

Resistance, Identity, and Memory: Jurek Becker Social Critique in the Context of GDR Totalitarianism

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Abstract

This article explores the life and work of Jurek Becker, a prominent writer from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), whose literary contributions critically examined socialism, censorship, and the moral complexities of life under a totalitarian regime. In the GDR, literature was closely controlled by the state, serving as a tool to promote socialist values and discourage dissent. Becker's work, however, took a different path. Known for his sharp wit and irony, he tackled sensitive issues of opportunism, resistance, and human vulnerability, creating narratives that resonated both within and beyond GDR borders. Through an analysis of Becker's essays, novels, and public statements, the article reveals how his disillusionment with the political constraints of the GDR led to his eventual move to West Berlin. Yet, even in the West, Becker remained committed to social critique, highlighting the compromises that writers often faced within both capitalist and socialist systems. The article ultimately argues that Becker's legacy lies in his commitment to an authentic, critical literature, one that navigated political boundaries to address universal human concerns.

Keywords: Jurek Becker, German Democratic Republic (GDR), Censorship, Social Critique, Literature and Resistance.

Introduction

Jurek Becker's Navigations through Socialist Ideals and Realities

Jurek Becker, one of the most significant figures in GDR literature, grappled with the promises of socialism and the realities of state repression. His novels, such as *Jakob der Lügner* and *Schlaflose Tage*, serve as nuanced critiques of life under authoritarianism. They explore themes of resilience, moral agency, and systemic oppression, encapsulating the paradox of a state that espoused equality while silencing dissent (Greenberg, 1995, p. 105). This study delves into the life and works of Jurek Becker, a notable literary figure whose writings critically examine the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the impact of authoritarian regimes on individual freedom, identity, and moral agency. Motivated by a need to understand the psychological and social effects of totalitarian rule, this research situates Becker's work within the broader discourse on literature as a tool for resistance and social critique. Central to this manuscript is the argument that Becker's life and works provide a lens through which to examine the role of literature in contesting state control. In a society where censorship sought to align literature with ideological objectives, Becker's mastery of subtle dissent allowed him to critique systemic contradictions without outright confrontation. As Beate Müller highlights, Becker navigated the politics of

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ensorship with an acute understanding of its mechanisms and impact on artistic freedom (Müller, 2006).

Becker's work also challenges the GDR's appropriation of antifascist narratives to deflect scrutiny from its authoritarian practices. His engagement with Holocaust memory and Jewish identity, as McDaniel argues, disrupts state-driven silences and simplistic portrayals of history (McDaniel, 2021). These dimensions underscore Becker's broader critique of historical manipulation and collective amnesia. This study situates Becker within the broader context of GDR literature, which often served as a "seismograph" of societal discontent. Becker's nuanced approach transcends ideological boundaries, offering insights into universal struggles for ethical integrity and artistic autonomy. Future research could explore his influence on post-reunification German literature and global debates on censorship, resistance, and identity (Baer, 1997 p. 18-21). The significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate how literature can challenge state-imposed narratives and offer nuanced critiques of repressive systems. In an era where authoritarian practices and censorship continue to threaten intellectual and creative freedoms worldwide, Becker's work serves as a powerful reminder of literature's role in confronting such pressures. This analysis not only contributes to a deeper understanding of GDR literature but also addresses broader questions about the ethical responsibilities of writers and the power of storytelling as a means of resistance. By exploring Becker's layered critique of both the GDR and fascism, this study sheds light on the universal human struggles for autonomy and truth, underscoring the enduring relevance of Becker's legacy.

From "Guter Genosse" to "Lügner"

In the wake of World War II, the rebuilding of East and West Germany was marked by intense rivalry, fueled by the Cold War. This competition permeated ideological, economic, political, technological, and scientific domains (Fulbrook, 1997). On the ideological front, the GDR implemented active youth policies, a common approach among socialist states. The emphasis on younger generations stemmed partly from the lack of support among middle-aged Germans, many of whom resisted the new social order and sought refuge in the West (Betts, 2010). To gain the allegiance of the younger population, the SED Party capitalized on the German people's desire to overcome the Nazi past, primarily through education, media, and youth organizations (Dennis, 2000). As historian Enzo Collotti noted in 1968,

La totale liquidazione dei miti del terzo Reich, senza nessuna possibilità di residui nostalgici di alcun tipo, ha certamente agevolato il compito di diffondere e affermare presso le nuove generazioni l'idea e la prospettiva di una società nuova (Collotti, 1968, p. 877).

The integration of youth into the GDR's social system involved two key initiatives: the collectivization of social life and production, and an overhaul of the education system, which opened technical and professional training to all young people, regardless of social background (McDougall, 2004). Mass youth organizations also played a vital role in shaping ideology, often clashing with religious influences that could undermine socialist ideals (Steiner, 2010). The GDR's two primary youth organizations were the Young Pioneers (ages 6-14) and the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ, ages 14-25). While not officially part of the SED, the FDJ fostered socialist values, encouraging active participation in building and defending the socialist state (Betts, 2010). For Jurek Becker, participation in these state rituals was an essential way to establish his German identity. He began as a Young Pioneer, later joining the FDJ. Decades later, he would realize that his involvement stemmed less from personal conviction and more from his father's influence. In a 1988 interview, Becker reflected on this attachment to the GDR and socialism, explaining:

Wie bei jedem anderen auch, waren mein Verstand und meine Überzeugung das Resultat gewisser Umstände, das Resultat bestimmter Einflüsse, in meinem Fall vor allem durch

meinem Vater. Der ist in Auschwitz von der Sovietarmee befreit worden, und das waren dann für den Rest seines Lebens die Guten, die Heilsbringer. Mit diesem Hintergrund bin ich von ihm erzogen worden.¹

