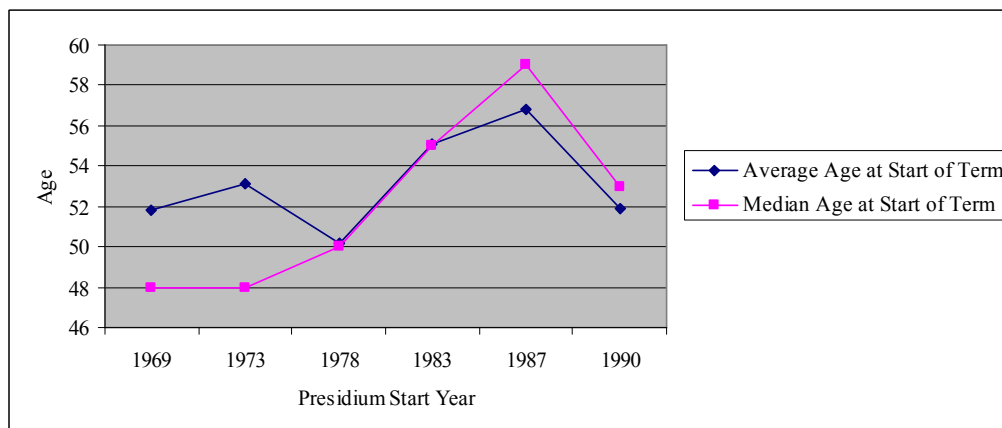


FIGURE 2: Average and Median Ages at Start of Presidium Term



Until at least 1973 the “veteran communists” predominated the organization’s leadership bodies, with five of the 12 presidium members having reached adulthood before the Nazis took power and two others born in 1921 and 1924. The “Hitler Youth generation” reached ascendancy within the Writers Union’s presidium first in 1973 and especially from 1978 onward, meaning unlike in the GDR more generally, the older generation of Writers Union leaders was able and willing to pass the torch to the 1929ers or middle generation and rejuvenate the presidium with each new term.¹⁵ The middle generation did block the ascendance of an even younger generation to leadership positions within the SV, however, only ceding power in the final Vorstand of the union’s history.

The importance of the 1929ers in the Writers Union can also be seen outside the leadership circles. In many ways the Biermann aftermath and the 1979 expulsions can be viewed as the culmination of a dispute with this middle generation of East German writers. Consider the primary authors, including Biermann, drawing fire from the SED and Writers Union leaders in the years 1976-79: Stephan Hermlin, Kurt Bartsch, Adolf Endler, Stefan Heym, Karl-Heinz Jakobs, Klaus Poche, Klaus Schlesinger, Joachim Seyppel, Reiner Kunze, Christa Wolf, Günter de Bruyn, Reimar Gilsenbach, Volker Braun, Jurek Becker, Ulrich Plenzdorf, Franz Fühmann, Sarah Kirsch, and Heiner Müller. The youngest (Volker Braun), was born in 1939, only thirty-seven at the time of the Biermann expatriation, and the oldest were Heym and Hermlin (born 1913 and 1915, respectively). Eleven of the twenty authors were born between 1926 and 1935, clearly the core of this group, and the median years born and ages (in 1976) were 1929 and 47, respectively. While many of these same names would reemerge in the late 1980s as leading dissenters within the Writers Union, by 1979 the SV was able to effectively

¹⁵ See Jessen, “Mobility and Blockage.”

neutralize these middle-generation critics for nearly a decade until they could lead the charge once more following the Tenth Writers Congress. Given the fact that after 1978 the Hitler Youth generation also occupied the leading roles within the union, the Biermann affair can retroactively be seen as a generational caesura in addition to a cultural-political one. The most vocal voices of this middle generation were contained and the trustworthy ones were handed the reins.

Importantly, this same middle generation continued to play a crucial role in the final stage of the union's history, although younger authors were also more involved. Rainer Kirsch, born in 1934, was 55 upon becoming president of the union. His two deputies, Joachim Walther and Bernd Jentzsch were somewhat younger, born in 1943 and 1940, respectively. The remaining Vorstand members ranged from age 35 to 72, with ten of 17 born between 1936 and 1945. This generational shift was late in coming however, and it is therefore little wonder that there was a perceptible problem with integrating younger writers into the association given the dominance of the middle generation.

In some ways these patterns are hardly surprising given that in general the 1929ers were disproportionately represented among GDR functionaries and avid supporters of the regime.¹⁶ But what impact did the statistical preponderance of the Hitler Youth generation have on the Writers Union in these years? Growing up under Nazism, members of this generation experienced the trauma of defeat and war firsthand, and many were thus strongly inclined towards the anti-fascist rhetoric of communism. Loyalty to the SED was rewarded with absolution for their tarnished pasts, and many of this generation quickly rose in the ranks within the new state. Many also encountered "veteran communists," those born before World War I, in the post-World War II period

¹⁶ Fulbrook, "Normalisation," 288-89.

as teachers, mentors, and colleagues, often leaving deep impressions on members of the younger cohort who were especially impressed with the suffering borne by these early opponents of Nazism. Thus within the SED, commitment to the ideals of the veteran generation and deference to their authority prevented, until it was too late, members of this middle generation from challenging the authority of those older communists.¹⁷

In the Writers Union, there was considerable deference paid to Anna Seghers and other veteran communists, but they had largely relinquished their posts by 1978, opening up opportunities for writers like Kant, Holtz-Baumert, Morgner, Nowotny, and Strahl. Other writers of the middle generation achieved sterling literary reputations at home and abroad, such as Wolf or Plenzdorf. In moments of general accord, the union consequently adhered closely to the cultural dictates of SED veterans. Even in the moments of greatest crisis within the organization, those members of the Hitler Youth generation never questioned the SED's right to rule, only its errors. Indeed, the fact that these were seen as errors that could be corrected and not fundamental flaws was telling. This generational pattern also helps explain why in the 1980s, although many middle generation authors had grown disillusioned after the Biermann affair, some critical authors from the same age cohort continued to try to work through union structures to promote changes. Likewise, for those 1929ers who achieved positions of power within the organization, they were able to avoid the problem of the SED leadership whereby the middle generation of leaders, blocked from the top positions, remained deferent to the increasingly rigid policies of their elders. In contrast, the new leaders of the Writers

¹⁷ Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 227-32; David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 10-13, 16-18; Wierling, "The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR."

