Art of Two Germanys Cold War Cultures

Stephanie Barron and **Sabine Eckmann**
Catalogue Editors

Stephanie Barron and **Eckhart Gillen**
Exhibition Curators

Essays by
Stephanie Barron
Svea Bräunert
Diedrich Diederichsen
Sabine Eckmann
Eckhart Gillen
Andreas Huyssen
Astrid Ihle
Paul Kaiser
Lutz Koepnick
Karen Lang
Richard Langston
Susanne Leeb
Barbara McCloskey
Christine Mehring
Ursula Peters
Roland Prügel
Peter Weibel

Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in cooperation with Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH. It was made possible in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. The international tour has been funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie.

The publication was made possible in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Exhibition itinerary:

Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)
January 25–April 19, 2009

Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (GNM)
May 23–September 6, 2009

Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (DHM)
October 3, 2009–January 10, 2010

The exhibition was curated by Stephanie Barron, LACMA, and Eckhart Gillen, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH.

The catalogue was edited by Stephanie Barron, LACMA, and Sabine Eckmann, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis.

Project Manager: Sara Cody

Editors: Nola Butler, Sara Cody, Thomas Frick

Design and Art Direction: Scott Taylor

Design (chronology and maps): Roman Jaster

Supervising Photographer: Peter Brenner

Production Manager: Alison Gervais

Rights and Reproductions: Cheryle Robertson, with Piper Severance and Stephen Forsling

Translators: Steven Lindberg, Isabel Cole, Justin Morris

Proofreader: Liz Sims

Indexer: Kathleen Preciado

Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for and may be obtained from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8109-8404-2 (Abrams)
ISBN: 978-0-8109-7793-8 (LACMA)
ISBN: 978-0-8109-7647-4 (LACMA paperback)

See pp. 448–50 for Illustration Credits.

Printed and bound in China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
115 West 18th Street
New York, NY 10011
www.hnabooks.com

Los Angeles County
Museum of Art
5905 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90036
www.lacma.org

Note to the reader: captions for objects in the exhibition are in boldface and include a catalogue number. They are abbreviated versions of the complete entries found in the Checklist of the Exhibition, pp. 357–380.

Front cover:

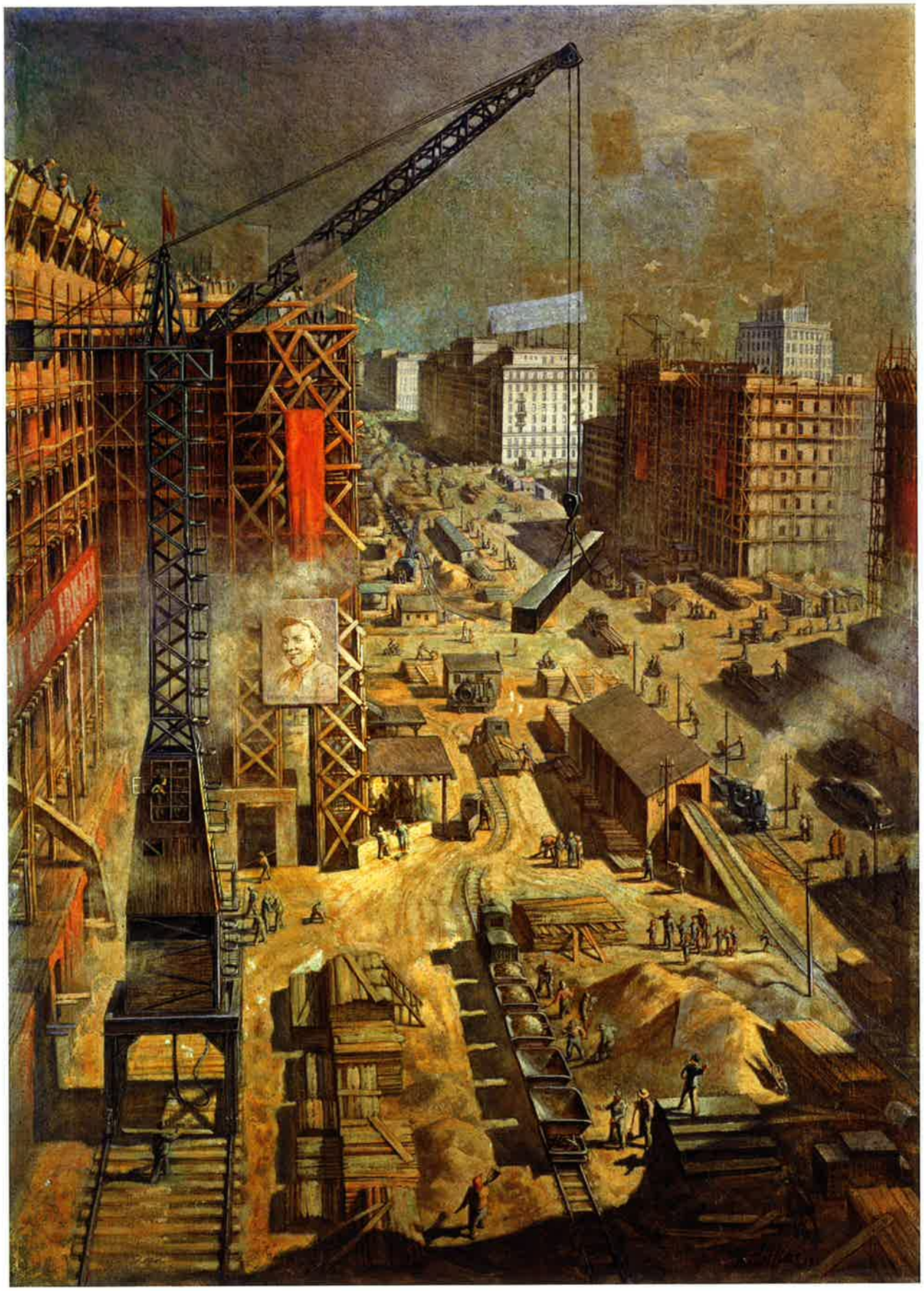
Sibylle Bergemann, *Ohne Titel (Gummlin)* (Untitled [Gummlin]), 1984 / Cat. 54

