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Transnational Dimensions of a ‘German Case’: The Expatriation of Wolf Biermann and the Politics of Solidarity in the 1970s

In November 1976, the East German singer-songwriter, poet and dissident Wolf Biermann gave a concert in Cologne, based on an invitation from *IG Metall*, the West German metalworkers’ union. As the authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had previously refused Biermann’s request to travel to the Federal Republic, the very fact that his performance took place was remarkable. Yet it was the event’s aftermath that transformed it into a major affair: three days later, the GDR announced that Biermann would be unable to return from his visit. His performance in Cologne had included various barbs against party officials and the shortcomings of state socialism. Such criticisms were well-known features of Biermann’s work – but, according to the East German authorities, they had constituted a ‘gross violation of his civic duties’ and thus ‘removed the grounds for the ongoing granting of GDR citizenship’.¹ Biermann’s expatriation met with disappointment from the artist himself, who stressed his commitment to improving the socialist system from within. Indeed, he had declined an earlier offer to leave the country and suggested ‘to the gentlemen on their high chairs’ that ‘if anyone is to bunk off, they should go themselves’.²

The Biermann expatriation sparked a significant expression of solidarity among East German authors, artists and actors. A joint letter by leading intellectuals attracted attention well beyond the two German states. As the British *Guardian* noted, ‘the writers who have signed the protest against his [Biermann’s] expulsion are not only the most talented and popular in the country, several ... have held high offices in the Writers Union or are old Communists in good

¹ *Neues Deutschland*, 17 Nov. 1976, 2.

² These comments featured in a song in which Biermann argued that attacks by the authorities were merely increasing his popularity: ‘Das macht mich populär’, released on *Aah-Ja!* (CBS LP, 1974).

standing with the party, and known to have social contacts with its leaders'.³ In overtly contradicting the official line, the protest note was unprecedented in East German cultural life – and for many of its signatories, it had drastic professional and personal consequences.

Contemporaries ascribed considerable significance to the Biermann case, and as a result it was documented extensively from the outset.⁴ Since then, source collections, commemorative publications and documentaries have explored different aspects of these events.⁵ Biermann himself has commented on the circumstances and consequences of his expatriation in different ways – in song, through interviews and in his autobiography.⁶ To this day, his case occupies a place in German cultural memory. Accordingly, when the German parliament marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, it invited Biermann to sing at the *Reichstag*. The songwriter used the occasion for a much-noted verbal skirmish with the deputies of The Left, the party that had its roots in the GDR's Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED*).⁷

The prominence of the Biermann case in public discourse is mirrored by its presence in the scholarly literature. According to Mary Fulbrook, the year of Biermann's expulsion amounted to 'a turning point in official cultural policy' within the GDR.⁸ The measures against

³ *The Guardian*, 19 Nov. 1976, 2.

⁴ Peter Roos, *Exil: Die Ausbürgerung Wolf Biermanns aus der DDR. Eine Dokumentation* (Cologne, 1977); Andreas Mytze, *Über Wolf Biermann* (special issue of the periodical *Europäische Ideen*, Berlin 1977).

⁵ Roland Berbig et al., (eds), *In Sachen Biermann: Protokolle, Berichte und Briefe zu den Folgen der Ausbürgerung* (Berlin, 1994); Renate Chotjewitz-Häfner (ed.), *Die Biermann-Ausbürgerung und die Schriftsteller: Ein deutsch-deutscher Fall* (Cologne, 1994). For an example of commemorative publications, see a collection edited by the broadcaster Fritz Pleitgen, himself a former West German correspondent in Moscow and East Berlin: Fritz Pleitgen (ed.) *Die Ausbürgerung: Anfang vom Ende der DDR* (Munich, 2001).

⁶ Wolf Biermann, *Warte nicht auf bessere Zeiten! Die Autobiographie* (Berlin, 2017).

⁷ For an English-language summary, see Felix Steiner, 'Opinion: A bit of fun in the Bundestag', *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-a-bit-of-fun-in-the-bundestag/a-18048384> (accessed 1 Apr. 2021).

⁸ Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918–2014: The Divided Nation* (4th edn., Oxford, 2015), 239. For a discussion of Biermann in this context, see Ann Stamp Miller, *The Cultural Politics of the German Democratic Republic: The Voices of Wolf Biermann, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller* (Irvine, CA, 1999).

Biermann and his supporters ultimately undermined the SED's efforts to ensure conformity. To Konrad Jarausch, 'the "Biermann case" was a cultural defeat, because his banishment demonstrated the party's lack of tolerance for constructive criticism'.⁹ Meanwhile, John Toprey has described 'the fallout' as 'profound' since the official actions 'led to waves of protest and disillusion, on the one hand, and of departures among the GDR's artistic community, on the other'.¹⁰ That said, Stefan Wolle has cautioned against a tendency in public discourse to portray the Biermann affair as 'the beginning of the end' for the GDR: while describing it as the 'sound of the gong that jolted [East German] society out of its lethargy and resigned silence', he noted that 'the booster detonation was not followed by an explosion'.¹¹

To many observers, Biermann's experience seemed to constitute a very 'German case'.¹² This point of view is understandable for several reasons. After all, his plight was connected to the existence of two German states, with their competing political systems. Moreover, the German past had shaped Biermann's personal convictions and decisions: born in Hamburg in 1936, he voluntarily moved to the GDR in 1953, in line with his communist views and the East German state's proclaimed antifascism.¹³ As a communist, Biermann's father had been involved in the resistance against the Third Reich; having been arrested because of his underground activities, he was later deported because of his Jewish background.¹⁴ Seen from this angle, Germany's recent history proved highly significant for Biermann's trajectory.

⁹ Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995*, transl. Brandon Hunziker (Oxford, 2006), 200.

¹⁰ John Toprey, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and its Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN, 1995), 67.

¹¹ Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989* (Berlin, 1998), 244.

¹² Carla Boulboulé, 'Wolf Biermann – ein deutscher Fall: Anmerkungen zu seinen politischen Implikationen', in Roos, *Exil*, 274–8.

¹³ On the role of antifascists in the GDR, see Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolution: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

¹⁴ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 8–33.

This article argues, however, that a purely national focus risks obscuring important transnational dimensions of this case. Indeed, shortly after his expatriation, Biermann himself acknowledged the extent to which international developments had helped to challenge the repressive forces in East Germany and elsewhere. As he put it, ‘The Stalinist bureaucracy has its nose caught between the blades of Helsinki and Euro-Communism and is crying out in pain’.¹⁵ This statement draws attention to two important factors. First, it alludes to the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act (1975), which provided important reference points for campaigners.¹⁶ Second, it indicates that the rise of Eurocommunist ideas within some Western parties provided internal critics of state socialism with potential allies.¹⁷ To these two aspects, one can add a third international factor, linked to Biermann’s role as a singer-songwriter: in the decade before his expatriation, music had become an important part of protest cultures in both East and West.¹⁸

The Biermann case enables us to gauge the influence of international developments on activists in both parts of Germany, yet this article will also show how the affair generated international impacts of its own. The piece starts by considering the specific cultural contexts and political commitments for Biermann’s activism, from Anglo-American protest songs to the politics of transnational solidarity in the 1970s. Following on from this, it analyses the two developments noted above – namely Eurocommunism and human rights politics. Thus, the discussion will show how Eurocommunism inspired transnational exchanges, yet it will also

¹⁵ Wolf Biermann interviewed by Thomas Hoernigk, 2 Feb. 1977, in ‘Two interviews with Wolf Biermann’, *New German Critique*, 10 (1977), 25.

¹⁶ Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge, 2011),

¹⁷ For an example of Polish dissidents appealing to Eurocommunists, see Kasper Sulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Social Actors* (Cham, 2019), 122.

¹⁸ Detlef Siegfried, ‘Music and Protest in 1960s Europe’, in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (eds), *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956–1977* (Basingstoke, 2008), 57–70; Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton (eds), *Music and Protest in 1968* (Cambridge, 2013), 199.

consider how far human rights became a focus of activist aspirations after the disillusionment with earlier ideals, including communism.¹⁹ As a whole, then, the examination of the Biermann affair will highlight wider shifts in the transnational history of the European left, with legacies that lasted well into the 1980s.