Union were more flexible than their predecessors, a fact which helps explain the begrudged tolerance of critical voices within the organization even after the Biermann affair as well as the accommodating attitude many adopted after the 1987 congress. Finally, this generational dynamic also meant that in 1989, members of the union made use of their organization to promote serious reforms in the GDR but not to call the SED's monopoly of power into question. The system was broken, they admitted, but rather than scrapping it, it simply needed an upgrade; they were not about to give up on a system in which they had lived their entire adult lives, one committed to the ideals that were burned into their consciences through the flames of world war. To a large extent, therefore, in the 1970s and 1980s the Writers Union's leadership decisions and the style and content of the conflicts generated as a result were products of a particular generational experience.

Gendered Experiences in the Schriftstellerverband

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, indeed, throughout all of East German history, the Writers Union was an organization dominated by men. At first glance, this seems strange given the strong tradition of women's writing in the GDR which sowed the seeds of an alternative feminist discourse to the official SED understanding of feminism (the latter stressed, above all, economic emancipation and the right to work). By the 1970s and 1980s, these independent feminists challenged the idea that socialism had solved the "women's question" in the GDR, focusing on contradictions created by full employment for women's lives, celebrating difference between men and women, and conceiving an image of women as strong instead of as victims. East German feminist literature especially aimed at "feminizing" society, by altering those conventions which shaped

individual male and female psychology by speaking out and refusing silence. In the vanguard of feminist writing in East Germany were authors from the Hitler Youth generation including Christa Wolf (b.1929), Irmtraud Morgner (b.1933), Brigitte Reimann (b.1933), Charlotte Worgitzky (b.1934), Sarah Kirsch (b.1935), and Gerti Tetzner (b.1936). Following the lead of works like Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (The Quest for Christa T., 1968), feminist literature in the early 1970s tended to explore the search for a feminine identity. By the latter part of the decade, literature turned to exploring women's everyday lives from a psychological perspective. Here, other authors born in the 1930s (such as Rosemarie Fret, Helga Shütz, Helga Königsdorf, Lia Pirskawetz, and Rosemarie Zeplin) were joined by younger authors born in the 1940s (such as Helga Schubert, Monika Maron, Maria Seidemann, Renate Feyl, Jutta Schlott, and Beate Morgenstern) and 1950s (such as Angela Krauss, Petra Werner, Maya Wiens, and Doris Paschiller). Among these authors, Wolf and Morgner's reputations were highest, although ironically they found themselves in opposite positions within the Writers Union during the Biermann affair: Wolf was a principal signatory of the pro-Biermann petition and Morgner roundly critiqued Biermann, justified the state's decision, and subsequently joined the union's presidium in 1978 (her only term).¹⁸

Despite the impressive national and international reputations earned by individual women authors, within the Writers Union, women's membership increased only slightly, from around a fifth in 1973 to a quarter of members in the late 1980s. The situation was even more egregious within the leadership circles of the Writer Union. It is true that Anna Seghers served as president of the union for twenty-six years, more than double

¹⁸ Lorna Martens, *The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 2-3, 18-21, 27-29.

Kant's tenure, but the number of women in the presidium hovered around 1-2 out of a dozen or more members until the post-1987-congress presidium, when the number of women members "ballooned" to three (of 19). In these years, not one of the union's vice president's was female. Even the final, "extraordinary" congress of 1990 elected only three women to the 17-member union leadership.

What accounts for this imbalance in leadership positions? By 1989, 91% of East German women participated in the overall labor force, higher than almost all Western European countries, but the division of labor remained gendered.¹⁹ The SED boasted of having achieved legal and social equality for East German women, yet this was true only insofar as women's overall employment rates were concerned. In addition to the preservation of traditional gender roles in society and the family, gendered divisions of labor were also preserved, creating a situation where the higher echelons of most professions continued to see an overrepresentation of men. To quote sociologist Dagmar Langenhan and social science historian Sabine Roß, "the closer to the real loci of power, the less women were represented in leading positions."²⁰ Part of the specific problem in the Writers Union was most likely structural as well; recall that the presidium had been largely content to work without the participation of women in 1983, and it was only the ruckus raised by authors like Hanna-Heide Kraze and others that caused them to rethink their positions, admitting just one woman to their ranks as a result. Indeed, several months later at a Vorstand meeting in September, Eva Strittmatter spoke out against

¹⁹ Leonore Ansorg and Renate Hürtgen, "The Myth of Female Emancipation: Contradictions in Women's Lives," in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 164. Also see Donna Harsch's study of ordinary women and their encounters with the SED during the 1950s and 1960s. Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Dagmar Langenhan and Sabine Roß, "The Socialist Glass Ceiling: Limits to Female Careers," in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 177-82.

“attempts to feminize the Writers Union,” drawing applause from the group.²¹ In other words, there seemed to be a “socialist glass ceiling” within the Writers Union, fitting the wider pattern in the GDR.²²

On a formal basis, the leaders of the union did little to address this disparity. The presidium rarely mentioned the impact of gender on literary careers, and the Vorstand never held any meetings specifically on the role of women in the association. It would seem that most union leaders adopted the stance that, as a gender-equal society, women’s involvement in the SV leadership was not a major concern. Future research is needed to probe gendered experiences on a district level, but if the local delegations to national congresses are any indication, women were if anything underrepresented in *Bezirksvorstände* as well.

