

Exile as an Intellectual Way of Life: The collaboration of Lion Feuchtwanger and Bertolt Brecht

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Andreas Rumler: Exil als geistige Lebensform, Brecht und Feuchtwanger. Ein Arbeitsbündnis, Edition A.B. Fischer, Berlin 2016, 160 S., ISBN 978-937434-76-6

In *Exile as an Intellectual Way of Life*, journalist and non-fiction writer Andreas Rumler examines the lifelong collaboration of two major German literary figures of the 20th century, playwright and novelist Lion Feuchtwanger (1884-1958) and playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).

Each writer had to flee the Nazis and continue his literary work for many years under the difficult conditions of emigration. Rumler concentrates on their period in exile and draws attention to many important texts written at the time, especially by Feuchtwanger, which have received insufficient consideration from the public at large and from academics.

The reader discovers numerous interesting details about the life and work of both authors and many of their contemporaries. Rumler covers the period from their first encounter in Munich in 1919 to their various places of exile under the Nazis in France, Scandinavia and the United States, and eventually the postwar years. He restricts himself largely, however, to biographical details and remains at the level of interpreting and describing their exile literature. He fails to seriously scrutinize their problems and artistic contributions as part of critically making sense of a society shaped by fascism and war. In fact, in dealing with this subject matter, such a broader approach is all the more necessary.

Rumler bases himself on the various biographical statements of the authors and their colleagues and describes the works which arose from their collaboration and how each influenced the other. Feuchtwanger writes in *Attempt at an Autobiography* (1927), that three colleagues had strongly influenced him: "Heinrich Mann changed my diction, [Alfred] Döblin my epic form, Brecht my dramatic form." All three authors were forced to emigrate.

Rumler vividly depicts, for example, the writers' budding friendship and their lives in the Schwabing [Munich] bohemian world as well as the first theatrical and lyrical successes of the young Brecht. But by the early 1920s artistic life in Munich was already overshadowed by the "brown demagoguery in a beer haze" and Nazi demonstrations. The right-wing press agitated against both Brecht and the Jewish Feuchtwanger. In a review of Brecht's play *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923) the Nazi paper *Völkischer Beobachter* wrote: "The theatre reeked of the stench of the Jew." Rumler comments: "The presumed Jewishness of Brecht 'stank' to the Nazis." Stink and tear gas bombs were thrown.

With their "emigration" to Berlin, the political and cultural center of the Weimar Republic, the two authors attempted to escape increasing attacks from the extreme right. It was, in a way, their "first exile" and at the same time a period marked by success. In his literary experiments, Brecht

frequently took the advice of the more experienced Feuchtwanger.

But the hostility from right-wing circles and the National Socialists was growing stronger. The Nazis resented Feuchtwanger, especially, for his novel *Success* (*Erfolg*, 1930), in which he satirically depicted the rise of Hitler.

As Feuchtwanger stated in the *Welt am Abend* [Communist Party-run daily tabloid] in 1931: "So what intellectuals and artists have to expect when the Third Reich is finally erected is clear: extermination. That is what awaits most of the intellectuals, and whoever can, is preparing today their emigration. When one moves among the intellectuals of Berlin, one has the impression that Berlin is a city of innumerable future emigrants."

Rumler describes the intellectual environment of his two protagonists, their associates and the atmosphere in which they worked and lived. What he does not discuss, however, are the political conditions that made it possible for the National Socialists to come to power. Neither the role of the Social Democrats nor the Stalinist KPD is examined in any detail, even though the two writers' plight and possibilities for working—their strengths and their ultimate powerlessness in the Weimar Republic—were directly determined by such factors.

January 30, 1933, the date on which Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, is depicted as more or less a natural catastrophe befalling the intellectuals, which, though not coming out of the blue, was still not foreseeable in the form it took. "But then one thing followed another, culture continued in Germany, but much more restricted against the backdrop of torture chambers and concentration camps," reads the conclusion of the chapter "Operas and Didactic Plays."

Rumler notes that Feuchtwanger had steel blinds installed at his villa in Grunewald, but then in November 1932 set off on a trip to the United States—where his novels had achieved greater success than in Germany—convinced that "Hitler is finished." It was to be a one-way trip.

In 1932 Brecht bought a house in Ammersee, Bavaria. Both authors found themselves on the list of "those to be eliminated," which "reads like a who's who of the intellectual elite in Germany." Their books were burned in the middle of Berlin on May 10, 1933.