A German singer-songwriter and his international cultural context

Having been involved in East German cultural circles, Biermann began setting his poetry to music in the late 1950s. From 1962 onwards, his sardonic take on life in the GDR attracted the ire of the authorities and was repeatedly censured. Growing tensions between Biermann and communist officials came to a head in 1965. As part of a shift towards more restrictive cultural policies, the SED's 11th Plenum also featured extensive attacks on Biermann.²⁰ Thereafter, he was confined to disseminating his work privately and in the West. Biermann's first poetry collection, *Die Drahtharfe* ('The Barbed-Wire Harp') was published in West Germany, where it became the top-selling poetry collection since the foundation of the republic.²¹ His first recording also appeared on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, based on a collaboration with Wolfgang Neuss, a West Berlin satirist with links to the emerging counterculture.²²

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Biermann was banned from performing in the GDR. By staging private concerts and distributing his songs in West Germany, he continued to be a thorn in the side of the authorities: Patrick Major has suggested that in this period,

¹⁹ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Jan Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten: Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940er Jahren* (Göttingen, 2014), 343–6.

²⁰ Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford, 2010), 174.

²¹ Wolf Biermann, *Die Drahtharfe: Balladen, Gedichte, Lieder* (Berlin, 1965). The sales were noted in *Der Spiegel*, 24 May 1970, 175. They were also mentioned in a piece by the renowned literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 Nov. 1976, as reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Wolf Biermann*, 20–1.

²² *Wolf Biermann (Ost) Zu Gast Bei Wolfgang Neuss (West)* (Philips LP, 1965).

Biermann was ‘the *enfant terrible* of the GDR’ standing out for his ‘[u]nabashed criticism’ of conditions in East Germany.²³ Biermann’s criticisms did not imply a fundamental rejection: rather than challenging the GDR’s ideological premises, he sought to hold the government to its own socialist standards.

Biermann’s political lyrics seemed to make him a distinctly German artist. They reflected the German past, the country’s Cold War division and the GDR’s brand of state socialism.²⁴ Moreover, Biermann viewed himself as part of a particular German literary tradition. Heinrich Heine was one point of reference, as illustrated by Biermann’s publication of a book whose title, content and structure pointed to Heine’s epic poem *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen* (‘Germany: A Winter’s Tale’, 1844).²⁵ Even more obvious was the influence of Bertolt Brecht – not only as a poet and playwright but also in terms of his musical collaborations with Hanns Eisler, Kurt Weill and Paul Dessau. At the end of the 1950s, Biermann spent two years working at the Berliner Ensemble – the theatre company co-founded by Brecht and headed by his wife, Helene Weigel.

This is not to say that Biermann’s work was short of international reference points and connections. For example, he expressed his affinities with the fifteenth-century French poet François Villon and with the contemporary *chanson* genre.²⁶ In the 1950s, the French *chansonnier* Georges Brassens had set a Villon poem to music and dedicated some of his work to him. According to Rossen Djaglaov, the fact that Biermann, the Italian singer Fabrizio De

²³ Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall*, 178.

²⁴ For a consideration of questions of identity and, see Peter Thompson, ‘Wolf Biermann: Die Heimat ist weit’, in David Robb (ed.), *Protest Song in East and West Germany* (Rochester, NY, 2007), 199–226.

²⁵ Wolf Biermann, *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen* (Berlin, 1972). A recitation of Chapter 1 featured on the album *Chausseestraße 131* (Wagenbachs Quartplatte LP, 1969).

²⁶ Jean-Pierre Hammer, ‘Wolf Biermann und das französische Chanson’, in Thomas Rothschild (ed.), *Wolf Biermann: Liedermacher und Sozialist* (Hamburg, 1976), 117–34.

André and the Soviet ‘bard’ Bulat Okudzhava all evoked Villon highlighted ‘Brassens’s influence on Italian, German, and Soviet guitar poetry’.²⁷

Biermann was familiar with Okudzhava, a protagonist of the Soviet ‘author-song’ genre: he translated one of Okudzhava’s songs and played it to him during a Moscow visit in 1971.²⁸ Biermann’s trip to the Soviet Union revealed commonalities as well as misunderstandings. His memoirs recall an evening at which he performed ‘an entire bag full of songs’ to Soviet intellectuals, with the singer ‘bathing in the sun of my listeners’ eyes’. To him, the encounter demonstrated that the ‘basic problems of the people in all the red-tinted dictatorships of the Eastern bloc were equally familiar to us’.²⁹ By contrast, a Russian account of Biermann’s 1971 visit suggested that ‘the Russians were not enthralled’: to them, the German singer-songwriter seemed ‘too much of a licensed liberal, too careful in his critique of the East German regime’ – a perception which Djagalov sees as striking, as Biermann ‘had entered into a more open conflict with the authorities than any other person present in that room’.³⁰ Whereas to Biermann, the encounter reaffirmed the vision of being part of ‘a political family’, to Djagalov, it suggested that the ‘elite post-Stalinist Soviet intelligentsia’ had an ‘immense capacity to misread a situation’.³¹

Links to the Soviet Union were reflective of common problems faced under state socialism. Yet Biermann’s performance style – songs accompanied by an acoustic guitar – also seemed to resonate with musical developments in the Anglophone world, as folk music became

²⁷ Rossen Djagalov, ‘Guitar poetry, democratic socialism, and the limits of 1960s internationalism’, in Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker (eds), *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), 159.

²⁸ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 249. Biermann’s version was later released as ‘Ach die erste Liebe’, on *Die Welt ist schön* (CBS LP, 1985).

²⁹ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 250.

³⁰ Djagalov, ‘Guitar poetry’, 157

³¹ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 250; Djagalov, ‘Guitar poetry’, 157.

a prominent forum for political song. In Britain, protagonists of the British folk revival maintained ties with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CGPB).³² In the United States, the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s involved not only the rediscovery of traditional songs, but also the penning of so-called ‘topical songs’. Radical songwriters from an older generation – especially Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger – helped to inspire the protest songs of young artists such as Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.

During the 1960s, Anglo-American examples influenced Germany’s emerging *Liedermacher* genre. In West Germany, festivals at Waldeck Castle became a forum for political song, featuring singer-songwriters who had links to communism or the New Left.³³ With regard to the GDR, David Robb has highlighted the rise of ‘an independent folk music scene ... in East Berlin, based on the informal Hootenanny model made famous by American folk singers such as Pete Seeger’.³⁴ Biermann can be linked to these broader cultural currents not only because of the style of his delivery, but also in terms of shared concerns: in 1963, he penned a song about William Moore, who had been murdered after delivering letters against Segregation in the American South.³⁵ Biermann thus seemed to echo the way in which

³² With an emphasis on political links that predated the 1950s, see Ben Harkar, ‘“Workers’ music: communism and the British folk revival’, in Robert Adlington (ed.), *Red Strains: Music and Communism Outside the Communist Bloc* (Oxford, 2013), 89–104.

³³ Eckhard Holler, ‘The Burg Waldeck Festivals, 1964–1969’, in Robb, *Protest Song in East and West Germany*, 97–132. See also Beate Kutschke, ‘Anti-authoritarian revolt by musical means on both sides of the Berlin Wall’, in Kutschke and Norton (eds), *Music and Protest in 1968*, 199.

³⁴ David Robb, ‘Political song in the GDR: The cat-and-mouse game with censorship and institutions’, in Robb, *Political Song*, 109.

³⁵ Wolf Biermann, ‘Die Ballade von dem Briefträger William L. Moore aus Baltimore’, in Biermann, *Die Drahtarfe*, 27.

American folk musicians engaged with African American civil rights – and indeed, both Seeger and Ochs addressed Moore’s case in songs of their own.³⁶

This wider cultural context helps to explain why Biermann’s vehicle for cultural expression could appeal to potential audiences in both East and West. By 1973, his renown was sufficient to gain him a recording contract with CBS – the international imprint of Columbia Records, which also hosted artists such as Bob Dylan. Within the German left, Biermann’s decision to work with a large American company attracted some controversy. Biermann himself argued that the arrangement would allow him to reach broader audiences, rejecting the suggestion that it would make him any less independent. He pointed out that his previous record label – the West German branch of the Philips company – had also sought to prevent him from releasing a song on Vietnam. He argued that ‘if I don’t let myself be censored by my own comrades, then even less so in the West’.³⁷

An international audience?

We should not consider international contexts merely in terms of international reference points and inspirations, but rather treat such processes in terms of reception and recognition that cut both ways. This point becomes evident when considering various ways in which observers from outside Germany responded to Biermann’s case – both before and after his expatriation. In 1970, the American poet Kenneth Rexroth cited the ‘sudden proliferation of the same kind of cultural expression, the raising of the same voices everywhere’, mentioning Biermann alongside artists from France, Sweden and Japan. To Rexroth, such similarities did not mean ‘that Joan Baez or The Beatles or Bob Dylan have thousands of imitators’ – rather, they all

³⁶ See also American songs on this case: Pete Seeger, ‘William Moore, The Mailman’, on *Broadside Ballads Vol. 2* (Broadside LP, 1963); Phil Ochs, ‘William Moore’, performed in 1963 and posthumously released on *A Toast to Those Who Are Gone* (Rhino LP, 1986).

