

Press Information

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Wolf Biermann.

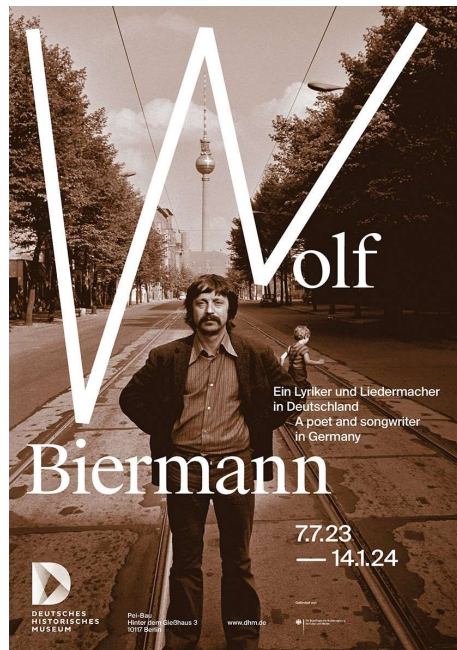
A poet and songwriter in Germany

7 July 2023 to 14 January 2024



DEUTSCHES
HISTORISCHES
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Wolf Biermann is one of the best known songwriters in Germany – East and West. His expulsion from the GDR in 1976 represents a political turning point in the post-war history of divided Germany and an admission of helplessness on the part of the SED leadership. Unlike less well-known artists, Biermann had become too popular to be arrested and too unpredictable to be allowed to perform in public. Many of his songs, ballads and poems have outlasted the original circumstances of their making. “Warte nicht auf bessere Zeiten” (Don’t wait for better times), “Ermutigung” (Encouragement), “Ballade vom preußischen Ikarus” (Ballad of the Prussian Icarus) have become classics.



Exhibition poster: Julia Volkmar & STUDIO BENS

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From this Friday on, the Deutsches Historisches Museum is showing the new exhibition **“Wolf Biermann. A poet and songwriter in Germany” (7 July 2023 to 14 January 2024)**. The exhibition, curated by Monika Boll (curator of “Hannah Arendt and the 20th Century”, 2020/21), deals with the life and work of Wolf Biermann before the backdrop of the special standing that culture enjoyed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Raphael Gross, President of the Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum: “For me Wolf Biermann is one of the most impressive and important lyric poets in the German language. His life and work are dialectically interwoven with the history of Germany. For us as DHM it is a challenge to throw light on central aspects of German cultural history through the lens of Biermann’s life and oeuvre: between East and West, German and Jewish, communism and democracy, politics and art.”

Monika Boll, curator of the exhibition: “In the GDR, culture was considered a fundamental asset in which all people should participate. In a state without free

media, the field of culture took on the function of the public sphere. That provided art with visibility and recognition, but also made it the object of state control and coercion.”

The show presents the life and work of the poet and songwriter interwoven with the (cultural-)political events of “German-German” history. After a prologue, the chronologically structured tour through eight thematic rooms follows Biermann’s biographical, artistic and political landmarks. Born in Hamburg in 1936, he grew up in a working-class, communist-oriented milieu. While still in school, Biermann moved to the German Democratic Republic in 1953 on the strength of his political convictions.

Between cultural awakening and restrictive cultural policy

The exhibition looks into Biermann’s first publications and successes: his work as director’s assistant at the Berliner Ensemble and as head of the Workers’ and Students’ Theatre b.a.t., also describing his controversial appearance at the legendary poetry evening in the East Berlin Academy of Arts in 1962. This marked the beginning of a phase of Biermann’s hard-fought disputes with the party and the party with him. In the wake of the 11th plenum of the Central Committee of the SED, Biermann was banned in the mid-1960s from performing and publishing in the GDR and subjected to almost unbroken surveillance by the State Security.

