

# The false friends of Peter Weiss, German dramatist, filmmaker and novelist

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20 October 2016

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of Germany's most important artistic figures. Peter Weiss (1916-1982) was in the course of his life a painter, novelist, filmmaker and dramatist. Central to his work were the seminal experiences of the twentieth century—the crimes of fascism, the October Revolution and its subsequent betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The centenary of Weiss's birth has been marked in Germany by the publication of a new biography, a new edition of his last novel, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (published in three volumes, 1975-1981), and a series of events and conferences.

In Berlin, the Academy of Arts held a tribute evening in April, the Brecht House organised a week of lectures in August, and 10 days of discussions on Weiss and related events were presented at the Hebbel Theatre in September. A three-day conference on Weiss's work took place in Potsdam at the start of October, and a "marathon" reading of the 1,000-page *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is planned at the Peter Weiss House in Rostock in November.

Shamefully, much of Weiss's work has still not been translated into English, including two-thirds of his magnum opus, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (only the first of the volumes has been translated). The purpose of this article is to provide a brief introduction to the work and significance of Weiss and, at the same time, liberate and defend him from some of his false friends.

Many of the events and meetings have been sponsored or supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, an institution affiliated to the Left Party. As we shall demonstrate, the Foundation and the Left Party, which has its roots in the former ruling party in Stalinist East Germany, the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), have absolutely no right to parade as friends of Peter Weiss. It is no coincidence that no attempt has been made in the course of the year to revive one of Weiss's important works, *Trotsky in Exile* (1972), his play about Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, although the controversy surrounding the play could not be suppressed in the discussions which have taken place.

Peter Weiss was born near Berlin on November 8, 1916. His father was of Austrian-Hungarian-Jewish descent and owned and ran a textile factory. His mother, a Christian, was an actress who worked, amongst others, with renowned Austrian theatre director Max Reinhardt. Weiss's schooling in Berlin was disrupted by the coming to power of the Nazis, and in 1934 the family emigrated, first to England and later in 1939, to Sweden. Sweden was to remain Weiss's home for the rest of his life.

For Weiss, who, in the terminology of the Nazis, was a "half-Jew," the experience of flight and exile remained primordial in all his work. Weiss had already begun to paint at a young man. In 1939, forced once again to pack the family's belongings for flight to Sweden, and fearful that her son's paintings might be interpreted by the Nazis as "degenerate art," his mother destroyed a number of them.

In his autobiographical work, *Fluchtpunkt* ( *Vanishing Point*, 1962), Weiss wrote: "Emigration meant for me no point of reference. I was an

outsider wherever I was." During the first exhibition of his works in Sweden, Weiss already encountered the antipathy toward émigrés. Failing to find an audience for his work, Weiss concluded he was yet another "unwanted foreigner." Art, he declared "which should, after all, be the most international, is being misused and crammed into national categories due to fears of competition."

Throughout his career, Weiss sought out and immersed himself in significant literary and artistic circles. He recalled seeing the newly produced Bertolt Brecht-Kurt Weill pieces *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 1930. Weiss's earliest professed artistic mentors were the surrealists—André Breton, Salvador Dali and Max Ernst. Later in life, Weiss named his third daughter after Breton's novel, *Nadja* (1928), and like Breton, increasingly gravitated towards left-wing politics.

Also like the leading surrealists, Weiss undertook a serious study of psychoanalysis and cultivated a friendship with the German-born, Swiss writer Hermann Hesse, for whose books he provided illustrations.

In a letter to his long-time friend Hesse in 1961, Weiss described the conflict he was experiencing: "I am very preoccupied with the art which first comes about, when reason, rational thinking is switched off. I have been unable myself to resolve this conflict: sometimes it seems to me that the most essential lies in the dark and in the subconscious, then however it occurs to me that one can only work today in an extremely conscious way, as if the spirit of the times demands that the writer does not lose his way in regions of half-darkness."

Weiss's initial literary efforts were written in Swedish, but in the 1950s he turned increasingly to the medium of film, producing a number of experimental and documentary works. His first literary work in German, *Abschied von den Eltern* ( *Leavetaking*, 1960), followed the death of his father and mother.