³⁷ Interview in *Der Spiegel*, 21 Oc. 1973, 84.

formed part of ‘the same universe of discourse, because it’s all the same audience listening to the same spokesmen speaking against the same evil and for the same good’. To Rexroth, these artists illustrated the ‘coherence of the counter-culture’.³⁸ Other observers did not go as far but sought to explain Biermann’s case by suggesting a potential equivalent. For example, in discussing Biermann’s situation during the early 1970s, the *Guardian*’s literary editor W.L. Webb told its readers to ‘imagine Bob Dylan shut up with his guitar for years in a room in the East Village, forbidden to sing in public, singing to friends who still visit him as if to a thousand, and writing songs for himself and for them, some of which find their way to a sympathetic publisher in, say, Cuba’.³⁹

Webb’s comments may have primarily sought to introduce Biermann to readers unfamiliar with his work. Yet in one respect, his comparison with Dylan and the East Village was not entirely far-fetched: some protagonists of the American folk scene did indeed interact with Biermann. Notwithstanding potential language barriers, his identity as a musician and writer provided opportunities for dialogue and exchange. This aspect became evident when one of the most celebrated American folk singers came to East Germany: in 1966, Joan Baez met with Biermann during a visit to the GDR. She demonstrated her solidarity with the banned songwriter, enabling him to attend her concert and dedicating a performance of the spiritual ‘Oh Freedom’ to him.⁴⁰

This was not the only example of interaction with the American folk scene. In the year of Baez’s visit, *Broadside* magazine – which was at the forefront of the American folk revival – printed his song ‘Soldat, Soldat’ (‘Soldier, Soldier’). In his introduction, the activist Josh Dunston explained that the piece had reached him ‘via a tape from a live performance’. He

³⁸ Kenneth Rexroth, *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other Side* (London, 1970), 165.

³⁹ *The Guardian*, 28 Mar. 1971, 20.

⁴⁰ ‘*Die Zeit*, 13 May 1966, available online via <https://www.zeit.de/1966/20/ein-lied-fuer-biermann> (accessed 1 Apr. 2021). See also Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 187–190.

noted that Biermann's 'barbs against war and bureaucracy have become extremely popular throughout all Germany', and praised the tune as 'an outstanding anti-war song'.⁴¹ The song in question had been written in 1963 – the year after the GDR had introduced conscription, thus placing Biermann's antimilitarist stance at potential odds with state practice.⁴² It had reached *Broadside* via the American folk musician Hedy West, who continued to serve a cultural mediator in later years: her disenchantment with the United States led her to move to first Britain and later to West Germany.⁴³

In 1967, West released her own version of Biermann's antimilitarist song.⁴⁴ This was not the only case of Biermann's work appearing in other languages. In 1968, Eric Bentley – a British-born, US-based theatre critic musician and expert on Bertolt Brecht – recorded English translations of Biermann's songs and poems for the record label associated with *Broadside* magazine.⁴⁵ Further international interest manifested itself in 1972, as the Swedish actress Lena Granhagen released an LP of songs by Biermann and the Greek musician Mikis Theodorakis.⁴⁶ Granhagen's translated versions had been prepared by Cornelis Vreeswijk, a Dutch-born singer-songwriter who, after moving to Sweden, became a well-known figure in the Swedish music scene – in fact, Kenneth Rexroth's previously cited essay mentioned Vreeswijk as another protagonist of an international counterculture.

Granhagen's album with songs by Biermann and Theodorakis placed the East German dissident alongside a well-known opponent of the Greek Junta. In fact, Biermann's work was

⁴¹ Wolf Biermann, 'Soldat', *Broadside*, no. 73 (1966), p. 8, featuring introduction comments by Josh Dunston.

⁴² Katharina Natalia White, 'The "Red Woodstock Festival" and the Making of an International Youth Culture in the Berlin Cityscape during Late Socialism, 1970s–1990s' (PhD thesis, George Washington University, 2018), 183.

⁴³ Ken Hunt, 'West, Grace Hedwig (Hedy, earlier Hedi) (1938–2005)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.90000369169>.

⁴⁴ Hedy West, 'Soldat', *Serves 'Em Fine* (Fontana LP, 1967).

⁴⁵ Eric Bentley, *Bentley on Biermann: Songs and Poems of Wolf Biermann* (Broadside Records LP, 1968).

⁴⁶ Lena Granhagen, *Sjunger Theodorakis & Biermann* (Proprius LP, 1972).

also disseminated in Greece, with a translation of his poems appearing in 1974, shortly after the fall of the military dictatorship. While rejecting any ‘parallels between the GDR regime and the Greek junta’, the Greek translator argued that ‘what strongly connected us to Biermann during the dictatorship was ... the common struggle for the political, psychological, spiritual, moral survival’.⁴⁷

The variety of transnational bonds meant that Biermann’s expatriation attracted some interest within cultural circles abroad. Together with the French singer Yves Montand, Joan Baez issued a letter in support of Biermann in December 1976.⁴⁸ Her expression of solidarity contrasted with Pete Seeger’s reluctance to attack the GDR. Seeger used his column in the folk magazine *Sing Out!* by printing a detailed comment from Victor Grossman, an American communist who had defected to the GDR.⁴⁹ During the 1960s, Grossman had been involved in the Hootenanny Clubs and organized Seeger’s first performance in East Germany. As featured in Seeger’s column, Grossman largely defended the actions of the East German government. He argued that some ‘artists (and others) for a variety of reasons orient their attitudes towards western or anti-government audiences’ and are then ‘quickly discovered and used by western propaganda’. According to Grossman, Biermann’s songs ‘gave far too little credit’ to the GDR’s achievements. Moreover, Grossman seemed to defend limitations on the freedom of

⁴⁷ Demosthenes Kourtowik, ‘Wolf Biermann in Griechenland’, in Thomas Rothschild (ed.), *Wolf Biermann: Liedermacher und Sozialist* (Hamburg, 1976), 137.

⁴⁸ *Die Welt*, 21 Dec. 1976, as reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Wolf Biermann*, 140.

⁴⁹ Pete Seeger, ‘Johnny Appleseed, Jr.’, *Sing Out!*, 26, 2 (1977), 45. Shortly after Seeger’s death, an article on his political affiliations noted this episode: David Graham, ‘Pete Seeger’s all-American communism’, *The Atlantic*, 29 January 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/pete-seegers-all-american-communism/283444/>, last accessed 1 Apr. 2021.

expression by claiming that ‘every expanded freedom is immediately utilized by the very concrete enemies across the way’.⁵⁰

This contribution sparked significant debate among *Sing Out!* readers, who criticized Seeger for ‘the piece of sophistry he chose to print’ and who argued that ‘Grossman’s justification of the East German mistreatment of Wolf Biermann uses precisely the same arguments that were used by those who attempted to shut up Mr. Seeger himself and the anti-Vietnam War protestors’.⁵¹ The magazine’s editors acknowledged the ‘controversy and discussion’ that had been caused; in defence, they stressed that ‘Pete’s questions and comments are his own’ and pointed to difficulties in obtaining a complete picture of the situation.⁵² *Sing Out!* subsequently printed one of Biermann’s songs.⁵³ Seeger himself responded to the criticisms by claiming that he had merely ‘opened up the discussion’ and by noting that censorship was not confined to communist countries.⁵⁴ Although this debate is but a small example, it highlights how the reception of a dissident figure could reach into different audiences, partly because of the presumed affinities and cultural bonds.

Biermann and the politics of transnational solidarity

Long before becoming the subject of a solidarity campaign himself, Biermann proclaimed his solidarity with causes that reflected both his identity as a GDR citizen and as an internationalist. A consideration of this aspect highlights the resonance of earlier internationalist allegiances

⁵⁰ Grossman as quoted in Seeger, ‘Johnny Appleseed, Jr.’, 45. More recently, Grossman has portrayed ‘the [Biermann] episode as a well-planned trap’ for the GDR leadership: Victor Grossman, *A Socialist Defector: From Harvard to Karl Marx Allee* (New York, 2019), 109.

⁵¹ See letters by Nancy Mortensen in *Sing Out!*, 26, 4 (1978), 55 and by George W. Lyon in *Sing Out!*, 26, 5 (1978), 45.

⁵² Note by the editors, *Sing Out!*, 26, 4 (1978), 45.

