

**The East
German
Writers
Union and
the Role
of Literary
Intellectuals**



WRITING IN RED

THOMAS W. GOLDSTEIN

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German History in Context

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UNION AND THE ROLE OF
LITERARY INTELLECTUALS



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Rochester, New York

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments | vii |
| List of Abbreviations | ix |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1: German Writers Associations through 1970 | 20 |
| 2: Socioeconomic Functions | 42 |
| 3: The Era of No Taboos? 1971–76 | 69 |
| 4: A Disciplining Instrument, 1976–79 | 97 |
| 5: Defending Peace, Defining Participation, 1979–83 | 126 |
| 6: Years of Resignation, 1983–85 | 152 |
| 7: Glasnost in the GDR? 1985–89 | 169 |
| 8: Coming Full Circle, 1989–90 | 199 |
| Conclusion | 217 |
| Notes | 231 |
| Bibliography | 319 |
| Index | 341 |

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|--|
| AdK | Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts) |
| AJA | Arbeitsgemeinschaft Junger Autoren (Working Group of Young Authors) |
| BPRS | Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller (League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers) |
| BStU | (archival designation) Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic) |
| BV | Bezirksverband (District Association of the Writers Union) |
| DSV | Deutscher Schriftstellerverband (German Writers Union) |
| FDGB | Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Free German Labor Union) |
| FDJ | Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth) |
| FRG | Federal Republic of Germany |
| GDR | German Democratic Republic |
| HVVB | Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (Main Administration for Publishing and Booksellers) |
| IM | Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter (Unofficial Collaborator of the Ministry for State Security) |
| JBA | (archival designation) Literaturarchiv: Jurek-Becker-Archiv, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (Literature Archive: Jurek Becker Archive, Archive of the Academy of the Arts) |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| KB | Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands (Cultural League for the Democratic Renewal of Germany) |
| KPD | Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany) |
| LAB | (archival designation) Landesarchiv Berlin (Berlin State Archives) |
| MfK | Ministerium für Kultur (Ministry for Culture) |
| MfS | Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security) |
| NDL | Neue Deutsche Literatur (New German Literature), journal of the GDR's Writers Union |
| PEN | Poets, Essayists, and Novelists Club |
| RKA | (archival designation) Rainer-Kirsch-Archive, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (Rainer Kirsch Archive, Archive of the Academy of Arts, Berlin) |
| RKK | Reichskulturkammer (Reich Cultural Chamber) |
| RSK | Reichsschriftumskammer (Reich Literature Chamber) |
| SAPMO-BArch | (archival designation) Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives [Berlin]) |
| SBZ | Sowjetische Besatzungszone (Soviet Occupation Zone) |
| SDA | Schutzverband deutscher Autoren (Protective Union of German Authors) |
| SDS | Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller (Protective Union of German Writers) |
| SED | Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) |
| SMAD | Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland (Soviet Military Administration) |

| | |
|---------------|--|
| SV | (general) Schriftstellerverband der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic) (archival designation) Literaturarchiv: Archiv der Schriftstellerverband der DDR, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (Literature Archive: Archive of the Writers Union, Archive of the Academy of the Arts) |
| SV-BV Potsdam | (archival designation) Literaturarchiv: Archiv der SV-DDR-Bezirksverband Potsdam, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (Literature Archive: Archive of the Potsdam District Branch, Archive of the Academy of the Arts) |
| USW | Union of Soviet Writers |
| VS | Verband deutscher Schriftsteller (Union of German Writers) |
| ZK | Zentralkomitee der SED (Central Committee of the SED) |

INTRODUCTION

“I REGRETTED THAT,” Rosemarie Schuder told me. The historical novelist, just shy of her eighty-fifth birthday, paused and looked away as I asked about the expulsion of nine members of the East German Writers Union (*Schriftstellerverband der DDR*, SV) in 1979. It was unclear from her answer whether she, a member of the union’s Berlin branch that carried out these actions, meant to imply that she regretted supporting these steps (she did not participate in the meeting) or regretted not doing enough to prevent them. Either way, her answer gave me pause. Here was an author who, despite refusing to join the Socialist Unity Party (SED), had risen to become one of the few female members of the SV presidium, its main leadership body. Her literature and activism had been dedicated to peace and social justice, as she eventually headed the union’s Solidarity Commission, and her membership in the East German Christian Democratic Union was a testament to her commitment to Christian ethics and human dignity. No evidence exists of collaboration with the Ministry for State Security (the secret police or Stasi), a relative rarity for presidium members. In brief, she was someone many considered a good person, a view her kindness during our interview bore out. Yet the fact remains that she had either supported expelling nine colleagues or at least had done little when others did so, thus ending the literary careers of the affected authors in the German Democratic Republic.¹ The question is *why*?

The American view of the East German dictatorship is often saturated with Cold War images, chief among them the Berlin Wall and Stasi. The coercive side of the dictatorship was very real for millions of citizens whose lives were adversely affected by SED rule. Yet it is also true that the dictatorship could not have functioned without the participation of authors like Schuder, a woman who experienced the horrors of the Nazi regime as a girl and adolescent and who later married author Rudolf Hirsch, a German man whose Jewish heritage would have likely ended in his death had his family not fled to Palestine. How is it that someone who had known the terror of the Third Reich could support a second German dictatorship? Someone who could criticize the SED’s authoritarian nature

and yet rise to the pinnacle of the most powerful professional organization for the country's writers? During our interview Schuder repeatedly returned to her desire to promote peace and help the less fortunate. In fact, she described the most important function of the union as enabling her to pursue humanitarian aims, suggesting that on a basic level she believed in the regime's stated ideals, even if it did not always live up to its promises.²

No single story can encapsulate the diversity of intellectual life in a country as complex as the German Democratic Republic, but Schuder provides an apt starting point. Here was a person who perhaps against her better judgment acquiesced to the dictatorship's will in 1979. The fact that in our interview she sardonically described Hermann Kant, president of the union, as "the great battleship" and "the master," someone with whom she had no relationship and who never bothered to read her books, also signaled her sense of her relationship to power. Yet eight years later, in 1987, she found herself in a very different position, frustrated by publishing delays and withdrawn from presidium work, a sign of the growing disillusionment of many members.³

In fact, Schuder's change in outlook in the 1980s reveals a wider shift among SV members. During the 1979 expulsions, the SV did the state's bidding and curtailed intellectual expression, collaborating with SED leaders as well as the Stasi. Strikingly, the vast majority of Berlin union members voted in favor of expulsion.⁴ During the Tenth Writers Congress in 1987, though, several delegates seized the opportunity, in front of the Western media, to discuss taboo topics such as censorship, pollution, and free expression. Environmental Minister Hans Reichelt, speaking to the writers about environmental policy, was so put off by the rowdy crowd that he stormed away from the podium.⁵ Most members, surprisingly, approved of this open atmosphere, a far cry from the Berlin meeting eight years earlier. Between these two extraordinary events and members' very different reactions to them lies the crux of my argument in this book.