In the 1960s, Weiss increasingly responded to the "spirit of the times"—i.e., the growing social and political radicalisation—and moved to the left. [1]

In 1963, he began working on one of his most provocative works, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of Mon sieur de Sade* (hereafter *Marat/Sade*), on the subject of the French Revolution. [2] Weiss's play with music—set in a madhouse in 1808, but treating events that occurred in the summer of 1793—draws its power from the exchanges between the libertine, individualist Sade (representing the dark and unconscious) and the dedicated and rationalist revolutionary Marat. However, at this stage, it is still not clear on which side of the divide Weiss places himself. (The surrealists claimed to be great admirers of Sade.)

Peter Brook directed a famed version of *Marat/Sade* in London, with lyric adaptation by poet Adrian Mitchell, at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964. Brook directed a film of the play in 1967, with a remarkable cast headed by Ian Richardson, Patrick Magee and Glenda

Jackson. Brook's approach is theatrically rich, but the core of the arguments among the French revolutionaries is lost to a considerable degree.

A major artistic and political turning point for Weiss was his next play, *Die Ermittlung (The Investigation)*, which dealt directly with the crimes committed by the Nazis at Auschwitz. In 1960, Weiss described his experience as a young man learning, for the first time, of the atrocities committed by the Nazis:

"Then, in the spring of 1945, I saw the end-point of the development I should have been swept up in. In blindingly clarity, I saw the places I had been destined for, the figures to whom I should have belonged. We sat in the shelter of a dark room and saw what had previously been regarded as inconceivable; we saw it in all its dimensions, so monstrous that we would never be able to forget it during our entire lifetime."

Weiss personally attended the series of Frankfurt trials—held from December 1963 to August 1965—of 22 individuals charged for their roles at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death and concentration camp complex. *The Investigation* drew directly on the testimony of witnesses of the mass killings and scandalised official political circles in West Germany, which had sought to play down the Holocaust as an unfortunate aberration. For his part, Weiss justified the play as follows: "I want to stigmatise capitalism, which can provide customers even with gas chambers." [3]

In 1965, Weiss issued his "The Necessary Decision. 10 Working Theses of an Author in the Divided World," in which he made public his affiliation to the cause of socialism and took up arms against those in the German literary establishment who were willing to "forget and forgive." In a supplement to the "10 Working Theses," Weiss castigated "The failure on the part of German authors, above all those who went through the war, to speak out forcibly against the general will to forget," indicted the latter for their continued failure to "undertake everything to oppose militarism and nationalism," and argued that "the German authors like most of the authors from other countries, do not represent an advance guard, but rather a rearguard to the extent that they attempt to keep alive 'humanitarian values' in the face of harsh everyday politics."

Enraged by American atrocities in Vietnam, Weiss wrote *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (1968). In both America and Europe, he spoke at public meetings and rallies condemning the US military intervention. For a period, Weiss gravitated toward literary and artistic circles in Stalinist Eastern Europe, who seized the opportunity to use the controversial but acclaimed author and playwright as their own propaganda instrument.

The more he moved in such circles, however, the more critical Weiss became of Stalinist politics. In 1967, Weiss met Trotsky biographer Issac Deutscher at the Russell Tribunal into American war crimes in Vietnam, and subsequently read Deutscher's three-volume work.

The following year, Weiss publicly criticised the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and protested vehemently against the expulsion of East German artist and dissident Wolf Biermann. In the same year, he briefly joined a "Eurocommunist" split-off from the Swedish Communist Party before travelling to Berlin at the end of the year to commence an exhaustive study of the October Revolution of 1917.

In 1970, as the Stalinist regimes in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe were preparing to celebrate 100 years since the birth of Lenin, Weiss completed his own tribute to "Lenin year" and the October Revolution—a new play, entitled *Trotsky in Exile*.

The play, to my knowledge, is unique in attempting to portray Trotsky's life and political struggle on stage. The work has its defects and, on occasion, reveals the influence of Weiss's discussions with the leader of the Pabloite Unified Secretariat, Ernest Mandel. What is striking about the play, however, is Weiss's valiant effort to correct all manner of Stalinist falsifications, to restore Trotsky to his rightful role in history as a leader of the Russian Revolution at the side of Lenin and as the principal Marxist

opponent of the Stalinist degeneration in the Soviet Union.