Ultimately, it was the activism of individual members, especially women but also men, who brought these concerns to light. If it were not for a group of concerned Berlin authors in 1983, for instance, the presidium elected that year would have had no women at all. And despite the lack of formal power, individual women did play key roles in major union disputes and issues. Seghers, of course, was not an idle president. She carefully but purposefully pushed to expand aesthetic and content limitations in literature

²¹ Quoted in Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 101.

²² Part of the problem might also have been the general reputation for women’s literature, Wolf and Morgner notwithstanding. Women were disproportionately represented in children’s literature relative to their overall numbers in the SV, and as Chapter Three demonstrates, this genre was held in lower regard than others within the union. The larger question as to why women, half of the population, were so poorly represented in the literary profession to begin with is difficult to answer. Here, the problem is probably connected to the historical tradition of patriarchal culture evident in Germany and elsewhere, one which provided few opportunities for women writers to publish and when they did, created disincentives for women to work in highly regarded genres such as fiction. They were subsequently relegated instead to genres of lower reputation such as letters and diaries and thus found it more difficult to gain recognition. Jo Catling, ed., *A History of Women’s Writing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6-8.

while not hesitating to use the union to police transgressions of internal norms and dictated views on socialism. Seghers, after all, not Kant, had been president of the union in the immediate aftermath of Biermann's exile. Christa Wolf and Sarah Kirsch were among the prime movers in the Biermann petition, while authors such as Gisela Steineckert, Eva Strittmatter, Irmtraud Morgner and several others participated actively in the debate within the union surrounding the petition, advocating passionately on both sides of the issue. Women also took part in the union's peace efforts of the 1980s and were especially active in the end stages of the GDR. It was not just Wolf who had made controversial statements at the Tenth Writers Congress, but also Helga Königsdorf, Helga Schubert, and Ruth Werner. And during the 1989-90 East German revolution, it was women members of the Berlin writers union who spearheaded the initiative in September calling for fundamental reforms in the GDR, the declaration which, when he failed to support it, eventually proved to be a crucial factor in the undoing of Hermann Kant's role as SV president in December. Finally, Ursula Ragwitz, though not a union member, was arguably the most important representative of the SED's Central Committee interacting with the association from the mid-1970s on, aside from those CC members (Günter Görlich and Gerhard Holtz-Baumert) who were also in the union. Ragwitz issued countless instructions to union leaders, held consultation meetings, and evaluated congresses and other official and unofficial SV gatherings; as the primary point person between the SED Central Committee and the Writers Union, she consequently wielded much coercive influence, as seen especially in the Biermann affair.

Gender equality remained problematic within the formal structures of the Writers Union during Honecker's tenure, although individuals played consequential roles within

the organization. Yet in the final assessment, very few members of the largely male leadership of the union, despite the occasional word of praise for the accomplishments of women writers, seemed particularly concerned with redressing this disproportionality

The Writers Union as a Professional Interest Organization

The production of literature in the GDR was a much more complicated endeavor than simply putting words to paper. Writing in East Germany was a dialogic process in which the author, publishers, official censors, readers, the SED, and the Writers Union all had voices. Although affected by the particular publishing system in place in the GDR, in facilitating authors' ability to publish the Writers Union fulfilled a more general role as a professional interest organization. The Schriftstellerverband's leaders positioned the association to serve a mediator role when conflict arose between the other partners, and union members often looked to their professional association to do just that. Especially common were appeals to the union to address publication delays for individual works, stemming from both ideological complications and bureaucratic delays. The SV leaders also regularly consulted with state authorities such as Klaus Höpcke about more general issues such as paper allocation, model contracts, agreements about authors' work with television and radio, annual thematic plans for fiction works for publishing houses, and official fee structures. Moreover, the association sponsored numerous promotional events for authors, beginning with inner-union manuscript discussions and also including public readings, book bazaars, and reviews in the official SV publication, *Neue deutsche Literatur*. The union's track record on these accounts was decidedly mixed, and the SV was especially unsuccessful at aiding the country's playwrights, but in the 1970s and

1980s members continued to look to the Writers Union to augment their publication and promotional possibilities and many benefitted from the association's help in these areas.

On a broader level, the content of literary works paralleled developments in writers' activities within the Writers Union. It seems an obvious conclusion that professional context influenced and was in turn influenced by literary texts produced in that context, but the institutional role of the Writers Union in reinforcing and generating content ideas among its members has not been sufficiently emphasized in scholarly accounts of either East German literature or the SV.²³ The relative openness of the early Honecker years found its expression most readily in the stream of books published that would have previously been barred in East Germany. Titles such as Plenzdorf's *Die neue Leiden des jungen W.*, Kunze's *Brief mit blauem Siegel*, and even Kant's *Das Impressum* testify to this liberalization. In these years, union leaders and members alike celebrated Honecker's "no taboos" policy, commenting approvingly on it at meetings, at the Seventh Writers Congress, and in official union publications. The growing qualifications on this openness were also registered within the union, as seen in discussions of works by Volker Braun, Stefan Heym, and others. The Biermann affair saw a direct intersection between literature and the political function of the Writers Union, as the association became the primary arena for settling the disputes arising therein. This conflict culminated in the expulsion of nine members in 1979, including Heym, Poche, and Schneider, who, among other things, had recently published damning literary condemnations of East Germany in the West. Members of the burgeoning environmental movement in the GDR likewise continued to promote their ideas and ideals both in literary works and through the union, eventually leading to the creation of an active group within the association dedicated to

²³ See Introduction.