Interestingly, in both 1979 and 1987 SV members justified their actions by referencing the function of literature and its creators in East Germany as well as the duties and obligations created by the Writers Union itself. The official rationale for the 1979 decision was that the accused had "violated their duties as members of the association," abandoning an obligation to act as "participants in the shaping" of socialism by going to the West to criticize the GDR. In the process, they "damaged the esteem of the Writers Union," breaking community rules and bringing harm to members.⁶ Yet in 1987 Günter de Bruyn, after attacking

censorship in the GDR at the congress plenary session, defended his right to say such things by invoking the union's duty to protect the "artistic concerns of its members, and to these absolutely belongs the question of publication approval."⁷ Who was right? Was it the union's obligation to refrain from criticizing socialism publicly or was it bound to protect members from censorship? As it turns out, both were correct, indicating a basic tension between the union's core obligations.

As seen in these events, since its creation in 1950, the Writers Union embodied an inherent conflict, one that was never resolved in its forty-year existence. The SV served two masters—the state and its members—and often had difficulty fulfilling the expectations of both. In this way, the SV was an expression of a basic contradiction in the relationship between writers and the state: the SED demanded ideological compliance, yet many writers desired to be critical, engaged intellectuals. At times this contradiction could be made more tolerable, as the interests of most authors converged with those of the Party, but on many occasions this disconnect bred conflict.

The union thus served differing and sometimes contradictory functions in the interactions between writers, state, and society. In this book I examine how literary intellectuals and SED officials contested and debated these functions and how each utilized the Writers Union to shape relations and identities within the literary community.⁸ At stake was the general role writers, as public intellectuals, would play in East Germany and the particular role they would play in supporting, critiquing, and improving socialism. It focuses on Honecker's GDR (1971–89), given changes to cultural policy vis-à-vis his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht, both in terms of relative openness and socioeconomic benefits for artists.⁹ In these years important generational conflicts also emerged full force, shaping behavior in significant ways. Finally, exploring the last two decades lets us examine the union during a time of relative stability and during the regime's collapse, probing connections between these two. Indeed, because of some similarity in expressions of discontent in early decades of GDR history, exploring the 1970s and 1980s illuminates the long-term inability of the regime to address intellectuals' concerns.¹⁰

In examining these years, let us consider several guiding questions: First, how did union members, leaders, and SED politicians understand the SV's purpose, and how and why did this change over time? Second, in what ways did the union affect members' identity as public intellectuals, and how was this identity accepted or contested by writers and SED officials? Third, how did members manipulate opportunities created by the SV to pursue their interests, and what were the consequences for

intellectual life in East Germany? In short, how did the SV mediate the relationship between writers as public intellectuals and the SED, and why and how did its role in this process change over time?

East German Literature

While East German artists shared many commonalities, writers were distinct in several ways. SED cultural officials often referred to the GDR as a *Lese-Land* (reading nation) or *Literaturgesellschaft* (literature society), and while such labels were overstated, they revealed a fundamental truth: East Germans valued literature. This was so in part because literature was perceived as one of the few avenues for expressing problems in a country without real freedom of speech. Books often gave a more realistic assessment of difficulties than the official media, and by the 1970s and 1980s literature offered ever sharper pictures of the shortcomings of real existing socialism. In fact, writers deemed “problematic” by authorities were often the most popular.¹¹ As the regime spoke in bankrupt platitudes and failed to offer real explanations for problems, authors seemed to speak a language of authenticity. At the very least writers could help readers develop the one area of their lives beyond the grasp of the dictatorship—their internal self.¹² Yet books did much more, as writers were often the first to discuss critical issues publicly, and public readings could create opportunities for unsanctioned dialogue on troubling topics.¹³ Authors thus were often important public figures, playing vital roles in ensuring steady improvement in socialism or at the very least in identifying problems so the SED could fix them.

At the same time, the SED placed great importance on writers as architects of the “better” Germany’s culture. If Katherine Pence and Paul Betts are correct that the essence of the GDR’s modernity was the SED’s attempt to remake society,¹⁴ then writers were central agents in that process. From the country’s founding in 1949, they were enlisted to assist “the development and expansion of national culture” and “to fight with their literature against fascism, for peace and social progress.”¹⁵ Writers, in brief, served a propaganda function, building a socialist and antifascist culture and thus wielding considerable political power. Many writers saw it as their duty to act as gadflies, prodding the SED to address shortcomings while also extolling the superiority of their system vis-à-vis the West. Occupying this paradoxical position, writers were well aware of their stature, and most felt it their duty to address issues of importance for both state and society, even those who were critical of the regime. Christa Wolf sensed this when she stated

in 1983: “Maybe we can’t say all the things that you can say here [in the United States], but, on the other hand, people listen to us much more. Not only readers, but the politicians as well.”¹⁶ Words mattered in East Germany, as did their creators. And one of the primary means for writers to debate their sometimes-contradictory roles was through the Writers Union.

The East German Writers Union

The Writers Union was the only professional organization for promoting the rights and interests of GDR literary professionals, including authors, editors, literary critics, and translators. In 1973 it counted 724 members, and when it dissolved in 1990 it had 1041. There were sixteen district branches (one per administrative district, plus one for Sorbian authors), though Berlin’s branch was larger than all the others combined, giving it disproportionate impact. Throughout its history the vast majority of members were men, while at most a quarter were women. Women were even less well represented in the two main leadership bodies, the steering committee (Vorstand, varying from sixty to more than a hundred members) and the presidium (twelve to nineteen members).

One could publish in the GDR without being a member (provided one had good political standing), but it became much easier once one was admitted, making membership a virtual *sine qua non* for a literary career. This meant that unless an author had gotten into serious trouble, every major East German writer belonged to the SV. Far from being a marginal organization, the union was thus a crucial site of interaction between writers and the SED and a primary arena for forging a group identity, both for interactions among writers and for participation in society.