⁵³ ‘Das Barlach-Lied’, transl. Peter Wortsman, *Sing Out!*, 26, 5 (1978), 20–1.

⁵⁴ Peter Seeger, ‘Johnny Appleseed, Jr.’, *Sing Out!*, 26, 6 (1978), 34.

and traditions on the left – for instance the joining of forces against right-wing dictatorships – but also a new strand of internationalism that extended to the opponents of repression in the Eastern bloc. The following section analyses these developments and the way in which they generated further tensions in the run-up to Biermann’s expatriation in 1976.

Like other activists in both East and West, Biermann expressed a significant interest in the Prague Spring of 1968.⁵⁵ In retrospect, he claimed that he had hoped that an East German equivalent to Czechoslovak reformers such as Alexander Dubček would emerge.⁵⁶ The subsequent invasion by Warsaw Pact states crushed such optimism. Under the impression of these events, Biermann wrote a song that placed the Prague Spring within a broader revolutionary tradition, claiming that the Paris Commune of 1871 was ‘still alive’ in the Czechoslovak capital.⁵⁷ The events of 1968 remained an important reference point for Biermann. A few months after his expatriation, Biermann stressed the need to overcome the ‘Stalinist bureaucracy system’ through a ‘second revolution’ and noted that ‘in none of those feudal-socialist countries are the conditions for such a peaceful, painless revolutionary step as favorable now as they were at that time in Czechoslovakia’.⁵⁸ In their turn, Biermann’s antagonists regarded the earlier events as a warning: an internal presentation by an SED official suggested that the pro-Biermann declaration by East German intellectuals had constituted an ‘attempt to bring about the conditions of the “Prague Spring” over here’.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ With a focus on the impact for Italian and French communists, see Maud Bracke, *Which Socialism, Whose Détente? West European Communism and the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968* (Budapest, 2005).

⁵⁶ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 213.

⁵⁷ The song (‘In Prague ist Pariser Commune’) and its allusions are noted in Hammer, ‘Wolf Biermann und das französische Chanson’, 134.

⁵⁸ Interview with Wolf Biermann, originally published in *Konkret*, Jan. 1977, translated by Jack Zipes in ‘Two interviews with Wolf Biermann’, *New German Critique*, 10 (1977), 16.

⁵⁹ Presentation by Roland Bauer for party official of the artistic section Berlin, 30 September 1976, document 63 in Berbig et al. (eds), *In Sachen Biermann*, 307.

In tracing the significance of transnational solidarity, Biermann's album *Es gibt ein Leben vor dem Tod* ('There is a Life before Death') merits particular attention.⁶⁰ Significantly, the record appeared shortly before the events of November 1976 and its material sheds light on his internationalism. At the same time, as the subsequent discussion will show, the content of the album was also shaped by activist alliances of the mid-1970s.

With only three exceptions, Biermann's album focused on the Hispanic world. One song had previously been a single in 1973: 'Comandante Che Guevara' was a German translation of Carlos Puente's well-known song 'Hasta Siempre, Comandante'. By the early 1970s, the late Argentine radical was a well-established revolutionary icon.⁶¹ While the GDR and other communist countries officially proclaimed their solidarity with Latin American liberation struggles – including those that Che Guevara had been involved in – dissidents responded to such movements for their own reasons. In some instances, such engagement helped them forge alliances with the non-communist left in the West, where solidarity with the 'Third World' attracted a broad spectrum of activists.⁶²

From an East German perspective, praise for the travelling revolutionary could be read as a critique of the bureaucratic model of state socialism. Biermann himself later admitted that his 'very liberal translation ... had a lot to do with the GDR and little with Cuba'.⁶³ Biermann's lyrics praised Che Guevara for 'not becoming a fat cat', not being 'a bigwig leering at money' and for 'not acting the hero from behind the desk, in posh garb with old decorations'. The song

⁶⁰ Wolf Biermann, *Es gibt ein Leben vor dem Tod* (CBS LP, 1976). All songs that are subsequently cited are from this album.

⁶¹ Robert Frank, 'Imaginaire politique et figures symboliques internationales: Castro, Ho, Mao et le "Che"', in Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand et al. (eds), *Les Années 68: Le temps de contestation* (Brussels, 2000), 31–47.

⁶² On this issue, see Robert Gildea, James Mark and Niek Pas, 'European radicals and the "Third World": Imagined solidarities and radical networks, 1958–73', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2011), 449–71. For the West German case, see Quinn Slobodian, *Third World Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC, 2013).

⁶³ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 275.

perpetuated Bierman's confrontation with the East German authorities: Biermann had entered it as a contribution to the World Festival of Youth of 1973, which was hosted by the GDR. Although his submission proved unsuccessful – unsurprisingly, given the general ban on his performances – Biermann used the circumstances of the World Festival to address a crowd informally on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz.⁶⁴

Two other songs on the album were concerned with Chile, dealing with the coup d'état that had disposed Salvador Allende's *Unidad Popular* government in September 1973 and with the right-wing Pinochet dictatorship that followed. 'Chile – Ballade vom Kameraman' ('Chile – Ballad of the Cameraman') deplored the way in which power seemed to emanate from the mouths of guns (*Mündungen*) rather than of humans (*Mündern*). Recorded in the year of Pinochet's coup, Biermann had intended the print version for inclusion in an East German anthology of texts on Chile, but it was rejected.⁶⁵

The recording exemplified the way in which Chile solidarity became a rallying cause for a diverse cast of campaigners. In the West, it involved the mobilization of activists who had been enthused by Allende's brand of socialism, yet it also became the subject of human rights campaigns by groups such as Amnesty International.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, East German officials expressed their support for the Chilean left: the GDR was one of the first countries to grant

⁶⁴ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 280–1. The circumstances and contexts are subject to detailed analysis in White, 'The "Red Woodstock" Festival'.

⁶⁵ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 303–4. The publication in question was Thomas Billhardt et al. (eds), *Chile: Gesang und Bericht* (Halle, 1974).

⁶⁶ Kim Christiaens, Idesbald Goddeeris and Magaly Rodríguez García (eds), *European Solidarity with Chile 1970s–1980s* (Brussels, 2014); Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (Cambridge, 2018); Tom Buchanan, *Amnesty International and Human Rights Activism in Postwar Britain, 1945–1977* (Cambridge, 2020), 184–91; Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten*, 583–710.

asylum to the victims of Pinochet's rule, subsequently hosting around 2,000 refugees.⁶⁷ This was the context for Biermann's second Chile-related song: his 'Ballade von den Spaniern im Dresdener Exil' ('Ballad on the Spaniards in their Dresden Exile') was inspired by Núria Quevedo's painting 'Thirty Years in Exile' (1971). The canvas depicted Spanish communists who had found refuge in the GDR during the 1950s, yet Biermann added a coda on the 'comrades from Chile who are now among us', stressing that forceful solidarity would be crucial to prevent Pinochet's rule from lasting as long as Franco's dictatorship in Spain.

The ballad was far from the only one to point to Spain: Biermann's 1976 album featured altogether ten songs that did so. This focus on Spain had been triggered by the invitation to perform at a West German 'Solidarity with Spain' event in October 1975. The protest event – initially planned for Frankfurt/Main and ultimately held in neighbouring Offenbach – addressed recent death sentences in Spain, imposed at a time when Franco was already gravely ill. Two former student leaders from the 1960s played a key role in planning the event: Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Rudi Dutschke. A central figure in the Parisian *événements* of 1968, Cohn-Bendit had been expelled from France in May that year and then continued his radical activism from Frankfurt.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Dutschke had narrowly survived an assassination attempt in April 1968 by a far-right fanatic – a pivotal episode in the broader history of the West German 1968 protests.⁶⁹ At one level, the subsequent collaboration of Cohn-Bendit, Dutschke and Biermann showed that the Spanish struggle continued to resonate among the European left; at another, it illustrated how transnational solidarity generated or reinforced political alliances.

⁶⁷ Sebastian Koch, *Zufluchtsort DDR? Chilenische Flüchtlinge und die Ausländerpolitik der SED* (Paderborn, 2017).

⁶⁸ On Cohn-Bendit's transnational trajectories, see Richard Ivan Jobs, 'The Grand Tour of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the Europeanism of 1968', in Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James Williams (eds), *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2011), 231–44.

⁶⁹ For a detailed account, see Nick Thomas, *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany: A Social History of Dissent and Democracy* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 165–82.