Of great interest also in *Trotsky in Exile* is Weiss's recognition of the central role of culture in assessing the October Revolution and Trotsky's own historical significance. Weiss had studied Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* and devotes a scene of his play to a discussion among Lenin, Trotsky and leaders of the Dadaist art movement. In Zurich in 1916, Lenin is known to have met political co-thinkers in the same café frequented by Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and other leading lights of the Dada movement. With legitimate poetic licence, Weiss brings the remarkable figures together in a discussion about the prospects for art in a post-revolutionary Soviet Union. A later scene features Weiss's old mentor Breton in discussion with Trotsky and Diego Rivera in Mexico.

When the play received its first performance in West Germany in 1970, the Stalinist apparatus in both West and East Germany went onto the offensive. The play's premiere in Düsseldorf, West Berlin, was disrupted and forced to stop because of the thuggish intervention of a group of students linked to Maoist groups who screamed slogans such as "Give us Lenin, but not Trotsky, you bastard!" [4]

The subsequent Stalinist propaganda campaign against the play was led by Weiss's Russian translator Lev Ginsburg, who accused the playwright of historical manipulation, falsifying the October Revolution and playing into the hands of capitalist opponents of the Soviet Union.

Weiss's reply to Ginsburg is virtually unique as an example of a prominent postwar artist or intellectual painstakingly rebutting every Stalinist slander and rigorously documenting the role played by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union.

One of the most revealing contributions at the recent Weiss conference in Potsdam dealt with the East German Stalinist secret police (Stasi) file on Peter Weiss. The latter's name crops up for the first time in a report prepared for the 11th plenum of the SED Central Committee in December 1965. At this point, Weiss was regarded as a Stalinist fellow-traveller and as sympathetic to the bureaucracy in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany).

The situation changed dramatically with the publication and production of *Trotsky in Exile*. Overnight the friend had become a traitor. The Stasi's "Operational Information No. 551/69" of September 5, 1969, reported "that the enemy side is making massive efforts to win over and misuse famous authors for the purpose of deliberate and destructive ideological purposes," and "it should be clearly recognised that the enemy has succeeded in turning the author Peter Weiss, who has been successfully featured in our theatres."

The Stasi report described *Trotsky in Exile* as a "clear commitment to anti-Soviet positions" and made clear it favoured a total ban on the work and its author in the GDR. The highest leadership circle of the SED also took up the case. SED chief ideologist Kurt Hager handed over a 13-page document on *Trotsky in Exile* to the members of the SED Politburo.

The document concluded that the play by Peter Weiss was "the provisional highpoint of an anti-Leninist wave." The play was a piece of "absolute anti-Leninist and anti-Soviet falsifying slander." Pressure was then applied on Weiss by his contacts in the GDR to dissociate himself from his Trotsky play.

Weiss was severely shaken by the violent reactions. In many respects the rest of his life was devoted to assimilating this event and its implications artistically—a process that found expression in his monumental final novel, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Written over a period of 10 years, this fascinating work represents the culmination of Weiss's attempt to establish the relations between society, politics and art in light of the concrete historical experiences of the twentieth century.

Weiss does not make it easy for the reader. Written in block text virtually without paragraph breaks, the book commences in the mid-1930s, after the victory of the fascists in Germany, with the deliberations of three young resistance fighters in front of the renowned

Pergamon Altar, built in the first half of the second century BC in Asia Minor, in the Berlin museum named after it.

The three volumes deal with many events, among them the Spanish Civil War and the plight of German refugees in Paris and Sweden, and a meeting with Brecht. As a young man, Weiss actually met Brecht once in Sweden. The meeting did not go well. The final volume returns to Berlin and the Nazi torture chamber in Plötzensee, where members of the Red Orchestra resistance group were tortured and killed. [5]

One of the main themes running through the volumes is the importance of art and theoretical questions for workers and the socialist movement as a whole. In the first volume, the nameless young worker who starts his daily factory work at 4 a.m. declares that a day without at least one hour of reading is a wasted day. Weiss writes of the group of youth: “Our studying was always revolt. Every inch we moved closer to the painting, the book, was a battle, we crawled, pushed each other forward, our eyelids blinking.”

Once news of the publication of the first volume of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* appeared, the GDR Stalinist leadership reacted with alarm. Descriptions of the Stalinists’ betrayal and their execution of leftists in Spain were beyond the pale. In response to Weiss’s request to conduct research into the Red Orchestra in the East German archives, the Ministry of State Security advised he should only be given access to selected documents. The Stasi file on *The Aesthetics of Resistance* covers a period of no less than 11 years.