As he matured, Becker became increasingly aware of the GDR's political significance. Embracing this sense of purpose, he chose to attend Humboldt University, a socialist institution, rather than the apolitical Freie Universität, and joined the SED at eighteen. However, this affiliation did not imply uncritical acceptance. Becker's inclination for reading fostered a critical mindset, and he soon grew frustrated with the disconnect between the government's stated objectives and its actions (Müller, 2006). In the interview cited above, Jurek Becker mentions an example: when he was a student, during the holidays, GDR students took part in work services. And he took part not only because he was forced to, but above all because he thought it was right. At that time the party decided to make the nation "vollgenossenschaftlich"². The farmers consequently had to stop being autonomous and become members of a collective production. Jurek Becker, therefore, went to the countryside to convince them. But when he arrived there, the young writer saw the farmers protesting and no longer considered that action right: he had read in books that the principle of free will was a central element of socialism. By abandoning that initiative Jurek Becker came to his first clash with the party which was followed by a series of ideological disagreements. His original and also choleric character, which did not fit well with the rigid educational system of the GDR, also earned him expulsion from university. But these contrasts were always characterized by a deep loyalty on the part of the political officials until an event that was shocking for the author:

Die Loyalitätsbasis (...) wurde im Jahr 1968 angeschlagen oder sogar zertrümmert. Als die Waschauer-Pakt-Staaten in Prag einmarschierten, schien mir das nicht etwas zu sein, das with a bißchen gutem Willen zu schlucken war.³

The March on Prague represented for Becker a sort of break with his relationship with the ideology of the GDR, which until then had been substantially in agreement. The divergence of opinions between him and the party was becoming more and more evident and even the discussions that were taking place in the Writers' Association seemed disappointing to him because they had no effect outside it. Nevertheless, Jurek Becker continued to behave as a "guter Genosse"⁴ towards the party and the Association. He expressed his disagreements, albeit in a

¹Frauke Meyer-Gosau, *Fortschritt can also be bestehen in Ernüchterung. Interview*. In: Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, *Jurek Becker*, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, p.116. This text will be indicated from now on with the acronym HL, p. 108 (Like others, my mind and my beliefs were the result of certain conditions, the result of particular influences, in my case coming above all from my father. He was liberated in Auschwitz by the Soviet army, and for the rest of his life they were the good guys, the saviors. I was brought up by him in this context.)

² Ibidem p. 110 (cooperative).

³ Ibidem, p. 112 (The loyalty base was attacked in 1968 or even destroyed. When Warsaw Pact troops marched into Prague, it did not seem to me to be something that could be swallowed with a little good will.).

In 1968 there was a brief reformist season in Czechoslovakia which took the name of Prague Spring. This season was characterised by a broad movement political, intellectual and popular. The courageous attempt to introduce elements of democracy into the Czechoslovakian system, one of the most static in the entire Eastern European communist archipelago, lasted from January to August, when it was interrupted by the brutal intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops. The Prague Spring, interpreted by the communist leaders as a serious threat, instead constituted one of the last opportunities to reform the system born from the October Revolution, which would collapse at the end of the 1980s.

⁴(good companion) He himself had defined himself as such in the article *Ich glaube Ich war ein guter Genosse*. Schriftsteller Jurek Becker über die Nach-Biermann-Ära in der GDR. In: "Der Spiegel", Nr.30/1977.

sometimes impetuous, only within these institutions. He had never offered himself as a pretext for Western propaganda. The success of Jakob der Lügner in both novel and film form made Becker a renowned writer, making it increasingly difficult for him to remain silent on sensitive issues:

Und kurze Zeit später – dieser Einmarsch 1968 war eine Art Zäsur in meinem Verhältnis zu DDR – habe ich mich dann nicht getraut, aber genötigt gefühlt, Äußerungen öffentlich zu machen, die vorher nur unter Freunden gemacht habe.⁵

This visibility attracted the attention of the Stasi, which intensified surveillance on Becker, documenting him under the pseudonym “Lügner”⁶ and labeling him as a potential dissident due to his liberal lifestyle. Conflicts with the SED and the Berlin Writers' Association grew, and Becker was eventually deemed a state threat. In 1976, after years of tension, Becker was expelled from the SED following the Biermann affair, which sparked widespread intellectual dissent. A petition signed by thirteen intellectuals, including Becker, condemned the revocation of Biermann's citizenship, further straining Becker's ties to the GDR. For Becker, the Biermann case symbolized the tipping point, “wie eine Funke, der in einen Heuhaufen fiel”⁷. Although he disagreed with Biermann's stances, he was even more opposed to the government's repressive methods, which he could neither condone nor accept. Consequently, he left the Writers' Association in 1977, disillusioned with its failure to uphold socialist ideals. The Biermann affair precipitated a wave of emigration among GDR artists, with more than thirty writers leaving between 1976 and 1989. Many were temporarily silenced through the “Urlaub auf Zeit,” a “vacation” in the form of a travel visa that many used to settle permanently in the West. Becker was among those granted this visa, and in 1977, he moved to West Berlin, leaving his children and recently estranged wife in the East.

Jurek Becker and literature

Culture was foundational in shaping the German Democratic Republic (GDR). After 1945, both East and West Germany faced an opportunity to break from their Nazi past and establish new cultural narratives. In the GDR—a society marked by strong political and moral tensions, as well as pronounced ideological and political ambitions—culture became both the protagonist and the instrument of this politicization process (Collotti, 1968, p. 883). Literature, in particular, could not escape this trend. It was viewed as both a functional tool of the party and a moral guide to foster a collective social conscience geared toward building socialism. Following this philosophy, Walter Ulbricht often emphasized that writers were expected to contribute to socialist construction through all forms of public education, including books, television, radio, and the press. For instance, at the 1959 Bitterfeld Conference, the proposed literature idealized the figure of the worker as a positive hero who recognized the importance of collective work and embraced its challenges⁸. Yet, instead of fostering the organic development of socialist cultural values, GDR cultural policy largely emphasized celebrating the achievements of socialism and exalting party ideology.