From the SED’s standpoint the chief function of the union was to ensure that authors aided the state’s mission. Its purpose was primarily ideological; it offered incentives, both positive and negative, to create literature that supported the GDR and disseminated socialist values to the masses. The basic problem, though, was that the SV was not just a political organization. An important secondary task was to advance the professional interests of members, which meant providing a secure social standing and publishing opportunities. It also meant enabling them to act as public intellectuals with a real say in the progress of socialism. This latter expectation meant that many authors demanded that their union work expand the role they played in improving the GDR, through constructive criticism if necessary, a demand that clashed with the SED’s ideological goal. The union, in brief, was both an arm of the state’s propaganda

apparatus and a professional interest group, and these divergent purposes proved difficult to balance.¹⁷

To be sure, the SED had numerous advantages to ensure that the union fulfilled its aims. Party officials met regularly with SV leaders, and the “educational” side of the dictatorship, where veteran communists instructed younger generations on proper political outlooks, likewise strengthened conformity.¹⁸ The recruitment of Stasi informants (IMs) in key leadership bodies also offered a powerful means of exerting influence and monitoring authors. Furthermore, the SED provided the union with various tools to ensure that authors served regime-friendly ends. Much more than average citizens, SV members were given preferential access to apartments, vacation spots, cars, loans, stipends, and travel to the West. On the punitive side, beyond withholding such privileges, the SV could block publications, mount press campaigns against a “problematic” author, and, ultimately, expel the member from the association, essentially ending his or her GDR literary career. The union thus acted as a gatekeeper, permitting access to a host of socioeconomic benefits for those who played the game, but barring from these benefits those who did not.

The Writers Union in Comparative Perspective

The SV was not the only GDR organization for creative intellectuals. With the founding of the state in 1949, the regime organized artists, like every group of working people, into mass organizations.¹⁹ These new cultural *Verbände* (associations) were formed under the SED’s Kulturbund (Cultural League) in 1950–51, including the Union of Visual Artists and the Union of German Composers and Musicologists. On April 1, 1952, all these associations became nominally independent.

These unions, plus two more founded in the 1960s—the Union of Theater Professionals and the Union of Film and Television Professionals—formed the cultural core of East German professional organizations, alongside the umbrella Kulturbund. The goals of each organization were similar. All adhered to SED policy and vowed to build strong relationships with workers.²⁰ All had an identical structure. The highest body of each was the national congress, held every four to five years, soon after SED Party Congresses at which cultural policies were enacted. On a monthly basis all were run by an executive steering committee or Vorstand (mirroring the Central Committee). They in turn selected a smaller group or presidium to plan meetings and serve as the union’s head (analogous to the Politburo). Finally, around the presidium was the secretariat, a group of cultural functionaries, led by a First Secretary, who

supervised the bureaucratic work needed to run these organizations and acted as the SED's chief representative. Each union was subdivided into regional branches, organized along federal lines.²¹ Finally, all were staffed via the *cadre* system, with all key positions requiring Central Committee approval.²²

Two other cultural organizations deserve mention, as both competed with the Writers Union for influence among literary professionals: the East German PEN Center and the Academy of the Arts. The PEN Center, formed in 1951 and affiliated with the international Poets, Essayists, and Novelists Club (dedicated to promoting intellectual freedom and opposing censorship), was intended to enhance GDR legitimacy by promoting prominent authors to foreign audiences. With a much smaller but star-studded membership, the PEN Club was better positioned than the SV to conduct cultural diplomacy in the non-socialist world, a crucial role at a time when the GDR lacked recognition thanks to the West German Hallstein Doctrine. Generally PEN members, including several who often ran afoul of the Party, were permitted greater latitude than other writers because of their status as cultural diplomats.²³

The Akademie der Künste (AdK), founded in 1950, was intended as a repository of high culture, at first for all of Germany but by the 1960s exclusively for the GDR. It comprised four sections (visual arts, performing arts, music, and literature), each organizing events and exhibits, awarding prizes, managing art publications, and offering master classes. Given its elite status (there were only fifty-nine members in 1962), its debates on cultural policy carried great weight.²⁴ In fact, one of its functions may have been to give critical artists "a certain territory for their activity," which would be "less uncomfortable" than if they joined opposition groups.²⁵ This leeway can be seen in its influential periodical, *Sinn und Form* (Sense and Form), which enjoyed a strong reputation on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Its "unimaginable" latitude helps explain why it was able to publish a range of "problematic" authors, and why, as a result, it so frequently became a source of scandal.²⁶ In contrast, the SV's journal, *Neue deutsche Literatur*, was less innovative and influential, even though it helped launch the careers of several important authors, among them Volker Braun, Günter de Bruyn, Hermann Kant, Heiner Müller, and Erik Neutsch.²⁷

For elite writers, membership in PEN or the AdK was a sign of prestige, and many of them would agree with Waldtraut Lewin, an SV presidium member after 1987, that the Academy of the Arts was more important for their intellectual life than was the Writers Union.²⁸ It is also true that talks and events in these groups had disproportionate

influence, and the latitude afforded members was a source of frustration for those not so fortunate. In 1973, for instance, several authors complained about a “three-way split” of the SV, AdK, and PEN, with prominent authors said to have “more opportunities available than the rest of the members organized in the union,” especially regarding travel.²⁹ But the vast majority of writers belonged to neither PEN nor the AdK, leaving the SV as the only group for *all* literary professionals. Consequently, for most writers the Writers Union was the most important institution to which they belonged.

It is also important to note that writing also existed outside official channels. Dissidents were often able to publish in the West, and underground printing became common by the 1970s and 1980s, as did literary readings and discussions in apartments, churches, and basements. In fact, much of the energy and creativity in East German literature came from unofficial circles, including Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, a popular alternative for young nonconformists. This countercultural scene promised greater autonomy, though the SED made efforts to infiltrate and subvert what it considered dangerous elements.³⁰ In brief, the Writers Union was not the only game in town, and the literature its members produced was often less experimental than that of the alternative scene. Yet while acknowledging these other avenues for literature, mainstream authors had wider print runs and broader audiences, and SV membership was a major factor in this.

East German writers were distinguishable not only from fellow GDR intellectuals but also from other Soviet-bloc authors. To be sure, there were overwhelming similarities across Eastern Europe because of the common Soviet blueprint. Such commonalities were strengthened via annual meetings of national writers unions, which articulated common values and promoted a transnational identity as a socialist writer. Yet historical and geopolitical distinctions influenced writers in each state, making it possible to define a particularly East German experience.