While Feuchtwanger first settled in Sanary-sur-Mer in southeastern France following his return from the US, Brecht fled on the morning after the Reichstag fire [February 27, 1933] through Prague, Vienna and Switzerland to Denmark. Rumler describes concisely but vividly how the life and work of both writers in exile took shape.

Sanary developed into a center of German émigré authors and artists, cut off from the culture familiar to them, their publishers, and their readership. Among them were Heinrich and Thomas Mann, his children Klaus and Erika, Ernst Bloch, Ludwig Marcuse, René Schickele, Ernst Toller, Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel, Friedrich Wolf and others. Very few of them had been able to rescue any of their possessions. Their houses,

apartments, libraries and archives were for the most part confiscated and plundered. Their German citizenship was revoked.

Feuchtwanger was relatively privileged, having access to ample royalties from his success abroad and was able to acquire a villa on the Riviera and a new library. For a short time, Brecht also came from Denmark to Sanary to work with him.

During this period, Feuchtwanger wrote a novel in which he sought to enlighten the world about the anti-Semitic barbarism in Germany: *The Oppermanns* [to *The Oppenheims*]. He had to change the name of the family in the title, however, because a high-ranking Nazi functionary and publisher named Oppermann threatened to send Feuchtwanger's brother, the owner of a publishing company in Halle and still in Germany, to a concentration camp.

In the fall of 1933, the book was released by the Dutch publishing firm Querido, which—like Allert de Lange in Amsterdam and Oprecht in Zürich—dared to print the works of German authors in exile. After the German invasion of the Netherlands, Emanuel Querido and his wife were transported to the Sobibor extermination camp and killed.

Relationship with the Kremlin bureaucracy

Rumler is vague about the relationship of Feuchtwanger and Brecht to the Kremlin bureaucracy in Moscow and its cultural politics.

In the spring of 1935, Brecht travelled to Moscow where he met friends and theatre collaborators, such as Erwin Piscator, the actresses Carola Neher and Asja Lacis, his colleague Bernhard Reich and his translator Sergei Tretyakov. Many of his friends and acquaintances in Moscow disappeared soon after into the Stalinist prisons, or were murdered. In his private records and diaries, Brecht expressed his concern over their fate but never addressed the issue publicly. Like Feuchtwanger, he deceived himself into thinking that, faced with the reality of fascism, one had to be oriented to the Soviet regime.

Both declared their willingness to participate with German Communist Party member Willi Bredel (who had emigrated to Moscow) in publishing the exile journal *Das Wort* [*The Word*]. Rumler mentions nothing about the conflicts between the publishers and contributors to the journal, which revolved around the issue of a literature appropriate to the situation and the “socialist realist” policy decreed by the Stalinists. He merely points out that “the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939” sealed the fate of the journal. [1]

He also fails to cite Brecht's (unpublished) description of the Stalin-Hitler deal in his journal on September 9, 1939: “Of course the German-Russian pact created much confusion among all proletarians ... in front of the world proletariat, the [Soviet] union carries the horrible stigma of offering assistance to fascism, the most extreme, anti-working class type of capitalism. I don't believe that anything more can be said than that the [Soviet] union saved itself at the cost of leaving the world proletariat without any solutions, hope or solidarity.” [2] Both authors agreed not to criticise the Soviet Union publicly.

Like Feuchtwanger, Brecht participated in 1935 in the Stalinists' International Conference of Writers for the Defence of Culture, in Paris, and both gave speeches, which Rumler refers to only in passing. He notes both authors had differing opinions about Marxism. Feuchtwanger espoused left-wing views, but openly opposed Marxism and argued with Brecht about this. Rumler points to this briefly, but hardly deals with the matter. The main problem is that he fails to pose the question of whether Stalinism had anything to do with Marxism at all.

In his Paris speech, Feuchtwanger spoke on historical novels and took up current problems: “For my part, since starting writing, I have tried to write historical novels based on reason, against stupidity and violence,

against that which Marx described as a sinking into the ahistorical. Perhaps there are weapons in the field of literature which work more effectively, but for reasons that I have tried to explain, I am best suited to use this weapon, the historical novel, and I intend to use it further.”

For Feuchtwanger the issue was how to enlighten with the aid of literature. As he wrote in his essay “The Novel Today is International” in 1932, he wanted to help the “great mass of those willing to be educated through narration to develop a point of view through feeling, enabling an orientation in this confusing world.” A praiseworthy undertaking, but how can one develop such an orientation without a profound analysis of class society?