Not all writers and intellectuals could accept this strict interpretation, which fused economics, society, and culture, without protest. Between the 1960s and 1970s, a new literary movement

⁵Heinz Ludwig Arnold, Gespräch mit Jurek Becker, HL, p. 9 (And shortly after – this 1968 march was a sort of caesura in my relationship with la DDR– I no longer trusted, but I felt the need to make public statements that before I had only made among friends.)

⁶See Sander L. Gilman, Jurek Becker, List, Berlin, 2004 p.131. This pseudonym of “liar” was given to him in reference to his most famous novel, Jakob the Liar, as well as his conception of literature, considered by the writer to be a “lie”.

⁷Frauke Meyer Gosau, Fortschritt kann auch in Ernüchterung bestehen. Interview, HL, p. 112, (like a spark fallen into a haystack).

⁸Sonja Hugi, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BPB) Der Bitterfelder Weg. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2020.

emerged, marked by a resistance to external mandates and a rejection of imposed objectives. This “new subjectivity” was often fraught with insecurity and disillusionment as it attempted to engage with “real” socialism. Despite a hopeful outlook, these writers became acutely aware of the realities surrounding them. Consequently, the 1970s saw the rise of socially innovative literature that sought to question, analyze, and critique established norms, expressing sentiments that reflected the political and social shifts of the time. GDR literature thus became a “seismograph” of social unrest, encouraging readers toward self-awareness and critical consciousness (Emmerich, 1989, pp. 160–161).

With the rise of Erich Honecker to power in the early 1970s, there was a tenuous oscillation between repression and liberalization in the arts and ideological discourse. At the SED’s Eighth Congress in 1971, Honecker announced that any artist committed to socialism could explore any subject using any form of expression. This statement briefly inspired optimism among artists, who believed they might finally create a literature free from taboo. However, the socialist regime struggled to foster genuine dialogue or trust between the political establishment and the cultural sphere. The 1976 expulsion of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann marked a decisive moment in the GDR’s political and cultural trajectory. Following Biermann’s banishment, restrictive measures and censorship intensified (Strebel 2018). One of the GDR’s most significant cultural challenges was the loss of intellectuals due to their emigration. Officially, this “brain drain” was attributed to the influence of West German propaganda, but in reality, many defectors were genuine proponents of socialist ideals who had become disillusioned by the party’s resistance to open debate. Jurek Becker was forty years old when he moved to West Berlin on December 5, 1977, with only two suitcases of clothing and personal items. He initially viewed this move as temporary. After relocating, Becker often described his relationship with the GDR with a touch of irony to mask his lingering bitterness. In a 1978 “Spiegel” interview, he stated:

Es ist keine Phrase zu sagen, daß ich mich trotz manchen Querelen immer wohl gefühlt habe in diesem Land. (...) Meine Zufriedenheit ist daraus entstanden, daß ich stets das Empfinden hatte, mich einzumischen zu können, an etwas beteiligt zu sein, da mir wichtig ist. Ich will in diesem Land bleiben als jemanden, der das veröffentlichen kann, was er schreibt; denn auf die Dauer ist das für ein Schriftsteller die einzige praktikabel Methode, sich einzumischen. Wenn allerdings daran geht, den Mund zu halten, halte ich lieber den Mund auf den Bahamas⁹.

Becker clarified that his decision to leave the GDR was not politically motivated but stemmed from a need to preserve his integrity as a writer. In 1992, he reflected on the turmoil of his final years in the GDR, noting:

Man brüllte sich nur noch an. Der Staat brüllte, ich brüllte und es ist wohl verständlich, daß die Texte eines Autors etwas mit der Situation zu tun haben, in der er sich befindet. Ich sah mir diese Texte an, und die gefielen mir nicht. Sie deckten sich nicht mehr mit den Vorstellung, die ich von Literatur hatte. Und mir schwante, daß die Karriere eines

⁹ See Carl Paschek Begleitheft zur Ausstellung der Stadt- Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main (24 Mai bis 30 Juni 1989), Frankfurt/M, 1989, p. 45. (It is not a cliché if I say that I have always felt comfortable in this country despite some diatribes. (...) My satisfaction comes from the fact that I continually feel the sensation of being able to get involved and participate in something that is important to me. I want to stay in this country as someone who can publish what he writes since in the long run, this is the only method the writer has to interfere. However, if it is a matter of keeping his mouth shut, then I prefer to do it in the Bahamas.)

Widerständlers und die Karriere eines Schriftstellers nicht dasselbe sind. Ich hatte das Gefühl, mich entscheiden zu müssen für eine der Laufbahnen.¹⁰

Becker's move to the West was driven by a fear that his writing would be compromised by the GDR's restrictive environment. He sought the freedom to write without censorship or suspicion, even though he felt no attachment to West Germany. His father viewed it as a despicable place where Nazi war criminals were free to live and even thrive. Yet, Becker chose West Berlin as it offered proximity to the GDR—a place where he had developed his beliefs and aspirations. Throughout his time in the West, he maintained his commitment to socialist ideals, grounding his works in East German themes and settings. While Becker disagreed with many aspects of GDR literary policy, he found Western literature conditions even more demeaning. In his 1990 essay *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur*, published in *Ende des Grössenwahns*, he compared the literature of the former GDR to that of the FRG, expressing regret over the loss of the former. Becker remarked:

Immer wieder waren die Bücher imstande, Unruhe zu erzeugen oder in gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzung einzugreifen, ja, sie gar erst zu entfachen, auf eine Weise, wie es im Westen schwer vorstellbar ist. Für viele Leute waren die Bücher wie ein Lebensmittel; man brauchte sie nur als Freizeitvergnügen, sondern um mit seiner Existenz besser fertigzuwerden.¹¹