Because the dictatorships in Eastern Europe were based on the USSR's model, strong similarities emerged across all writers associations.³¹ The Union of Soviet Writers (USW) was founded in 1932. To forge ideological coherence, “socialist realism” was enshrined in 1934 as the only acceptable style, depicting workers' heroism and socialism's virtue. After 1945, all Soviet bloc associations aimed to unite writers in service to the Communist Party and instill an understanding and appreciation of socialism in workers. To do so, all unions conveyed benefits to members, and all shared punitive powers, using coercive tools to enforce the Party line.³² The ultimate weapon, at least after Stalin's bloody purge

in the 1930s, was expulsion, relegating prodigal writers to outsider status and pulling their works from bookstores and libraries.³³

Yet whereas the Czech and Polish writers unions became major centers of opposition to their communist regimes, the GDR Writers Union cleaved closely to the SED. The reasons are largely contextual. In Poland, the rise of an “almost professional underground publishing industry” in the 1970s meant the writers association lost its monopoly on representing authors, forcing its leaders to make concessions to oppositional figures to maintain relevance.³⁴ And in Czechoslovakia, where the union helped lay the groundwork for the Prague Spring, authors profited from the broader influence of reformist views within the ruling party.³⁵ Generally, by the 1980s critical intellectuals in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary tended to be more anti-Communist and “anti-political,” whereas their GDR counterparts often remained committed socialists. Opposition groups developed relatively late in East Germany compared with other Soviet bloc states, emerging only in the 1980s and in relatively small numbers. Even then, in 1989 most intellectuals, including writers, clung to ideas of reformed socialism, whereas many if not most critical intellectuals in other states rejected communism outright.³⁶

One can explain this difference in part through two differences between East Germany and its neighbors—its relationship to the Nazi past and its position vis-à-vis West Germany. After the Second World War all communist regimes were founded on the basis of antifascism, but in East Germany this idea retained its urgency well after its magnetism faded in other states.³⁷ The Soviets claimed that fascism was a militant outgrowth of capitalism; it was not a product of racist thinking or anti-Semitism, but of the desire of capitalists to violently expand their wealth. By extension, the only way to be truly antifascist was to embrace its opposite, which, according to Marxist analysis, was Marxism. If fully eradicating fascism meant removing capitalism, then of the two Germanys, the only truly antifascist state was the GDR.³⁸ For a generation of writers who came of age under Nazism and who had, if not participated in its crimes, at least had firsthand awareness of atrocities, and who had themselves suffered during Germany’s collapse, communist antifascism retained an emotional grip that endured until the end of the GDR.³⁹ As Wolfgang Emmerich asserts, “Antifascism, born out of bad political conscience, became the ideological umbrella—uniting writers such as Erwin Strittmatter, Franz Fühmann, Hermann Kant, Erich Loest, Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Günter de Bruyn and Erik Neutsch with those older writers whose exile or resistance was testament to their left-wing identity.”⁴⁰

The other contextual difference was the existence of a “near other” in West Germany. While the SED sought to build legitimacy around concepts of *Heimat* (homeland) or working-class history, it continually fell back on ideology to justify its statehood, rendering intellectuals all the more crucial to the project.⁴¹ East Germany was the only communist country in direct competition with a Western variant over living standards, athletics, culture, industrial output, and a thousand other comparisons. Only in the GDR did critical intellectuals have a large, built-in audience to their works—without translation—across the Iron Curtain. Indeed, the presence of West German media was unavoidable, especially with the advent of television.⁴² The images of a more prosperous West Germany bleeding through the airwaves could not escape East German attention, a fact explaining the SED’s continued anxiety about the survival of their country. All the same, this dynamic did create one advantage for the SED, namely its ability to expel its most vocal critics easily, a “safety valve” that lessened pressure to change; “exit,” to use Albert O. Hirschman’s terms, undermined “voice.”⁴³

In sum, crucial similarities can be found across Eastern Europe in the role played by intellectuals, and the ideas expressed by East German writers were thus part of a larger pattern. Yet one can also discern key contextual differences, which stamped the experience of GDR writers—and hence the activities and role played by their union—as distinctly East German.

Historiography

There has been only one monograph with the Writers Union as its primary focus: Sabine Pamperrien’s *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt* (2004). The book, offering an overview of the union’s functions, also provides a useful collection of edited documents. Pamperrien offers a cursory summary of the 1970s and 1980s, providing detail only on the SV’s relationship with its West German counterpart and how the SED sought to influence that relationship. By focusing on the role of ideology in understanding the union, she succeeds in highlighting one of its animating features, but she does not explore other factors impacting the SV.⁴⁴ Carsten Gansel’s *Parlament des Geistes* (1996) is also noteworthy. His focus is the impact of division and the formation of the GDR on literature, providing essential background on the formation of the SV. The union and other cultural institutions loom large in his analysis, but his understandable focus on elites leaves a gap in our understanding of how the SV functioned for lesser-known authors.⁴⁵ This book is thus the first study of the Writers Union across multiple analytical dimensions.

When mentioned in scholarship, the SV is often presented as unidimensional—an instrument of control against which independent-minded writers struggled.⁴⁶ To be sure, it did play such a role, as SED officials expected. Yet what is needed is a nuanced understanding of the SV's functions and significance, not viewing it simply as a means to curtail dissent. The union should be seen as a crucial site of interaction, however asymmetrical, between writers and rulers, one that epitomized the basic tension between the two functions of authors as set down by the SED. Writers were restricted in their literary style, subject matter, and mission, yet empowered to speak about vital issues in a public manner, and in both areas the SV was essential. The union was indeed an instrument of control, but it was also a tool to navigate a bureaucratic and oppressive system, one that could be used to benefit writers and challenge the system to which it granted access.

