

German writer Georg Büchner: 200 years since his birth—Part 2

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13 January 2014

Georg Büchner: Revolutionary with pen and scalpel [Georg Büchner. Revolutionär mit Feder und Skalpell], an exhibition from October 13, 2013 to February 16, 2014 at the Darmstadt Conference Centre, Darmstadt. The catalogue of the same title is published by Hatje Cantz, 612 pages, €65 (US \$89). This is the second part of a series on the great German writer Georg Büchner (1813-1837). Part one was published on January 11.

When the future playwright and revolutionary Georg Büchner (1813-1837) was growing up, Upper Hesse was one of the poorest and most backward regions in Germany. The small-scale farmers could hardly survive on the miserly few acres allotted to them. The so-called “emancipation of the peasantry” in 1811 had failed to improve their situation in any significant way.

Although they no longer had to yield up to the landlords their agricultural produce or provide them with other forms of manual labour, the peasants now had to compensate for their “emancipation” by paying money to the landowners. As a result, many incurred so much debt they had to give up their farms and eke out an existence as day labourers, or emigrate to America.

After the lifting of the continental blockade imposed by Napoleon, British yarns and fabrics began to flood the local market, so that even spinning and weaving no longer offered a way out of abject poverty. Prussia’s customs laws, which prevented the movement of goods in certain regions that had formerly been an outlet, also contributed to the decline of these ancillary industries.

Rich farmers and landowners privatised commonhold land, commonhold property and the forests. The right of the poor to graze their cattle or gather wood was thus abolished or severely restricted. They were also subjected to increasingly higher tax burdens. All this resulted in food shortages, hunger revolts and the first uprisings of the rural population.

In 1830, insurgent farmers in Hesse rebelled. Approximately two thousand destitute field labourers, impoverished farmers, maids and servants from the Vogelsberg area marched with flails, pitchforks, scythes and cudgels on Büdingen in the Wetterau region. They plundered the nobles’ estates and burned their property; they also set fire to custom houses, state offices and police stations, destroying files and land registers. The uprising, however, was put down with great brutality.

“Peace to the peasants—War on the palaces”

Together with his comrade August Becker and a few others, Georg Büchner established the secret revolutionary “Society for Human Rights” in March 1834 in Giessen and later drew up and published the incendiary political pamphlet, *The Hessian Messenger* (July 1834).

In doing so, Büchner by no means contented himself with mere agitation; he buttressed his social indictment against the rulers with startling statistics. Facts and figures bring out the extreme social inequality, and the luxury and waste of the court, the ruling circles, their army, officials and judiciary at the expense of the rural poor. Büchner calculates that the 700,000 inhabitants of the Hesse grand duchy had to pay the state more than six million guilders annually, while they themselves were reduced to starvation. The tone of much of the pamphlet is extremely sober and businesslike, rendering its accusations all the more scathing.

“For centuries in Germany justice has been the whore of the German princes. Any path you take to the law you must pave with silver, and you pay for its verdicts with poverty and humiliation. Think of the stamp taxes, think of your bowing and scraping in government offices and the hours spent waiting outside the door. Think of the fees paid to clerks and bailiffs. You can go to court against your neighbour for stealing a potato; but try going to court over the theft perpetrated daily against your property by the state in the name of dues and taxes, so that a horde of useless officials can grow fat on your sweat: complain that you are subject to the whims of a pot-bellied clique, and that these whims are called laws; complain that you are the plough-horses of the state; complain that you have been deprived of your human rights: where are the courts that will hear your complaints, where the judges that would give you justice?—The jangling chains of your fellow-citizens from Vogelsberg who were dragged off to Rokkenburg [prison] will give you your answer.” (Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 1993, 169-170)

But conditions in Hesse and the circumstances of rural poverty were by no means Büchner’s only concerns. He describes in a few paragraphs the historical situation in Europe, beginning with the French Revolution, when “the people of France were tired of being the king’s ill-treated milch-cow” (Ibid., 173), and demanded their human rights:

“No one shall inherit privileges or entitlements by virtue of birth, no one shall inherit privileges by virtue of property. Supreme authority resides in the will of all or of the majority. This will is the law, it is manifested through the deputies or the representatives

of the people, they are elected by everyone and everyone can be elected; these elected representatives express the will of those that elected them, hence the will of a majority of them corresponds to the will of a majority of the people.” (Ibid., 173)