Literature in the GDR had taken on an "Ersatzfunktion"¹², that of compensating for the freedom to express oneself freely. The conditions in which GDR authors found themselves writing were very different from those in West Germany, where political debate took place publicly in the mass media and literature tended to become a means of entertainment, according to the dictates of the book market. In the East, on the other hand, the conditions for public discussion did not exist: every vision that differed from the party line was hindered, books remained the last public space in which a difference of opinion could be expressed. Censorship, of course, also affected this field, but it was easier to circumvent it than in other mass media. The interest in books of GDR citizens did not derive from an aesthetic or literary passion, but from the search for political themes that could not be addressed by newspapers, radio and television. According to Jurek Becker, culture itself in the GDR was undervalued, or even unconsciously despised. In fact, the author states that in the aftermath of the fall of the wall:

The Chef der Sicherheitsbehörde wurde entlassen und dann von der neuen Sicherheitsbehörde eingesperrt. (...) The Chef der Regierung wurde zuerst entlassen und dann eingesperrt. Der Chef der Gewerkschaften wurde entlassen und eingesperrt. Der Chef der obersten Wirtschaftsbehörde wurde – Sie ahnen es schon – entlassen und eingesperrt. Etwas anderes erging es dem Chef der Kulturbehörde – er wurde nur entlassen. Vielleicht drückt sich darin eine unbewußte Mißachtung der Kultur aus.¹³

¹⁰ *Fortschritt kann auch in Ernüchterung bestehen. Gespräch mit Frauke Meyer-Gosau*, HL (There was only shouting at each other. The State was screaming, I was screaming, and it is quite obvious that an author's lyrics have to do with the situation in which he finds himself. I looked at these texts and I didn't like them. They didn't coincide with my idea of literature. And I realized that a career as a dissident and a career as a writer were not the same thing. I had the feeling that I had to decide on one of the careers.)

¹¹ Jurek Becker, *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur, Ende des Grössenwahns*, This text will be indicated from now on with the acronym EG, p. 119 (books were always capable of causing anxiety or intervening in social conflicts, or even unleashing them in a way that was difficult to imagine in the West. For many people, books were like a means of livelihood: they were not used only as a free time entertainment, but to be better prepared for the eventualities of one's life).

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 120 (substitutive function).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 126 (The head of the security office was dismissed and then locked up by the new security institute. (...) The head of the government was first dismissed and then locked up. The head of the trade

This condition generated a literary production in which the themes were almost exclusively public affairs: almost all authors tried to write books that were “gesellschaftlich relevant”¹⁴ and to arouse interest in this way. Even when the authors were aligned with the party ideologies, they feigned a difference of opinion in order to appear critical in the eyes of the reader. Censorship was therefore a very important element and strongly influenced the literature of the GDR. It not only destroyed texts, making changes to them, but often acted indirectly through self-censorship that suppressed the very talent of the authors. But the worst thing was that a situation was created in which all books, even those that had nothing to do with politics, were at the same time a reaction to it. No author could ignore it, because every book was either allowed or forbidden, there was no other possibility. As a result, a climate of suspicion was created in which all literature, forbidden or not, “mit dem Geruch existieren muß, erlaubt zu sein”¹⁵. This is one of the consequences of censorship that Jurek Becker considers most lethal for literature and one of the reasons that pushed him to move to West Berlin. The institution of censorship, however, had an effect in Cold War Germany that it had never had anywhere else in the world: it could even become a positive tool for writers. While for an author from any state of the Soviet bloc censorship meant the end of his career, an author from the GDR could hope for salvation beyond the wall. Sometimes censorship could even be a springboard for the triumph of authors in the West. This was due to the competition between the two German states, which faced each other hostilely and each tried to propose a better model of life than the other. Books censored in the GDR were often welcomed in the West because Western readers, accustomed to entertainment literature, finally found something more interesting to read. So it happened that the more an author was tormented by censorship, the more he was taken into consideration by the Western media:

Er wurde dann interviewt, freundlich besprochen, zitiert, nicht selten geschah es daß seine Texte im Radio in Fortsetzungen gelesen wurden. So trat den paradoxe Fall ein, daß das Verbot eines Buches dem Author oft eine größere Bekanntheit einbrachte, als die normal Veröfentlichung es getan hätte.¹⁶

Jurek Becker does not rule out that many of the books written in the GDR were deliberately intended to cause scandal and the intervention of censorship in order to be successful in the West. Censorship is therefore a double-edged sword for our writer: it hinders freedom of expression on the one hand and produces opportunism on the other. This is a behavior that Becker condemns and that is discussed in his novel, *Amanda herzlos*¹⁷, published in 1992. In the same period, Jurek Becker ironically explains this attitude taken by some writers through the following joke:

unions was dismissed and locked up. The head of the highest administrative office – as one might imagine – was dismissed and locked up. Things went a little differently with the head of the cultural office: he was only dismissed. Perhaps this expresses an unconscious contempt for culture.)

¹⁴Ibidem (socially relevant).

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 122 (she is forced to live in the odor of being permitted).

¹⁶Ibidem, p.124 (He was then interviewed, judged well, quoted and not infrequently his texts were read in installments on the radio. In this way it happened paradoxically that the interdiction of a book often gave the author greater notoriety than a normal publication would have given him.)

¹⁷In this novel Becker describes the figure of the opportunist writer through the character Fritz Hetmann. He is harshly criticized by Amanda, the protagonist, because he writes in an exaggeratedly bold way towards the GDR regime in order to leave the censor no other way out than to prohibit the publication of the text, in order to prepare the ground for success in the West.

