

---

# Educating the Masses: The Theme of Conflict in Literature in the Formative Years of the East German State

**Helen Jones**

*University of Central Lancashire*

The following essay sets out to analyse in detail the East German depiction of international conflict as found in fiction in the years 1952 to 1956. Of particular interest here is the popular mode of narrative launched in 1949 known as the 'Heftreihen', or the various series of stories produced as cheap paperbacks for the kiosk trade.<sup>1</sup> These series promised cheap and cheerful escapism in their titles and illustrated covers and bore names such as 'Das neue Abenteuer', 'Zur Abwehr bereit' and 'Für Volk und Vaterland'.<sup>2</sup> A number of questions arise: how did they fit into the cultural and political policies of the newly formed GDR which aimed to transform its citizens into responsible socialists? How was the demand for popular fiction, for an exploration of Germany's recent and dreadful history, and the desire of both socialist writers and the state to educate the reader married? Edith Gaida, in a first comprehensive study of the genre's manifestation in the GDR, suggests that the 'Hefte' acted as a bridge between higher and lower forms of literature and this bears itself out in that some issues were entirely devoted to novellas or extracts of novels by established writers: for example, Anna Segher's tale of sabotage by workers in a munitions factory on the day of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, *Die Saboteure* (1958), appeared in the 'Erzählerreihe' of the 'Verlag des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, young writers were encouraged to produce material for serial publication, so that they would have a springboard into the book market, and the reader would enjoy the opportunity of encountering a potential talent of

the future. The risk of an anomaly, however, between the official desire to educate, and a popular desire for escapism was high due to the restrictions and traps of the genre. In the case of war stories, we may well ask whether the moral intentions of the state were fulfilled or thwarted.

I intend to focus on the 'Heft' format, although I shall also make comparisons with stories which did not appear in this form, but which are available in anthologies. Central to my analysis will be one author in particular, Brigitte Reimann. She was only 12 years old when the war ended and she belongs to a generation of writers who began their writing careers in the 1950s and early 1960s and who were being educated by an older generation of writers returning from emigration to the first socialist state on German soil.<sup>4</sup> Unlike numerous male authors who were depicting war in fiction, Reimann had no experience of armed combat. Therefore, rather than being faced with the dilemma of bridging the gap between personal experience and a communication of that experience,<sup>5</sup> she was translating ideological beliefs and, for the most part, the documented experience of others into literary form.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of her war stories can therefore offer insights into conventional patterns of narrative passed down by role models.

I have chosen the period 1952-56 as these dates mark the establishment of key political, cultural and military structures in the former GDR. From 9 to 12 July 1952 the second Party Conference of the SED took place, formally announcing the construction of socialism in the GDR and thus marking an at least preliminary acceptance of the split status of the German nation. Additionally at this conference, plans for the formation of a defence force were sanctioned. In terms of cultural developments, the formalism debate, initiated at the Fifth Meeting of the Central Committee in 1951, aimed to establish, as the Cold War developed, a socialist realist alternative to West German literary trends. The Committee also laid the foundations of a system of censorship. 1956 saw the formation of the National People's Army (NVA), while the signing of the Warsaw pact had taken place in 1955. The period 1955 to 1956 marked a peak in the production of 'Hefte', but it was also a time in which the GDR's own literary critics were keen to criticise any example of trivialisation. A call for more war literature depicting the crisis of youth under National Socialism was declared at the fourth Writer's Union in January 1956, although the

ensuing move towards aesthetically more demanding forms came hand in hand with the 'hard-boiled writing' debate which will be summarised in the conclusion of this essay.

