

## **The Portrayal of the Late 1950s in GDR Literature, Published Before and After the Fall of the Wall in 1989**

*Gabriele Eckart (Southeast Missouri State University)*

This study will examine very different literary portrayals of the late 1950s in the GDR in works of Anna Seghers, Christoph Hein, and Wolfgang Hilbig – authors of different generations who created either a rosy portrait of the so-called ‘*Gründerjahre*’ (founding years) of the GDR or a very critical one. Interestingly, Seghers, who returned in 1947 to East Germany from exile in Mexico, portrayed the 1950s in two different ways. In her narrative *Vierzig Jahre der Margarete Wolf* (*Forty Years of Margarete Wolf*) (1957), the GDR is depicted as the embodiment of the utopia of a classless society for which German communists fought in their resistance to fascism, while in *Der gerechte Richter* (*The Upright Judge*), written approximately at the same time as *Vierzig Jahre*, but unfinished for reasons of self-censorship and published only in 1990, the reality in the GDR of those years is depicted much less favorably.

Hein and Hilbig, both two generations younger than Seghers, described the 1950s in the GDR looking back from the 1980s – Hein in his novel *Horns Ende* (*Horn’s End*) (1985), Hilbig in his narrative *Der Brief* (*The Letter*) (1985). While both portrayals are critical – Hein investigates the circumstances of the suicide of a historian who was expelled from the Party in 1957 – Hilbig’s is very different from Hein’s because, as a working class writer, Hilbig looks at those years from the perspective of the lower class, those who shoveled the coal to keep the East German factories going in the landscape of ruins after World War II.

In Seghers’s narrative *Vierzig Jahre der Margarete Wolf*, the narrator meets a woman, Margarete Wolf, who tells her about her family’s suffering during the Third Reich. As resistance fighters against Hitler’s regime, her husband and her brother were murdered. She was jailed in a German concentration camp and only set free because the Gestapo had hoped to catch her contacting other Communist resistance fighters. At the end of her story, Margarete Wolf states:

Wenn ich hier um mich sehe, dann sehe ich soviel, wovon Gustav [her murdered husband] gesagt hat, so muß es bei uns werden. – Er ließ sich dafür totschiagen, damit es so wird. Wir haben es nicht allein fertiggebracht. Uns hilft die Sowjetunion. (When I look around here, then I see so much of which Gustav [her murdered husband] said, that way it shall be. – He let them kill him so that life will be like that. We didn't accomplish it alone. The Soviet Union is helping us.)<sup>1</sup>

Later, the protagonist specifies the expression 'here': 'hier in unserem Betrieb und in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und in der Sowjetunion und in China und mit dem kleinen russischen Mond, der um die Erde rumjagt' ('here in our factory and in the German Democratic Republic and in the Soviet Union and in China and with the little Russian moon that is chasing around the earth')<sup>2</sup> – alluding to the Soviet satellite Sputnik that had been successfully launched in October 1957. Although life in the GDR during the late 1950s is not portrayed in much detail, the GDR is clearly shown as the embodiment of the utopia of a classless and truly democratic society for which German communists like the protagonist's brother and husband had given their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Anna Seghers died in 1983. In 1990, shortly after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the East Berlin Aufbau-Verlag published an unfinished novella that was found in Seghers's estate *Der gerechte Richter* – a text that also had been written in 1957 and only been published after the collapse of the GDR. The portrayal of the GDR in this piece of prose is that of a Stalinist society whose leaders are betraying the ideas of humanism and justice for which German communists had sacrificed their lives. In this text, Victor Gasko, a former fighter of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and concentration camp inmate during the Third Reich, is arrested and charged with espionage. Jan, the young judge assigned to the case, is dismissed and himself imprisoned when he refuses to bring the case to trial for lack of evidence. Both men meet again in jail after Victor Gasko, who had been brought to trial and sentenced by another judge, had tried to commit suicide for reasons that he put in the following words, 'Es ist euch also gelungen, unsere Idee ganz zu verhunzen, endgültig.' ('You succeeded in destroying our idea definitely.')<sup>4</sup> Both men survive the captivity and forced labor and in the end of the story still believe in the possibility of a just and human society in the GDR.