“literature and environment.” Ecologically themed literature, such as Hanns Cibulka’s *Swantow* or Monika Maron’s *Flugasche*, in some cases predated these union efforts to promote environmentalism, but found particular resonance in conjunction with the union’s peace campaign. The easing of censorship restrictions in the late 1980s and the concomitantly higher incidence of critical works appearing in East Germany such as Volker Braun’s *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* or Christa Wolf’s *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* was likewise mirrored in the increasingly candid discussions within the Writers Union regarding pressing societal issues.

Taken together, the activities, events, and discussions within the Writers Union add an institutional dimension to David Bathrick’s argument about the official discourse in which East German literature participated during the 1970s and 1980s. Seeing a “dissolving of political Manichaeism within the cultural sphere” caused by the SED’s desire to bolster its legitimacy, Bathrick contends that by the late 1970s the state and people alike were deprived of previously accepted signposts designating the limits of toleration, thus leaving a “terrain of uncertainty and ambivalence” within the cultural world. The result was that literature increasingly expanded its focus beyond culture to areas which contributed to an increasingly differentiated socialist public sphere, especially in challenging patriarchy, environmental damage, and censorship. The combination of a lack of political will by cultural bureaucrats, an incoherent cultural policy, and the determination of authors, editors, and publishers to defy the censorship system and SED dictates resulted in ever more critical literature being written and

published in the GDR. Thus in the end, literature helped to expand the critical socialist public sphere, creating space for other dissidents to take the stage in the fall of 1989.²⁴

Writers accomplished substantially the same thing within the structures of the Schriftstellerverband, as will be discussed in greater detail below. Suffice it to say now that exploring the Writers Union's role in this process underscores the crucial connections between literary text and institutional as well as societal contexts. In this process, the content and form of literature may have been specific to the East German situation, but the interplay between the union, its members, their literature, and the wider social and political context spoke to a more general function of the Writers Union in protecting and cultivating the professional interests of its members.

The Professional Identity and Role of Writers in Socialism

The Writers Union played a crucial role as a locus of debate on the identity and role of authors in the GDR and in socialism more generally. The union's members were able to reach consensus on several key characteristics of their corporate identity, but often disagreed on the precise meaning of those terms. Though interrelated, these characteristics can be broken down into external ones (norms and values in interacting with non-union members) and internal ones (norms and values in interacting with fellow union members). As for external characteristics, first and foremost, East German authors were to be devoted to the socialist cause. In terms of societal roles, this meant producing literary works bolstering socialism as well as participating in union events aimed at disseminating socialist values and ideas to the East German population. However, the specific dimensions of socialism that authors were supposed to highlight shifted over the

²⁴ Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, 53-56.

course of Honecker's reign as per the desires of the SED's leadership. In the early 1970s, East German writers were supposed to distinguish themselves carefully from West German colleagues and to promote the legitimacy of the GDR as an independent state. Writers were also supposed to actively adopt a supportive stance on the most pressing domestic and international issues of the day, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from the USSR, the Vietnam War, the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile, and the World Festival of Youth Games. By the late 1970s this consensus on group identity had broken down over the particulars, as many authors believed it their duty to criticize wrong turns in the SED's socialist policies, especially those errors striking closest to home (like the Biermann expatriation).

Despite this turmoil, it was the Writers Union which played a central role in reasserting a hegemonic view of the identity of writers in East Germany, especially in the early 1980s when peace promotion and anti-NATO activism provided a seemingly non-controversially topic around which to center GDR writers' sense of self. Yet the success of these endeavors at forging a consensus on professional identity in the first half of the decade met with increasing complications by the second half, as individuals and groups of authors, claiming to be exercising their right and duty to promote peace, used their state-and-union-vested authority to speak against threats to peace which could not be designated as exclusive problems of the West. Especially in the realm of environmentalism, authors used opportunities created by union leaders to create rhetorical legitimacy for their repackaged assertions that to be a writer in East Germany still obligated one to challenge the SED's failures publicly. This self-understanding came to predominate for many union members, conditioning their attitudes towards the final

years of East Germany when, during the 1989-90 revolution, the preferred organizational response was issuing declarations about the need for SED reform.

There was also an internal component to writers' collective identities, expressed in community practices generated via the Writers Union. Part of this process involved a self-styling of authors to fit accepted behavioral norms. In requests or complaint letters to the union, members learned to present their appeals in ways that maximized their chances for success. In doing so, they emphasized the wider significance of these requests (for travel, subsidies for completing a project, or even membership in the organization), thereby transforming their personal inquiries into matters which would enable authors to fulfill their societal mission more fully. In these requests and in the thank you notes occasionally sent to the union's leaders, members actively pursued their wants and needs via the Schriftstellerverband. No doubt these maneuvers evinced a mixture of genuine gratitude and calculated cynical ingratiation, but the net effect was enforcing a culture of dependence and deference to the SV's leadership and the state as the purveyors of these goods and services. The message was clear: things could be accomplished in East Germany via private and professional channels, so authors would do best to adapt to these accepted patterns in order to get ahead.

Certain behavioral and collegial norms were most evident when they were transgressed, as was seen especially in the mid-1970s. Complaints and disagreements about socialism or about each other were supposed to be handled in house, under the aegis of the Writers Union. Volker Braun, for instance, had voiced critical remarks about the status of real existing socialism in his literary works in the early 1970s, but these matters had been dealt with internally through closed-door meetings instead of public

forums. The events surrounding the Biermann affair exposed the limitations of this system of conflict resolution, however. For the signatories of the pro-Biermann petition, their sense of societal mission ran counter to the associational norm of preventing highly critical comments from reaching the outside world. The dissenting authors believed it an obligation to make their views public in order to have a true impact in East Germany, but since such a path was blocked in the GDR, they had gone to the Western press. This step antagonized several other union members who characterized this action as a thumbing of their noses at established inter-union principles. Moreover, these rebellious acts were particularly damaging because all union members, as part of a literary community, shared common experiences, including both winning privileges and suffering at the hands of the SED. To quote Kant (from a 1990 interview), “The writers, for all their diversity and their frequent enmities, were all linked in the eyes of authority by a common suspicion.”²⁵ Taking the “easy way out” by going to the Western media was thus a slap in the face to those who did their duty and kept their frustrations by and large to themselves. To many colleagues, the offense of writers like Heym, Hermlin, and Wolf was less going to the West and more turning their backs on their fellow East German writers, although both undermined group cohesion.