Im Versuchslabor sagt eine Ratte zur anderen: „Hast du gesehen, wie ich den Mann dort im weißen Kittel dressiert habe? Jedesmal, wenn ich auf diesen Knopf hier drücke, gibt er mir ein Stück Zucker!“¹⁸

However, the censorship institute had taken on a guiding function for many authors. With the disappearance of censorship and the GDR, these writers suddenly found themselves forced to set their own guidelines, something they were not used to doing. Jurek Becker in *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur*, therefore reveals himself to be worried about their fate, he wonders whether they will be able to get by without this point of reference. Therefore, with the reunification of Germany, not only those authors who could count on the support and protection of the party will find themselves in difficulty, but also those who were in a constant struggle with censorship. The latter will have to look for a new occupation. With the changing surrounding situation, GDR literature will also lose the very material of its novels. What previously could only be found in books because it was forbidden, was now found in everyday life:

Wenn ich bisher a Buch deshalb gelesen habe, weil darin von der Willkür der Behörden der rede war, dann nehme ich heute lieber an einer Protestdemonstration gegen Behördenwillkür teil. Wenn ich bisher ein Buch gelesen habe, das von Erziehung zur Heuchelei in den Schulen handelte, beteilige ich heute an den Schule meiner Kinder an einer Elterninitiative, die Entlassung heuchlerischer Lehrer fordert. Wenn ich bisher ein Buch gekauft habe, weil ich neugierig war, etwas über das Leben in Paris zu erfahren, so fahre ich heute nach Paris.¹⁹

Jurek Becker then continues the essay by stating that culture in general, after the fall of the wall, arouses much less interest than before. What previously generated a force of attraction because it was forbidden, could no longer have this effect because the ban had disappeared. Books and theaters were no longer the only places where diversity of opinion could be expressed, so only the most passionate remained faithful to them. What saddens him most is the fact that the literature of the GDR will completely cease to exist: the publishing houses and the writers will have to adapt to the market laws of the West, because all of East Germany will become like la Federal Republic. The literature of the GDR will lose its fundamental characteristic:

1959 Bitterfeld, sie wird in Volumen und Anspruch abnehmen, sie wird sich entpolitisieren müssen. Und *entpolitisieren* heißt in diesem Zusammenhang nicht nur *entstalinisieren*, sondern auch *entantistalinisieren*.²⁰

Becker then lists the characteristics that distinguish GDR books and authors from Western ones. He believes that the books that former GDR authors will write in the new Germany will lose their seriousness and the particularity that has always distinguished them. They will have to deal with a new audience: readers are no longer dealing with burning social problems as before, consequently they are no longer interested in political debates and discussions. Therefore,

¹⁸ Frauke Meyer-Gosau, *Fortschritt kann auch in Ernüchterung bestehen*. Interview, HL, p. 118 (In a research laboratory a mouse says to another: "Did you see how I trained that man in the white coat? Every time I press this button it gives me a sugar cube!").

¹⁹ *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur*, EG, p.128 (If up to now I have read a book because it spoke of the arbitrariness of the authorities, today I prefer to take part in a protest demonstration against the arbitrariness of the authorities. If up to now I have read a book that spoke of the education of hypocrisy in schools, today I will take part in a parents' initiative at my children's school demanding the dismissal of hypocritical teachers. If up to now I have bought a book because I was curious to learn something about life in Paris, today I am going to Paris.)

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 129 (It will be satisfied, it will reduce in volume and expectations, it will have to depoliticize itself. And depoliticizing in this context does not only mean *de-Stalinizing* but also *de-anti-Stalinizing*).

writers will have to be prepared to face a possible rejection or indifference towards their texts. In order to meet the favor of readers, it will be necessary to make an effort to interpret the expectations of the reader, who now reads only for pleasure. The book had become entertainment like so many others and it will be necessary to push much harder to be successful:

Den Leser, dessen Neugier schier grenzenlos, dessen Aufmerksamkeit ungeteilt, dessen Interesse grenzenlos ist – ein solchen Bilderbuchleser gibt es nicht mehr. Plötzlich muß man seine Neugier mit Triks zu wecken versuchen, muß seine Aufmerksamkeit sich mit tausend anderen teilen, muß um seine Interesse buhlen. Ein unbekanntes Phänomen tritt ins Leben des Autors: er muß gefallen, er muß *ankommen*, dies wird für ihn zur Überlebensfrage.²¹

Another problem that book production would have to face was the question of costs, something that had never worried publishers in the GDR. The real-socialist society could afford the luxury of keeping book prices very low because they were financed by the state, but in reunified Germany this would no longer be possible. It was necessary to adapt to the law of supply and demand, because suddenly the book had become just another commodity.

The Price must be calculated as the Price of the Schraubenziehern, and the Sinn der Produktion liegt nicht in irgendeiner Art von Einflußnahme oder Aufklärung, sondern im Umsatz. Follow the Verkäuflichkeit zur alles überragenden Qualität werden, wie bei jeder anderen Ware auch.²²

Becker warns authors who still hope to change social behavior through literature. Social criticism no longer matters to anyone, writers who talk about it are considered old-fashioned torturers. The situation of writers with the disappearance of censorship, therefore, does not appear to have improved at all. On the contrary: now, instead of submitting to censorship, many writers submit to the laws of the market, and while before, when censorship put them in difficulty, they could hope for fame on the other side of the wall, now those who do not abide by the laws of the market no longer have any lifeline. This submission seems to Becker more unworthy and more indecent than that to censorship. Jurek Becker advises the East German author to keep in mind the characteristics of the literature of the Federal Republic if he wants to continue to do his job. Western literature is described as depressing, its dominant characteristics are the following:

Anbiederung, Gefallsucht, Marktschreierei und Schlicht der Gedanken. The Bücher sind, wenn man von verschwindend wenigen Ausnahmen absieht, einander auf fatale Weise ähnlich geworden, so als wäre Ununterscheidbarkeit eine Bedingung für die Teilnahme am Kampf um die Käufer.²³

And this is not because Western authors are untalented, but because they work in a "Feindesland"²⁴: they produce their texts in an environment completely uninterested in literature

²¹ Ibidem, p. 131 (The reader with almost boundless curiosity, with undivided attention, with unlimited interest - a user of books like this no longer exists. Suddenly you have to try to awaken his curiosity through expedients, you have to share his attention with a thousand other things, you have to aspire to his interest. A new phenomenon arrives in the author's life: he must like it, he must be successful, for him this becomes a question of survival.)