Critics of this story pointed out that Seghers does not delve beneath the surface of this painful issue of the lack of political justice in the new society. However, the criticism that ‘Evil is mythologised in the figure of [a] mysterious visitor, who, with his pale expressionless face and red feminine mouth, manifests traditional attributes of the devil and death’<sup>5</sup> is not justified. This visitor is present when Kalam, a powerful judge for whom ‘the end justifies the means’ with the consequence that ‘he willingly betrays the ideals of humanism and justice, which are supposed to be the cornerstones of the new society’<sup>6</sup>, tries to push Jan, the young judge, to bring the Gasko-case to trial. Without doubt, this visitor portrays the ubiquitous presence of the infamous state police in the GDR.

Seghers’s text *Der gerechte Richter*, as critics pointed out, is based on her experiences witnessing the political show trials against Walter Janka, Wolfgang Harich, Gustav Just and others in 1957 that had brought her to realize the fact ‘that the society in which she expected her humanistic ideal to be realised manifested aspects of the society she abhorred, and that, even worse, the unjust acts were being performed in the name of socialism against fellow socialists’<sup>7</sup>. After the trial against her editor and old friend Walter Janka,<sup>8</sup> who was sentenced to five years in prison, Seghers went to Party boss, Walter Ulbricht, in support of the defendant. After Ulbricht had declined to change the harsh sentence, Seghers kept quiet. As we know today, she started to write the novella *Der gerechte Richter*, then resigned and locked the fragment away forever.

To understand how communists of Seghers’ generation saw the late 1950s in the GDR it is helpful to consider the reasons for her act of self-censorship in regard to the novella as well as the reasons for not having protested publicly against the harsh sentences against the unjustly accused. Referring to East German censorship and the context of the Cold War, Günther Rücker states in his afterword to the publication of Seghers’ fragment in 1990:

Wo hätte sich damals solcher Aufstand und Aufruf vollziehen sollen? In einem der Magazine der anderen Seite? In einer dieser Zeitungen, die nur zu gern ihre Seiten dafür zur Verfügung gestellt hätten? [...] Damit wäre jeder, der Änderungen hier wollte, gerade bei denen ungläubwürdig geworden, auf die er wirken wollte im eigenen Land. Die Gedanken der Menschen waren beherrscht vom kalten Krieg und der Furcht vor dem nächsten Tag. Es sah nicht rosig aus für das Schicksal der Welt. Keiner konnte sagen, ob

der kalte Krieg nicht morgen schon in den heißen übergehen würde. (Where should have taken place such a revolt and appeal in those days? In one of the magazines of the other side? In one of those newspapers that really would have liked to put their pages at her [Seghers's] disposal for that? [...] With that, everybody who wanted changes here would have become unbelievable in the eyes of those whom he wanted to have an effect on in his own country. The thoughts of people were dominated by the Cold War and by fear of the next day. It didn't look rosy for the destiny of the world. Nobody could say if tomorrow the Cold War would turn into a hot one.)<sup>9</sup>

Referring to the tragic fate of Seghers' Jewish family during the Holocaust, Rücker adds, 'Könnte man sich [Anna Seghers] denken [...] als Zuarbeiterin des BRD-Staatssekretärs Globke, der die Gesetze machte, nach denen ihre Mutter auf den Transport ins Vernichtungslager geschickt wurde?' ('Could you think of [Anna Seghers] as a collaborator of the FRG's secretary of state Globke who made the laws according to which her mother was put on the transport to the death camp?')<sup>10</sup> In other words, for members of Seghers's generation who were communists or Jews or, as in Seghers's case, both, in the context of the Cold War, the GDR in the late 1950s despite its lack of political justice and humanism was still the far better state compared to West Germany where former Nazis were part of the government.

Rücker is probably right in his apology for Seghers's behavior. However, there is an important question about her novella *Der gerechte Richter* that he does not address: Did Seghers not finish it because it would have been a waste of time given the impossibility of publishing it in the East? Or was she not capable of finishing it?