Throughout this period, the union’s leaders claimed a gatekeeper function for their organization, controlling who would be permitted to participate in official public discourse on socialism, and thus defining who could meet the criteria for being considered a socialist writer in East Germany. By the 1980s, many authors learned to make use of opportunities provided to them by the union for peace activism to steer the conversation toward more probing assessments of the GDR’s shortcomings. These

²⁵ Interview with Kant, von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals*, 148.

authors thus learned how to balance internal and external roles and identity norms, and by exploiting the SV's own logic, were successful in expanding limits on public discourse about socialism's strengths and weaknesses. With this formula, outspoken authors once more became a force within the union in the late 1980s, forcing hard-line leaders to at least pay lip service to demands for an end to censorship, greater environmental protection, and a redress of the 1979 expulsions, among other issues. In 1989 they were able to fully wrest control of the union from these old guard leaders like Kant and Görlich, firmly setting the Schriftstellerverband on a new path. Yet until at least 1987, these critical authors were unable to fully articulate their critiques, and even after that they often expressed their grievances through union-facilitated interactions with the SED, meaning that until the end of the GDR, the union continued to shape participation in the socialist public sphere and hence what it meant to be an East German writer..

These contested facets of writers' professional identity rested on a number of shared assumptions. First was the assumption that socialism was the only acceptable political and economic system for East Germany and therefore the SED was entirely legitimate in its one-Party dictatorship. As aforementioned, this belief was especially pronounced in the middle-generation writers, baptized into anti-fascist socialism through their experiences under Nazism. Still, many if not most authors viewed the SED as an imperfect ruling Party, and several saw in it severe problems, but neither the union nor the vast majority of its members ever questioned the Party's right to rule until it after the SED's fall from power. The second major assumption upon which the union and its members constructed their group identity and sense of societal role was the belief that the state was obligated to provide union members with a certain level of social and

professional protection, thus allaying the anxieties and insecurities associated with a free market. Whether it was health or pension insurance, stipends for research trips, funds for completing projects, literary awards, vacation spots, travel privileges, housing subsidies, or opportunities for publication or book promotion, union members received much from the SV, but expected even more as evidenced by the many complaints about insufficient benefits. The combination of these underlying assumptions goes far in explaining the attitude of writers in the 1989-90 revolution. During the upheaval, most members initially clung to a strong but non-revolutionary reformist course; their efforts as a union were subsequently directed towards the Party. When one of these two underlying assumptions, the SED's monopoly on power, was undermined by the course of events, writers clung ever more steadfastly to the second, hoping a non-partisan Schriftstellerverband could at least exact some concessions from the lame-duck GDR government and later from the unified German government. The prospect of no state support in the face of a capitalist economy frightened many authors greatly, and the Writers Union's final months were spent trying to prepare members for this transition while hoping to mitigate, if only slightly, the uncertainties generated by the free market.

Compromise and Crisis in the GDR

Finally, the Writers Union sheds light onto both the reasons for East Germany's long-term stability in the 1960s and 1970s, its gradual decline in the 1980s, and its dramatic collapse in 1989. Writers were not typical East Germans in many ways, but the perpetual oscillation between conflict and compromises with the regime, mediated through the union, reflected the complex and sometimes contradictory interplay between

the adaptations and flexibility that compatriots experienced on a daily basis, on the one hand, and encounters with the coercive power of the state, on the other.²⁶ Many of the interactions between the SED's top leadership and writers were based on compromise and negotiations, although each party brought different levels of influence to bear on these relationships. These compromises were based on a degree of mutual interest – the SED had an interest in keeping writers satisfied so that they promoted their brand of socialism, and writers were interested in having their career and professional needs taken care of. Yet negotiations had a definite limit in East Germany; on some points there was no bargaining, as the post-Biermann years demonstrated. Moreover, although they reached a number of compromises over the years, the SED and writers were never able to effect a *lasting* compromise. Exploring these dynamics in three specific groups – the SED's Central Committee, the presidium of the Writers Union, and “ordinary” union members – therefore further illuminates the complexities of intellectual life in the GDR.

Members of the SED's Central Committee, especially Erich Honecker, Kurt Hager, and Ursula Ragwitz, in partnership with members of the Ministry of Culture such as Hans-Joachim Hoffmann and Klaus Höpke, laid out the GDR's cultural policy in the 1970s and 1980s. Wielding the full power of the state's coercive arsenal, including the Ministry for State Security but also social welfare provisions, these leaders utilized a variety of tools to cajole and reward compliance among the writers, especially through their professional union. They demanded the SV serve as an “ideological transmission belt” from the SED to union members, coordinating and cultivating literary production to serve state and Party goals.²⁷ Their chief partners within the SV were members of the

²⁶ Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise*, 1-26.