Dutschke and Biermann were connected in several ways, although their respective trajectories in some ways constituted mirror images: in contrast to Biermann, Dutschke had fled the GDR at the age of 21 and then sought to transform the West German political system. After Dutschke's shooting, Biermann recorded a song in which he portrayed West German politicians and the right-wing newspapers of the Axel Springer publishing house as the real culprits – accusations that delayed the song's release in West Germany.⁷⁰ Dutschke and Biermann subsequently met during the World Festival of Youth in 1973, despite initial attempts by the GDR authorities to prevent Dutschke's entry.⁷¹ Prior to the 'Solidarity with Spain' event, Dutschke and Cohn-Bendit also visited Biermann in East Berlin.⁷²

To his own surprise, the GDR initially authorized Biermann to attend the West German solidarity event. Dutschke mentioned that when matters became 'more concrete', Biermann engaged in 'feverish labour', writing songs that expressed his 'deep desire for solidarity, a United Front and personal change'.⁷³ As featured on his subsequent album, one song dealt with the fate of Julián Grimau – the communist leader executed by the Francoist state in 1963 – while others deplored the fact that Franco had held on to office until the end of his life. In addition to his own songs, Biermann revisited several tunes from the Spanish Civil War. At first sight, such themes hardly contradicted the GDR's policies, as proclamations of solidarity

⁷⁰ Wolf Biermann, 'Drei Kugeln auf Rudi Dutschke' ('Three Bullets for Rudi Dutschke'), released on *4 neue Lieder* (Wagenbachs Quartplatte LP, 1968). See *Der Spiegel*, 20 October 1968, 220.

⁷¹ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 278–9.

⁷² Archives of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic, Berlin (hereafter: BStU), MfS, AOP, no. 11806/85, vol. 21: 'Bericht über die Veranstaltung "Solidarität mit dem spanischen Widerstand"', 89–90 (digitized version at <https://www.stasi-mediathek.de/>).

⁷³ Rudi Dutschke, 'Offener Brief an Wolf Biermann: Kritik und Selbstkritik', 28/29 April 1976, as featured in Rothschild, *Wolf Biermann*, 79.

with Spanish communists figured prominently in public discourse.⁷⁴ Several GDR leaders had personal associations with Spain: the East German Minister of the Interior Friedrich Dickel had fought in the International Brigades; *Stasi* chief Erich Mielke had been attached to Soviet intelligence during the Spanish Civil War; and the SED's chief ideologist Kurt Hager had covered the conflict as a journalist. Yet Biermann's timing raised uncomfortable questions as the GDR had entered into diplomatic relations with Francoist Spain during the early 1970s.

At short notice, however, the GDR authorities withdrew their permission to perform at the West German solidarity event. An East German *Stasi* report suggested that Biermann's absence occupied a prominent place in Offenbach. When Cohn-Bendit announced that the GDR authorities had prevented Biermann from travelling, the audience responded with jeers. The organizers subsequently played a recording of Biermann, which not only featured two songs on Spain, but also a personal declaration: Biermann revealed that in 1974, GDR officials had invited him to leave the country – a 'dirty offer' that he had rejected as he 'was needed in the GDR'.⁷⁵ Subsequent speakers not only commented on conditions in Spain, but also on Biermann's fate, leading the *Stasi* observer to conclude that 'the entire event had been planned in terms of Biermann's participation'.⁷⁶

Dutschke rejected claims that the organizers had targeted the GDR rather than the Francoist State. In an open letter to Wolfgang Abendroth – a prominent Marxist political scientist in the Federal Republic – Dutschke asserted that 'Comrade Cohn-Bendit and I' had never intended to 'transform the anti-Franco event into an "anti-GDR" affair'. Even after Biermann had been banned from travelling, they had 'no interest' in shifting the focus from

⁷⁴ Arnold Krammer, 'The cult of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39 (2004), 531–60.

⁷⁵ 'Bericht über die Veranstaltung', 89

⁷⁶ 'Bericht über die Veranstaltung, 90–1.

‘the reactionary regime in Spain’.⁷⁷ Dutschke addressed another open letter to Biermann himself, initially publishing extracts in the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel*.⁷⁸ The prominent East German dissident Robert Havemann – a friend and mentor of Biermann’s – was apprehensive about such public advice, fearing that it might become ‘a further step towards the disintegration of the left’.⁷⁹

The cancelled West German performance of 1975 highlighted the ongoing restrictions for Biermann, and inspired a campaign that ultimately led to his West German concert tour in 1976. At the same time, the events of 1975 highlight important transnational factors. On the one hand, the GDR’s public commitment to internationalism had made it possible to contemplate Biermann’s participation in a West German event dedicated to Franco’s victims. On the other hand, Biermann’s recordings on Spain, Chile and Che Guevara signified a dissident take on transnational solidarity, which in turn provided opportunities for cooperation with activists beyond communist circles.

Transformations in the politics of the left

Apart from New Left figures such as Cohn-Bendit and Dutschke, Biermann had potential allies among left-wing sections of the West German labour movement, for instance the youth branch of *IG Metall*. At the same time, Biermann’s politics meant that there were boundaries to such support: on the West German centre-left, activists and politicians were ready to criticize the GDR’s actions yet remained wary of Biermann’s self-proclaimed communism. Meanwhile, the West German Communist Party (DKP) officially supported the East German line, reflecting its orientation towards, and funding from, the East.

⁷⁷ Rudi Dutschke, undated letter to Wolfgang Abendroth (c. April 1976), as included in ‘Offener Brief’, 83.

⁷⁸ Dutschke, ‘Offener Brief’. For the earlier extracts, see *Der Spiegel*, 6 June 1976, 73,

⁷⁹ Archiv der DDR Opposition, Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft, Berlin (hereafter: ADO), RH0221 Bd. 076, Robert Havemann to Rudi Dutschke, c. Mai 1976.

Biermann's case illustrated the divisions in the international left during the 1970s. Significantly, the diversity of currents raised fresh questions about the potential allies or antagonists for oppositional figures within the Eastern bloc.⁸⁰ Shortly after his expatriation, Biermann's friend Robert Havemann warned him 'not to let yourself be appropriated by any of the political sects'. In this context, he advised him to 'be careful with the Parisian Trotskyists'.⁸¹ The growth of Trotskyism among radical circles had been a wider phenomenon during the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting disillusionment with the Soviet model of state socialism.⁸² Activists from the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI) used the Biermann case to reiterate their broader critiques, as exemplified by coverage in the *Intercontinental Press*, the New York-based FI weekly.⁸³ At the same time, FI members argued that Biermann had failed to 'understand the fundamentally counterrevolutionary nature of Stalinism'.⁸⁴

While Biermann kept his distance from the FI, similar observations apply to his relationship with Maoist currents that had gained prominence in the European left from the end of the 1960s onwards.⁸⁵ Like their Trotskyist counterparts, West German Maoists discussed Biermann's case, combining their condemnation of the GDR authorities with criticisms of the singer's alleged ideological shortcomings.⁸⁶ For example, one of West Germany's competing

⁸⁰ On this wider issue, see e.g. Robert Brier, 'Beyond the "Helsinki effect": East European dissent and the Western left in the "long 1970s"', in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager and Helle Porsdam (eds), *The 'Long 1970s': Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (London, 2016), 71–86.

⁸¹ ADO, RH0221 Bd. 076, Robert Havemann to Wolf Biermann, 27 December 1976.

⁸² For an encyclopaedic survey, see Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC, 1991).

⁸³ *Intercontinental Press*, 29 Nov. 1976, 1698–99; *Intercontinental Press*, 6 Dec. 1976, 1758–9; *Intercontinental Press*, 13 Dec. 1977, 1787–8; *Intercontinental Press*, 31 Jan. 1977, 68 and 71.

⁸⁴ *Intercontinental Press*, 6 Dec. 1976, 1758.

⁸⁵ On West German Maoists, see Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties, 1962–1978: The Global Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge, 2013), 209–10. On the wider reach of Maoism, see Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York, 2019).

⁸⁶ See the extracts selected by Peter Roos in 'Fall Biermann in maoistischer Sicht', *Exil*, 147–52.