Heike Doane concludes in her discussion of the artistic deficiencies of the text (besides a part missing that would explain the optimistic ending of the novella, there are unmotivated events, relative lifeless figures, as well as stereotypes),

Die Novelle belegt, wie Anna Seghers' im Exil vielfach erprobte Erzählmethode, nämlich sich mit den unmittelbaren Ereignissen der Zeit auseinanderzusetzen, angesichts der Verhältnisse im sozialistischen Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat zu versagen beginnt und wie Seghers' "Glauben an Irdisches" [ein Zitat Pablo Nerudas, das Seghers als Metapher benutzte um ihren Glauben an die sozialistische Idee zu beschreiben] vor der Unzulänglichkeit der neuen Zeit verblasst. (The novella shows how Anna Seghers's many times practiced method of narration, which consists in her examination of immediate events of the present, begins to fail in the face of the conditions in the socialist Workers' and Peasants' State and how Seghers's "trust in the earth" [a quotation from a

poem of Pablo Neruda that Seghers used as a metaphor to describe her belief in the socialist idea] fades against the shortcomings of the new time.)<sup>11</sup>

In other words, while writing *Der gerechte Richter*, Seghers was confronted with the problem that she had to make a choice: either to follow her sharp sense of reality that, together with her literary talent, had enabled her to write highly accomplished novellas during the Third Reich and during the early 1950s in the GDR; or to dull this sense of reality to rescue her belief in the socialist idea that, as Doane noted correctly, was threatened with collapse during the time of the trials. As we know, by putting the fragment of the novella away, Anna Seghers had chosen the second way. Whether Ulbricht really had convinced her that injustice against people like Janka must be committed in the interest of the more perfect society in the future or if she just suppressed her shocking experiences out of fear, we do not know. That Ulbricht had convinced her of Janka's guilt is out of the question since one of the major reasons for his arrest and trial was his intent to drive to Budapest and rescue Georg Lukács after the Soviet tanks had rolled in to crush the Hungarian uprising against the Stalinist regime in October 1956. This rescue operation had been Seghers's own idea. As Janka states in his memoirs, she had come to his office in the *Aufbau-Verlag* and said:

Wenn man den Nachrichten glauben darf, müsse damit gerechnet werden, daß auch das Leben von Lukács gefährdet sei. In Anbetracht seines Alters, seiner angegriffenen Gesundheit, seiner internationalen Bedeutung müsse alles versucht werden, wenigstens ihn, mit dem uns neben allem anderen auch enge Freundschaft verbinde, zu retten. (If you believe the news one has to expect that also Lukács's life is in danger. Given his age, his frail health, his international fame, one has to do everything to save at least him who, in addition to everything else, is our close friend.)<sup>12</sup>

She pleaded to send somebody to Budapest and get Lukács out. After Janka had tried to persuade her that this was impossible and nobody would take such a risk, she begged him, 'Würdest du zu ihm fahren?' ('Would you go to him?')<sup>13</sup> Finally, Janka agreed to do her this favor and drive to Budapest. He was arrested before he had the chance to go. Later, during the show trial, when the infamous judge Merlsheimer screamed, 'Und diesen Verräter Lukács [...] wollte der hier auf der Anklagebank sitzende Verräter und Feind des Ersten deutschen Arbeiter- und Bauernstaates namens Janka [...] nach Berlin

holen und zum geistigen Inspirator der Konterrevolution in der DDR machen' ('And this traitor Lukács [...], the traitor and enemy of the first German Workers' and Peasants' State with the name Janka, who is in the dock, wanted to bring to Berlin and make him the leader of the counterrevolution in the GDR')<sup>14</sup>, Anna Seghers kept silent. After Janka was released from jail in 1960, to his surprise, the only thing she said to him was, 'Ich bin der Meinung, daß du jetzt einen Lehrgang an der Parteihochschule absolvieren solltest' ('I think that you now should get enrolled in a course at the Party's school.')<sup>15</sup>

In the years after 1957 until her death, as Sigrid Bock showed, Seghers chose to deal with events in her texts that happened before 1953 (this is, interestingly, the year of the June 17<sup>th</sup> workers' uprising in the GDR!) or she chose international themes, preferably, those concerning the Third World. 'Die weitere Darstellung unmittelbarer DDR-Gegenwart unterblieb.' ('Any further representation of immediate GDR reality did not take place')<sup>16</sup>. That means, by clinging to her transcendental anchorage in the form of the socialist idea and suppressing what she experienced during the trial against Janka and others, Seghers was not capable of finishing the novella *Der gerechte Richter*.

Christoph Hein, born in 1944, belongs to a much younger generation of GDR writers who, unlike the writers of Seghers's generation, 'who found no way to air the contradictions they saw between reality and the ideal [...] and thus were locked into the position of apologists of 1950s socialism'<sup>17</sup>, were able to express their desperation about the attempts to destroy the socialist idea of an unalienated society in the GDR.