Against this background, it is hypocritical and fraudulent for the Left Party and its misnamed “Rosa Luxemburg Foundation” to pose as friends of Peter Weiss. If he were alive today, Weiss would express contempt for an individual like Left Party leader Sahra Wagenknecht—a fierce defender of Stalin and Stalinism in the 1990s, who now advocates the reactionary economics of German postwar ordoliberalism (defense of the “free market”) and chats comfortably with the leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany.

The centenary of Weiss’s birth is a long overdue opportunity to explore the work of a key figure in European literature.

Notes:

[1] On Weiss and the student movement in Germany in the 1960s, Robert Cohen—in *Understanding Peter Weiss* (1993)—writes: “Peter Weiss was, in a number of ways, a forerunner of the 1968 student movement: in his turn toward Marxism, in his preoccupation with the fascist German past, in his radical critique of capitalism, and in his support for liberation movements of the Third World. But, unlike Marcuse or Adorno, Weiss was no father figure of the student movement. (The Frankfurt School, by the way, had no noticeable influence on Weiss’ work). Rather he was its father and its pupil at the same time. He repeatedly debated with leftist students, especially with the budding writers among them, as an equal among equals. Communication, however, proved to be difficult. There was too much that separated the older writer living in permanent exile in Sweden from the young German left.” Following one such fruitless exchange with radicalised students, many of whom were under the influence of both Stalinism and/or the Frankfurt School, Weiss concluded: “I am constantly reminded that I come from someplace completely different.”

[2] Since its first performance in 1964, *Marat/Sade* has become an integral part of German theatre repertoire, but the play was first performed in 2002 at the Berliner Ensemble, the theatre in former East Berlin associated with the dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s widow Helene Weigel, who continued to run the theatre following Brecht’s death in 1956, had refused to perform the piece in the 1960s, describing it as “counterrevolutionary.”

[3] Denunciations of Weiss’ play also came from America. Elie Wiesel criticised the play for not presenting the victims as Jewish and condemned it as a “Shameless attempt to rob the victims of their memories.” Of

course Weiss, the “half-Jew” was quite aware of the identity of the victims of the death camps, but regarded the exterminations as a crime against humanity, not merely against Jews.

[4] One of the group of hecklers in Düsseldorf was Jörg Immendorff, a student at the city’s Academy of Art, headed at that time by Josef Beuys. Immendorff went on to become a favoured “avant-garde” artist of the German ruling elite, and court painter to former Social Democratic leader Gerhard Schröder.

[5] The leader of the loose group of resistance fighters in and around the Red Orchestra was Leopold Trepper. Leading a group of agents inside occupied Europe and working under the control of Soviet military intelligence Trepper and his associates passed on vital information relating to Germany’s plans to invade the Soviet Union in 1941—information that was ignored by Stalin.

On his return to Moscow in January 1945, Trepper was arrested and imprisoned in Lubyanka prison for 10 years on the orders of Stalin, who sought to repress any information regarding his own role in facilitating the Nazi invasion. After his release, Trepper wrote a detailed report on his activities during the war and declared: “In fact, responsibility for the liquidation of the Berlin group rests with the leadership of the military intelligence service in Moscow and the Central Committee of the illegal Communist Party of Germany.”

Trepper also paid his own tribute to Trotsky and the Left Opposition in his memoir *The Great Game*: “But who then, at that time [during the Stalinist repression], protested? Who stood up to shout his disgust? The Trotskyists are able to claim this honour. Following the example of their leader, who paid for his stubbornness by [receiving] the blow of an axe, they fought Stalinism totally, and they were the only ones. At the time of the great purges, they could no longer shout out their revolt except in the frozen vastness to which they were dragged to be more easily exterminated. Their conduct in the camps was dignified and even exemplary. But their voice was lost in the tundra. Today the Trotskyists have the right to accuse those who once howled with the wolves for [the Trotskyists’] death. May they not forget, however, that they possessed the immense advantage over us of having a coherent political system which was likely to replace Stalinism, and to which they could cling in the profound distress of the revolution betrayed. They would not ‘confess,’ because they knew their confessions would serve neither the party nor socialism.”



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