This study profits much from the robust scholarship on East Germany to appear since the opening of its archives. Many early studies adopted a totalitarian lens, privileging the regime's repressive facets and positing a stark contrast between an overbearing state and a beleaguered society.⁴⁷ Yet as many scholars have observed, totalitarian models, focusing on institutions and tactics of control and repression, fail to account for the evolution of the GDR beyond Stalinism when relative stability set in and less brutal means of control became commonplace. Nor do such models help us to recognize East Germans' agency in accommodating or resisting the regime.⁴⁸ In recent years, social historians and scholars of everyday life have complicated this binary of people vs. power, stressing the limits of control and the entanglement of citizens with the dictatorship, even while acknowledging repression. Mary Fulbrook's notion of the GDR as a "participatory dictatorship" best captures this dynamic.⁴⁹ Innovative studies of workers' practices, youth, privacy, sexuality, consumerism, conservation, identity, and sports have illuminated convergences between citizen and state, areas of disaffection and discord, and strategies for navigating red tape, state interference, and repression.⁵⁰ Even recent works on the Stasi, long the stock-in-trade of totalitarian studies, offer a differentiated assessment of its practices and vast network of informants.⁵¹ In these approaches, Alf Lüdtke's use of the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, meaning self-directedness, self-meanings, or a determination to realize one's own aims, has enabled scholars to better capture the complexity of social structures and daily compromises.⁵² Fulbrook's related concept of "normalization" has also been helpful: as the system became more stable, its predictability encouraged individuals to learn the written and unwritten rules of the game and how best to exploit them to their own advantage.⁵³

The discrepancy between the aspiration to achieve total control and the practical limits to this goal is fruitful in conceptualizing the spaces created in the SV for intellectual autonomy despite the SED's power. At the same time, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* helps us unpack writers' motives and the ways in which they affirmed or undermined SED policies (or both). After uncertainty in the 1940s and 1950s, the SV created a degree of stability by the 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s, members learned rules to obtain benefits, advance interests, and define their role as public intellectuals. The union also complicated the state/writer dichotomy, as in many ways they overlapped. SED agents worked closely with the SV at both local and national levels. Many writers were also Party members, SED leaders and, in a few cases, Central Committee members. Ideas of "normalization" cannot be taken too far, though, as within the union stability was often fleeting. In other words, while members made compromises and achieved some stability in their relationship with the SED, it was never permanent, in part because of the state's constant interference and in part because members no longer believed it was possible to forge enduring compromises.

In fact, recent studies have explored either the mechanisms through which the regime maintained power for decades or the reasons for the state's rapid collapse in 1989, but seldom do scholars trace the link between them.⁵⁴ As early as 1996, Jeffrey Kopstein argued that in the long term, workers' small acts of resistance helped erode the SED's capacity to formulate policies to meet their demands.⁵⁵ Andrew Port has suggested that a neglected element of the GDR's stability was two entrenched patterns: the willingness of local functionaries to make accommodations for key social groups, and the regime's ability to direct conflict horizontally, creating divisions within social groups and thus inhibiting a broad-based revolt akin to the 1953 uprising. It was only the rise of a new generation, he contends, untouched by the trauma of 1953 and thus more willing to challenge the regime, that pushed the GDR to collapse.⁵⁶ This book also posits a relationship between stabilizing and destabilizing processes as seen in the Writers Union. Generational change was one key component, but more than that, entrenched methods of conflict resolution had gradually lost their appeal for the majority of members by the late 1980s. As cultural policy became incomprehensible and social benefits dried up, the compromises sought by the SED seemed increasingly hollow to members, including those who had acquiesced to the union's repression in the 1970s. Time evidently did not heal all wounds, in part because the instability generated by official policies provided poor conditions for convalescence.

Moreover, while this bounty of studies has yielded important insights into life under the dictatorship, few historians have examined how citizens' engagement with the regime impacted their views on it. As Jan Palmowski argues, "We still have insufficient knowledge about how activity within the institutions of state and party affected the ways in which individuals identified with their circumstances. Nor is it sufficiently clear how the citizens' participation in the GDR's mass organizations and its other institutions helped to sustain existing power relations."⁵⁷ In this book I aim to address this gap, exploring how everyday practices in a major institution impacted both its members and the government that interfered in its affairs. The SV was a primary arena for forming and contesting a group identity among writers and defining the functions of public intellectuals in the dictatorship.

Furthermore, as many studies have revealed, from the outset the regime utilized notions of community to police individuals' behavior and subordinate their ambitions to the collective. To some extent all states use ideas of community to condition actions and attitudes, but in a society premised on socialism, individualism was an especially discouraged if ultimately irrepressible force.⁵⁸ Yet despite this normative emphasis, bonds based on common group identification, locale, or experience could also function as a resource for citizens, providing a network to overcome shortages, a sense of solidarity and social responsibility, and a source of pride and identity apart from SED proscriptions.⁵⁹ As historians have shown, contested meanings of "community" are essential to understanding GDR state and society. Surprisingly, studies of intellectuals have seldom focused on community. In understanding intellectuals' behavior and ideas, scholars have examined a number of factors: generational experiences; ideals shared with the regime and fear that criticism would damage the state; and instruments of power, including censorship and collaboration with or victimization by the Stasi.⁶⁰ Similarly, histories of professional groups such as engineers and technocrats or cultural institutions such as the Academy of the Arts have focused on ideological paradigms, structural arrangements, and relations between their leaders and the SED.⁶¹ What remains to be examined are the ways institutional cultures fostered group identity and notions of community in the GDR and how these dynamics shaped responses to crises, especially late in its history, another gap I hope to close with this book.

Finally, while in this book I am not concerned with literature so much as the institutional context in which it was created, it could not exist without the penetrating and expansive work of literary scholars whose studies offer invaluable insight into the works produced by the

writers who populate this study.⁶² Others have brilliantly explored elements of literary production such as the shifting contours of censorship.⁶³ Such works reveal a broad spectrum of engagement with the regime as well as common strategies to circumvent state control, including selecting careful themes, appealing to well-disposed bureaucrats, (re)appropriating the SED's language, publishing abroad, and writing between the lines. The best of these studies consider writers not merely as creators of literature but also as actors negotiating a complex political and cultural landscape. Here Matthew Philpotts's inventive use of Bourdieu's concept of "dual habitus" is especially helpful, a term applicable to persons such as museum directors or journal editors who must master the demands of both "economic" and "intellectual" dispositions, becoming at once "professional" and "poet." Thus the editors of *Sinn und Form* were forced to balance demands of both literary and political capital, resulting in an "institutional triangle incorporating [their] journal, its parent institution, and the ruling Party."⁶⁴ More generally, for many writers under socialism, exercising their role as intellectuals required a balance between artistic standards and the Party line. Certainly these pressures were felt by SV leaders, whose balancing act between promoting artistic autonomy and reinforcing SED policy was burdensome for the two long-time presidents, Anna Seghers and Hermann Kant.