Maoist factions argued that ‘his expatriation has not triggered any new realization for Biermann’, complaining that ‘those countries, such as the People’s Republic of China and the People’s Republic of Albania, where a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat exists, are either being ignored or ridiculed by Biermann & Co.’.⁸⁷ In his turn, Biermann was sceptical of such currents, considering it ‘foolish to try to relate Maoism to Western European conditions’.⁸⁸

In December 1976, Havemann’s letter to Biermann pointed towards potential allies: he advised him to ‘seek intensive contact with the comrades of the Italian, Spanish, French and even the English CPs’.⁸⁹ Indeed, Biermann himself noted in this period that ‘my natural political allies’ among the communists ‘are those very ones whose language I don’t understand – the Italians, the French, the Spanish’.⁹⁰ Havemann and Biermann referred to parties that had embraced Eurocommunism, which involved greater independence from Moscow as well as an acceptance of parliamentary democracy. The Eurocommunist stance was exemplified by the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI) whose ‘Historic Compromise’ of 1973 had expressed an openness to new political alliances. As Donald Sassoon has put it, Eurocommunism was ‘an attempt to map out a new path for European communism’ and ‘for a time, it provided Western communism, and particularly the PCI, with a platform from which it could speak to the entire European left’.⁹¹

In the year of Biermann’s expatriation, debates triggered by Eurocommunism were particularly vigorous. In June 1976, the GDR hosted an international meeting, the Conference of Communist and Workers Parties of Europe. At this event, politicians such as Santiago

⁸⁷ *Rote Fahne*, 24 November 1976, as featured in Roos, ‘Fall Biermann in maoistischer Sicht’, 150

⁸⁸ Wolf Biermann, interviewed by Thomas Hoernigk, 2 February 1977, in ‘Two interviews with Wolf Biermann’, 20.

⁸⁹ ADO, RH0221 Bd. 076, Havemann to Biermann, 27 December 1976

⁹⁰ Biermann, interviewed by Hoernigk, 2 February 1977, 20.

⁹¹ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (rev. edn, London, 2010), 581.

Carrillo from Spain, Georges Marchais from France and Enrico Berlinguer from Italy attacked traditional orthodoxies – and, significantly, their comments were printed in *Neues Deutschland*, the SED’s daily paper.⁹² In early 1977, Biermann looked back on these events, arguing that ‘on this occasion, our normally mendacious newspapers printed things which were very important, stimulating and encouraging for us – viewpoints for which a GDR citizen would be jailed even today’.⁹³ Even much later, Biermann noted how unusual it had been for such content to appear ‘in the central organ of the SED, where everything was normally clean, in an ideological sense’.⁹⁴

Biermann later remarked that the official permission to tour West Germany in November 1976 at first had made him wonder whether it might be a ‘trial balloon’ – speculating that party leaders might have been trying to say ‘hello, dear comrades, we are getting our act together, we are figuring out some democratic reforms after all, we are arising out of this Stalinist mass grave into the open, into life’.⁹⁵ In this respect, the autumn of 1976 ‘was a time of great hope’ – with Eurocommunism being one of the ‘reasons for such hope’.⁹⁶ Of course, the GDR’s subsequent measures suggested that liberalization had been far from the officials’ minds, as they used Biermann’s trip to rid themselves of an inconvenient critic. Strikingly, in asking GDR leader Erich Honecker to reconsider this decision, Robert Havemann argued that Biermann’s criticisms could hardly count as pro-capitalist as they mirrored the views expressed by Georges Marchais during the East Berlin congress a few months earlier.⁹⁷

⁹² See Santiago Carrillo’s speech in *Neues Deutschland*, 30 June 1976, 8, and the speeches by Enrico Berlinguer and Georges Marchais in *Neues Deutschland*, 1 July 1976, 7 and 9.

⁹³ Biermann interviewed by Hoernigk, 2 February 1977, 26.

⁹⁴ ADO, DL091, Doris Liebermann, interview with Wolf Biermann, c. 25 Oct. 1996, 9.

⁹⁵ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 11.

⁹⁶ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 9.

⁹⁷ *Der Spiegel*, 22 Nov. 1976, 49–50

In 1976/1977, Biermann publicly stated his support for the Eurocommunist project. He opened his Cologne concert with a new version of his song ‘So soll es sein’ (‘It should be that way’) in which he noted the need for a communist party in the Federal Republic. Rather than celebrating the traditionalist DKP, his song suggested that such a party in question was ‘growing ... under Italy’s sunshine’ – in other words, he portrayed the Eurocommunist PCI as a model.⁹⁸ In an interview after his expatriation, he reiterated his support for Eurocommunism: while being ‘in the developmental stage’, he viewed it as being ‘on the right track’ and, in fact, ‘the only danger which can really threaten capitalism, for Soviet Stalinism is no danger to capitalism’.⁹⁹

In their turn, Eurocommunist parties and periodicals openly criticized the GDR’s actions against Biermann. The French Communist Party attacked both the ‘rationale of the measures as well as the nature of their implementation’.¹⁰⁰ The PCI periodical *L’Unità* was initially cautious, but within a few days condemned the expatriation and emphasized ‘Bierman’s right to express his political ideas in poetic form, through his songs’.¹⁰¹ By December, *Mundo Obrero* – the newspaper of the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España*, PCE) – reported that the French and Italian communists had denounced the ‘inacceptable measure’ against Biermann and stressed that their Spanish comrades shared these views.¹⁰²

Such ties did not remain confined to mere proclamations. Prior to the events of November 1976, Biermann had been ‘little known’ in Italy and was mostly seen within a New

⁹⁸ This was noted in *Die Zeit*, 19 Nov. 1976, available online via <https://www.zeit.de/1976/48/floh-im-ohr-des-sozialismus/> (accessed 1 Apr. 2021). The live recording was released as ‘So soll es sein (Neue Fassung)’ on *Das geht alles sein’ sozialistischen Gang* (CBS LP, 1975).

⁹⁹ Biermann, interviewed by Hoernigk, 21–2.

¹⁰⁰ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 Nov., 1976, reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Wolf Biermann*, 28.

¹⁰¹ Extract of *L’Unità*, 20 Nov. 1976, as featured in Boulboullé, ‘Solidaritätsbewegung’, 134–5.

¹⁰² Extract of *Mundo Obrero*, 1 Dec. 1976, as featured in Boulboullé, ‘Solidaritätsbewegung’, 139.

Left context.¹⁰³ Yet in December 1976, he performed to an audience of 1,500 at the congress of the *Federazioni unitaria lavoratori chimici* (United Federation of Chemical Workers) in Florence, using this opportunity to meet with PCI politicians and to praise Eurocommunism. Highlighting the multi-layered transnational linkages, Biermann's performance included one of his Chile songs.¹⁰⁴

Even stronger ties connected Biermann to the Spanish communists, sustained by both his earlier interest in the anti-Francoist struggle and his ongoing support for Eurocommunism. The PCE had shifted towards a Eurocommunist course in the early 1970s, when it still operated underground and in exile.¹⁰⁵ Following Franco's death in November 1976, the party actively participated in the Spanish transition to democracy. In 1977, Biermann was invited to perform at events that formed part of the PCE's election campaign. Biermann later described the Spanish communists as his 'allies in the inner socialist struggle'.¹⁰⁶ The visit resulted in a delicate development: Biermann accepted a PCE offer to join the Spanish party. He later summarized his response in the following terms:

This is great; the fat cats in the [SED] Politburo will be hopping mad, and my friends... will be happy and say: 'look, now Biermann is a member of your fraternal party, which you have to recognize' ... And it had the appropriate impact: the folks in the GDR, [and] also the DKP in West Germany, they were hitting the ceiling, they were hopping mad at this.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Eveljn Andergassen, Walter Eccli and Domenico Marcolini, 'Wolf Biermann in Italien', in Rothschild, *Wolf Biermann*, 143.

¹⁰⁴ *L'Unità*, 14 Dec. 1976; *L'Unità*, 15 Dec. 1976; *Tagesspiegel*, 15 Dec. 1976; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 Dec. 1976, all reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Wolf Biermann*, 136–7.

¹⁰⁵ José M. Faraldo, 'Entangled Eurocommunism: Santiago Carrillo, the Spanish Communist Party and the Eastern bloc during the Spanish transition to democracy, 1968–1982', *Contemporary European History*, 26 (2017), 647–68.

¹⁰⁶ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 15–16.

In response to criticisms from German communists, PCE officials argued that Biermann's membership was a 'symbolic recognition' of his commitment to their cause, and noted the songs on his recent album *Es gibt ein Leben vor dem Tod*. They also cited the activism of his late father, who had sabotaged German ships containing supplies for Franco's troops.¹⁰⁸

Such transnational ties added a peculiar twist to Biermann's political affiliations in his West German exile: having settled in Hamburg, the city of his birth, he was invited to join a local PCE branch. The PCE presence was the result of two processes: labour migration from Spain, which had been underpinned by a 'guest worker' agreement signed in 1960, as well as the importance of exile activism for the PCE before Franco's death. As most of the Spanish labour migrants were employed in industry, they were a focus of communist efforts.¹⁰⁹ According to Biermann, there were 'More communists in the PCE in Hamburg than DKP people'.¹¹⁰ In the end, the DKP put financial pressure on the Spanish communists in West Germany. After the PCE had sought to resolve the issue by offering 'honorary membership' to Biermann, he ceased to attend the party's local meetings.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, as late as 1979, the Spanish daily *El País* introduced Biermann not only as an expatriated writer and singer, but also as a 'PCE member'.¹¹²

These interactions seemed to indicate wider tensions. In commenting on Biermann's PCE membership, *Der Spiegel* noted that the foreign branches of the Italian and Spanish parties had the potential to become 'dangerous rivals to the DKP', whose own membership was

¹⁰⁸ *Der Spiegel*, 12 June 1977, 95. On Biermann's father and his activism, see Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 16.