In Hein's novel *Horns Ende* (1985), at the beginning of the 1980s the protagonist with the name Thomas tries to remember the year 1957 to find out the reasons of the suicide of a man named Horn who had worked as an historian in the local museum. Thomas, then eleven years old, and his friend had found Horn's corpse hanging from a tree in a nearby forest in September of that year. Step by step, the reader learns that the job in the small museum was Horn's punishment after his promising academic career in Leipzig had been terminated for political reasons; he had been expelled from the SED (Socialist Unity Party), and in July 1957, while working at the museum in Thomas's hometown, he was even convicted a second time. Specific reasons for his punishments are not given. However, as Phil McKnight suggests, Horn's tragic story should be read in the context of the events surrounding the infamous show trials in that year:

The assimilation of historical biographical fragments into his [Hein's] characters results in reminiscences of figures like Walter Janka or Gustav Just, like Gerhard Ziller, Secretary of Economics in the Central Committee, who committed suicide in December 1957, or like Rudolf Herrstadt and Karl Schirdewan, who both ended up in museums of history after they were removed from their positions. There are also reminders of Ernst Bloch, who, according to Guntolf Herzberg's summary of a wiretapped conversation of Bloch's regarding the convictions of the Harich-Janka-Group and of his own student Günter Zehm, compared Socialism with Prussianism and the spirit of servility.<sup>18</sup>

Although McKnight's assumptions are legitimate, the story of Horn, who is an historian, must also be read in the context of the controversy surrounding the definition of objectivity and *Parteilichkeit* (partisanship) of 1956-7, a small kind of *Historikerstreit* of the GDR in the 1950s with sometimes tragic consequences for those on the side that lost. As Heiko Feldner showed, in this controversy, 'the question of objectivity and partisanship was not just a matter of epistemological interest.' Instead, 'the very possibility of a historical science that intentionally presented things in a certain perspective as part of a political project, without renouncing modern standards of scientificity'<sup>19</sup> was at stake. The most challenging position in this controversy was taken in Jürgen Kuczynski's article 'Partisanship and objectivity in history and historiography,' published in East Germany's foremost historical journal *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* in 1956.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, Kuczynski in this article makes it clear that, according to his point of view, impartial historiography as demanded by bourgeois historians is something impossible since 'any speaker speaks from a certain viewpoint which is predicated on a number of features such as origin, education or religion'.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Kuczynski attacks the attempts of the SED to pin historiography down to a subjective class partisanship with the consequence of the erosion of scientific standards. As a part of his argumentation, Kuczynski states,

The development of [historical] science demands rather a *specific partisanship*. It demands partisanship for progress: at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century partisanship for capitalism and the bourgeoisie, today partisanship for socialism and the working class. It demands *partisanship for the new and the progressive to which society advances*. To be partisan for reality – that is the literal meaning of the word objectivity.<sup>22</sup>

Given the time of the publication of this article shortly after Khrushchev's bold speech about Stalin's crimes at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the USSR that triggered the before-mentioned reform movement in the GDR with its call for a new public openness, Kuczynski's demand to be partisan '*for the new and the progressive to which society advances*' can clearly be read as a support of this movement. As Feldner shows, Kuczynski was viciously attacked for this article; nine articles alone were published against him in the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*. 'The polemic ranged from "unprincipled eclecticism" and having "not resolutely argued on the basis of Marxist partisanship," to "bourgeois objectivism," an "attempt to undermine proletarian class partisanship" and "revisionism".'<sup>23</sup> Although Kuczynski himself (as an antifascist emigrant during the Third Reich and a Jew) did not have to face the termination of his academic career, other 'less fortunate academics such as the historian Günther Mühlfordt'<sup>24</sup> did. Horn, in Hein's novel, does not comment on this controversy and his stance on it. However, his remark to the boy Thomas about the fragments of earthenware and the pieces of metal in the museum, 'Das alles ist sehr alt. Zu alt um noch zu lügen' ('this all is very old. Too old to be able to lie')<sup>25</sup> indicate that Horn probably had articulated his fear of historic science being reduced to the affirmation of the party-political standpoint of the SED.<sup>26</sup> Also Kruschkatz' naming of Horn's 'crimes' as 'Mißachtung des Prinzips der Parteilichkeit' ('disregard of the principle of partisanship') and 'feige[n] Zugeständnisse an die bürgerliche Ideologie' ('coward concessions to the bourgeois ideology')<sup>27</sup> are indicators that Horn was definitely not one of those GDR historians who attacked Kuczynski as a 'revisionist.' Instead, it can be assumed that he was accused by the Party to be one himself and had to suffer the same consequences as, for instance, the historian Günther Mühlfordt.