Two major theoretical models guide this work. The first is from David Bathrick's *The Powers of Speech*, which analyzes GDR writers who participated in the official socialist public sphere, writers whose "very existence was enabled by, indebted to, and an expression of power." The official discourse on socialism was premised on a set of either-or binaries, yet many authors with no desire to challenge its principles inadvertently subverted this "monosemic" discourse, rendering it "polysemic" because of the "multiplicity of meanings" they created. By rewriting "master codes," for example, adopting modernist literary techniques (allegorical references, folklore, or mythology) that destabilized socialist realism, writers problematized the discourse. These actions were neither purely subversive nor purely affirmative, but a mix of both.⁶⁵ Bathrick presents writers who, by participating in the official discourse on socialism, pluralized its meaning and thus destabilized the linguistic power system from which the SED drew its legitimacy.

To be sure, calling authors who re-inscribed these "master plots" a "literary opposition" is difficult, in the sense that many would never have used the term to describe themselves. Here, Axel Fair-Schulz's idea of "loyal subversion" is more appropriate, as they unintentionally destabilized a system they merely sought to reform.⁶⁶ The Writers Union is not a

major focus of Bathrick, and so he does not explore it as a site for mediating writers' participation in the socialist public sphere. Nonetheless, *The Powers of Speech* offers an apt model for exploring writers' roles as public intellectuals within socialism, helping us investigate their engagement with the regime and the discursive complications they created. Indeed, one finds an echo of Bathrick in Jan Palmowski's concept of the SED's "public transcript," a normative way of speaking about socialism to which all citizens were expected to adhere. As he puts it, "in the GDR, the key was not so much what one said, but how one phrased it and who said it," and it was not uncommon for participants in official events to inscribe their own meanings to those events, even while conforming outwardly to the state's narrative.⁶⁷

The second model derives from institutional theory. Bourdieu reminds us that "any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of 'legitimizing discourses,' which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies."⁶⁸ Sociologists and political scientists have long considered institutions important to how systems function.⁶⁹ While there are many strands of "new institutionalism," the most relevant here is the impact that choices made early in an institution's history have on members in the long-term. Due to "path dependency," policies, norms, and patterns of behavior, once established, tend to become rigid, resulting in potential inefficiencies and creating an impediment to change.⁷⁰ A second insight comes from rational choice theory, which suggests individuals are motivated by strategic calculations about how others will behave, relying on institutions to structure these interactions so as to promote more favorable outcomes.⁷¹ Third is the idea that behavior is shaped by norms provided by institutions, which affect how individuals interpret a problem and the range of choices available. Indeed, institutions condition how individuals create meaning and thus shape identities in powerful ways. When individuals act in the manner dictated by institutional conventions, their actions are affirmed as legitimate while they also reinforce those conventions.⁷² Yet while individuals are strongly influenced by institutional norms, they have the ability to reflect on these processes and to try to change them.⁷³

A number of these considerations are useful to a study of the SV. First, focusing on path-dependent decisions will help us to understand the persistence of policies or behavioral norms over time. We can then investigate the ways in which institutional cultures circumscribed not only member behavior but even the range of options considered. These theories also suggest how an institution is a space to create group identity,

examining how and why certain ideas are adopted while others are not, how language is used, how values are produced and re-produced, and how and why institutional culture changes.

Sources

In this study I utilize a variety of sources to address two main issues: the significance of the Writers Union as a professional institution and the role of writers as public intellectuals under a dictatorship. Three categories of documents allow us to scrutinize the SV as an institution: first, sources on benefits and privileges, including correspondence between leaders and members; second, reports for SV meetings to explore how it functioned, how decisions were made, and how behavior was impacted by institutional norms; and third, documents related to planning, execution, and evaluation of congresses, including instructions and appraisals by the SED. Many of these same sources were also utilized to explore intellectual life in the dictatorship, but four more categories were consulted: documents by the SED and Stasi, which reveal the degree of oversight or repression for SV activities as well as compromises and conflict between the regime and union members; meetings and correspondence between the union and other organizations in and beyond East Germany, which explain how it helped authors participate in a larger intellectual community; those works of literature that aroused the greatest discussion within the SV, enabling an analysis not only of the beliefs espoused by their authors regarding socialism and the GDR but also an examination of the ways in which the union facilitated and policed artistic expression; and lastly, interviews with former SV members.⁷⁴

Historians are limited in their understanding by the sources they access, and this study is no different. Since the overwhelming majority of files on the union were produced by the central organization, SED, and Stasi, and since many files deal primarily with the presidium and steering committee, members of those bodies loom large in the following pages. I have tried to offset this bias with interviews, reports from district branches, and Ministry for State Security (MfS) files on authors across the GDR, but the narrative is still perhaps too focused on the central union and on Berlin. These pages are filled with dramatic events and important personalities, people and perspectives without which one cannot understand GDR intellectual life. Yet it is also important to remember stories like Rosemarie Schuder's, for they hint at the large, often silent majority, whose actions and attitudes we glimpse only imperfectly. It is their gradual abandonment of the group norms constricting behavior in the SV and

their embrace of a more confrontational style of associational life that tells the story of the collapse of the union and ultimately of East Germany.

Organization

This study sheds light on the Writers Union as a major locus of interaction between writers and the ruling Party. Specifically, it provides insights into four aspects of East German intellectual life. First, it highlights the significance of generational experience. Those authors who were adults before the Third Reich had a different relationship to communism than those who were socialized under Nazism or those born in East Germany, and these experiences helped condition attitudes and actions for each cohort. Second, it illuminates the impact of professional organizations on intellectual activity. SV membership conveyed benefits that facilitated the production of literature, but more than that, the themes authors explored in books often mirrored comments made at union events. Third, it enables us to see how group identity was forged. Encompassing nearly all GDR literary professionals, the SV had a major impact in shaping how members understood their societal role, though disagreements on this were frequent. Fourth, it helps explain why the regime endured so long yet collapsed so suddenly. The mechanisms the SV and SED created to mediate conflicts were successful at making short-term peace between most writers and the Party, but those same processes proved unstable in the long run.

In the first chapter I look at attempts to organize authors into a professional association from the Wilhelmine period through the end of Ulbricht's reign in 1971. It explores lessons writers learned over a century, including a willingness to draw on state power to restrict the free market and to embrace authoritarian ideologies. The thematic second chapter uncovers the SV's socioeconomic functions. When we analyze the goods and services members acquired from the union along with their complaints about what they did not receive, it becomes clear that the SV led many writers to depend on the state as the chief means of securing a career, a livelihood, and prestige.