King Louis XVI had sworn to abide by the constitution “but he betrayed the people, and the people dealt with him as befits a traitor. Then the French abolished the hereditary monarchy and freely chose a new form of supreme authority, as is the right of every people in accordance with reason and Holy Scripture.” (Ibid., 173)

Following the victory of the revolution over the European kings’ and princes’ armies of intervention, “The newborn freedom grew apace in the tyrants’ blood and the sound of its voice made thrones quake and their peoples rejoice. But the French themselves traded their freedom for the fame that Napoleon offered them, and set him on an emperor’s throne.” (Ibid., 174)

When the “fat-bellied Bourbons” were again in power after Napoleon’s defeat, the people rose once more in 1830. “[B]rave men drove the treacherous King Charles the Tenth from the country in July 1830, [and] France, having regained her freedom, even now resorted to ‘limited’ monarchy, and made a new rod for her own back in the person of that hypocrite [King] Louis Philippe.” (Ibid., 174)

Then Büchner describes how the German princes—including the grand duke of Hesse—grew afraid of losing their power entirely and were thus willing to adopt constitutions.

“Unfortunately, the people trusted them and went about their peaceful business again. Thus Germany was deceived as France was. For what *are* these new constitutions in Germany? Nothing but chaff from which the princes have beaten all the grain for themselves.” (Ibid., 174)

He describes the fraud of the election laws, “whereby no one can be elected who does not possess substantial wealth, no matter how upright and well disposed.” (Ibid., 175)

With the help of Butzbach theologian Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, the text of the pamphlet was secretly printed in Offenbach and distributed by the co-conspirators. However, Weidig had previously revised it and not only given it a more Christian tone, but also largely remodelled it to suit himself, aiming at an alliance with bourgeois liberals and right-wing *Burschenschaft* (student fraternity) intellectuals. His political goal was the reinstallation of an emperor elected by a small body of princes, as in the Middle Ages.

Büchner, who had probably heard of the first proletarian strikes in France and the Lyons textile workers’ riots in 1832, had violent arguments with Weidig over the political orientation of the movement. Büchner rejected an alliance with the wealthy burghers, because he recognised that a fundamental change in society could only come from the impoverished masses. In his view, these forces were to be found in the rural poor of Hesse, where capitalist industry was still in its early stages of development.

He sought to win over the masses for a political revolution. In conversations and letters to his friends, he vehemently distanced himself from the changes Weidig made in the text. He was particularly angry about Weidig’s substitution of the expression

“the gentry” for “the rich.” Although Büchner’s original manuscript has not survived, his position is clear from his own statements and court records. It is obvious that for him the issue was not simply changing political structures—it was a matter of social revolution and achieving social equality.

Numerous copies of the *Hessian Messenger* were seized by the authorities. Karl Minnigerode, a school friend of Büchner, betrayed by one of the co-conspirators, fell into the hands of the police while in possession of 150 copies of the pamphlet. A warrant was also issued for Büchner’s arrest. Following a search of his home, he was interrogated by the sadistic and alcoholic judge, Konrad Georgi. For tactical reasons, however, Büchner was not immediately placed under arrest, possibly because the authorities wanted to discover the full extent of the conspiracy. It was obvious to him, however, that in future he would be closely observed and spied upon.

The current Darmstadt exhibition provides maps indicating the spread of the pamphlet. Despite police terror and confiscations, it reached relatively large parts of Hesse. But only a few recipients of the text dared to pass it on. Many handed the pamphlet, read or unread, over to the authorities. The violent suppression of the revolt of 1830 had left its mark and no uprising took place. The working class was only in the first stages of its development and conditions for a revolution and the expropriation of the “rich” remained unripe in Hesse and throughout Germany.

To escape further political persecution, Büchner left Giessen and initially returned to his parents’ house in Darmstadt. But he maintained his involvement in revolutionary activity, establishing a Darmstadt section of the secret society. In the course of these weeks, he was deeply troubled about the fate of his arrested friends and fellow co-conspirators.

To be continued



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