In Christoph Hein's novel the story of Horn's suicide is reconstructed from different perspectives. One is that of Kruschkatz, a figure very similar to that of the powerful judge Kalam for whom 'the end justifies the means'<sup>28</sup> in Anna Seghers' novella *Der gerechte Richter*. Kruschkatz had been a member of the infamous committee that had decided about Horn's fate in Leipzig and therefore was partially guilty of his suicide. With the following words, Kruschkatz tries to justify what he did:



Ihm war [...] Unrecht geschehen, gewiß, und an diesem Unrecht hatte ich meinen Anteil. [...] Aber es gibt eine höhere Moral, vor der sich Recht und Unrecht die Waage halten oder gemeinsam zu fragwürdigen Werten schrumpfen. Es war ihm ein geschichtlich notwendiges Unrecht angetan worden im Namen eines höheren Rechts, im Namen der Geschichte. Ich war nur das ausführende Organ, die kleine Stimme dieses ehernen Gesetzes. (Injustice had happened to him, of course, and I had my part in it. However, there is a higher moral in front of which justice and injustice are balancing one another or they shrink together to questionable values. A historically necessary injustice was done to him [...] in the name of a higher law, in the name of history. I just was the implementing organ, the little voice of this eternal law.)<sup>29</sup>

Later, Kruschkatz adds cynically, ‘Das schrecklichste Opfer, das der Gang der Geschichte fordert, ist der Tod von Schuldlosen. Er ist der Blutzoll, den der Fortschritt kostet.’ (‘The most horrible sacrifice that the way of history demands is the death of innocent people. It is the blood toll that progress costs.’)<sup>30</sup> McKnight in his examination of Hein’s novel shows correctly that Kruschkatz’ statements represent the Stalinist notion of historical truth. Nevertheless, McKnight points out that Christoph Hein did not intend to portray the GDR society of the 1950’s when the internal reform movements of the Party were crushed – an event ‘which ultimately prevented socialism from ever gaining a democratic character’<sup>31</sup> – as a genuine Stalinist society. In other countries with a soviet social structure, the victims of the show trials were executed (think for instance of Rudolf Slánský, André Simone, and many others in Czechoslovakia) while in the GDR they received only prison sentences. Some, as McKnight stresses, were even rehabilitated after they had served their sentences. In *Horns Ende*, the author hints at Horn’s possible rehabilitation, had he not committed suicide, when Kruschkatz still calls him ‘Genosse’ / (‘Comrade’)<sup>32</sup> after he had been expelled from the Party. After Horn rejects this address, Kruschkatz says: ‘Den Antrag auf deinen Ausschluß habe ich gestellt, wie du weißt. Dennoch, Horn, ob du Mitglied meiner Partei bist oder nicht, für mich wirst du immer mein Genosse sein.’ (‘I applied for your expulsion from the Party. Nevertheless, Horn, if you are a member of my Party or not, for me, you always will be my comrade.’)<sup>33</sup> That Horn rejects Kruschkatz’ obligingness and insists on being called *Mister Horn* instead of *Comrade*, makes him appear stubborn, unsympathetic, unsocial in the eyes of the reader.

McKnight summarizes Christoph Hein’s portrayal of the GDR during the 1950s:

Stalinism in the GDR meant a restricted public sphere, forced submission to party discipline for the members of the Party, and intolerance towards opposition. Yet in terms of the measures of retribution exercised, the GDR was inconspicuous when compared with other dictatorships in the 20th century, and even more so in comparison with those of Hitler and Stalin.<sup>34</sup>

This not too negative portrayal, besides the unpleasant characterization of Horn's personality, was probably the reason why Hein's novel *Horns Ende*, although it refers to the silencing of the democratic reform movements of the late 1950s and its tragic consequences, succeeded in being published in the GDR.