²⁷ Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, 36.

union leadership, specifically its presidium. That three leaders of the Writers Union – Günter Görlich, Gerhard Holtz-Baumert, and Hermann Kant – were also Central Committee members by the 1980s created a degree of overlap, thus complicating a simplified trifurcation of SED-union leaders-ordinary members. Presidium members by and large supported the SED's policies, but time and time again they advocated, in both subtle and explicit ways, to stake out a modicum of autonomy for the union in the literary realm. These calls were more pronounced in times of consensus than in periods of discord, but many times during the 1970s and 1980s these union leaders fought for and succeeded in winning, if only tentatively, some degree of self-regulation. Thus the Biermann affair, though prosecuted on a number of levels, was handled largely as an internal conflict among union members. Doing so gave the SED the appearance of non-interference in what was described as writers' own issues, even if the Party was in reality heavily involved in these actions. Nonetheless, rhetorically the SED continually ceded ground to the union leaders, eventually enlisting their organization in a vital propaganda campaign in the 1980s around the peace issue. If language was power in the GDR due to its legitimating function, the liberalization of writers' contributions to official discourse on socialism could be reversed only at the cost of destabilizing that legitimacy.²⁸

To be sure, the Schriftstellerverband's leadership was not synonymous with the entire organization, and writers from all corners of the GDR, acting in their own interests and according to their own beliefs, participated in the union and helped determine its course of action. In spite of these complex interactions, rough compromises were forged between all parties at key points during Honecker's tenure, compromises which

²⁸ Ibid., 43-44.

succeeded in minimizing conflict with writers for five to six years before they inevitably broke down over tensions stemming from the inherent contradictions which marked East German intellectual life. Upon his assumption of office, Honecker promised that there would be no taboos in art so long as one worked from a socialist perspective. With the latter qualification taken for granted, artists and writers were generally enlivened by this cultural “thaw,” and enthusiasm for the SED was relatively high. As aforementioned, this compromise necessitated that writers play an active, crucial role in the related goals of solidifying socialism in the GDR and differentiating their country from the Federal Republic. In doing so, writers were rewarded with greater cultural openness and, after 1973, improved socioeconomic benefits. However, some writers began pushing further in their literary works and public statements than the Party desired, offering what the authors deemed constructive criticism but SED leaders increasingly viewed as opposition. The compromise began fraying in 1974 and 1975 before breaking completely with the decision to expatriate Wolf Biermann. The ensuing conflict, meant to be a final reckoning with a certain group of creative intellectuals, brought discord to the Writers Union for several years. The crisis effectively ended with the expulsion of nine authors in June 1979 from the SV, followed by Erich Loest’s decision to quit the union months later. Those whose words and actions had exposed the limits of the consensus reached in the early 1970s were marginalized within the Writers Union; critical authors not expelled by and large withdrew from associational life, at least for the time being.

In 1979-80, the SED leadership, SV presidium, and rank-and-file union members established a new compromise. The SED had had its legitimacy damaged as a result of the Biermann affair, and so its leaders offered that if authors were willing to curtail

critical comments, respect organizational norms, and operate within union-mediated events, they were permitted to play a leading role in what became one of the most important causes of the East German state – the anti-NATO peace movement. Writers once again could play the part of concerned public intellectuals with real influence over public consciousness, at least insofar as they could succeed in convincing East (and West) Germans of the danger posed by NATO nuclear missiles. Presidium members likewise approved as they were given starring roles in this campaign and allowed a degree of control over how their organization would participate in it. This compromise began dissolving by the mid-1980s as a result of two interrelated factors: First were efforts within the union to push ecological activism as a complementary partner to peace efforts, with its resulting critique of East Germany's environmental record. These authors were bolstered in no small part by the second factor, namely the revolutionary reform policies of Mikhail Gorbachev and the domestic pressure these policies created within the GDR for reforms there as well.²⁹ The combination of domestic pressure and external contextual changes resulted in the remarkable spectacle of the 1987 writers congress, an event which, no less dramatically than the Biermann expulsion, announced the end of the most recent compromise. The difference this time was that it was critical authors within the Writers Union, not the SED, who shattered the consensus. Nineteen eighty-seven was not necessarily the beginning of the end of East Germany, but it was a crucial turning point within the literary community for from that date forward, while the Party and the hard-line union leaders continued to exert considerable influence and

²⁹ For the impact of Gorbachev's policies on literature, see Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2009), 263-71.

introduced adroit rhetorical adaptations to blunt the critical barbs of outspoken writers, the latter had seized the momentum.

The new compromise worked out in that year involved the SED and old guard SV leaders, shaken in their authority, agreeing to scale back limitations on free expression within the East German cultural world and increasingly willing to listen to the concerns of authors regarding important policy areas, especially cultural policy but also the environment and human rights. Writers, in turn, continued their support of the SED's rule despite the growing economic crisis and popular disillusionment. But this compromise, too, was unstable, predicated as it were on a number of concessions by the SED which may or may not have been forthcoming. Many authors, as East Germany's economic troubles deepened, increasingly demanded additional socioeconomic concessions and professional support, especially among playwrights. Disappointed in these efforts, some authors grew ever more disenchanted with the Writers Union as the vehicle for obtaining social and professional security. Concerned authors wishing to address the union's history, a point nominally conceded by Kant at the 1987 congress, found their hopes only partially realized in the months and years that followed: While new presidium members took the lead at making contact with former members, no decision on the 1979 expulsions was reached until the 1989 revolution. Writers hoping for greater freedom of speech in East Germany greeted Höpcke's announcement that the official censorship system would end, although delays in this process sparked doubts and fears of foot-dragging. Finally, environmentalist union members, among the driving forces behind the 1987 congress, were enthusiastic about the consultation meeting granted them in June 1989 by Hans Reichelt and other representatives from government

ministries. Though they were able to voice highly critical comments to these officials in person, bureaucratic stalling delayed accession to the demand made by Jurij Koch to protect Sorbian villages from further environmental damage.

