

Resolution by the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, adopted at the Fifth Session (March 15-17, 1951)

Abstract

In March 1951, the SED stepped up its campaign for a “radical turnaround in all areas of cultural life” and articulated basic principles of Stalinist cultural policy. Western art forms were rejected as “formalistic.” The new art was to be “realistic,” and its goal was to reeducate people in the spirit of Socialism. To that end, the SED encouraged artists to adopt elements from the classical legacy of German culture and to consult the example of recent Soviet art.

Source

The Struggle against Formalism in Art and Literature, for a Progressive German Culture

The smashing of Hitler Fascism and the liberation of the German people by the glorious Soviet army created the preconditions for the fundamental democratic transformations that have made possible, in the German Democratic Republic, the greatest successes in all spheres of economic, political, and cultural life. Through the Decree on the Preservation and Development of German Science and Culture, the Further Improvement of the Situation of the Intelligentsia, and the Elevation of its Role in Production and Public Life, dated March 31, 1949, and the Decree on the Development of a Progressive Democratic Culture of the German People and the Further Improvement of the Working and Living Conditions of the Intelligentsia, dated March 16, 1950, have created the preconditions for the development of a truly democratic culture in Germany.

The primary task in the area of cultural policy was formulated as follows in the Resolution of the 3rd Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, “The current state and the tasks of the SED”:

“In the area of cultural policy, as well, the struggle for peace, for the democratic unity of Germany, and for the consolidation of our anti-Fascist, democratic order is the centerpiece of our common work. Through cultural policy, people are educated into true democrats, into independent and responsible citizens, and into highly skilled workers who place all their skills in the service of peace, progress, and democracy.

This education can take place only in the unrelenting struggle against the cannibalistic doctrines of the imperialist warmongers. Any attempt to portray these hostile ideologies objectively is tantamount to spreading and thus aiding these ideologies. It is therefore the crucial cultural-political task to achieve a radical turnaround in all areas of cultural life and to put a merciless end to tepidness and conciliationism.”

Achieving the great tasks of the Five-Year Plan requires increased efforts to further raise the cultural level of the urban and rural populations, and to create a closer link between science, art, and literature and the working people.

The struggle against remilitarization, for the reestablishment of German unity on a democratic basis, and

for the conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany in 1951 is the most important task of the entire German nation. This task can be achieved only in a resolute struggle against warmongering American imperialism, which has already gone down the road of brutal war provocation.

Cultural Successes in the German Democratic Republic

The Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany notes that in the German Democratic Republic, accomplishments were achieved in the area of art and literature as well, accomplishments of which all progressive Germans are justly proud.

They include the works of the writers and poets Arnold Zweig, Johannes R. Becher, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, Bernhard Kellermann, Friedrich Wolf and Willi Bredel, Erich Weinert, Hans Marchwitza, Bodo Uhse, Stephan Hermlin, Kurt Bartel (Kuba), Alfred Kantorowicz, works that were written during emigration or after 1945 and have been published over the last few years. These works have played a major part in changing the consciousness of the German people. They include the "German National Anthem" and a number of folksongs and youth songs written by Johannes R. Becher/Hanns Eisler.

[...]

Weaknesses and Shortcomings of Cultural Work

In spite of all the successes, development in the cultural field has not kept pace with the great accomplishments in the economic and political realms.

Comrade Johannes R. Becher stated at our 3rd Party Congress:

"It would be both absurd and harmful to deny, or to white-wash by way of finger-pointing, that we culture-creators, in our artistic achievements, are still far behind the demands of the day, behind the demands of the epoch. With few exceptions, what do we have to hold up to the successes of the activist movement?"

The chief reason why art has lagged behind the demands of the epoch arises from the dominance of formalism in art and from the lack of clarity about the path and methods of the artist in the German Democratic Republic.

Many of the best exponents of modern German art confront, in their work, the great contradiction between new content and the unusable means of formalistic art. To create new content, one must overcome formalism.