Back cover:

Joesph Beuys, *Ausfegen* (Sweeping Up), 1972–85 / Cat. 60

Heinz Löffler, *Aufbau der Stalinallee* (Construction of the Stalinallee) 1953 / Cat. 210

Alexander Deineka, *Defense of Petrograd*, 1927, oil in canvas, 82⅝ x 93⅝ in. (210 x 238 cm), Central Museum of Military Forces, Moscow



Dialectic at a Standstill: East German Socialist Realism in the Stalin Era

Barbara McCloskey

In November 1947, Soviet cultural officer Alexander Dymschitz addressed an audience of prominent Germans, Soviet administrators, and other Allied personnel at Humboldt University in Berlin. In a speech titled "The Relationship of Soviet Art to Bourgeois Art," he extolled the superiority of Soviet socialist realism over and against the "bourgeois" modernism prized by the United States and other Western capitalist countries. Dymschitz insisted that the figural distortion, abstraction, and subjectivism of cubism, surrealism, and other variants of modern art made such work unintelligible to those outside the cultural elite. By contrast, socialist realism prescribed an aesthetic of easily legible, photonaturalistic realism. Enshrined as the state style of Stalin's regime in 1934, such art combined accessible imagery with clear, didactic themes readily understood by the masses. An art "of the people," it had helped secure the triumph of socialism in the Soviet Union. Transferred to German soil, socialist realism could now help foster a new socialist society from the rubble of Nazi atrocity and national defeat.

Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, an art expert attached to the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of the U.S. military government in Germany, was among those present at Dymschitz's speech. In his book *Art under a Dictatorship* (1954), he featured the event as an "opening blast" in the cultural cold war. Likening socialist realism to Nazi art, Lehmann-Haupt condemned their shared realist aesthetic as visual proof of the fundamentally repressive character of Stalin's and Hitler's regimes. He warned his readers that socialist realism now dominated eastern Germany in a network of censorship, intimidation, and mechanisms of press and exhibition control that reprised the worst of the Nazi art world. The true purpose of such Soviet sponsorship, he concluded, was to ensnare German artists, recently liberated from the nightmare of the Third Reich, in yet another "totalitarian program."[1]

Now that the long chill of the Cold War has receded, studies are beginning to reveal that the imposition of Stalin's control in the eastern (and, after 1949, East)[2] German art world was more attenuated, debated, and conflicted than suggested by the absolutism of Lehmann-Haupt's totalitarian thesis.[3] Soviet cultural authorities and their Stalinized counterparts in the leadership of the German communist party, the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) indeed attempted to impose socialist realist doctrine unimaginatively – and undialectically – on a devastated German art world. For Cold War commentators like Lehmann-Haupt, the result was a debased artistic culture of retrograde, Stalinist kitsch that wholly lacked the vanguard formal experiment and relative freedoms of Western modern art.

