

Preface

This volume had its origins in an international conference held at the University of Bath in September 1991. The conference itself was conceived a year earlier, on the eve of German unification, as a first attempt, from the relatively objective distance of the UK, to take stock of a body of contemporary literature which had suddenly also become, in some respects, an historical phenomenon. The creative achievements of the GDR's best-known authors, still recognisably 'East German' whether they had spent the dispiriting years before the collapse of the Honecker regime in the GDR or in West German exile, now needed to be reassessed. The effects on the GDR's literary development of the missed opportunities for political reform could now be better understood, as the writers began to talk more openly and the archives became accessible. Above all, the complex relationship between writers and the political leadership in an avowedly socialist state could be reexamined in the light of the failure not just of the GDR's 'really existing socialism' but also of the 'November revolution' of 1989, when the writers took the initiative in attempting to lay the foundations for a genuinely socialist alternative to the Federal Republic.

The relationship between *Geist* and *Macht* has, of course, been the focus of intense debate in the German-speaking world throughout the twentieth century. Heinrich Mann established the terms of reference in programmatic essays such as 'Geist und Tat' (1910) and 'Zola' (1914), at a time when the role of the left-wing intelligentsia, as the voice of the people in implacable opposition to the authority of the bourgeois state, appeared unambiguous. By the late 1940s, however, when Mann considered returning from American exile to East Berlin as the first president of the GDR's Academy of the Arts, hopes had been raised that writers would have a major role in creating a humanistic basis for the new socialist state. The rhetoric of an intimate and equal relationship between *Geist* and *Macht* in the GDR briefly appeared to have gained some substance through the appointment of Johannes R. Becher as Minister of Culture. As Becher himself claimed:

Nie waren Kunst und Dichtung so verbunden mit der Macht wie bei uns, nie war die Macht so aufgeschlossen gegenüber Kunst und Dichtung wie bei uns. Geist und Macht - diese tragische Gegensätzlichkeit im Vergangenen geht ihrer Lösung entgegen.

Although this illusion was short-lived - if indeed Becher ever believed in the truth of his own claim - the question of how successfully his fellow-authors resolved the contradictions of their position as relatively privileged members of a repressive society has become increasingly controversial in the period since the collapse of the GDR.

The point of departure for our conference was a sense of disquiet regarding the negativity of the instant judgements being passed on GDR literature as a whole in the West German press following the publication of Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt* in June 1990. The

undifferentiated accusation that writers in the GDR had never been more than *Staatsdichter*, consciously or unwittingly subjecting themselves right up to the end to the will of the state, becoming its agents as much as writers in Hitler's Germany had been, cried out for a more measured response. The tone of some of these judgements was alarming: 'die vierzig Jahre DDR [schrieben] das längst abgeschlossen geglaubte Unglücksverhältnis des deutschen Intellektuellen mit der Macht bis in die Gegenwart fort' (Frank Schirrmacher) or 'die deutschen Intellektuellen [...] im Osten [haben ...] das Spiel mit der Macht gespielt und es verloren' (Ulrich Greiner). A cliché implying the permanent subservience of *Geist* to *Macht* in the GDR was being generated, for whatever psychological or political reasons, in the run-up to German unification. The research findings of scholars in both parts of Germany and abroad over the two decades of détente, which had identified a significant process of self-liberation from political and cultural conformism in the creative development of the GDR's most important authors, were being entirely disregarded.

It was in this spirit that we gave the conference the sub-title *The Struggle for Cultural Autonomy in the GDR*, seeking to offer a corrective to the one-sidedness of what one journalist in this country called the 'Crucifying Christa' debate. This in turn proved problematic, as some of our speakers were to emphasise in their papers. There were dangers in the implied identification of writers with a relatively autonomous *Geist* in perpetual conflict with the *Macht* of politicians. However urgent the need had become to establish a framework within which the achievements of GDR literature might be properly judged, it was not the moment to put its authors on pedestals as *moralische Instanzen*. The revised conference papers which make up this volume do not therefore represent the fleshing out of a thesis, but rather offer a spectrum of perspectives on the relationship between *Geist* and *Macht*, viewed in terms of the different historical phases in the GDR's cultural development or of the work of major authors and groupings of authors. It seemed more appropriate to reflect this sense of a serious debate which is only just taking shape by adopting the more neutral sub-title *Writers and the State in the GDR*. We also decided that it was in the spirit of the conference - in this case the *aufgeklärte Zweisprachigkeit* in which its formal and informal discussions were conducted - to allow our contributors to submit their papers either in English or in German, in the expectation that our readers will also appreciate the liveliness of this linguistic mix.

Those who attended the conference - and helped in no small measure to create its stimulating atmosphere through their comments and criticisms - will note some changes and/or additions to the programme. Joachim Walther, who read from his work in progress in September, has allowed us for the purposes of this volume to include three texts which document his changing perception of the situation of intellectuals in the GDR from the earlier Honecker years, through the *Wende*, to the final disintegration of the state. We are also very pleased to have Hanne Castein's paper on science fiction, which she was prevented through

illness from giving at the conference. T.J. Reed, who was present, but not as a speaker, has kindly offered us his Cheltenham Lecture, given just a few weeks later at the town's annual Festival of Literature, which, by placing German writing since the *Wende* in a broader historical context, rounds off the volume very neatly.

We wish to acknowledge our warm thanks for the generous support provided to this conference by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Goethe-Institut in London, and the British Academy, which contributed significantly to its success. We are grateful too to our contributors for submitting their revised papers with exceptional promptness to ensure their publication while the issues raised remain fresh, and for their willingness - where the technical resources were available - to supply their papers on disk and thus allow us to prepare a camera-ready text with the minimum of delay. The typing which has been needed has been carried out with great efficiency by Louise Roberts and Edith Schoeb. Our special thanks must go to the Chief Technician in the School of Modern Languages and International Studies at Bath, Chris Williams, for his unfailing patience and support in enabling us to produce the text which is now before you.

Axel Goodbody and Dennis Tate
University of Bath
May 1992