In the third chapter I scrutinize the SV in Honecker's first years as SED leader. Promised "no taboos" in art, in the early 1970s writers began to speak more openly in books and in the SV about reform. Yet by mid-decade the limits of tolerance were apparent, and several authors grew disenchanted with what they saw as another failed attempt at improvement. In chapter 4 I trace the most serious conflict in the literary community: between 1976 and 1979 the regime used the SV

to reprimand, penalize, and silence writers whose criticism was articulated in forums seen as hostile to East Germany and against community norms. After the expatriation of songwriter Wolf Biermann, dozens of writers expressed grave concerns about their government's practices, and the union became a major tool for restraining them. Union leaders claimed disagreements were still welcome but had to be expressed *within* the SV, not outside it.

In the fifth chapter I explore the period in the early 1980s when the SV took an active role in a peace movement directed against American nuclear missiles. In so doing, the SV enabled authors to reassert their voices publicly around a vital issue only a short time after their ability to comment on socialism had been restricted. As I discuss in chapter 6, now that writers could discuss the threat of destruction by (Western) nuclear weapons, it was but a short leap to raising concerns about the threat of world destruction by environmental degradation and human rights abuses, all of which implicated East Germany. In chapter 7 I chart how this critical discourse broke through after Mikhail Gorbachev inspired a new openness in socialist states. The crucial moment was the Tenth Writers Congress in 1987, where several authors publicly criticized the GDR, forcing SV leaders and SED officials to adopt a more liberal approach to public discourse. The final chapter follows this activism into the revolution of 1989, a time that saw a brief hope for reformed socialism but culminated in unification. With unprecedented openness, the union lost its gatekeeper function for public discussion. As a result, the association fell into moral and financial bankruptcy, an irreversible trend that made sustaining the union infeasible after 1990.

Though it was created as an institution of control, the union also provided writers with opportunities to speak publicly about the regime and its policies. There were always strong incentives to toe the line, meaning the SV served as a filter to most outright dissent. But by the 1980s many authors had learned the rules of the game, exploiting their membership to insulate carefully worded critiques from reprisal and thus begin to break down limitations on public speech. So long as critical authors remained a minority within the SV, their impact was limited, but by the late 1980s the severity of problems eroded faith in older styles of conflict resolution and left most members more amenable to criticism of the regime. Thus while in the 1970s the union helped normalize relations between writers and state, over the course of the 1980s it inadvertently aided the expansion of permissible expression and helped destabilize the system.

To be sure, writers were not the only reason for the expansion of free speech. The push came from many groups and the general climate of openness must also be credited to Mikhail Gorbachev and dissidents in the wider Eastern bloc. Nonetheless, given writers' role as voices for voiceless readers, the significance of East German literati in expanding the limits of public discourse, and of the institutional context within which they were able to do this, should not be underestimated.

GERMAN WRITERS ASSOCIATIONS THROUGH 1970

BEFORE THE WRITERS UNION was created there were many German attempts to organize literary professionals to advance their collective economic and professional interests. Others tried to organize authors along ideological lines to work toward societal change. By the time the SV was founded in 1950, East German authors could thus look to examples during the Imperial period, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and the Allied occupation. Of course, the final shape of the union was not a foregone conclusion in 1950; it was the result of a contentious process between writers and the Socialist Unity Party, as the union was not a mere receptor of *Kulturpolitik*.

In the GDR's first two decades, the SV emerged as an important institution during pivotal moments such as the 1953 uprising, the *Bitterfelder Weg* movement, the building of the Berlin Wall, and the Prague Spring. In these years, cultural policy oscillated between dogmatism and liberalization, and writers' responses served as a barometer of these fluctuations. The results were ambivalent; on the one hand, by the late 1960s the SED had largely (if tenuously) taken control of the union and could deploy it to enforce cultural policy. Yet several SV members who were critical of the regime were not effectively silenced; it was these voices who would haunt the SED in the 1970s, utilizing the union to bolster their challenges to the regime to broaden the limits of speech.

In this chapter I focus on four broad periods: the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras; the Third Reich; the time of the Soviet occupation zone; and the GDR's years under Ulbricht. This raises two questions. First, what were the successes and failures of writers' attempts to organize since the nineteenth century? Second, which lessons learned from these experiences did the founders of the East German Writers Union carry with them? As we will see, the SV drew inspiration from a number of examples, and not always those that aligned ideologically with its members' beliefs.

Early Writers Associations, 1842–1909

Professional associations became a hallmark of bourgeois life in Germany before the First World War, and organizations for creative intellectuals were no exception. By the late nineteenth century many professions had begun to organize to protect and advance economic and career interests. Groups such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and engineers now sought more uniform criteria for admission to their profession (primarily via “scientific” university training or state examination/certification) to control the labor supply. By monopolizing access, professional groups attempted to reduce competition and ensure their livelihood, prestige, and professional ethics.¹ At the same time, many professionals were wary of the free market and thus sought “neocorporatist” solutions, desiring the state to secure financial and social positions but rebuffing its control over their organizations and practices.² Hence by the early twentieth century most professional groups had attempted to organize, encouraging a tendency toward statist solutions to allay insecurities.

While sharing many of these goals, members of creative occupations encountered greater difficulties in organizing than other groups. For one thing, barriers to entry for artistic professions were harder to control or standardize. One did not need higher education, for example, to become a successful writer.³ An additional difficulty arose from the self-conception of artists. In literature, many writers viewed professionalization as unbefitting their stature as purveyors of high culture. They saw their purpose as articulating the values of their people and tended to view the economic focus of professional organizations as beneath them. Thus the ideal of writer as *Dichter* (literally “poet” but suggesting a creator of literature embodying the nation’s *Geist* or spirit⁴) gave rise to elitist aspirations, inhibiting efforts at professionalization.⁵

Nevertheless, several factors spurred attempts to organize. The growth in the profitability of literature by the late nineteenth century spurred a substantial growth in the number of people seeking to make their living by books. With more authors entering the field, some established writers decried a “proletarianization” of literature that would lead to lower-quality works and limit their prospects. The growing clout of large publishing houses also stimulated attempts to create organizations to represent writers. By 1913 publishing cartels controlled 90 percent of the market; under such conditions, writers complained that publishers raked in profits but paid low sums for manuscripts. Moreover, the growth of labor unions served as an example to emulate in struggles with publishers.⁶ Finally, professional associations would offer a greater chance

of influencing the government, specialized job counseling, social welfare provisions, and legal representation.⁷