In his study of the theme of military literature, Bernhard Decker concludes that 1956 marks a shift in themes. If, in the years after the founding of the National People's Army, the role of the German socialist fighting forces in keeping world peace emerged as the predominant theme, before 1956 it had been the progressive fight of the German and international working class.<sup>7</sup> Given the difficulty in accessing the flood of 'Hefte' on to the market in the 1950s, I am inclined to accept rather than question Decker's view, for no texts have come to light that question his results. Indeed, in the texts under debate here, it was not the military battles of the Second World War, but the conflicts in Indo-China and Greece, and the popular front in the Soviet Union which were portrayed. The overriding similarity in the depiction of the conflicts concerned is the fight for freedom against an outside aggressor, and the colonialist mentality of the capitalist world. Neither Indo-China nor Greece are portrayed as civil wars; in each case, the respective countries' nationals are fighting against French claims on Indo-China, or resisting the foreign slaughter of Greek fighters. Resistance fighting in some stories is depicted on the periphery of the narrated events: for example, the reference to the female partisan defending her country in Wolfgang Joho's *Die Hirtenflöte* (1948) or the partisans defending their village during the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in Reimann's *Die Frau am Pranger* (1956).<sup>8</sup> In the period under question the onus lay on propagating the concept of 'justified war' by supplying in literature the image of the East as the defender of mass revolution and the West as the colonialist and imperialist exploiter. In this respect Reimann's texts are typical. Common to all of her war literature is the claim to authenticity and a direct reference to historical facts. In each text dates, places and even names of politicians are given in order to assign each fictional plot overt contemporary political coordinates. *Der Legionär. Marienlegende 1952* (1955), for example, is the story of a young French soldier's decision to join Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh in their battle against colonial rule and in *Der Tod der schönen Helena* specific reference is made to Nikos Zachariades, the party secretary of the Greek Communist Party.

In *Der Tod der schönen Helena*, Tanassis and Helena Zioplakis join the Greek partisans after the family farm is razed to the ground. The commander, Tadschidis, falls in love with Helena but adheres to the unit's code of discipline which stipulates that relationships between the sexes are banned. The unit then gains another new member, Costas Chalkidis, and a relationship develops between the two with fatal consequences. When both are involved in a dangerous mission Costas flees and betrays the secret of the mission to the enemy. Tanassis and another member of the group are shot and Helena and Costas are taken captive. Helena spits in Costas's face on their arrest and once taken captive is tortured, imprisoned and finally shot.



*The love triangle: Costas and Helena sleep as Tadschidis looks on in Der Tod der schönen Helena*

The narrative contains numerous popular conventions: the ending, for example, may not be happy, but it is most certainly resolved. Any sense of horror at the news of Helena's death is averted by the authorial comment on the heroism of her actions and the significance of her sacrifice to a historical movement:

No-one knows against which wall the bullet was fired.  
No-one knows why she had to die [...] Perhaps she was simply the victim of senseless cruelty.  
Nevertheless the death of beautiful Helena is not senseless. She is and remains a heroine in the ranks of those who have brought the world a step closer to the ultimate goal of all human desire.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the conclusion is preempted from the very outset of the narrative. Helena's resolution to fight to the death remains constant and it is the gradual revelation of Costas's capriciousness that drives the narrative forward. As the risks to the partisans' lives and the sheer scale of the fighting increases battle by battle, so does Costas's fear which culminates in his betrayal. Interestingly, a warning to the reader is built into the narrative

that the search for pure adventure is irresponsible and unsocialist, i.e. the text implicitly condemns pure escapism. Costas is not assigned to the partisan unit in the mountains, he fights his way through, stealing an American gun in the process. He is aware that he cannot gloat in his success before the partisans. However, his means of joining the unit is directly acquainted with a lack of inner strength that marks him ultimately as an enemy of the cause.

In both *Der Tod der schönen Helena* and *Der Legionär* cause and effect are clearly defined, and all suggestion of chaos is avoided. The perpetrators of the razing of the farm in the Greek tale, for example, are exposed in no uncertain terms: 'For months the wolfs of the king had been patrolling the land [...] hundreds died, thousands, under the knives and bullets of the executioners'.<sup>10</sup> In a narrative device which defines the binary opposites of fascist enemy and communist ally, the narrator muses on the thoughts of whichever neighbour betrayed the family: 'the young Ziplakis was also a partisan, he has so many English on his conscience, at that time as well, 1944 - you remember - he also fought against the Germans'.<sup>11</sup> Cold War sentiments are clearly on the agenda with the guerrillas organised as the Greek Democratic Army on the one side, the British and Americans serving the Greek monarchy on the other. The pattern is repeated in *Der Legionär* the French soldier's decision to confront his officer marks the opportunity for the narrator to proclaim capitalist aggression as the sole cause of the war.



