

## Press Information

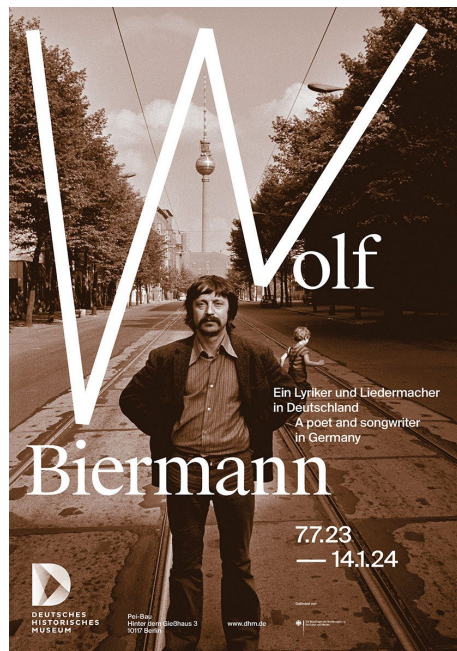
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# Wolf Biermann. A poet and songwriter in Germany

From 7 July 2023 in the Deutsches Historisches Museum



Wolf Biermann is one of the best known songwriters in Germany – East and West. His ousting from the GDR in 1976 was 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 was too popular to have arrested and too unpredictable to allow 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

From 7 July 2023 to 14 January 2024, the Deutsches Historisches Museum is showing the exhibition “**Wolf Biermann. A poet and songwriter in Germany**”. Curated by Monika Boll (curator of “Hannah Arendt and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, 2020/21) deals with the life and work of Wolf Biermann before the backdrop of the special standing of culture in the GDR. After the Second World War, the invocation of the “cultural nation” (Erich Honecker) formed a part of socialist self-understanding. In the GDR, culture was considered a precious asset in which all people should participate as active “worker-artists”. In a state without free media, the cultural world took on the function of the public sphere. This brought it visibility and recognition but also turned it into the object of state control and coercion.

The exhibition presents the life and work of the poet and songwriter in its intersection with the (cultural-)political events of “German-German” history. After a prologue, the chronologically arranged 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 milieu marked by communist influence. Still a student in school, Biermann moved to the GDR in 1953 out of political conviction.

Deutsches Historisches Museum

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### **Between cultural emergence and restrictive cultural politics**

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. as well as his controversial appearance at the legendary poetry evening in the Berlin Academy of Arts in 1962. This marked the beginning of a phase of tough struggles with the party and the party with Biermann. In the wake of the 11<sup>th</sup> plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in the mid-1960s, Biermann was banned from performing and publishing in the GDR and subjected to an almost unbroken observation by the State Security.

### **Denaturalisation and protests**

After eleven years of being prohibited to perform, Wolf Biermann's famous concert took place in Cologne on 13 November 1976. The expulsion from the GDR that followed, it is now known, 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 had never before happened in the GDR.

### **Wolf Biermann in the Federal Republic**

For Wolf Biermann, 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, who despite all criticism of the SED leadership still saw himself as a communist and exile? In West Germany Biermann supported the peace movement, the anti-nuclear power protests, and the founding of the German Green party.

### **Civil liberties movement in the GDR**

When in 1989 the civil rights movement in the GDR grew stronger and the government began to totter, Biermann was at first forced to remain a passive onlooker. He was not permitted to cross into East Berlin for 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 Biermann 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.

### **Jewish self-understanding**

As a Jew and member of the communist resistance, Wolf Biermann's father Dagobert was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. An extensive period of Biermann's life is devoted to his family history. Under the domination of a socialist ideal of

living, Jewish life in the GDR was hardly visible in the public sphere. Nonetheless, for Wolf Biermann a Jewish self-understanding did not first take on central importance after his expulsion from the GDR.

On a surface area of 530 m<sup>2</sup>, the cultural-historically based exhibition shows around 280 objects from the DHM collections, 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 emerges that is closely interlinked with the German-German history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On display, for example, are Biermann's GDR typewriter, a food container from Wehrmacht stocks in which Biermann's diaries were hidden from the Stasi, his first LP "Chausseestrasse 131", an observation camera, a bugging device, and a circulating index card cart like the ones used by the Stasi during their unbroken observation of Biermann.

Biermann's controversial songs, ballads and poems – often the occasion for and, at the same time, commentary on cultural-political events – are present in the exhibition as six decades of contemporary testimonies. A central media installation is dedicated to the artist and his work in the mirror of contemporary criticism between 1962 and 2016. A children's exhibition trail and a notebook for children are aimed at our young museum visitors between the ages of 8 and 12.

Accompanying the exhibition 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 and a film programme** in the second half of 2023 add to and enlarge upon the topics of the exhibition.

**Press conference:** Wednesday, 5 July 2023, 11 am, Pei Building

**High-resolution press images** are available in the [press area](#) of the DHM website.