Given these developments, there were several attempts to organize writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though most proved ineffective. As early as 1842 the Leipzig Literati Association was formed to protect writers' concerns, mainly on censorship and copyrights violations, though after the revolutions of 1848 it lost importance. Thirty years later the conservative-nationalist General Union of German Writers was created, but it failed to become an overarching interest group. In the late nineteenth century several regional associations were founded, though none could claim to have decisive influence over writers' concerns. These included the German Writers Association (1885), German Writers Union (1887), Protective Association of German Writers (1887), German Writers League (1888), and General Association of Writers (1901). Others represented larger groups of creative intellectuals or specific groups of authors, such as the Union of German Journalists and Writers Associations (1895), the Cartel of Lyric Authors (1902), and the Union of German Stage Writers (1908). Each of these associations had difficulty representing all genres on a national scale, and there was much disagreement as to whether the groups should merely protect economic interests or seek real political influence.⁸ The time was ripe for an organization that could transcend regional and professional differences.

Writers Associations of the Late Imperial and Weimar Period, 1909–33

The late Wilhelmine and Weimar periods saw greater success in organizing writers, but these years also presented grave challenges. The most successful group was the *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (Protective Union of German Writers, SDS), which achieved broad representation and made strides in improving writers' status. Yet because of its non-partisan stance, some authors sought other vehicles for collective action as the republic's political center disintegrated, especially two anti-democratic associations: the KPD's League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers and the Nazis' Fighting League for German Culture.

The SDS was created in 1909 as an association for all professional German writers. It boasted almost all of Germany's important writers, including Thomas Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Tucholsky, and Theodor Heuss, and aimed to protect and expand members' economic, social, and intellectual interests. Both men and women

were welcome (a fifth of members were women), and a relatively high percentage were of Jewish descent, a contrast to many earlier associations that were nationalist or anti-Semitic. The SDS was also non-partisan, and because of this inclusivity its membership grew from 250 members in 1911 to 2404 by 1932. Its activities were manifold. One early target was censorship, lobbying officials to alter policies, supporting legal appeals of censorship decisions, and organizing publicity for egregious cases. It also gave material support to members. In the First World War it helped find jobs (publishing was restricted) and floated loans, distributing some 200,000 marks in total. In the 1920s it continued to provide financial support to impoverished writers, and in 1927 it forged an alliance with the Union of German Stage Writers, the Cartel of Lyric Authors, and the Union of German Storytellers, forming a Reich Union of German Literature to lobby government agencies and legislatures.⁹

The Great Depression marked a crisis for writers, as state and local governments slashed arts expenditure and the public had far less disposable income.¹⁰ Already vulnerable to the market's ebbs and flows, by the early 1930s writers saw newspapers and magazines cut publishing opportunities and reduce honoraria, while markets increasingly favored only books dealing with the most pressing issues. The SDS tried various schemes to aid destitute writers. It formed a "Contribution for Needy Colleagues" for one-time stipends of 10 marks. It worked with welfare agencies to provide unemployment relief. It set up an Emergency Society of German Literature, which offered rent help, loans, travel stipends, assistance for those who had fallen ill, coupons, footwear, hats, cheap or free meals, and low-cost dental care.¹¹ Still, the SDS could do little to stem the tide of crisis, and as writers languished in poverty many looked for alternatives.

Even before the Depression, many writers agreed with Friedrich Wolf when he declared, "Art *today* is a floodlight and a weapon!"¹² After 1918, writers, hoping to forge a new society after the First World War, were involved in politics as never before. They held posts in short-lived experiments such as the Political Council of Intellectual Workers in Munich¹³ and the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and the destruction of such efforts did not deter them from continued political engagement.¹⁴ Indeed, art became highly politicized in the 1920s, especially with the decline of liberalism and growing support for parties hostile to the republic.¹⁵

In this climate, frustration at the SDS's neutrality drove authors to form three groups in the 1920s. First was a German branch of the International PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) Club, founded in 1921. PEN emerged in several countries, influenced by the pacifist movement and

devoted to world peace.¹⁶ Yet while PEN's members tended to be politically liberal, the two most important ideological writers associations came from parties hostile to the republic: the Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller and the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur.

After the First International Conference of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers in Moscow in 1927, a push from Soviet authorities led to the founding of a German association a year later.¹⁷ Several authors joined this League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (BPRS), including Johannes R. Becher (chairman), Anna Seghers, Erich Weinert, and Hans Marchwitza. Its press organ, *Die Linkskurve* (Left Turn), appeared 1929–32 and was later described by East German author Otto Gotsche as “the first collective organizer, propagandist, and guidepost of the German socialist literature movement.”¹⁸ The BPRS was critical of the SDS,¹⁹ but its main goal was to foster “proletarian” literature.²⁰ As Becher put it in a 1928 article, “Become part of the class struggle! Struggle with [workers] in everything great and small! Use your art as weapons! Declare war on war!”²¹ The arrival of Hungarian communist Georg Lukács in 1931 solidified Communist Party (KPD) control, and henceforth the BPRS became firmly pro-Soviet.²² In doing so, it forged a new identity among members; these authors now saw themselves as “proletarian” writers, an identification with the working class that would exert a powerful claim after 1945.

The 1920s also saw the rise of groups bent toward *völkisch* or racist ideologies.²³ The most important was the Fighting League for German Culture, founded by Alfred Rosenberg in 1928 and closely (if informally) tied to the Nazi Party. Its first aim was to promote the Nazis to the educated middle class, but its more significant goal was to “defend the value of the German character” from Jews, cultural modernists, Communists, feminists, and promoters of American jazz music, using lectures and publications to extoll “true” German culture and attack corrosive influences. While its impact was small, the League’s calls to address artists’ economic problems through neocorporatist solutions that unified the arts professions in estates resonated with many suffering in the Depression, as did its calls to purge unwelcome competition.²⁴ This growing attention to economic concerns signaled a new trajectory; by appealing to writers seeking both economic relief and partisanship, the Nazis stumbled upon a formula with an enduring legacy.

Writers under Nazism, 1933–45

Indicative of Nazi views on literature were the May 1933 book burnings by university students across Germany, destroying books deemed decadent,