Denaturalisation and protests

After eleven years of the performance ban, Wolf Biermann’s famous concert took place on 13 November 1976 in the West German city of Cologne. As is now known, the expulsion from the East Germany that followed had been decided before the concert took place. In an open letter to the SED leadership, prominent artists including Stephan Hermlin, Sarah Kirsch, Manfred Krug, Armin Mueller-Stahl, and Christa Wolf protested against the ousting of Wolf Biermann. This kind of open protest was unprecedented in East Germany.

Wolf Biermann in West Germany

For Wolf Biermann, the forced resettlement from East to West presented a challenge to his artistic and political self-understanding. How was a songwriter to redefine himself in the Federal Republic, an artist who despite all criticism of the SED leadership still saw himself as a communist and an exile? In West Germany Biermann supported the peace movement, the anti-nuclear protests, and the founding of the German Green Party.

Civil liberties movement in the GDR

When in 1989 the civil rights movement in East Germany grew stronger and the government began to totter, Biermann was forced to remain a passive onlooker. He was not permitted to cross into East Berlin and could not participate in the demonstration at Alexanderplatz on 4 November 1989. During the occupation of the central headquarters of the Ministry for State Security in Berlin in 1990, Biermann voted to preserve the Stasi files. Even today he retains a critical distance to the SED's successor parties PDS and Die Linke (The Left). He was equally sceptical of Russia's willingness to reform after 1989.

Wolf Biermann and the Jews

As a Jew and member of the communist resistance, Wolf Biermann's father Dagobert was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. A lengthy stage of Biermann's life is devoted to his family history. Under the domination of a socialist ideal of society, Jewish life in East Germany was hardly visible in the public sphere. Nonetheless, Wolf Biermann's understanding of Judaism was of central importance both before and after his expulsion from the GDR.

On a surface area of 56 m², the cultural-historically based exhibition shows around 280 objects. They come from the DHM collections, from the private archive of Wolf and Pamela Biermann as well as from archives around the country such as the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship, the Federal Archive, and the Robert Havemann Society. Very many objects are from the Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which took over a preliminary part of Biermann's estate in 2021. On the basis of documents from Biermann's life and family, diaries, historical audio and video recordings, media reports, musical instruments, personal objects, photographs, artworks, and posters from East and West, a political life and artistic creation of the songwriter emerges that is closely interlinked with the history of the two German states in the 20th century. On display, for example, are Biermann's East German typewriter, a food container once belonging to the Wehrmacht in which Biermann's diaries were hidden from the Stasi, his first LP "Chausseestrasse 131", a surveillance camera, a bugging device, and a circulating cart for index cards like the ones used by the Stasi during their unbroken observation of Biermann. A series of photographs produced especially for the exhibition by Barbara Klemm, who had previously photographed the famous Cologne concert in 1976, document the life of Wolf and Pamela Biermann in Hamburg today.

Biermann's controversial songs, ballads and poems – often the occasion for and a commentary on cultural-political events – are to be found in the exhibition,

representing six decades of testimonies to the contemporary life and history of the two Germanys. A central media installation is dedicated to the artist and his work in the mirror of criticism from the years 1962 to 2016. A children's trail and notebook for the exhibition are aimed at our young museum visitors between the ages of 8 and 12.

The **DHM's digital format *More Story*** introduces the exhibition in German and English and offers extensive background interviews with Dorlis Blume, Achim Bonte, Raphael Gross, Roland Jahn and Gabriele Stötzer.

Accompanying the show is an extensive **publication in German** (224 pages, ca. 80 illustrations, published by Ch. Links Verlag) with contributions by Roland Berbig, Holger Böning, Gerd Dietrich, Marcus Heumann, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Monika Linder, Sabine Sanio, Hendrikje Schauer, Manuel Soubeyrand, Hannes Stein, Gabriele Stötzer, and Stefan Wolle, with songs and poems by Wolf Biermann, and many previously unpublished photographs.

A programme of events in cooperation with Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin as well as a **film programme in cooperation with Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung and Deutsche Kinemathek** in the second half of 2023 add to and enlarge upon the topics of the exhibition.