

# Stephen Parker's *Bertolt Brecht. A Literary Life*—a welcome biography that raises big historical issues

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Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht. A Literary Life*, London, New York, 2014.

There will undoubtedly be a flurry of magazine articles and theatre productions this year to mark 60 years since the death in August 1956 of the extraordinary German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). The social analysis undertaken by Brecht, the strengths and weaknesses of his work and his theoretical writings on the theatre remain relevant, not least because his life was bound up with questions that remain unresolved to this day.

Brecht was one of the outstanding playwrights of the 20th century, but his body of work includes more than simply his plays. Although he only lived to the age of 58, he also achieved a great deal as a theoretician of drama, lyricist, essayist and prose author (even if his novels remained for the most part uncompleted). His meditations on theatre practice, expressed in *Messingkauf Dialogues* and *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, for example, are still authoritative for many active in theatre, even if one does not agree with all of Brecht's conceptions.

Stephen Parker's biography, *Bertolt Brecht. A Literary Life*, is an excellent introduction to this author and his work, and its planned translation into German is welcome news. Parker, a German literature specialist at the University of Manchester, whom we were able to interview at some length, has thoroughly studied critical studies of Brecht's works and life, Brecht's own works and a mass of biographical material. Parker also based his research on archive material first made available after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (Stalinist East Germany), where Brecht lived from 1949 until his death, that has not yet been published.

The biography begins with a vivid portrait of Brecht's childhood and youth, and his family life in Augsburg, in southern Germany. Parker describes the political turmoil of the years before and after the First World War and the conflict between the left-wing Spartacist movement (the nucleus of the future Communist Party), led by Rosa Luxemburg (murdered in 1919), and the reactionary *Freikorps* mercenaries—a period which politicised the young poet along with many others of his generation. Brecht's early passion for the theatre, together with his instinct for its shortcomings and limitations in the hands of the bourgeoisie, led to an indomitable desire on his part for change.

Parker deals in detail with Brecht's frail physical constitution, his susceptibility to sickness from childhood and his development into an extremely sensitive young man. The biographer seeks to explain, perhaps a little reductively, Brecht's vacillation between morbidity and tremendous vitality. This latter condition led, not least of all, to his passion for women. They not only inspired him to write wonderful love poems; he was also able to win them as significant and devoted collaborators. Parker describes these entanglements in a genuinely sober

and objective manner.

Brecht's fascination with figures such as Baal (from his early play by the same name), who recklessly enjoy life only to leaves a large number of victims in their path, resulted in part from Brecht's precarious health, the early emerging symptoms of cardiac weakness and painful kidney disease, which eventually led to his early death.

Many of the facts that Parker cites are already known in the broad spectrum of Brecht literature. In particular, the two-volume biography by Werner Mittenzwei and Werner Hecht's extensive Brecht chronicle (both unavailable in English), contain numerous details about Brecht's life and work. Parker, however, succeeds in presenting Brecht's personality and work in a fresh light and brings the author and his work closer to a contemporary audience.

Parker's biography is a valuable work. It is honest and meticulous. Moreover, the author is generally sympathetic to Brecht's socialist aspirations. After a number of right-wing smear jobs, such as John Fuegi's *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht* (the review of which in the *Independent*, for example, began: "That Bertold [sic] Brecht was a rat has been known for years ..."), the present volume is a pleasing change. Parker's book is enjoyable to read and takes up fascinating questions of 20th century culture.

While we welcome the biography, precisely *because* we take Parker's efforts seriously it is necessary to express our differences on a number of key political and historical questions. A clear understanding of the consequences of the emergence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the Stalinisation of the German Communist Party and the rise of fascism, representing the historic defeat of the German working class—is crucial and necessary to comprehend the trajectory of Brecht and many other intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century.

In essence, the issues boil down to these: was Brecht's orientation and adaptation to Stalinism in the 1920s, 1930s and beyond a correct perspective, or at least the only "realistic" one? Was it more or less "inevitable" given the difficult circumstances of the period? And what was the essence of Brecht's "anti-fascism"?

Like many of his contemporaries, Brecht was politicised by the First World War, which he initially glorified—as a teenager—in patriotic poems. Based rather more on instinct than a worked out understanding of society, Brecht lined up with the left-wing Spartacist tendency in the convulsions of 1918-19. In the years immediately after World War I, however, he concentrated more on his private concerns and artistic career.

Parker exhibits weaknesses and historical inexactitude in some passages dealing with political conditions in the Weimar Republic and the relationship of Brecht and other intellectuals to the Communist Party. As a rule, he uncritically adopts Brecht's own political judgments and justifications for the development of the German Communist Party (KPD)

and the USSR, from the late 1920s onward.

For example, Parker declares (p. 274) that there was no possibility that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the KPD could have united against the Nazi threat. The reason, according to Parker, was the unwillingness of the left to recognise that “their” voters in the working class had voted for Hitler’s party (NSDAP). The left’s “fetishising of the working class and also the lower middle class” allegedly drastically impaired its ability to evaluate the power and attraction of fascism.