¹⁰⁹ Similar processes can be observed among Portuguese workers who were labour migrants in France during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship: Victor Pereira, *La Dictature de Salazar face à l'émigration: L'État portugais et ses migrants en France (1957–1974)* (Paris, 2014).

¹¹⁰ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 16.

¹¹¹ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 17.

¹¹² *El País*, 7 Oct. 1979, available online via https://elpais.com/diario/1979/10/07/internacional/308098805_850215.html (accessed 1 Apr. 2021).

declining.¹¹³ It noted that the West German section of the PCI boasted 3,800 members and the PCE's ranks in West Germans amounted to around 1,000. In light of this situation, the DKP launched efforts to attract foreign workers in Germany.¹¹⁴ In all of these effects, the Biermann affair seemed to illustrate and exacerbate tensions between different communist parties.

The international politics of human rights

Eurocommunism was one attempt to find new political answers in a period of dissatisfaction with political orthodoxies, and human rights activism was another. One influential interpretation treats the 1970s as the decade in which human rights experienced their 'breakthrough' on the international scene, being frequently evoked by activists and political leaders alike.¹¹⁵ Ned Richardson-Little has traced the ambivalent relationship between the GDR and human rights activism in this era, with SED officials casting their party 'as a steadfast champion of human rights beyond the borders of the GDR' and thus staking 'claims of socialist superiority in the field of human rights'.¹¹⁶

To foreign observers, the Biermann case seemed to challenge such representations. Their engagement with Biermann's plight was exemplified by *Index on Censorship*, a British periodical that had been launched in 1972. Its initial inspiration had come from an appeal for Soviet dissident authors in 1968, which gave rise to a new organization, Writers and Scholars International; as noted by its co-founder, 'its deliberate echo of Amnesty International (then

¹¹³ *Der Spiegel*, 12 June 1977, 94.

¹¹⁴ *Der Spiegel*, 12 June 1977, 95.

¹¹⁵ Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013). See also Moyn, *The Last Utopia*; Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten*; Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Mark Philip Bradley, 'The Origins of the 1970s Global Human Rights Imagination', in Villaume et al. (eds), *The 'Long 1970s'*, 15–32.

¹¹⁶ Ned Richardson-Little, *The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity and Revolution in East Germany* (Cambridge, 2020), 3. See also Ned Richardson-Little, 'Dictatorship and Dissent: Human Rights in East Germany in the 1970s', in Eckel and Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough*, 49–67.

relatively modest in size) indicated a feeling that not only literature, but also human rights would be at issue'.¹¹⁷ In 1973, *Index on Censorship* covered Biermann's experiences as a banned author, introducing readers to his poetry and music, as well as promoting it to a British audience.¹¹⁸ In 1977, the periodical suggested that the Biermann expatriation was the culmination of events that seemingly undermined earlier, more liberal developments in East Germany's cultural policy.¹¹⁹ In 1979, a survey on the country's 'literary climate' started with a reference to the shadow cast by the Biermann affair.¹²⁰ Whereas the name of *Index*'s publisher alluded to Amnesty International, Amnesty itself only engaged with the Biermann case indirectly. From its principal concern for political prisoners, Amnesty broadened its focus during the 1970s, for example through its anti-torture campaign.¹²¹ As a censored and then exiled author, Biermann did not fall directly under the organization's remit. However, Amnesty documented the cases of individuals who had been imprisoned because of their support for Biermann and for more general criticisms of the regime.¹²²

The most evident connection between the Biermann case and human rights developments of the 1970s was the way in which activists and observers repeatedly referenced the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Helsinki Final Act. The importance of these developments for dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe is well known.¹²³ However, Douglas Selvage has argued that 'the CSCE had little direct influence upon dissidents in the GDR before 1985', with scholars such as Sarah Snyder and Jan Eckel

¹¹⁷ Michael Scammell, 'How *Index on Censorship* Started', *Index on Censorship*, 10 (1981), 6.

¹¹⁸ Michael Morley, 'Hard times for poetry: On the songs and poems of Wolf Biermann', *Index on Censorship*, 23–6.

¹¹⁹ William Treharne Jones, 'Biermann & Co.', *Index on Censorship*, 6 (1977), 25–8.

¹²⁰ William Treharne Jones, 'The literary climate in East Germany', *Index on Censorship*, 8 (1979), 17–25.

¹²¹ Buchanan, *Amnesty International*, 182–203.

¹²² Amnesty International, *Annual Report 1977* (London, 1977), 247.

¹²³ Apart from Snyder, *Human Rights Activism*, see also Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten*, 717 and 733–44.

presenting similar assessments.¹²⁴ According to Ned Richardson-Little, in the 1970s, there was ‘little to indicate that human rights would eventually form an integral part of opposition to SED rule’, noting that after the Biermann expatriation, ‘East German intellectuals asked the state to reconsider, citing his loyalty to socialism instead of positing any abstract right to free expression’.¹²⁵

Outside the GDR, however, many observers saw the Biermann affair through the prism of Helsinki and the CSCE. For example, the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Willibald Pahr, criticized the Biermann expatriation as a ‘violation against the spirit of Helsinki’.¹²⁶ In Switzerland, the *Internationaler Schutzverband deutschsprachiger Schriftsteller* (International Association for the Protection of German-Language Authors), which had originated in an association of Jewish emigrant authors, highlighted Biermann’s case in a letter to the United Nations and evoked ‘the spirit of the Helsinki Accords’.¹²⁷ In West Germany, the liberal weekly *Die Zeit* argued that, in comparison to the CSCE, Biermann had ascribed too much importance to the Conference of Communist and Workers Parties of Europe. *Die Zeit*’s author argued that the communist conference had primarily been relevant to intellectuals who could cite ‘the declarations of French, Italian and Spanish communists when they ask for more freedom of opinion, more discussion and more democratic structures’. By contrast, Helsinki had transformed ‘the political environment’ because ‘GDR citizens who apply for their emigration

¹²⁴ Douglas Selvage, “‘Human rights demagoguery hostile to détente’: the German Democratic Republic and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1975–89”, in Rasmus Mariager, Karl Molin and Kjersti Brathagen, *Human Rights in Europe during the Cold War* (Abingdon, 2014), 142; Snyder, *Human Rights Activism*, 67; Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten*, 721–3.

¹²⁵ Richardson-Little, *The Human Rights Dictatorship*, 170–1.

¹²⁶ *Tagesspiegel*, 19 Nov. 1976, reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Biermann*, 33.

¹²⁷ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 November 1976, reproduced in Mytze (ed.), *Über Biermann*, 62.

do not evoke the words of George Marchais, but human rights or the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that had been ratified by the GDR'.¹²⁸

Moreover, the efforts of two committees associated with the Biermann affair suggest that human rights discourse was not entirely absent from German activism in 1976. The first of these committees was connected to Carla Boulboulé, who had been a student leader at Bochum University. In June 1976, she launched a petition to allow Biermann to travel to West Germany. Her initiative gathered momentum and ultimately led to Biermann's concert tour under the auspices of *IG Metall*.¹²⁹ After Biermann's expatriation, Boulboulé set up a *Komitee für die Verteidigung und Verwirklichung der demokratischen Rechte in Ost und West, in ganz Deutschland* ('Committee for the Defence and Realization of Democratic Rights in East and West, in All of Germany'). Its founding declaration called for Wolf Biermann's 'free return' as well as 'immediate freedom for Robert Havemann', who had been placed under house arrest following his expression of support for Biermann. At the same time, it called for 'freedom for all political prisoners' and protested against occupational bans that prevented West German communists from working in the public sector.¹³⁰ In its embrace of rights issues in East and West, the committee took up a key trope of human rights discourse of the period, casting the question of basic freedoms as cutting across Cold War binaries. Early on, the committee raised the issue of a group of young people from Jena who had been imprisoned after an event at

¹²⁸ *Die Zeit*, 26 Nov. 1976, available online via <https://www.zeit.de/1976/49/es-knistert-im-gebaelk-der-ddr/> (accessed 1 Apr. 2021).