Formalism means the dissolution and destruction of art itself. Formalists deny that the crucial meaning lies in content, in the idea, in the thought of the work. According to their view, the meaning of a work of art lies not in its content, but in its form. Wherever the question of form acquires meaning of its own, art loses its humanistic and democratic character.

Form giving that is not determined by the content of the work of art leads to abstraction. Form giving that contradicts objective reality cannot convey the understanding of objective reality. If the understanding of reality is not conveyed through art, then art does not fulfill its exalted mission, since art, according to Karl Marx, is in all phases of humanity's development the artistically practical method for appropriating the world, in other words, it is a way of understanding reality.

The denial of the fundamental importance of the content of a work of art is not only a sign of

backwardness, something with which a true artist cannot reconcile himself any way, but it also leads to the destruction of artistic form. Denial of content and destruction of artistic form – that means the disintegration and destruction of art itself.

The most important characteristic of formalism lies in the desire, under the pretext or with the misguided intention of developing something “completely new,” to carry out a complete break with the classical cultural heritage. This leads to the deracination of national culture, to the destruction of national consciousness, it promotes cosmopolitanism and thus amounts to direct support for the war policy of American imperialism.

[...]

The Struggle for Realism in Art and Literature

To eliminate the dominance of formalism in art, it is necessary to develop a realistic art.

“Realism, in my mind, entails, apart from fidelity to detail, the faithful reproduction of typical characteristics under typical conditions.” (Engels to Margaret Harkneß, April 1888)

To develop a realistic art, we will take our cues from the example of the great Socialist Soviet Union, which has created the most progressive culture in the world.

Comrade Zhdanov put it this way in 1934:

“Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you?

In the first place, it means knowing life, to depict it not in a scholastic, dead way, not as ‘objective reality,’ but as reality in its revolutionary development. In the process, the truthful and historically concrete artistic portrayal must be combined with the task of ideologically reshaping and educating the working people in the spirit of Socialism. This is the method that we call Socialist Realism in literature and in literary criticism.”

What lessons must we draw from this for cultural work in the German Democratic Republic? To develop a realistic art that “expresses the new social conditions of the German Democratic Republic” (Resolution of the 3rd Party Congress of the SED), our culture-creators must portray life correctly, that is, in its forward development. That requires knowledge of the development of life. The typical conditions of our time under which the faithful reproduction of typical characteristics is to take place are the new societal conditions in the German Democratic Republic, which is the struggle for a solution to the existential questions of our nation.

In accordance with these conditions, the faithful, historical, concrete artistic portrayal must be combined with the task of educating people in the spirit of the struggle for a united, democratic, peace-loving, and independent Germany, for the fulfillment of the Five-Year Plan, for the struggle for peace.

Realistic art conveys the understanding of reality and awakens in people aspirations that are suited to becoming embodied in a progressive, creative activity in the sense of solving the existential questions of our nation.

Realism and the Classical Cultural Legacy

[...]

Above all, it is important to recognize the enormous importance of the classical legacy, to study it, and to develop it further under the new conditions, that is, from the standpoint of the struggle for peace and the democratic unity of Germany, from the standpoint of the fulfillment of great tasks within the framework of the Five-Year Plan, whereby a deep and organic connection with the people must be established.

Criticism and Self-Criticism in Art

Of great significance for overcoming the backwardness in art is the intensified continuation of the discussion in all areas of art and literature. This discussion and an open exchange about all mistakes and shortcomings will be the greatest help to our artists and writers themselves. Open discussion, combined with objective criticism, is an important precondition for the further development of art. He who fears criticism of his work will neither advance in his creative endeavor nor overcome his weaknesses.

[...]

Source: Resolution of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, adopted at the Fifth Session (March 15-17, 1951); reprinted in E. Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED* [Documents on the Artistic, Literary, and Cultural Politics of the SED]. Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1972, pp. 178ff.

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