In his conversation with the WSWS, Parker reaffirmed his view that Brecht could not have followed any course other than critical, at times highly critical, support for the KPD and Stalinism because of the “unfavourable” circumstances.

In the first place, the circumstances were increasingly “unfavourable” because of the defeats brought about by Stalinist policies on a global scale (in Germany in 1923, in Britain, in China and elsewhere). Each defeat strengthened the forces of reaction and further demoralised socialist-oriented workers.

In fact, there was an alternative. The writings of Leon Trotsky, both his political and cultural analyses, were read by Brecht and those around him, as Trotsky’s supporters in the Left Opposition fought tenaciously for a hearing in the working class and amongst intellectuals.

In Germany in particular, a resolute statement of agreement with Trotsky’s policies by well-known figures such as Brecht could have had significant results. The ability of Stalinism to impose its reactionary policies on the German working class was by no means preordained.

Everything depended on uniting the organised workers against the fascist danger and arming them with an understanding of the situation and with principled socialist policies.

The SPD, the KPD and the unions had millions of members. As late as November 1932, the number of parliamentary seats held by the SPD and the KPD still exceeded the Nazis’ total. The disastrous course of the KPD—which demagogically and ultimatically termed the SPD and its supporters “social fascists”—and the subsequent victory of the Nazis had nothing to do with a “fetishisation of the working class” by the left intellectuals. It was first and foremost the result of Stalinist policy dictated from Moscow.

There was nothing “realistic” about Brecht or anyone else remaining part of the Stalinist orbit. The series of disasters organised by the Communist International and the various Stalinist parties in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, including, above all, the victory of Hitler, enormously weakened the international working class and the position of the Soviet Union itself. The ultimate catastrophe of another imperialist war, which cost the lives of 30 million Soviet citizens, and of the Holocaust was only made possible by the Stalin bureaucracy’s nationalist and counter-revolutionary policies.

The support among intellectuals for the Stalinist regime did not simply result from a misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge. Many left-leaning middle class artists—even some who recognised the Stalin regime’s immense crimes—felt more “at home,” by and large, with the bureaucracy and all its resources than they did with Trotsky, with his confidence in the working class and the program of world socialist revolution.

Brecht’s indefensible arguments about Stalin’s “realism” or the supposed “necessary evil” that the Soviet bureaucracy represented were repeated by dozens of other respected poets, painters, novelists and filmmakers. Brecht knew the Moscow Trials were frame-ups, but largely kept his mouth shut.

At least on one occasion, however, Brecht actually justified the trials. Parker cites a letter written to an unnamed recipient, written by Brecht after the third show trial, which was first published in 1993. Brecht wrote: “To adopt an attitude in opposition to the government of the Union, which is staging these trials, would be quite wrong—since this would

automatically, and in no time at all, be transformed into an attitude of opposition to the Russian proletariat, which stands under threat from global Fascism, and to the process of the construction of Russian socialism.” Other intellectuals did the same, or worse, signing petitions hailing the murderous show trials.

As Trotsky explained in *Art and Politics in Our Epoch* (1938), capitalism had radicalised the artists—like Brecht and many others—but Stalinism represented “a formidable snare.” An entire generation of the “leftist” intelligentsia had turned its eyes to the Soviet Union, Trotsky argued, and had “bound its lot, in varying degrees, to a victorious revolution, if not to a revolutionary proletariat. Now, this is by no means one and the same thing.” In the victorious revolution, he pointed out, there was not only the revolution, but there was also the new privileged layer that had raised itself “on the shoulders of the revolution. In reality, the ‘leftist’ intelligentsia has tried to change masters. What has it gained?”

The point is not to demonise Brecht, to leave him “pinned and wriggling on the wall.” These were complex, objective problems of political and cultural life. Only a few artists passed the harsh test of that period. But Brecht’s adaptation to Stalinism had consequences, both for the general cultural and political situation and for his own work.

Parker’s use of the term “antifascist literature,” with which the biographer labels Brecht’s work in the 1930s and during the war, does little to shed light on the works in question, nor does it correctly identify the political context. Again, Brecht failed to clearly identify the role of the Stalinist leadership in the defeats suffered by the working class, and held capitalism responsible for fascism and war—but then in a very abstract way. As a result, many of the characters in his “antifascist literature” resemble marionettes more than genuine figures anchored in history.

Without a doubt, features of the author’s own precarious situation in exile and relations with the Stalinist bureaucracy are reflected, as Parker points out, in Brecht’s intriguing *Galileo Galilei*—above all the earlier version of this play, written while Brecht was in exile in Denmark. Brecht also wrote extraordinary poems during this time, setting out the playwright’s problems and the character of the “dark period”—a period in which he, his family and his companions struggled morally and physically to survive.