¹²⁹ Archiv der DDR Opposition, DL091, Doris Liebermann, interview with Carla Boulboulé, n.d., 2 and 4. See also Michael März, *Linker Protest nach dem Deutschen Herbst: Eine Geschichte des linken Spektrums im Schatten des 'starken Staates', 1977–1979* (Bielefeld, 2012), 327.

¹³⁰ Declaration, under the Heading 'Wolf Biermann – ein Deutscher Fall, Bochum, January 1977', as reproduced in Carla Boulboulé, 'Solidaritätsbewegung mit Wolf Biermann in Ost- und West-Deutschland', in Roos (ed.), *Exil*, 143–4.

which they had discussed the Biermann case.¹³¹ As Boulbollé noted, ‘this was already [carried out by] the Committee for Democratic Rights but it was still in direct connection with the Biermann invitation, as it was a consequence of this Biermann invitation’.¹³²

In the same period, journalists and intellectuals established another committee, the *Schutzkomitee Freiheit und Sozialismus* (‘Protection Committee on Freedom and Socialism), in West Berlin. In many ways, this body affirmed the concerns of the other committee: it addressed the fates of Biermann, Havemann and the young people from Jena, while also criticizing aspects of the West German state. As Michael März has noted, the committee brought together ‘trade unionists, artists, [and] intellectuals’ and understood itself as a ‘committee of the left’.¹³³ Significantly, the group had transnational reference points: a *Stasi* report noted that it propagated its aims ‘by appealing to the resolutions of Helsinki and the United Nations’ human rights’, while in organizational terms, it sought to adopt ‘structures analogous to the ... infamous Charter 77’ in Czechoslovakia.¹³⁴ By mid-1977, the association noted its intention to establish links with Amnesty International and other organizations.¹³⁵

It is true that the efforts of the two ‘protection committees’ did not turn into a fully-fledged human rights movement. At the same time, they illustrate that the language of human rights was prominent enough for campaigners and external observers to frame the Biermann case partially in such terms. In this respect, the examples illustrate a point that Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann has made in response to Samuel Moyn’s arguments on the role of the 1970s in human rights history. Hoffmann argues that ‘In the 1970s and 1980s “human rights” coexisted

¹³¹ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung und Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft, ‘Proteste in Jena’, *Jugendopposition in der DDR*, <http://www.jugendopposition.de/145336> (accessed 1 Apr. 2021).

¹³² Liebermann, interview with Carla Boulboulé, 6. Cf. März, *Linker Protest*, 325–9.

¹³³ März, *Linker Protest*, 330. See also Selvage, ‘Human rights’, 142.

¹³⁴ BStU, MfS, ZKG, Nr. 858, ‘Bericht über die westdeutsche Menschenrechtsgruppe “Schutzkomitee für Freiheit und Sozialismus”’, 3 (digitized version at <https://www.stasi-mediathek.de/>).

¹³⁵ März, *Linker Protest*, 333.

and overlapped with other moral and political idioms like “solidarity” and included competing notions of rights, which were in many ways still indebted to the legacies of socialism and anti-colonialism’.¹³⁶ The pronouncements of several pro-Biermann activists seem to back up this assessment. Biermann himself portrayed human rights and socialist politics as interconnected in their challenge to state repression: ‘Helsinki has provided the form, supported the formal insistence on tolerance, freedom of speech, etc. while the Euro-Communists have provided the revolutionary content.’¹³⁷

Coda and conclusion

Transnational connections and international contexts are crucial for understanding both the run-up to and the aftermath of the Biermann affair. They can also be traced beyond the period under consideration. This, for instance, was the case when the international peace movement experienced a revival following the NATO Double-Track Decision of December 1979. In the face of a new wave of peace activism, Biermann clashed with communist forces in the West German peace movement. In 1982, Biermann noted that the cultural programme at a large-scale anti-war demonstration in Bonn was dominated by the DKP and suggested that the latter deliberately marginalized ‘people who come from the East and who know from their own experience that the peace policies of the GDR will lead to war in exactly the same way as the so-called peace policies that are carried out here in the West’.¹³⁸

Biermann later reiterated his conviction that, while the vast majority of peace demonstrators had ‘nothing to do with the DKP and the GDR and Stalinism’, the communists

¹³⁶ Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ‘Human rights and history’, *Past & Present*, 232 (2016), 282.

¹³⁷ Biermann interviewed by Hoernigk, 2 Feb. 1977, 26.

¹³⁸ ADO, Bärbel Bohley papers, BBO 148, doc. 105: Gabriele Klenk, ‘Krach im Schriftsteller-Verband’. These records formed part of the preparation for the West German broadcaster ARD and its *Panorama* political programme, 28 September 1982.

‘held the reins’ of the organized peace movement.¹³⁹ Accordingly, ‘if you told the peace movement which peace you meant, namely not the Stalinist cemetery peace, then the war started in the peace movement, then the peace idyll was over’. In some ways, Biermann’s willingness to criticize both blocs for their participation in a nuclear arms race was reflective of broader, independent currents within the European peace movement during the 1980s.¹⁴⁰ To Biermann himself, this position appeared as consistent with his earlier stance: when he performed his ‘Soldat, Soldat’ song at a West German Easter March in 1965, the message applied to militarists on both sides of the Iron Curtain.¹⁴¹

During the 1980s, Biermann stopped describing himself as a communist. He later claimed that this decision had resulted from a conversation with the Paris-based writer Manès Sperber.¹⁴² As with other retrospective accounts of personal motivations, such a statement needs to be approached with caution. Yet it is nonetheless instructive as it inscribes Biermann’s ideological journey into a wider tradition of ex-communist conversion narratives.¹⁴³ It would go beyond the scope of this article to follow Biermann’s subsequent trajectory, for instance his performance in Leipzig shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or his active role in debates about the *Stasi* during the 1990s. What has been demonstrated here is that the lead-up to and impact of the Biermann expatriation of 1976 were symptomatic of much wider issues.

Four insights are particularly important in this regard. The first is that we need to take cultural contexts seriously: for instance, the emergence of an international folk scene enhanced

¹³⁹ Liebermann, interview with Biermann, 22. For a critical assessment regarding the question of communist dominance, see Holger Nehring and Benjamin Ziemann, ‘Do all paths lead to Moscow? The NATO Dual-Track Decision and the peace movement – a critique’, *Cold War History*, 12 (2012), 1–24

¹⁴⁰ Patrick Burke, ‘European Nuclear Disarmament: transnational peace campaigning in the 1980s’, in Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke and Jeremy Varon (eds), *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear and the Cold War of the 1980s* (New York, 2016), 227–50.

¹⁴¹ Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 155.

¹⁴² Biermann, *Warte nicht*, 376–7.

¹⁴³ For earlier examples, see Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed* (London, 1949).

the interest in Biermann's fate and informed some expressions of support. Secondly, our discussion has shown that Eurocommunism was more than a project of political parties: it constituted a potential bridge for activists who sought to transform state socialism from within. Thirdly, these events add to the historiography of human rights. In the Biermann affair, human rights and, more specifically, the Helsinki process were one of several available frames. The fact that some left-wing activists deployed this particular one highlights both the wider appeal of human rights language during the 1970s and the possibility of combining it with left-wing tropes of solidarity. Finally, the Biermann case allows us to make a point about periodization: the broader context of the affair ranges from cultural developments of the 1960s to rifts within the peace movement of the early 1980s. As such, it illustrates the value of a 'long 1970s' perspective, which some scholars have begun to adopt.¹⁴⁴

As a whole, this article shows why it is worth approaching an episode in German Cold War history in ways that acknowledge multiple transnational entanglements. Importantly, this transnational perspective is not superimposed. Instead, it reflects the observations of activists at the time, who were inspired by international developments and allegiances. In December 1976, Robert Havemann advised Biermann to ignore suggestions by sympathetic commentators who argued that in exile, he might find himself deprived of inspiration as he was 'uprooted' from his 'political and artistic home soil'. Such suggestions were 'all nonsense', according to Havemann: '*Mon Dieu* – even within the GDR, we have never just lived in the GDR!'¹⁴⁵ While this statement can be read in different ways, this article has shown that 'not living only GDR' also involved cultural and political reference points that were international in nature, as well as a commitment to forging transnational links based on notions of solidarity.

¹⁴⁴ See e.g. Villaume et al. (eds), *The 'Long 1970s'*.

¹⁴⁵ ADO, RH0221 Bd. 076, Havemann to Biermann, 27 Dec. 1976.