At that moment the young man recognised that the tool of evil stood before him, the greedy weapon of the monster that was devastating Vietnam in the name of money.<sup>12</sup>

The damning representation of all three western allies contrasts sharply with the image of the Soviet soldier as is illustrated by two examples: Herbert Otto's *Weg in die Gefangenschaft* (1955) and Friedrich Wolf's *Siebzehn Brote* (1953).<sup>13</sup> In the former, two German soldiers are on the retreat in the Soviet Union, their unit dispersed. One is captured while

collecting food for the other who is seriously ill. As the latter will die without the help of the former, the captured soldier is confronted with the decision either to deliver his comrade into the hands of his Russian captors or to abandon him. The story is structured around the correctly learnt lesson by the German soldier that the Soviet forces offer him and others like him a chance for the future: he is quite literally guided out of the physical environment of the woods, and, metaphorically speaking, out of his confusion, on to a road that marks a clear way to a new stage of development. In Wolf's text, German troops on the retreat are found starving to death on the day of Lenin's birthday. In an act of generosity Soviet soldiers share their rations with the Germans so that they can be brought to safety and re-educated. Just as Reimann's German soldier of *Die Frau am Pranger* dies on the Eastern front at the hands of partisans and not soldiers, so it is the case here that no Soviet soldier is depicted fighting; they are a defence force embodying moral integrity.

While the framework of the stories examined are determined by Cold War politics, the characterisation is not aimed to give life to psychologically rounded personalities. Instead, the literature is populated with archetypal figures common to conventional war fiction. In Reimann, for example, the figure of the mother stands as a symbol for peace. This is exemplified in *Der Legionär* where the story opens with the soldier telling his mother how he came to make his decision. While patrolling an area with his commander they had spotted a burnt out village in the jungle. In the one remaining hut they had found a woman in labour with her husband. The commander had given the order to kill the man and suggested raping the woman once she had given birth to her child, but the soldier had knocked out his commander with the butt of his rifle to save the family. Here a message of international solidarity is conveyed: one mother's son saves another mother's child who in turn represents the birth of a new future. Likewise, in *Die Frau am Pranger*, Kathrin gives birth to a baby in a woman's concentration camp in April 1944, the father of whom is a prisoner of war who himself was a child of the Russian Revolution (he was born in 1917). Reimann is not alone in her focus on the mother, and the influence I would suggest comes not just from a broader traditional source but from Anna Seghers in particular. According to Cettina Rapisarda, Seghers frequently uses the name Marie in an evocation of

secularised Christian imagery, just as Reimann does: Helena's mother, for example, is called Maria. That the image of mother is not free of difficulties is an issue raised by Gunnar Müller-Waldeck in her analysis of the unquestioning adoption of the figure of woman as mother and as a figure of peace in GDR literature of the 1950s; like Rapisarda she does, however, recognise an attempt by Seghers to release the image from the National Socialist idolism of motherhood in the context of a militarised state.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is not just the woman as mother who is idealised, but also the image of woman per se. In Wolfgang Joho's *Die Hirtenflöte* (1948) in which a train of German soldiers is attacked by partisans on the Greek border, the female partisan, Jarmila, serves as a measurement of Wendt's own failure to break free from his subservience to National Socialism:

She had loved him as a young person loves, beyond all borders and nations. But she had not betrayed her country and her duty. How great Jarmila was, the little seventeen year old Jarmila, and how little was he, the will-less servant of a foreign cause!<sup>15</sup>

It is a common feature in numerous texts to present female figures - often the lovers of soldiers - as a source of conscience and yardstick of moral behaviour. In *Der Tod der schönen Helena* and Boris Djacenko's *Der Schwalbenkonstrukteur* (1952)<sup>16</sup> it is to the credit of the leaders of comrades-in-arms that they both love and treat with respect their exceptionally beautiful but also highly effective female fighters, Helena and Asja respectively.<sup>17</sup>