Wolfgang Hilbig's narrative *Der Brief* (1985) was not published there. The writer (1941-2007) wrote most of his texts while he was working full-time as a blue-collar worker and should have been loved by the Party that wished nothing more than a literature created by the working class. However, with the exception of a small volume of poetry<sup>35</sup> Hilbig's books were forbidden in the GDR. He published them illegally in West Germany, was sentenced to pay a fine for that and even had to spend a short time in prison. In 1985, Hilbig left the GDR and settled in the West.

In the narrative *Der Brief (The Letter)*, the first person-narrator who is from a working class family and earns his living as a blue-collar worker has an argument with an imaginary opponent in a red armchair who represents the Party. They discuss the expression 'Klassenstandpunkt der Arbeiterklasse' (class stand point of the working class) – a term that the Party used to describe the perspective from which literature in the GDR was supposed to be written. According to the person in the red armchair, the first-person narrator should easily be able to write such socialist realist literature since he is a worker himself – a demand that the first-person narrator sharply rejects by pointing to the miserable situation of the working class in the GDR. If he realistically described his experiences as a factory worker, the outcome would be the opposite of the rosy portrayal of life that the Party expected with its notion of *Socialist Realism*. Since Hilbig's first-person narrator during this argument mainly points to his experiences while being a high school student, an apprentice in a factory and a young worker, these sketches are a valuable part of a portrayal of the life of the working class in the GDR during the late 1950s.

Hilbig's key words to describe the life of a GDR working class family of those years are fear and exploitation. The fear refers to ghosts that supposedly live in the deserted mines and roam around in this desolate landscape full of industrial ruins, tips and other remnants of opencast mining south of Leipzig. Sometimes those ghosts kill people, cutting their throat. And the word fear refers also to the danger of falling one more step down on the social ladder to the very lowest, becoming a criminal which – as Hilbig's first-person narrator makes clear – can easily happen for political reasons. Every blue-collar worker knows, he writes:

wie schnell es ihm geschehen kann, daß er plötzlich ein Provokateur, Bandit, veretzter Asozialer genannt wird. Jeder, beinahe jeder von ihnen hat es schon erlebt [...], wie schnell er oder sein Nachbar in diesen Abgrund stürzen kann. (how fast it can happen to him that he suddenly is called a provocateur, bandit, agitated antisocial element. Every one, almost every one of them, has experienced it already [...] how sudden he or his neighbor can fall into this abyss.)<sup>36</sup>

The first-person narrator addresses the second keyword, exploitation, when he deconstructs the notion 'Heldentum der Arbeit' (heroism at work) – another favored propaganda tool of the Party. According to his experiences, this notion was part of the method of those in power to keep the worker in the GDR in constant 'latentes Schuldbewußtsein' ('latent feelings of guilt'):

Wird sein Tun und Lassen nicht andauernd mit Gewissensfragen verbunden. Wo sagte man ihm zum Beispiel einmal, er solle so gut und so viel produzieren, wie notwendig. Immer heißt es doch, so gut wie möglich, so viel wie möglich. Eigentlich ist er doch sein Leben lang gezwungen, vorzuspiegeln, er sei im Begriff, sich ohne alle Reserven einzusetzen, er sei bereit, sich auf Verschleiß beanspruchen zu lassen, eigentlich ist er doch sein ganzes Leben lang damit beschäftigt, Täuschungsmanöver zu entwickeln, denn tagtäglich muß er beweisen, daß er seinen verdammten Lohn *verdient* hat, einen Lohn, der bestenfalls einen geringen Prozentsatz seiner Mühe gerecht begleicht. (Do they not always connect what he does and does not do with questions of conscience? Where, for instance, did they say once that he should produce as good and as much as necessary? Always they say, as good as possible, as much as possible. Actually, he is forced all his life to pretend that he is showing complete commitment, that he is ready to let them wear him out; actually, he is busy all his life to develop ploys, because he has to prove daily that he deserved his damned pay – a pay that in the best case settles a small percentage of his effort.)<sup>37</sup>