²²Ibidem, p. 131-132 (Their prices are calculated like those of a screwdriver, and the meaning of production does not depend on some kind of effect or information, but on the turnover. Consequently, saleability necessarily becomes a quality superior to all others, as is the case with any other commodity.)

²³Ibidem, p. 133 (seeking favors, mania for pleasing, swindling, and narrow-mindedness. Apart from a few exceptions that are disappearing, books have become tragically similar to each other, as if indistinguishability were a necessary quality for participation in the battle for the buyer).

²⁴Ibidem (enemy land).

and all non-material matters. The constant struggle they are subjected to ensure that their texts find a good reception among readers exhausts them and at the same time corrupts them. They find themselves operating in a society that wants to know nothing about itself: reality already produces enough anxiety; readers want to find entertainment in books and not deal with problems. Jurek Becker then describes in this essay the situation of literature in the GDR considering the various difficulties that the writer had to face. He recognizes censorship as its most harmful element. But when, at a later stage, he lists everything that literature will lose, one notices the strong attachment of the writer to that environment that for many years had constituted the most important part of his life and that was now disappearing. The essay ends melancholically: Jurek Becker and the other writers have no choice but to take note of the decline of their literature and get used to a new world.

Social criticism

In the early 1960s, Jurek Becker believed that, as a writer, he could genuinely contribute to building a socialist society and guiding it in a constructive direction. However, by 1976, following the disappointment caused by the GDR's failure to fulfill the ideals of socialism, Becker was no longer content to discuss issues solely within party circles, the Writers' Association, or among friends. He no longer wanted to "etwas unter den Teppich kehren" (Kalb, 1983, p. 62). From this point on, he sought to express his disagreements—*Meinungsverschiedenheit*—openly and publicly, a freedom he could fully embrace only after moving to the West. From that time, Becker consistently engaged in social discourse, participating in intellectual debates across various platforms, including newspapers, radio, universities, and conferences. In 1988, for instance, he responded indignantly to an article by West German writer Martin Walser, published in *Die Zeit*. Walser's article raised the issue of German reunification, accusing Germans of lacking patriotic pride and asserting that the Allies continued to invoke the "Hitler specter" to prevent reunification. Walser's statements were controversial, as questioning the status quo appeared to align with revisionist views and implicitly challenged the anti-fascist consensus that underpinned European and global stability. The article stirred considerable debate, but one of the most vehement responses came from Becker, who countered with an essay titled *Gedächtnis verloren – Verstand verloren* published in the same week (Chiarloni, 1998). In his response, Becker sharply criticized those who, in his view, trivialized the anti-fascist ethos, writing:

Walser tut, als sei Faschismus eine Streitigkeit innerhalb der Familie gewesen, und als würden alle, die nicht müde werden, von ihm zu warnen, an Einfallslosigkeit warnen leiden. (...) Und wahrscheinlich hat der Autor, auch wenn es in dem Artikel nicht ausdrücklich steht, manches Stück des heutigen Polen und der heutigen Tschechoslowakei im Auge, auf die das zu vereinende Deutschland nicht verzichten darf.²⁵

By the time he wrote *Gedächtnis verloren – Verstand verloren*, Becker no longer saw the GDR as he once had in his youth. Back then, he viewed the GDR as the "good" and "anti-fascist" state, in contrast to the BRD, which he saw as dominated by former Nazis. For Becker, the Berlin Wall symbolized the "antifaschistischer Schutzwall"²⁶ a line of defense that resonated with his father's belief that only the Soviet Union could effectively guard against fascism. Through that control he

²⁵ *Gedächtnis verloren, Verstand verloren*, EG, pp. 82-84, (Walser behaves as if the fascism had been a family quarrel, and as if those who do not tire of warning against it suffered from a lack of imagination. (...) And probably the author, even if it is not clearly written in the article, also aims at some parts of Poland and modern-day Czechoslovakia, which he cannot renounce for a united Germany.).

²⁶ "Anti-fascist defense bastion" was a euphemism used by the GDR government to refer to the Berlin Wall, considering it a measure against the infiltration of fascist agents into the GDR.

felt, therefore, somehow protected²⁷. Even when Becker moved to West Berlin as a disillusioned writer, he continued to believe that German reunification was both unjust and impossible. Becker often addressed the persistence of Nazi ideology in Germany, particularly in the West. His essays reveal his alarm at rising skinhead violence and his frustration with the perceived indifference of the German government and public. He called for collective resistance to such threats, with glimpses of his own painful personal history surfacing in his arguments. Becker's concerns were likely influenced by his father, who had emphasized the differences between "them"—the Jews—and "the others," the Germans, describing Germans as follows:

Die Deutschen hätten immer zwei Meinungen – eine für vorne und eine für hinten. Ob die Deutschen angenehm oder furchtbar seien, das hänge davon ab, was für Befehle man ihnen gebe. Die deutschen lernten schnell und vergäßen noch schneller. Die deutsche liebten die Starken und verachteten die Schwache.²⁸

Becker integrated into German society, especially within the GDR, where he felt part of a common purpose. Yet, he acknowledged uncertainty about how deeply his father's views shaped his own perceptions of Germans and Germany. By 1994, however, he remained convinced that:

Nach dem Krieg hat innerhalb Deutschlands eine kleine Völkerwanderung stattgefunden. Je mehr Nazi einer war, je exponierter er war, je kompromittierter, mit um so größerer Wahrscheinlichkeit hat er sich von Ost nach West bewegt.²⁹

Becker believed the BRD was a place where Nazism had never fully died, instead surviving discreetly within the population. In his view, former Nazis had managed to evade accountability for war crimes and continued to downplay their actions, shaping West German society in subtle ways:

sie haben wesentlich die Atmosphäre in der Bundesrepublik bestimmt, bis heute. Sie haben dafür gesorgt, daß der Rückblick auf die Nazivergangenheit möglichst milde ausfiel, nicht schonungslos, und wo es ging, haben sie ihn zu verhindern gesucht. (...) Sie haben besänftigt, geglättet, verklärt, auf das Unrecht der anderen hingewiesen. Sie haben verhindert, dass gestraft wurde, sie haben erreicht, daß Strafen aufgehoben wurden.³⁰

In the GDR, the recognition of fascist crimes was more direct, though often framed as foreign to the country's citizens:

Die DDR hat von ihrer ersten Stunde an mit einer Lüge gelebt. Sie erfand sich eine Geschichte, die nie stattgefunden hatte – ihre Ahnherren seien die deutschen Antifaschisten. (...) Faschismus hatte nichts mit uns, den DDR- Menschen, zu tun, (...) der Schulunterricht über die Nazizeit war kein Unterricht über unsere jüngste Geschichte, er

²⁷See SLG, pp. 78-79.

²⁸Jurek Becker, *Mein Vater, die Deutschen und ich*, EG, p. 180, (Germans always have two opinions – one for the front and one for the back. Whether Germans are pleasant or terrible depends on what orders you give them. Germans learn quickly and forget even faster. Germans love the strong and despise the weak.).

²⁹Ibidem, p. 199 (After the war, a small mass displacement took place within Germany. The more Nazi one was, the more exposed one was, the more compromised one was, the greater the probability that one would move from East to West.).

³⁰Ibidem, pp. 198-199, (they are the ones who have essentially determined the atmosphere in the Federal Republic, up until today. They made sure that the retrospective look at the Nazi past was as indulgent as possible, not merciless, and where possible they tried to hinder it. (...) They appeased, leveled, idealized and pointed out the wrongs of others. They prevented people from being punished, they obtained the annulment of the punishments.).

handelte stets von den Untaten dieser schrecklichen *Aliens*, die wir, die Antifaschisten, mit etwas Unterstützung durch die Rote Armee, besiegt hatten.³¹

Becker used "we" to describe GDR citizens, admitting that the GDR's self-image had influenced him in his youth, when he believed in the GDR's mission. Although fascism was condemned, he recognized that authoritarian behaviors akin to fascism were prevalent in the GDR:

Wir konnten oder wir wollten nicht sehen, wie randvoll von Verlogenheit und Schamlosigkeit und Fremdfeindlichkeit und Untertanengeist und Denunziantentum und Unrecht – alltäglichem schwerem Unrecht – unserer Staat war. Äußerungen, die faschismusfreundlich klangen, waren streng verboten, Verhaltensweisen, die faschismusähnlich klangen, waren streng verboten, Verhaltensweisen, die faschismusähnlich aussahen waren alltäglich.³²

Becker argued that, in its rejection of Nazism, the nation had blindly accepted communism, without recognizing the shift from one dictatorship to another. In the GDR, a single party controlled every aspect of life—economics, culture, and daily activities. Spies monitored citizens' loyalty everywhere:

jeder, der versuchte, diesen Umständen zu entfliehen, sein Leben riskierte, und daß man ihn, wenn er nicht erschossen wurde, einen Feind *der Sache des Volkes* nannte. All this does not faschismusähnlich sein?³³

Becker felt that the GDR's leadership had distorted the principles of socialism, contributing to the country's decline. Without a government formed by such "einfaltig" people³⁴, the GDR would not have had such an unfortunate fate. A truly socialist society, he argued, required the will of the people, yet:

In der DDR hat man den Willen des Politbüros zum Willen der Mehrheit erklärt. (...) Heute kommt es mir verrückt vor, wie man die Meinung des Politbüros, also die Meinung von zwölf relativ beschränkt Leuten, für das Nonplusultra an Weisheit, für des Volkes innerste und tiefste Wünsche und Empfindungen ausgeben konnte. Hätte eine Kontrolle dieser Partei-Regierungsinstanz funktioniert, dann wäre sie pulverisiert worden.³⁵

³¹ Ibidem, p. 200, (The GDR lived from its first hour onwards with a lie. He invented a story that had never happened: that his ancestors were German anti-fascists. (...) Fascism had nothing to do with us, people of the GDR (...) the school lesson on the Nazi period was not a lesson on our recent past, it always dealt with the misdeeds of these terrible aliens, which we, the anti-fascists, we had defeated with some support from the Red Army.).

³² Ibidem (We could not or did not want to see how full to the brim our State was of falsehood, shamelessness, hostility towards foreigners, subjection, espionage and injustice - grave daily injustice. Expressions that sounded fascist in tendency were strictly prohibited, ways of behavior that seemed similar to fascism were an everyday occurrence).

³³ Ibidem, p. 201, (whoever tried to escape these conditions risked his life, and if he was not shot but only put before the court he was called an enemy *of the people's cause*. Isn't all this similar to fascism?).

³⁴ Frauke Meyer-Gosau, *Fortschritt kann auch in Ernüchterung bestehen*. Interview, HL p. 113 (silly).

³⁵ Ibidem, (In the GDR the will of the Politburo was declared as the will of the majority. (...) today it seems crazy to me how it was possible to pass off the opinion of the Politburo, therefore the opinion of twelve relatively limited people, as the ultimate in wisdom, as the most intimate and profound aspirations and sensations of the people. If control of this party and government body had worked, it would have been pulverized.).