A perhaps surprising element in Joho's text as in others cited in this essay, although not in the context of the politics pursued by the Eastern bloc, is the characteristics attributed to what are very young fighters: Helena is only 15 when she joins the Greek cause and 16 when she is captured; the French soldier in *Der Legionär* had only just come of age when conscripted to the army; Joho's Jarmila is 17; and in *Der Schwalbenkonstrukteur* the four young Soviet saboteurs are members of the communist youth organisation, *Komsomol*, and are aged between 12 and 17. Having been captured and interrogated by German soldiers for blowing up a bridge, their lives are saved by the Red Army who recapture the town. This is clearly connected to the policy of reaching a



young readership, with a view to attracting future recruits for strategic defence. Indeed, the 'Hefte' were predominantly aimed at the young, and *Der Schwalbenkonstrukteur* was published in the 'Kleine Jugendreihe' of 'Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt'. Reimann's text *Der Legionär*, has, incidentally, a direct link to issues addressed by East Germany's Free German Youth (FDJ): Indo-China was on the agenda of the World Festival of Youth in 1955 and Students for Peace and Friendship in 1951 in Berlin. At the festival in 1955, for which Reimann wrote her story, it was announced that the Geneva conference had reached an interim solution to the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Literature for young readers: Kolija under interrogation in *Der Schwalbenkonstrukteur*

With their overtly simplified patterns of narrative, authorial control and resolved conflicts, these texts would seem to do little to break the mould of conventional war fiction. However, they also came under fire from the GDR's own critics: in the *Tägliche Rundschau* of 30 September 1953, the 'Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt' was accused of failing to produce stories capable of drawing young people's attention away from American trash;<sup>19</sup> in 1956, a review for the *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel* suggested that the creation of authentic accounts based on recent trial records of enemy agents would fulfil the need for suspense and educate the reader more successfully given the general lack of aesthetic quality in the series 'Für Volk und Vaterland' and 'Zur Abwehr bereit';<sup>20</sup> and, in the same year, Otto Braun, referring to the two series 'Zur Abwehr bereit' and 'Das neue Abenteuer', wrote in *Neues Deutschland*: 'these series are nothing more than an imitation of western war and sensationalist literature, in which an artificial incident and not the human being is central'.<sup>21</sup> By its own standards, therefore, literature designed to educate was failing. Even outside the genre, writers were inducing nothing more than either the reader's rejection of political didacticism or a gratuitous interest in adventure.

So what was the alternative? Certainly soldiers returning from the fronts of the Second World War were translating their overwhelming experiences into a literature which diverged from the norm, but this was taking time and was a process fraught with difficulty. An oft-cited example is Karl Mundstock's *Bis zum letzten Mann*, a story in which mistrust in a German unit destroys any opportunity for solidarity and rebellion and ultimately the soldiers themselves.<sup>22</sup> Mundstock had begun to write the story in the late 1940s, but only completed it in 1956. By this stage, although a temporary thaw had occurred in cultural/political terms, attention had been drawn to the potential of depicting the newly formed NVA in literature. Furthermore, fearful of losing their ideological stranglehold in a critical era of socialist construction and mindful of the recent signing of the Warsaw pact, state officials clamped down on any examples of what they perceived to be nihilism and pacifism in what has become known as the 'hard-boiled writing' debate. Alongside Mundstock's *Bis zum letzten Mann*, Thürk's novel *Die Stunde der toten Augen* (1957) and Hans Pfeiffer's *Die Höhle von Babie Doly* were targeted. Criticised in all three texts were the lack of authorial voice, the perspective of the foot soldier, and the 'naturalist detail'. The situation was unfortunate: while seeking to encourage more innovation, the officials of the GDR simultaneously slammed the first sight of that innovation. Former soldiers may have wanted to focus on the bitterness of war, but the state wanted that bitter pill to be easier to swallow.