Afterwards, the first-person narrator tells his opponent in the red armchair that he – in order to escape from the unacceptable working conditions in the machine hall<sup>38</sup> in his factory – had asked to be transferred to work as a boiler man; however, there, his situation got even worse. When he asked to be allowed to return to his former job in the machine hall, his request was turned down. In a bout of black humor, the protagonist steals Marx’s characterization of the working class in capitalism calling himself ‘eine[n] der Verdammten dieser Erde’ (‘one of the damned of this earth’)<sup>39</sup> – thereby stating that for the workers nothing had changed in the so-called Workers’ and Peasants’ State. Hilbig’s negative portrayal of the relationship between the SED and the working class during the late 1950s agrees with the results of the examination done by historians during recent years. While before and in 1953, as Gareth Pritchard shows, ‘many SED members were ordinary workers, and even many functionaries still felt bound by traditional class loyalties’, in the years after the violent crushing of the workers’ unrest on June 17, 1953, the Party and working class drifted apart until ‘the organic link between party and working class was irretrievably broken’.<sup>40</sup> Bertolt Brecht, as is well known, had commented on the blindness of the Party to this fact laconically in the poem ‘Die Lösung’ (‘The Solution’):

Nach dem Aufstand des 17. Juni  
 Ließ der Sekretär des Schriftstellerverbands  
 In der Stalinallee Flugblätter verteilen  
 Auf denen zu lesen war, daß das Volk  
 Das Vertrauen der Regierung verscherzt habe  
 Und es nur durch verdoppelte Arbeit  
 Zurückerobern könne. Wäre es da  
 Nicht doch einfacher, die Regierung  
 Löste das Volk auf und  
 Wählte ein anderes?<sup>41</sup>

(After the uprising of the 17th June  
 The Secretary of the Writers’ Union  
 Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee  
 Stating that the people  
 Had forfeited the confidence of the government  
 And could win it back only  
 By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier  
 In that case for the government

To dissolve the people  
And elect another?)<sup>42</sup>

Contrary to Christoph Hein's protagonist Thomas who still believes in the idea of a classless and truly democratic society and the possibility that it can become reality in the GDR, Hilbig, as Paul Cooke pointed out, 'sees the GDR's official rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism [that is based on that idea] as having little relation to the actual experience of the masses living in the East'<sup>43</sup>. Believing in a future utopia on earth in the form of the GDR is irrelevant for Hilbig's working-class protagonists who are struggling to cope with their working conditions.

To summarize, while Anna Seghers initially confirmed the rosy self-portrait of the GDR as a just and democratic society in *Vierzig Jahre der Margarete Wolf*, in her unfinished novella *Der gerechte Richter*, written at the same time, but unpublished until 1990, she revoked this portrayal. Seghers, in this text, and Christoph Hein, in his novel *Horns Ende*, point to the severe lack of political justice in the GDR of the late 1950s. In contrast, Wolfgang Hilbig, in his narrative *Der Brief*, shows that not only political justice was lacking there, but also social justice. Since the Marxist notion of 'Diktatur des Proletariats' (dictatorship of the proletariat), which was used by the Party to describe its form of government, tacitly admits the lack of political justice for some members of this society, Hilbig's narrative makes it clear that it was definitely not the proletariat who had established a dictatorship in that country. For the life of the working class nothing had changed after the so-called socialist revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Seghers, 'Vierzig Jahre der Margarete Wolf', *Erzählungen 1952-1962* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1977), pp. 205-19 (p. 219).

<sup>2</sup> Seghers, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> A similar example, as Margy Gerber pointed out in her examination of the portrayals of the early 1950s in the GDR, is Eduard Claudius' novel *Menschen an unserer Seite* (1951), in which the protagonist's dream of social and political equality in the GDR is realized in the course of the novel. Like Seghers, Claudius belonged to the émigré generation of resisters to fascism and could not go beyond 'the *Schwarz-Weiß-Malerei* of

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capitalism/fascism, on the one hand, and socialism, on the other.’ See Margy Gerber, “Das Wort wird zur Vokabel” – The Depiction of the Early 1950s in GDR Literature’, in *Geist und Macht: Writers and the State in the GDR*, ed. by Axel Goodbody and Dennis Tate (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 35-45 (p. 36).