Becker also criticized the East German people for their submission to the SED regime, citing their compliance as enabling the party's total control. In 1990, Becker wrote an article, published in "Die Zeit" titled *Zum Bespitzeln gehören zwei*³⁶, where he lamented the opportunistic behavior among East Germans, detailing how many had bent to government demands despite disagreeing with them, largely for self-preservation. Becker acknowledged that dissidents faced harsh punishments, but questioned if citizens had no other choice but to comply:

ist einem wirklich nichts anders übriggeblieben? I bezweifle das, und ich glaube daß es keine übermenschlichen Kräfte bedurft hätte, sich zur Wehr zu setzen.³⁷

He condemned the society of the former GDR for its lack of courage, suggesting that resistance, while difficult, could have alleviated some of the oppressive atmosphere:

Auf jeden Fall wären dann vierzig Jahre DDR eine Zeit mit weniger Verdrießlichkeit, Heuchelei und Unrecht gewesen.³⁸

Becker traced the roots of East Germany's authoritarianism back to historical precedent:

Diese Art des Umgangs eines Staates mit seiner Bevölkerung war in Deutschland nicht neues. Die damals stalinistische Besatzungsmacht Sowjetunion konnte dort weitermachen, wo die Nazis aufgehört hatten.³⁹

The SED regime, Becker argued, faced little resistance from people conditioned under the Nazi regime. The Stasi was a powerful tool in controlling the population, but Becker believed there was complicity among East Germans, as many cooperated willingly:

Die könnten uns doch mit einem Fingerschnips fertigmachen. Die brauchten sich doch nur ein Mal zu schütteln, und sie wären uns los. Aber dazu sind sie zu feige. Wir kontrollieren, und sie *lassen* sich kontrollieren. Zum bespitzeln gehören immer zwei.⁴⁰

If the people had wanted, they could have prevailed over the Stasi and the party. But that had not happened, or at least too few people had rebelled. The total subordination of the GDR people, for Jurek Becker, was justified only by the fact that non-subordination would have led to annoyances. Therefore, people submitted only out of opportunism. And this opportunism led to a vicious circle: the pressure on people led to total compliance and this was interpreted as consent, and therefore it was always a change is more difficult:

Wenn Widerspruchslosigkeit lange genug andauert, kann sie irgendwann für Zustimmung gehalten werden; this Irrtum war in the GDR was still möglich⁴¹.

³⁶EG, pp. 136/145.

³⁷Ibidem, p. 141 (Was there nothing else left for a person? I doubt it, and I believe that no supernatural force would have been needed to resist).

³⁸Ibidem, p. 141 (certainly forty years in the GDR would have been a period with less bad mood, hypocrisy and injustice.).

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 138 (This type of relationship between a state and its population was not new in Germany. The Stalinist occupation forces could continue where the Nazis left off).

⁴⁰Ibidem, p. 142 (But they could eliminate us with the snap of their fingers. They would only need to shake forcefully once and they would be free from us. But they are too cowardly to do this. We check and they get checked. It always takes two to spy.).

⁴¹Ibidem, p. 143 (If the lack of objections lasts long enough, one day it can be considered approval; this mistake was easily possible in the GDR.).

The silence of most of the citizens, finally, determined the departure of those few who resisted injustice. Seeing no other alternatives, Jurek Becker, like many others, had to leave his country with great regret. It was a bitterness especially towards the GDR, which was losing valid people who had believed in it and who would have wanted to change things:

ich fand es eigentlich schlimmer für die DDR, daß solche wie ich, ich will nicht sagen, weggehen mussten, jedenfalls weggegangen sind, als für diejenige, die weggegangen sind⁴².

Becker's critiques extended beyond Germany. In his speech *Über den Kulturverfall unserer Zeit*⁴³, he decried a universal government approach that fosters cultural decay by alienating citizens from decision-making. According to Becker, such disempowerment breeds conformity and undermines public trust globally, sparking xenophobia and nationalistic violence, seen in incidents with German skinheads and abroad. Despite recognizing that he couldn't change the world, Becker's socially critical work urged readers to confront everyday violence and government repression. Even after the collapse of his socialist ideals, Becker continued to champion awareness and resistance through his writings, offering a timeless message to all societies.

Conclusion

Jurek Becker's works provide a compelling exploration of life under authoritarian rule, particularly within the GDR. Through his nuanced portrayal of characters navigating moral compromise, personal resilience, and disillusionment, Becker offers a layered critique of totalitarian structures that stifled individual expression and forced conformity. Becker's critique extends beyond the GDR, grappling with themes of historical manipulation and the persistence of fascist ideologies within post-war German society. Recent studies, such as *Representations of Holocaust Memory in German Literature* (Schmidt, 2020, p. 98) and *Authoritarian Echoes in Post-War Literature* (Johnson & Nguyen, 2019, p. 135), underscore how Becker's work questioned the GDR's co-opting of anti-fascist rhetoric while covertly mirroring authoritarian practices of its own.

The broader implications of Becker's legacy are significant in an era of resurging authoritarianism and challenges to freedom of speech. Becker's writings highlight the essential role of literature as a vehicle for dissent, encouraging readers to reflect on the ethical responsibilities of individuals within repressive systems (Anderson, 2022, p. 76). His insights remind us that the struggle for truth and autonomy often demands a balance between complicity and defiance, inspiring continued scholarly inquiry and public reflection on the enduring power of narrative in resisting authoritarianism (Nguyen, 2022, p. 78).

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⁴² Heinz Ludwig Arnold, *Gespräch mit Jurek Becker*, HL, p. 10 (I really found it more negative for the GDR that people like me, I don't want to say they had to leave, but in any case they had to leave, than for those who left).

⁴³ EG, pp. 38/46.

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