His novel *Erfolg* features a Swiss liberal writer Jacques Tüerlin, a kind of alter ego of Feuchtwanger, who declares: “A great man ... who you can't stand and I cannot either, I mean Karl Marx ... said philosophers have only explained the world, the point is to change it. I believe for my part, the only way to change it is to explain it ... Great empires pass away, a good book remains. I believe in well-written paper more than in machine guns.” Rumler comments: “Tüerlin was to be proved right.”

Brecht was also no Marxist. Although he posed as an admirer of dialectics and declared himself a materialist, the historical dimension of Marx's theory remained foreign to him, or at least he was incapable of applying it to his own situation. As his letter to the artist George Grosz revealed, Brecht followed the Stalinist-organised congress in Paris from a certain distance and urged writers in his speech not to seek the origins of fascism in “barbarism” or a lack of education, but in “the roots of the barbarism,” the prevailing “property relations.”

Brecht's conviction that the key question was the overthrow of capitalist property relations, of course, was not wrong. But this remained completely abstract because he never dealt with the concrete policies of the Communist Parties and their leadership in Moscow, making his “defence of culture” in the face of Stalinist politics at the least naive, if not misguided and deluded.

Brecht and Feuchtwanger—and they were not the only intellectuals to fall in this category—regarded the Soviet Union, despite Stalinism, as the only possibility for defeating fascism, and therefore kept any criticism or doubts about the policies of the Comintern they had to themselves. “Given the successes and acceptance of National Socialist Germany within the Western democracies, the Soviet Union seemed to him [Feuchtwanger] as the only remaining bulwark and the only possible ally in the struggle against the Nazi terror,” writes Rumler, in what amounts to an apology for this stance, which Brecht also shared.

Feuchtwanger in particular went much further than merely refraining from criticism. This became especially overt and public in 1937 during his trip to Moscow, which he selectively depicted in the slim volume *Moscow 1937*. Despite certain doubts and reservations, Feuchtwanger accepted the invitation from the Soviet Union after Andre Gide had published his own highly critical report about his trip. He wanted to evaluate the USSR with his own eyes and came to diametrically opposed conclusions than Gide.

After dealing with a number of secondary issues, Rumler notes that Feuchtwanger even met Stalin himself. Rumler fails to mention that Feuchtwanger was not able to meet writers who had fallen out of favour, such as Boris Pasternak or Boris Pilnyak. The most famous literary critic, a man highly valued by Lenin and Trotsky, Alexander Voronsky, was notably not among his discussion partners. Voronsky was executed following a 20-minute trial by an emergency court of the military collegium of the Supreme Soviet in August 1937.

Moscow Trials

Rumler deals very briefly with the especially repellent report by Feuchtwanger of the second “Trotskyist Trial,” which the author attended along with the American Ambassador Joseph E. Davies. In the second half of January 1937, he was in the court on several occasions during the second trial.

Both the diplomat and the author convinced themselves of the legality of the accusations and the conduct of the trial. Rumler writes tersely “Like the American ambassador Davies, Feuchtwanger also assessed his experiences in the Soviet Union with a sort of benevolence that is difficult to understand today. His book *Moscow 1937* ... disappointed, when compared to the pithy analyses of National Socialism in *Success*, *The Oppenheims* and *Exile*. He criticises the ‘extreme personality cult’ around Stalin ... as a sort of forgivable sin. He regards the ‘essence of the Soviet Union’ to be ‘organised reason within bounds.’ It is true, however, ‘the nagging and paternalistic attitude towards artists’ disturbed him.”

Rumler’s paltry assessment of Feuchtwanger’s account is remarkable, bearing in mind the facts already known at the time of the notorious frame-up trials that Feuchtwanger must have also known. Feuchtwanger swallowed the lies given him by his accompanying KGB agents and Stalin himself, and distorted historical facts in his report—e.g., regarding Lenin’s relationship with Trotsky and Stalin—and regurgitated Stalin’s version alone. He portrayed Trotsky’s personality in such a way to make the case that Stalin had no other recourse but to persecute and ultimately kill him to save the Soviet Union.