For the West, modern art's Cold War instrumentality lay in its assumed autonomy from politics. In East(ern) Germany, by contrast, socialist realism became embroiled in highly contentious, party-regulated debates between artists, the public, and government functionaries over art's role in a new German cultural order extricated from the infamy of the Nazi past. Socialist realism's vanguardism lay not in its aesthetics, but in these debates as East(ern) Germany imagined a different function for art under socialism. In contrast to the market-driven exclusivity of the Western capitalist art world, East(ern) Germany pursued – through tragically undemocratic means – a democratic art of "the people" grounded in national and public values compatible with Soviet interests. Before Stalin's death in 1953, this socialist realist vanguardism – as stillborn from the beginning as it was utopian in its vision – brought the postwar German and Soviet art worlds into their closest point of connection for a few brief and consequential years.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Soviet military administration officials in Germany's eastern occupied zone instituted a united front strategy that enlisted broad public support in antifascist work and reconstruction efforts. Such pluralism was evident in 1946 at the first major display of German art since the war. Held in Dresden under the auspices of Soviet occupation authorities, the *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstaustellung* (General German Art Exhibition) featured a wide stylistic spectrum of art from throughout Germany. It also accorded special honor to artists such as Ernst Barlach, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and Käthe Kollwitz, who had been defamed and persecuted during the years of Nazi dictatorship.

Other Soviet-sponsored exhibits and events of this period took place under the banner of artistic freedom announcing a new era of humanism in the arts and fostering awareness of artistic traditions and developments in other countries, including those of the Soviet Union. In February 1947, the Soviet House of Culture opened in Berlin. Its first exhibition treated German audiences to graphic works by Ivan Pavlov, Ilya Sokolov, and Michail Matorin. The show also included Alexander Deineka's *Defense of Petrograd* (1927), a work that established Deineka's art as an acceptable modernist variant to the more traditional socialist realism that dominated the Soviet art world beginning in the 1930s.

1 Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 200–15.

2 Hereafter I will use the designation East(ern) Germany when referring to both the Soviet-occupied zone of eastern Germany and the East German state after its founding in 1949.

3 Among them, Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR: Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991); Günter Feist and Eckhart Gillen, eds., *Kunstkombinat der DDR: Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945–1990* (Berlin: Nishen, 1990); and Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus: Die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001).

Artistic pluralism also characterized occupied eastern Germany's foremost art monthly, *bildende kunst* (Visual Arts), when it first appeared in April 1947.[4] Until it suspended publication in October 1949, the journal served to reconnect a demoralized citizenry to valued traditions of German and international artistic achievement. Essays explored the work of German modernists such as Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth and the socially engaged art of Otto Nagel and Otto Dix. Important canonical figures from the international history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernism, including Édouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, and Pablo Picasso, were also featured. The first illustrations of Soviet art appeared in the second issue of *bildende kunst*, which included two sculpted heads by Vera Muchina along with works by Jeanne Mammen, Alex Lex, and Marie Laurencin in an international survey of women in the visual arts.[5]

However, with the publication of Anatol Schnittke's essay "Thirty Years of Soviet Painting" in its November 1947 issue, the incipient Stalinization of *bildende kunst* became apparent.[6] Schnittke's contribution was intended, as noted in the editorial introduction, to clarify for the journal's readers "the much debated question" of socialist realism. His account, which included both historical and theoretical explication, formed part of a broader and systematic effort by Soviet cultural authorities and their Stalinized SED counterparts to prepare socialist realism's entry into the occupied eastern zone.[7] "Thirty Years of Soviet Painting" began by describing socialist realism's Russian pedigree. Its origins lay in the nineteenth-century works of Ilya Repin, Vasily Perov, and other members of the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers), whose realist art had exposed the class injustice of the czarist regime. Schnittke explained that Lenin himself had regarded the Wanderers' progressive and democratizing realist tradition as the basis for a new and viable proletarian culture under Communist Party rule. In the turmoil immediately following the October Revolution, however, the iconoclasm of the Proletkult movement and the alien influence of cubism, expressionism, and other forms of Western modernism dominated the Soviet art world. Such indirection was overcome by the mid-1920s, Schnittke explained, when Soviet artists turned to the lessons of the Wanderers in developing socialist realism and building toward a communist culture of the future.

Though socialist realism's history therefore identified it as a distinctly Russian and Soviet art, *bildende kunst*'s readers were encouraged not to construe its adoption in occupied eastern Germany as Soviet cultural imperialism. Indeed, in a speech before the Soviet Union's Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, Stalin had insisted upon national autonomy in culture by calling for the development of art throughout the USSR both "national in form and socialist in content."[8] Freed from the yoke of czarist tyranny, artists in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the other Soviet republics had accordingly developed nationally rooted, flourishing artistic cultures in recent years. The fact that their most acclaimed artists had arrived at socialist realism as their preferred style was not a matter of coercion, Schnittke maintained. In their independent commitment to human emancipation, artists in these republics had, on the contrary, spontaneously taken up socialist realism as the most progressive form of artistic expression. The ineluctable convergence of their cultures within an enduring framework of the republics' national distinctiveness testified to socialist realism's fundamental anti-imperialism as well as its universal validity. Illustrations of Armenian artist Taras Gaponenko's *Collective Farmwomen on the Way to Work* and Martiros Saryan's *Industrial Site in the Mountains* accompanied his essay, along with Yuri Pimenov's *A Drive through Moscow*, which paid homage to the great reconstruction projects that had defined Soviet advancement under Communist rule.

