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Postwar Literature of the West and East Sectors

Lauren Davidson

The Second World War, a fight of ideologies, destroyed Germany literally and figuratively. Expanses of buildings were left in ruins; much of Germany was eliminated through bombs and slaughter. Through the years of war, the psyche and strength of the people were also severely damaged, as the war only grew worse. After the war, Germany was occupied by four powers—the USA, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—until 1949, when Germany was divided into the German Federal Republic in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East. The West Sector belonged to the USA, Great Britain, and France; it was characterized by capitalism and American ideals. The East Sector belonged to the Soviet Union and communism. Both sectors were destroyed and changed. In the first years following the Second World War, the West and East Sectors were required to confront their new reality, but they did so in different ways. The East Sector had a strong optimism, because the people saw a new possibility for reconstruction and finding a better way. On the other hand, the people of the West Sector saw everything in grey, because their country was destroyed and occupied, and suffering was everywhere. Ultimately, the two sectors of Germany had differing perspectives of the postwar world, because they held differing ideologies.

The psychological wounds of the war remained, particularly in the West, where people saw only the destruction of their country and could not be optimistic. For the Germans, the war did not end in 1945: their suffering continued; the atmosphere was still of war; and many men were still held as prisoners of war. No one had really won this appalling war. Persistent hunger and poverty ravaged this destroyed country. There was neither enough to eat nor to buy. The majority of cities, such as Cologne, were flattened by Allied bombs, and many had no place to live. This hunger and poverty was also a destruction of the societal construct. The people could not live on or improve their lives in the face of this torture. The country and the people were empty and cold, almost without hope. No one wanted to remember the war, but they had no choice. Writers of this time primarily wrote short stories, documentaries, and ‘rubble literature’ (*Trümmerliteratur*) in an attempt to

grasp the experiences of the postwar years. In the West Sector of Germany, the people were extremely pessimistic, because they were cast off from the Western world to suffer acutely, without a greater goal to pursue.

The works of Wolfgang Borchert are exemplary of postwar literature in the West. Borchert was a soldier who survived only a few years after the end of the war. Because he had seen so much terror and destruction of the surroundings and the soul, he had much to criticize. He wrote short, ordinary stories about everyday suffering.

In 1947 Borchert wrote "The Kitchen Clock" (*Die Küchenuhr*) to convey how life and purpose, much like this clock, stood still after the war. In the style of 'rubble literature,' this story deals with a destroyed life and a destroyed city. A twenty-year-old man with "an entirely old face" carries a clock that no longer works, because it was the only thing left to him. His home was destroyed and his family killed; he was one of many in Germany that had survived such terrors. The clock was broken and stood still at 2:30 AM. Half past two was the time of his "paradise," because it was the time at which his house, before the war, was always still and he was with his mother in the kitchen during the quiet, early hours. This time described a simple, homely life of the everyday in the years before the war. No longer could he have this life. Therefore, the clock is a metaphor for the man, who, too, is broken and in a standstill. Through bombs and war he lost everything but this clock, and the future did not matter to him. An entire life was changed in a moment, and no genuine life remained after the war. The people around him did not wish to look upon him, because they did not want to see the reality of the past war in him. All sought a new way to live after the war, even if that meant merely existing.

"Surely Rats Sleep at Night" (*Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch*), also published in 1947, is a melancholic and bittersweet short story by Borchert. The story tells of a small boy who sat in the rubble. It was dusk, and the child was completely alone. An older man spoke to him and asked what he was doing. This man was also a symbol of the difficult life, in which there was never enough to eat, because he was visibly starved and weak. One could "see through the legs" of the man (Borchert, 215). At first the boy did not want to say anything about what his business was in this grey place, beyond that he was watching out for something. Against the rats he kept guard, because the rats eat corpses. Eventually the boy confessed that he was guarding his four-year-old little brother, dead and buried under the rubble. Their house was hit by a bomb, and the little one did not survive. The boy felt it his duty to keep guard of his little brother. The man sympathized with the boy and paused before saying that "the rats sleep at night" (Borchert, 217). The boy was confused. The man continued, "Surely the rats sleep at night. At night you can peacefully go home. The rats always sleep at night, as soon as it turns dark" (Borchert, 217). Of course this was not true, but it was dangerous for

the boy to be sitting in the rubble after dark. So many Germans were in this situation of having their house and family destroyed, and they had to support each other. The boy was too old for his years, yet he was small. The man wished that, perhaps, the younger generation could live on. He offered the boy a little rabbit, a small happiness for the poor child. This story allows the reader to see how terrible the postwar years were and how everyone suffered, but suffered together.

Conversely, the East Sector suffered for a goal they considered true. As was later clear, the promises of the communist ideal for something better were not completely true in practice. Nonetheless, the people of the East had much optimism at the start, because they believed that the future had come. Such unrealistic hopes were kept of a Utopia. First there was a liberal phase, in which many artists returned to Germany. They considered the East Sector to be the true, innocent Germany. The East Sector spoke not of the past, because they accepted no responsibility for the Nazi regime. The communist government dispersed excessive propaganda, and the artists were their mechanisms. No artist was allowed to describe anything negative or pessimistic. This was a critical problem in art movements such as the *Bitterfelderweg*. The *Bitterfelderweg* was a movement that allowed workers to describe their actual lives in writing. The workers should also be artists, and the people of the East Sector should all be equal, so argued the *Bitterfelderweg*. As soon as these stories did not discuss the wonders and special happiness of the working class, as communism suggested, the government swiftly ended this movement. There was also great hope for reconstruction and a new societal form in the communist mold. In this mold, the society is the most important, and the individual means nothing. The art and literature of this time reflected these ideas of unity and optimism.

In "Construction Song" (*Aufbaulied*) by Bertolt Brecht, written in 1948, the optimism and wish for reconstruction in the East Sector is expressed. "In spite of hunger, cold, and needs" (Brecht, 195) the East Germans work enthusiastically, because the dawn is coming soon. All should be ready to help and reconstruct; it was the responsibility of all. "Gone with the rubble and something new be built!" (Brecht, 195) went the refrain. The East Sector should be a communist ideal, completely built through the work of the people. The reconstruction was the best and greatest goal, meant Brecht, "but it must be in our own cause" (Brecht, 195). That meant that each person must take part. Those who did not wish to take part must be thrown out, for all communist comrades had a role. No one should be higher than another, because all were equal. The new state was also a symbol of the realization of communism; here was the possibility for something "better." The ideal was that the citizens "could lead themselves better" (Brecht, 196) without a leader. The East Sector was also destroyed, but not for long, believed Brecht. This destruction was seen as a chance. "Gone with the old, here with the new

state!” (Brecht, 196). The end of the war and the division of Germany was the turning point that communism had long awaited.

The ideological foundations of the German West and East Sectors, influenced by their occupying powers after the war, shaped the voices and feelings of the people of these sectors, because they did not see the same future. Their formulations of the future, and how they should achieve those futures, were entirely different and grounded in their ideologies. One sector was known for capitalism, the other for communism, and great was the divide between these small worlds that lay in rubble. In the West the melancholy society concentrated only on the rubble, destruction, and emptiness; they did not know how to go on, but they did not want to look back for an instant. The East Sector was proud of its ideal for the future, and the society gathered together to rebuild their half of Germany, led on by empty promises. Artists and writers were the voice of society in the postwar years, and they charted how a divided, destroyed country would carry on.

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