Ultimately the conventions of war fiction, as maintained in the 'Hefte', sat comfortably with the Socialist Realism of early 1950s GDR fiction and with the need of the state to instil a confidence in the victory of socialism in its citizens. In the propaganda war of the era, the GDR was looking forward not back; the rejection of 'hard-boiled writing', therefore, was the rejection of a literature which was interested in reflecting on the moral chaos and physical horror of the recent past, and not in naming contemporary enemy names. The disguise of a moral lesson in a popular genre was not, however, totally successful.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> No conclusive explanation has been found for the introduction of the genre in the GDR, although conjecture exists on the subject. Edith Gaida surmises that the 'Heftreihen' were launched to stem the flood of 'trash' literature from the west, a view which is rejected by Gerd Labrousse on the grounds that the genre also made an appearance on the West German market in 1949. He equally rejects Mallinckrodt's thesis that the 'Hefte' fulfilled the call for 'Groschenhefte' by the Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller in 1931. See Edith Gaida, 'Belletristische Heftreihenliteratur in der DDR. Eine erste Bestandsaufnahme', in *Weimarer Beiträge* (1970), 16/12, 158-76; Gerd Labrousse, 'Neuanfang und neue Tradition. Heftreihenliteratur in der DDR', in Karl Pestalozzi and others (ed.), *Vier deutsche Literaturen? Literatur seit 1945 - nur die alten Modelle?* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), pp. 147-54, p. 149; and Anita M. Mallinckrodt, *Das kleine Massenmedium. Soziale Funktion und politische Rolle der Heftreihenliteratur in der DDR* (Cologne, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Both 'Zur Abwehr bereit' and 'Für Volk und Vaterland' were created by the Verlag des Ministeriums des Innern which was to become the publishing house of the National People's Army. 'Das neue Abenteuer' was created by Verlag Neues Leben, the publishing house for youth literature. See Bernhard H. Decker, *Gewalt und Zärtlichkeit. Einführung in die Militärbelletristik der DDR 1956-1986* (New York, Peter Lang, 1989), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Seghers, *Die Saboteure*, no. 25, 'Erzählerreihe' (Berlin, Verlag des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Structures such as the *Arbeitskreise junger Autoren* and the Johannes R. Becher institute in Leipzig were developed with the aim of nurturing the new generation. One direct example of contact between a former émigré writer and potential young talent is a short correspondence which appeared in the journal *Neue Deutsche Literatur*: here a young Brigitte Reimann sought advice following news of a writing competition being held by Seghers; see "'... da' Sie mir Mut gegeben haben". Briefe von Brigitte Reimann und Anna Seghers', in *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, (1988) 36/6, 5-8.

<sup>5</sup> For comments on the difficulties faced by former soldiers in translating their experiences into the written word, see Ursula Heukenkamp,

*Militärische und zivile Mentalität. Ein literaturkritischer Report* (Berlin, Aufbau, 1991), p.9. Research to date has, incidentally, revealed no other women writers in the GDR writing about war in the 1950s. See, for example, the years 1952-56 in Herbert Jacob and others, *Literatur in der DDR. Bibliographische Annalen 1945-1962*, 2 vols (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Reimann's Greek stories were inspired by the tales of a former Greek partisan with whom she became acquainted via her husband's work. See her letter to Wolf Brennecke of 10 May 1955 in *Die geliebte, die verfluchte Hoffnung. Tagebücher und Briefe* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1984), pp.20-1.

<sup>7</sup> Decker, p.27.

<sup>8</sup> See Wolfgang Joho, 'Die Hirtenflöte' (1948), in *Fünfundsiebzig Erzähler der DDR*, 2 vols, (Berlin and Weimar, Aufbau, 1981) I, 118-47 (p.138) and Brigitte Reimann, *Die Frau am Pranger* (Munich, dtv, 1987). Neither text appeared in 'Heft' format.

