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Johannes R. Becher 1891–1958

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Johannes R. Becher 1891–1958

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Throughout much of the 20th century, the name of Johannes R. Becher elicited strong reactions: he was a gifted Expressionist poet or a dangerous but largely incoherent pacifist; he was a tool of Moscow willing to betray the Weimar Republic or an example of an artist who transcended his class and served the proletariat; he was a degenerate enemy of the Third Reich or a hero of the *Volksfront*; his was a strong voice for the survival of German culture in the dark years or the timid voice of a survivor of Stalin's blood purges; he was a heroic pioneer for cultural renewal in the fledgling German socialist state or a vain, grasping functionary who betrayed his friends to retain his own tenuous position. Any of these views can be found in writings about Becher, both during and after his lifetime, and there is doubtless a kernel of truth in most of them.

Johannes R. Becher, the son of a judge in Munich, began writing poetry early. He idolized Dehmel, Hölderlin, and Kleist. An adolescent love affair with a young woman named Fanny Fuss ended in a self-consciously Kleistian suicide pact on Easter Sunday, 1910. Becher shot Fanny and then himself in the chest; she died, and he survived. Images of death, martyrdom, sin, and redemption filled Becher's earliest published works—his Kleist hymn, *Der Ringende* (1911); his first poems, *Die Gnade eines Frühlings* (1912); the novel *Erde* (1912); and *De profundis domine* (1913)—and reflected his struggles with this terrible event.

Becher moved between Berlin and Munich in the years before the war. Ostensibly a student, he wrote, helped with his friend Bachmair's publishing venture, and became a part of the literary cafe scene in both cities. He also developed a serious morphine addiction that plagued him for the remainder of the decade. In *Verfall und Triumph* (1914), he juxtaposes images of society's outsiders—prostitutes, criminals, the sick, and the impoverished—with visions of apocalyptic change, which he brought forth through the power of the poetic word.

Becher was horrified by the outbreak of the war in 1914 and by the deaths of many of his contemporaries. The imagery of his poetry became more extreme, his syntax became more radical, and his work,

with titles such as *An Europa* (1916), *Päan gegen die Zeit* (1918), and *Verbrüderung* (1916), became a series of manifestos for revolution and cultural upheaval. Becher conjured visions of armies of social outcasts rising up to exorcise the horrors of society and offered images of an ill-defined Utopia born of this revolution. Becher joined the Spartakists in 1917 and wrote a poem celebrating the birth of the Soviet Union, but not until 1924 did he become an active member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).

The intervening years, which brought the end of the war and the failure of the radical revolution Becher had anticipated, also included personal changes for Becher. Since 1916 Katherina Kippenberg of the *Insel Verlag* and Harry Graf Kessler had supported Becher financially and morally, and with their help he slowly weaned himself of his drug addiction. He studied medicine briefly, married and divorced, and had several love affairs. His poetry turned toward a religious Utopia in volumes such as *Um Gott* (1921), *Verklärung* (1922), and *Hymnen* (1924).

During the early 1920s, however, Becher involved himself in KPD activities and began to study Marxism. While *Maschinenrhythmen* (written in 1922, published in 1926) combines his old Expressionist imagery with his new communist zeal, *Der Leichnam auf dem Thron* (1925) marked his emergence as an agitational communist poet. Past extremes of image and form yielded to simplicity and directness. This volume and the 1925 novel (*CH Cl=CH*)₃ (*Levisite*) (1926) resulted in Becher's prosecution for high treason, which caused international protests and established him as an important literary voice for the KPD. In 1928 Becher became the leader of the League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller) and an editor of its journal, *Die Linkskurve*. He had made the first of several trips to the Soviet Union in 1927 and in 1931 published his dramatic poem *Der grosse Plan*, a celebration of the first Five Year Plan, which was performed by the Neue Volksbühne in Berlin in 1932.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Becher was forced into exile, first in Vienna and Prague and then in the Soviet Union. He

went to Paris in 1934 and 1935 and helped organize a *Volksfront* of intellectuals that came together at the International Writers' Conference in Defense of Culture in June 1935. He returned to Moscow where he assumed the editorship of the important exile journal *Internationale Literatur: Deutsche Blätter*. In 1936 the pace of Stalin's purges intensified, and many of Becher's closest associates were arrested and perished. By many accounts, Becher was often in peril, but he avoided arrest and survived his own suicidal depressions. He turned his attention as a writer inward; in his poems he reflected on the Germany lost and what it could be. *Der Glücksucher und die sieben Lasten* (1938) evokes the south German landscapes Becher loved and found resonance with such luminaries as Thomas and Heinrich Mann. Becher also wrote an autobiographical novel, *Abschied* (1940), which shows the idealized development of a bourgeois youth toward socialism.

The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 struck a blow to the surviving German Communists in Moscow, but the invasion of the Soviet Union was devastating. Becher, like most of the others, was evacuated to Tashkent. His stature as a cultural-political figure allowed an early recall to Moscow in January 1942, where he became part of the propaganda war against the Nazis. He spoke frequently on the radio, and, later in the war, visited prisoner-of-war camps as part of the Nationalkomitee "Freies Deutschland."

Becher returned to Germany in 1945 as a key member of the KPD team in the Soviet Occupation Zone. He founded the Kulturbund for the "renewal of German culture" and helped to found the Aufbau publishing house and the journals *Aufbau* and *Sinn und Form*. He collaborated with Hanns Eisler to write the national anthem for the new German Democratic Republic and in 1953 became the state's first culture minister. He published poetry, a diary, and several volumes of reflective prose, and he edited and revised his earlier work. By 1956, when Stalin's crimes were acknowledged in the Soviet Union, Becher's health had begun to fail and his influence had weakened. He did not move to help several of his closest associates who fell victim to repressive cultural policies in late 1956 and 1957.

Although Becher retained his position as minister until his death in 1958, his power had dissipated. After his death, he became an icon of the state, “the poet of the socialist nation,” and only with the passing of the GDR has it been possible to begin the process of reassessing Becher’s literary achievements and his political significance.

ROBERT K. SHIRER

Biography

Born in Munich, 22 May 1891. Studied philology, philosophy, and medicine in Munich, Jena, and Berlin; cofounded in 1928 the Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers (Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller); emigrated to the Soviet Union, 1933, where he edited *Internationale Literatur-Deutsche Blätter*, 1935–45; member of the central committee of exiled Communist Party members of Germany; founder and president of the *Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands*; cofounder of the Aufbau Verlag; founder of the literary magazine *Sinn und Form*, 1949; cultural minister of the GDR from 1954–58. Died 19 November 1958 in East Berlin.

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