Rumler does not make any reference to the repulsive passages and characterizations of Trotsky and his followers in *Moscow 1937*. Feuchtwanger wrote: “Trotsky’s tragedy is that he was not content with being a great writer. This insatiability turned him into a contentious doctrinaire who, by the mischief he made, and meant to make, caused innumerable people to forget his merits.” [3]

According to Feuchtwanger, “closer examination reveals that the conduct of which the charge [in the Moscow Trials] accuses Trotsky, far from being incredible, is the only conduct which can be expected from Trotsky’s state of mind. ... Trotsky has given expression time and time again to his unbounded hatred and contempt for Stalin. Would he not translate into action what he had expressed in word and writing?” It was clear, Feuchtwanger asserted, that to achieve his ends to get into the USSR again, Trotsky “would even go so far as to work with the Gestapo.” [4]

Feuchtwanger praised Stalin as a “great organiser,” who “for many years ... has been striving to win over competent Trotskyists, rather than destroy them, and it is in a way, affecting to see how doggedly he is endeavouring to use them for his work.” [5]

Turning a blind eye to what was going on around him, Feuchtwanger denied that innumerable Trotskyists and Bolshevik revolutionaries had already disappeared, been tortured and eliminated in prisons and camps. Even many Communists and ordinary citizens who had never expressed sympathy for Trotsky, but who were regarded with disfavour by Stalin and his cronies, shared the same fate.

Feuchtwanger went to extreme lengths and employed the most specious arguments to account for and justify what he declared to be “the clarity and secrets of the Trotskyist trials.” The fact that he published his report against the advice of acquaintances, Rumler regards as proof of his “bravery and civil courage.” To underline this, he also quotes Brecht’s praise for Feuchtwanger’s “Tacitian travel report.” Brecht praised Feuchtwanger’s Moscow book “as a small miracle” and “a special achievement ... For a skeptic like him it is difficult to praise. He has been forced to change his style ... And that required bravery, not just intellectual, a quality which is very rare in our literature.”

The fact that Rumler deals briefly with this history, and in an entirely uncritical manner, indicates he has not bothered to study the relevant political and historical background. In any event, he makes no mention of

any of Trotsky’s writings in his bibliography.

Trotsky’s essay “Art and Politics in Our Epoch” (1938) could have helped him gain a much more informed understanding of the problems and tragedies faced by writers in the 1930s and 1940s. Trotsky writes:

“The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch. It fears superstitiously every new word, for it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death. The oppressed masses live their own life. Bohemianism offers too limited a social base. Hence new tendencies take on a more and more violent character, alternating between hope and despair. The artistic schools of the last few decades—cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism—follow each other without reaching a complete development. Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.

“To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology. Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably—as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery—unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character. For these reasons the function of art in our epoch is determined by its relation to the revolution.

“But precisely in this path, history has set a formidable snare for the artist. A whole generation of ‘leftist’ intelligentsia has turned its eyes for the last ten or fifteen years to the East and has 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 there is not only the revolution, but there is also the new privileged stratum which raises itself on the shoulders of the revolution. In reality, the “leftist” intelligentsia has tried to change masters. What has it gained?” [6]

Unlike Brecht, who eventually moved to East Germany, Feuchtwanger remained in the US until his death in 1958, although he never received his long-cherished American citizenship. He was spied on by the US government, and repeatedly had to undergo long interrogations. His letters were monitored by the security forces of both the US and East Germany (Stasi).

In 1952, when the city of Munich wanted to award Feuchtwanger its literary prize, right-wing opposition came from “the entire Bavarian provincial episcopal movement” and the city council had to justify the award on the basis of the author’s literary achievement and not his political views.

Feuchtwanger and Brecht never met again after their parting in 1947 in Santa Monica. Feuchtwanger remained “an emigrant all his life,” Rumler writes, and then adds, his “exile became an intellectual form of life,” clearly indicating that Feuchtwanger never really felt at home in his comfortable villa on the Pacific.

But this certainly had less to do with the “intellect” and much more with the painful real world. Feuchtwanger wrote to Brecht in 1949: “My situation here is not exactly comfortable, peaceful calm while a few gentlemen with atomic bombs peek around the corner.” Along with Brecht he feared a new war. In light of the rearmament taking place in West Germany, Brecht wrote to the German parliament in 1956: “Since I am against the war, I am against the introduction of conscription in both parts of Germany, and since it may be a question of life and death, I propose a referendum in both parts of Germany.”

While Rumler’s book is unsatisfactory in regard to its political-literary

analysis, it does provoke renewed interest in the questions and tasks confronting artists and writers in the 20th century—which are just as relevant today.

Notes:

[1] Rumler is very imprecise here. It is true that in the spring of 1939, negotiations between Germany and the USSR had secretly begun by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, but the pact was not signed until 23 August 1939 in Moscow.

[2] Bertolt Brecht: *Arbeitsjournal* 1938-1942, Frankfurt 1974, 48

[3] Lion Feuchtwanger, Moscow 1937, Left Book Club, 118

[4] Ibid., 136

[5] Ibid., 132

[6] Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch” (June 1938), *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, Pathfinder Press, 1970, 106



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