<sup>9</sup> The German is phrased as follows: 'Niemand weiß, an welcher Mauer die Kugel das Mädchen traf. Niemand weiß, warum sie sterben mußte [...] vielleicht ist sie nur das Opfer sinnloser Grausamkeit geworden. Dennoch - der Tod der schönen Helena ist nicht sinnlos. Sie ist und bleibt eine Heldin in der Reihe jener, die die Welt ein Stück näher gebracht haben dem endlichen Ziel aller menschlichen Sehnsüchte', in *Der Tod der schönen Helena*, no.12, 'Zur Abwehr bereit', (Berlin, Verlag des Ministeriums des Innern, 1955), p.55. The original of all ensuing references will be given in cases where access to stories is only possible via archive copies. All 'Hefte' here are to be found in the Reimann papers at the Hans-Fallada archive, Feldberg, Mecklenburg.

<sup>10</sup> The German reads 'seit Monaten schon durchstreiften die Wölfe des Königs das Land [...] Hunderte starben, Tausende, unter den Messern und Kugeln der Henker' (TdSH, p.3-4).

<sup>11</sup> 'Der junge Ziplakis war auch Partisan, er hat so und so viele Engländer auf dem Gewissen; auch damals, 1944 - ihr erinnert euch -, hat er mitgekämpft gegen die Deutschen' (TdSH, p.5).

<sup>12</sup> 'Da erkannte der Junge, daß das Werkzeug des Bösen vor ihm

stand, gefräßige Waffe in der Hand des Ungeheuers, das da im Namen des Geldes das Land Vietnam verwüstete', in Brigitte Reimann, *Der Legionär. Marienlegende 1952* (Magdeburger Lesebogen, Arbeitsgemeinschaft junger Autoren, zur Vorbereitung der V. Weltfestspiele in Warschau, 1955), p.6.

<sup>13</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that either story ever appeared in a 'Heft' format, however, they have narrative patterns worthy of inclusion in this essay. See Herbert Otto, 'Weg in die Gefangenschaft' (1955), in Heinz Ludwig Arnold, *Die deutsche Literatur 1945-1960. Im Treibhaus 1953-1956* (Munich, dtv, 1995), pp.304-11, and Friedrich Wolf, 'Siebzehn Brote' (1953), in *Fünzig Erzähler der DDR* (Berlin and Weimar, Aufbau, 1974), pp.9-15.

<sup>14</sup> See Cettina Rapisarda, 'Women and Peace in Literature and Politics: the Example of Anna Seghers', in Rhys W. Williams, Stephen Parker and Colin Riordan, *German Writers and the Cold War 1945-1961* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992), pp.159-79, and Gunnar Müller Waldeck, 'Zum Bild der Frau in der DDR-Literatur um 1950' in Ursula Heukenkamp, *Militärische und zivile Mentalität. Ein literaturkritischer Report* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1991), pp.77-96.

<sup>15</sup> *Die Hirtenflöte*, p.138.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Djacenko, *Der Schwalbenkonstrukteur*, no.6, 'Kleine Jugendreihe', (Berlin, Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt, 1953).

<sup>17</sup> For further comments on the depiction of women in conventional war fiction, see Miriam Cooke's chapter 'Subvert the Dominant Paradigm', in *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), pp.13-67.

<sup>18</sup> A summary of the international youth festivals 1947-1968, unpublished. The document was found at the 'Akademie der Künste (Ost)' [catalogue no: 130] during a visit in July 1994.

<sup>19</sup> 'Abenteuerliteratur - aber realistisch', in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, 30 September 1953, p.4.

<sup>20</sup> 'Gelesen und beurteilt. Abenteuer und Patriotismus. Gedanken zu zwei Heftreihen im Verlag des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung, in *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel*, no.35, 1 September 1956, pp.559-60.

<sup>21</sup> Decker, p.34

<sup>22</sup> Karl Munstock, 'Bis zum letzten Mann', in *Fünzig Erzähler der DDR* (Berlin and Weimar, Aufbau, 1974), pp.284-308.

<sup>23</sup> According to Gaida over 10,000 copies were produced of each 'Heft' which were also shared among readers. However, little is known about reader reception in this period of GDR fiction and we therefore can only judge these texts by the critical attention they received.