By the late 1980s, writers had learned, through engagement with their union, that their professional livelihood and public role were to be defined and secured through compromises reached with the leaders of the dictatorship, although time and again they had seen the breakdown of those compromises because of fundamental tensions in their relationship with the SED. The latest crisis came in 1989. Writers had inadvertently contributed to the destabilization of the SED by playing a vital role in expanding free speech rights in East Germany. They did not cause the 1989 revolution, to be sure, but their efforts in literature and through the Writers Union had succeeded too well for some members' tastes. As popular demonstrations gripped the country that autumn, writers sought to play active roles, but they were gradually marginalized as fall became winter and unification became a realistic alternative to their preferred reformist course. The attitude of many writers, born out of decades of practice, was that changes should be accomplished through negotiations with the SED, and so Writers Union efforts that fall aimed at fostering dialogue between the Party, themselves, and opposition groups which had sprouted during the fall. In doing so, they harbored the illusion that the solution to their cyclical pattern of conflict and compromise was at hand, that they could finally break the vicious circle that characterized intellectual life in East Germany. However, growing criticism of the privileges earned by East Germany's writers as a result of their compromises with the SED became a persistent theme in the media, provoking alarm and defensiveness in many authors. The popular rejection of the SED, moreover, left the

Writers Union in an unprecedented position, with no ruling Party to appeal to. More seriously, the rejection of both socialism as the state ideology and the idea of a separate East German state meant that GDR writers' professional identity lost its mooring.

The upshot of this new situation was that critical union members, having wrested control of the organization from hard-liners, found their association greatly reduced in societal stature and forced to deal with an East German government that had bigger concerns than satisfying the demands of literary intellectuals of diminished social importance. During the summer of 1990 the West German government was even less keen on negotiating concessions. Even if the SED had held most of the cards throughout East German history, writers had possessed some degree of leverage given their function in legitimating Party rule. What use did the East or West German government have now for authors committed to preserving a state which had essentially been voted out of existence already? This was a bitter pill for many writers to swallow, and preventing 23 former union members from joining the Union of German Writers was only the final insult, even as other ex-SV members looked on with *Schadenfreude*.

In the end, the relationship between writers and the state in the 1970s and 1980s, mediated through the Writers Union, was characterized not by compromise, nor by conflict, but the constant vacillation between the two. There's was a contested and unstable relationship, punctuated by periods of stability and compromise. Yet a lasting compromise or stability proved elusive and ultimately impossible, foundering on the basic contradiction between at least some writers insisting on their obligation, as public intellectuals, to address problems within socialism and the SED, and the Party's demand for ideological compliance. The degree of tolerance could change over the years and

periodic compromises could be reached, but this fundamental problem remained an intractable feature of East German intellectual life under the SED dictatorship.

* * *

Its state defunct, its coffers depleted, the Writers Union had little choice but to dissolve itself at the end of 1990. One final incident in the last weeks of that year provides a fitting conclusion about the meaning of Writers Union to its members. The imminent end of the union was acknowledged in a note by new Berlin chairperson Klaus-Dieter Sommer to district members in December, just weeks before it was scheduled to halt operations. While most of the concerns of union members over the course of 1990 had been about social and economic protections in unified Germany, Sommer seemed concerned about something else. He began the letter by stating plainly, “At the end of the year the Writers Union ceases to exist as a member organization,” although he also communicated that the association would technically live on as a legal person for at least a year for the purpose of its final liquidation. Many district members, he explained, would also be joining the VS; they would all thus meet again in the new Berlin district organization of the West German union. Yet Sommer felt compelled to add, “[W]e in the Berlin district association should not disband without meeting one more time for an informal get-together.” For those unable or not wanting to come, he wished all the best, especially “good health and energy, which will be necessary in order to be equal to the difficulties, not to be overlooked, of everyday life.” The postscript to the letter was also a fitting *dénouement* for the union, as Sommer appended that, because their meeting venue

was no longer being operated, “everybody should bring with them drops [of wine] or morsels which they would enjoy sharing with others on this day – soda, seltzer, coffee, and tea are naturally available.”³⁰

Its money was gone and the once-commonplace spreads financed by the Writers Union were no longer possible. The all-powerful Berlin Writers Union district branch, the site of some of the most important discussions in the history of East German cultural policy, had been reduced to a potluck gathering. Yet while financial difficulties were painfully apparent, Sommer’s concern, just weeks before the union was to disband officially, was not for socioeconomic burdens, but for community. They would see each other again, he had told them; indeed, the newly constituted VS Berlin branch most likely would not have been all that different from what the Schriftstellerverband’s Berlin branch had become over the past year. But from another perspective, these two organizations were vastly different, and Sommer’s proposed get-together was more about looking back than looking forward. It was clear that Sommer had no nostalgia for certain aspects of the union, given his election as deputy chairperson of the VS following their 1991 congress in Lübeck.³¹ Yet he was aware that the professional community they had built within the Writers Union would disappear forever on 1 January 1991. In many ways it was already gone, but at least for one night they could gather and reminisce, perhaps selectively, about what they had lost in the unification process.

Surely many, perhaps most members chose not to attend. This was a redundant organization affiliated with a country that no longer existed. For others, though, this was

³⁰ Klaus-Dieter Sommer, Chairperson, to the Members of the Berlin District Association, December 1990, RKA 1163, vol. 1.