Parker deals thoroughly with Brecht’s difficult relations with the Stalinist bureaucracy, including KPD emigrants in the Ulbricht Group, based in Moscow. But here again he misses the heart of the matter. He discusses the hostility towards Brecht from this quarter, especially from the defenders of Stalinist Socialist Realism, including Fritz Erpenbeck, Alfred Kurella and Georg Lukacs.

Brecht was well known to be an opponent of Socialist Realism, but his position was far removed from Trotsky’s principled opposition. Parker writes of Brecht’s “efforts to contribute to socialist construction with his own brand of socialist realism.” The problem is that Parker does not challenge Brecht’s adaptation to what was in fact the strangling of all artistic creativity in the Soviet bloc by the bureaucracy.

The “Moscow people” accused Brecht sweepingly of “formalism and negativity.” Indeed, while they included him in the editorial collective of the exile literary journal *The Word*, they published hardly anything by him, nor did they accept his suggestions. In the circle of the Ulbricht Group, the suspicion was raised repeatedly that Brecht was a “Trotskyist” like his friend, the actress Carola Neher, and her husband, Anatol Bekker, who both fell victim to Stalin’s terror.

Literary questions were, as Parker correctly states, with regard to the purges, questions of life and death. To a certain degree, this explains why Brecht’s statements about the purges and the Moscow Trials came to a halt, although he composed a few texts and poems (not published in his lifetime) in which he expressed his doubts.

A number of Brecht’s close friends and collaborators fell victim to the Stalinist terror. Indeed, Brecht tried cautiously to look into their fates. In

several unpublished texts, which Parker quotes, he vacillates between justifications for the purges and his own skepticism.

Parker also deals with Brecht's friendship with Walter Benjamin, a congenial critic and discussion partner of Brecht's. The treatment of Benjamin offers a reservoir of interesting suggestions on questions of aesthetics. Brecht also discussed with Benjamin the role of Trotsky, whom they both evaluated in a contradictory way. Brecht held Trotsky to be the greatest writer of his time, while at the same time rejecting his political perspective.

Parker's chapters on the period following Brecht's return to Europe from American exile after World War II and his life in East Berlin are also engrossing. He bases himself on archival material drawn from the Academy of Art. Parker describes the hostility of the Ulbricht bureaucracy in East Germany toward Brecht, and the tenuous position in which the playwright repeatedly found himself, despite all of his diplomatic efforts.

Brecht played an important role in the cultural-political discussions of artists and intellectuals in the early GDR, and many of the other artists and intellectuals who had returned to Germany after the collapse of the Nazi regime looked to him for guidance—for example, the German literary scholar Hans Mayer, who at that time taught in Leipzig. Many of those who returned fell victim to the illusion spread by the Stalinists that there should be a united, "progressive," capitalist Germany under Stalinist influence.

The fact that Brecht and his wife Helene Weigel—not least of all as the result of his solidarity with the Stalinist ruling party during the East Berlin workers' uprising in 1953—received their own ensemble and finally also their own Theater at Schiffbauerdamm was anything but a matter of course. The successes of Brecht's works abroad and performances at the Berliner Ensemble made it difficult for the bureaucracy to act against him. He became an important figurehead for the GDR and could not be dispensed with easily.

*I need no grave stone, but  
If you need one for me  
I wish that it would say:  
He made suggestions. We  
Have accepted them  
Through such an inscription  
All would be instructed.*

Brecht summarised his artistic life's work as revolutionising his "means of production," that is, the theatre. His goal was to transform the theatre, in the scientific age, into a workshop for knowledge, into a place that would help the audience realise it was necessary to change the world. However, the great social problems could not be solved through transforming the theatre alone, but by a social revolution. The political apparatus with which he was associated was the greatest impediment to that social transformation. Brecht did indeed "make suggestions," but the anti-communist Stalinist bureaucracy had long since closed its ears.

Intellectuals and artists were divided about his work and theories, and remain so up to this day. Contrary to Brecht's hopes, the ruling classes in the West remained in the saddle. Unable to boycott or ignore him, the West German elite decided to appropriate his work and elevate Brecht to the status of a "classicist" whose writings could be safely taught in schools.

Today, the "new, privileged layer" in the USSR to which Trotsky referred in 1938 no longer exists. The bureaucracy in the former Soviet Union overturned all of the gains of the October Revolution in the interests of capitalism. However, despite the triumphal proclamations of "the end of socialism," the capitalist system is unable to overcome its basic contradictions.

Unprecedented social inequality, obscene wealth, bitter poverty, the lowering of the standard of living of broad masses, wars and the danger of war in all parts of the globe, which could lead to the end of humanity

through weapons of mass destruction—all of this once again poses the task of revolutionising society, of the overthrow of the outmoded capitalist system. Brecht's works remain relevant and instructive for a critical, historically conscious audience. Stephen Parker's biography of Brecht is a highly readable and stimulating opener to the debate.



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