<sup>4</sup> Anna Seghers, *Der gerechte Richter* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Gerber, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Gerber, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Gerber, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Their friendship dated back to the early 1940s. During the Third Reich, both Seghers and Janka, who had been a member of the communist party since his early youth and fought in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, had lived in Mexican exile. As Christiane Zehl-Romero showed in Seghers’ biography, Janka and the other defendants had been arrested in 1957 because they had discussed plans to reform the socialist system in Eastern Europe after Khrushchev at the soviet XX party congress in Moscow had revealed the crimes committed by Stalin. ‘Die Anklage kriminalisierte ihre Aktivitäten zu politischer Gruppenbildung und Boykotthetze mit dem Ziel der “Veränderung gesetzlich geschützter gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse” [...]. Sie hätten die bestehende Regierung der DDR absetzen und ihre Gesellschaftsstruktur ändern wollen’. (‘The indictment criminalized their activities to a forming of political groups and a smear campaign for boycott with the goal “to change societal conditions that are protected by law.” They would have wanted to dismiss the existing government of the GDR and change its societal structure.’) See Christiane Zehl Romero, *Anna Seghers: Eine Biographie 1947-1983* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2003), p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Günther Rücker, ‘Nachwort’, in Anna Seghers, *Der gerechte Richter* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990), pp. 57-80 (pp. 70-1).

<sup>10</sup> Rücker, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Heike A. Doane, ‘Die Unzulänglichkeit der neuen Zeit: Zu Anna Seghers Novelle *Der gerechte Richter*’, in *Neues zu Altem: Novellen der Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, ed. by Sabine Cramer (München: Fink, 1996), pp. 165-84 (pp. 179-180).

<sup>12</sup> Walter Janka, *Spuren eines Lebens* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), p. 265.

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<sup>13</sup> Janka, p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> Janka, p. 270.

<sup>15</sup> Janka, p. 446.

<sup>16</sup> Sigrid Bock, 'Die Last der Widersprüche: Erzählen für eine gerechte, friedliche, menschenwürdige Welt – trotz allem', in *Weimerer Beiträge*, 36, 10 (1990), 1554-71 (p. 1568).

<sup>17</sup> Gerber, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Phil McKnight, 'History and GDR Literature: Amnesia, Fragmentation, Chronicles, Critical Consciousness, and Setting the Course. Reflections on the Mid-1950s: Mankurt, Horn and *Horns Ende*', in *Christoph Hein in Perspective*, ed. by Graham Jackman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 45-73 (p. 58-9).

<sup>19</sup> Heiko Feldner, 'History in the academy: objectivity and partisanship in the Marxist historiography of the German Democratic Republic', *The Workers' and Peasants' State: communism and society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, ed. by Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) pp. 262-79 (p. 265).

<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Kuczynski, 'Parteilichkeit und Objektivität in Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung', in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 4 (1956), 39-55.

<sup>21</sup> Feldner, p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Feldner, p. 266.

<sup>23</sup> Feldner, p. 267.

<sup>24</sup> Feldner, p. 268.

<sup>25</sup> Christoph Hein, *Horns Ende* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1987), p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> As Feldner shows, Kuczynski during his argumentation in the defense of a realistic objectivity which requires partisanship for the new and the progressive in society, goes so far as to phrase the underlying issue that had inspired him to write this article. By stating, 'partisanship is not required of [GDR historians] "as a result of a resolution of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany" or "in the interest of a uniform working-class ideology"' (Feldner p. 267), Kuczynski was revealing that there was a serious problem with the Party's attempt to control historiography in the GDR. It is easy to imagine that historians like Horn who long had felt frustrated about those attempts felt encouraged by

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Kuczynski's article to speak out about what they otherwise would have kept to themselves.

<sup>27</sup> Hein, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Gerber, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> Hein, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Hein, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> McKnight, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Hein, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Hein, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> McKnight, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Hilbig, *stimme, stimme* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1983)

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Hilbig, *Der Brief* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), pp. 101-2.

<sup>37</sup> Hilbig, pp. 104-5.

<sup>38</sup> More precisely, Hilbig's narrator describes his job in the machine hall as 'ein dauerndes Wechselbad zwischen sklavischem Überstundenschinden an der Maschine und Abkommandierung in andere darniederliegende Abteilungen' ('a constant alternation between the slavery of doing overtime at the machine and being detailed for work in other nonfunctioning departments') – a result of the nonfunctioning planned economy of the GDR. See Hilbig, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> Hilbig, p. 147.

<sup>40</sup> Gareth Pritchard, 'Workers and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany in the summer of 1953', in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: communism and society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, ed. by Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) pp. 112-29 (p.126).

<sup>41</sup> Siegbert Praver, *Seventeen Modern German Poets* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Poems, 1913-1956*, ed. by John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Methuen, 1976), p. 440.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Cooke, *Speaking the Taboo: A Study of the Work of Wolfgang Hilbig* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 16.