³¹ See Wolfram Dorn and Klaus-Dieter Sommer, eds., *Komm! ins Offene, Freund! - Erster gesamtdeutscher Kongress des Verbandes deutscher Schriftsteller (VS) in der IG Medien* (Göttingen: Steidl, 1992).

precisely the point; the Writers Union had helped aggregate East Germany's literary professionals and mold them into a collective, marked by a shared professional identity and sense of societal mission. That identity and mission were contested, to be sure, occasionally with great acrimony, but in the norms they practiced, the events they sponsored and participated in, the values they adhered to, and the Party they deferred to, the members of the association at least agreed that they were part of a community, one destined for societal importance, and one in which membership brought both privileges and responsibilities to each other and the wider nation. It was also an organization which had tried to solve the dilemma of every German writers associations before it – collecting all would-be authors into a single organization, colluding with the state to restrain the professional and social insecurities generated by the free market, and promoting a common ideological agenda. Though many authors would produce literature in unified Germany, often invoking the same themes they had during the GDR's existence,³² the formal channels for organizing that country's literary intellectuals into a distinct community were gone. Therefore in many ways the Writers Union's dissolution, rather than the fact of unification, marked the real end of East Germany's literary community.

The meaning of the Writers Union has been contested since before its formal end in 1991. Some authors remember the positive aspects, the community it created, the

³² See any number of studies on post-Wende East German literature, including Jill E. Twark, *Humor, Satire, and Identity: Eastern German Literature in the 1990s* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007); Dennis Tate, *Shifting Perspectives: East German Autobiographical Narratives before and after the End of the GDR* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007); Hyacinthe Ondo, *Literatur und politische Imagination: zur Konstruktion der ostdeutschen Identität in der DDR-Erzählliteratur vor und nach der Wende* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2005); Frank Thomas Grub, *“Wende” und “Einheit” im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur: ein Handbuch* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Julia Kormann, *Literatur und Wende: ostdeutsche Autorinnen und Autoren nach 1989* (Wiesbaden: DUV, 1999); David Rock, *Writers in Times of Change* and Martin Kane, “Von Abraham bis Zwerenz: An Anthology for Unification?” in *Voices in Times of Change: The Role of Writers, Opposition Movements, and the Churches in the Transformation of East Germany*, ed. David Rock (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 191-224 and 225-44.

critical dialogue it helped foster. Others remember the negatives, the manipulation by the SED, the role the union played in curtailing dissent. Many authors also fell between these poles, having experienced both the supportive and repressive aspects of the union. The difficulty for scholars interpreting the Writers Union is that each strand of these competing memories is based in fact: the association both hindered and produced compelling intellectual work in East Germany, with both trends inherent in the nature of the organization. In this way, the Writers Union, like the wider GDR, was a site of contradictions, one that escapes easy understanding, and one that will likely continue to be debated in the realms of public memory for a long time to come.

Appendix

Presidium Members, 1969-90

1969-73

Anna Seghers	President
Jurij Brezan	Vice President
Hermann Kant	Vice President
Fritz Selbmann	Vice President
Max Walter Schulz	Vice President
Erwin Strittmatter	Vice President
Gerhard Henniger	First Secretary
Werner Neubert	Editor-in-Chief, <i>Neue deutsche Literatur</i>
Günter Görlich	
Hans Koch	
Helmut Sakowski	
Kurt Stern	

1973-78

Anna Seghers	President
Hermann Kant	Vice President
Max Walter Schulz	Vice President
Jurij Brezan	Vice President
Fritz Selbmann	Vice President (died in 1975)
Erwin Strittmatter	Vice President
Gerhard Henniger	First Secretary
Werner Neubert	Editor-in-Chief, <i>Neue deutsche Literatur</i>
Helmut Sakowski	
Günter Görlich	
Gerhard Holtz-Baumert	
Rainer Kerndl	
Joachim Nowotny	
Kurt Stern	

1978-83

Hermann Kant	President
Jurij Brezan	Vice President
Gerhard Holtz-Baumert	Vice President
Rainer Kerndl	Vice President
Joachim Nowotny	Vice President
Max Walter Schulz	Vice President
Gerhard Henniger	First Secretary
Walter Nowojwski	Editor-in-Chief, <i>Neue deutsche Literatur</i>
Horst Beseler	
Guenter Goerlich	
Irmtraud Morgner	

Werner Neubert
Helmut Sakowski
Rudi Strahl
Hans Weber

1983-87

Hermann Kant	President
Jurij Brezan	Vice President
Gerhard Holtz Baumert	Vice President
Rainer Kerndl	Vice President
Joachim Nowotny	Vice President
Max Walter Schulz	Vice President
Gerhard Henniger	First Secretary
Walter Nowojski	Editor-in-Chief, <i>Neue deutsche Literatur</i>
Horst Beseler	
Walter Flegel	
Günter Görlich	
Werner Neubert	
Herbert Otto	
Rosemarie Schuder	
Rudi Strahl	
Hans Weber	

1987-90

Hermann Kant	President (resigned December 1989)
Jurij Brezan	Vice President
Gerhard Holtz-Baumert	Vice President
Rainer Kerndl	Vice President
Joachim Nowotny	Vice President
Max Walter Schulz	Vice President
Gerhard Henniger	First Secretary
Walter Nowojski	Editor-in-Chief, <i>Neue deutsche Literatur</i>
Horst Beseler	
Volker Braun	
John Erpenbeck	
Walter Flegel	
Günter Görlich	
Klaus Jarmatz	
Waldtraut Lewin	
Herbert Otto	
Rosemarie Schuder	
Maria Seidemann	
Rudi Strahl	

1990 (Executive Steering Committee)*

Rainer Kirsch	Chairperson
Bernd Jentzsch	Deputy
Joachim Walther	Deputy
Dirk von Kugelgn	Business Manager
Peter Brasch	
Werner Creutziger	
Friedrich Dieckmann	
Klaus Jarmatz	
Manfred Jendryschik	
Adel Karasholi	
Helga Königsdorf	
Gisela Kraft	
Werner Liersch	
Richard Pietraß	
Wolf Spillner	
Landolf Scherzer	
Jutta Schlott	
Jean Villain	

* In March 1990 a reduced executive steering committee replaced the presidium as the primary leadership body of the union.

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