These new realities of the Soviet art world necessitated the revival of the imperial art academy. Dismantled following the October Revolution of 1917, it reopened in August 1947 as the USSR Academy of Arts. Its first president was Alexander Gerasimov, who held the post until 1957. Gerasimov was known for his cultic images of Stalin appearing before assemblies of respectful party leaders and often adoring masses of Soviet citizens. He also headed the executive committee of the Union of Artists of the USSR between 1939 and 1954, which gave him control over all practicing artists in the Soviet Union. As president of the USSR Academy of Arts, he presided over the Zhdanovshchina, a period of cultural terror named after Party Secretary Andrei Zhdanov, who inaugurated socialist realism as the USSR's state style at the Soviet Writer's Congress of 1934. Lasting from 1946 until Stalin's death in 1953, the Zhdanovshchina rolled back the tentative measures of artistic tolerance that had emerged in the Soviet art world during the war. Precipitated by the heightened tensions of the Cold War, the terror purged the Soviet art world of "formalism," "cosmopolitanism," and other forms of Western cultural contamination. Even the plein air, French-inspired sketchiness of Russian impressionism was condemned. The Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow was closed and artists such as Deineka, whose quasi-modernist *Defense of Petrograd* (1927) was shown in Berlin in 1947, were declared "un-Russian"; other offending artists were arrested and interned in camps.[9]

In the summer of 1949, Berlin's Soviet House of Culture hosted its second major exhibit. The sixty-seven works on display included contributions by Boris Joganson, Isaak Brodsky, and Yuri Pimenov, providing German audiences with unadulterated examples of officially sanctioned Soviet art in the era of the Zhdanovshchina. Most celebrated was the work of Brodsky, a founder of socialist realism admired by Stalin and whose followers triumphed in the postwar purges of the Soviet art world. Gerhard Bergen's review of the House of Culture exhibition in *bildende kunst* featured an illustration and a full-page close-up of Brodsky's monumental *Demonstration* (1934). The work depicts an endless stream of Soviet citizens parading along a broad avenue with banners held high in annual commemoration of the October Revolution. Such "parade" paintings – large-scale, multifigured, celebratory works – enjoyed particular favor during Stalin's last years. Often produced by teams of artists, they eschewed individual expression in their realist style and in their collaborative production process. They also rigorously adhered to "scientifically verifiable" academic standards of the accomplished drawing, compositional balance, and narrative clarity now demanded of Soviet artists.

For Bergen, Brodsky's *Demonstration* best exemplified socialist realism's response to Marx's charge "not only to interpret the world, but also to effect its transformation" by revealing the link between specific events and their larger "universal" import.[10] In accord with socialist realist doctrine, as well as the Enlightenment thought and Marxist theory of history on which that doctrine was based, Brodsky's work illustrated the "typical" – not merely the representative or the ordinary – but rather the ideal example of history's inevitable advance toward the goal of human emancipation under communism. Though realistic, *Demonstration* refrained from simple "naturalism" or mere documentary description. In Brodsky's hands, a specific event had acquired a deeper meaning as a demonstration not simply for or against

Alexander Gerasimov, *I.V. Stalin Reports at the Sixteenth Congress of the VKP*, 1935, oil on canvas, 39 ⅞ x 70 in. (99.5 x 178 cm), State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Isaak Brodsky, *Demonstration (On the Prospect of the 25th of October)*, 1934, oil on canvas, 101 ½ x 78 ¾ in. (258 x 200 cm), State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

something; the painting in and of itself was a demonstration of "the triumph of an idea and its realization, the established fact of a socialist society already at hand." *Demonstration*, Bergen concluded, exhibited an outstanding harmony of form and content—in its specific details as well as in its totality—of the unity between the specific and the universal embodied in the socialist realist notion of the typical. Its optimism also served to prepare the future in the present by holding out to its intended audience an image of a better society not only worth defending in the here and now, but also striving for in the communist order to come.

After the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in October 1949, the Stalinization of the German art world proceeded apace alongside the centralization of the country's political structure and the institution of a Soviet-style command economy. In March 1950, Arnold Zweig became president of the newly organized German Academy of Arts in Berlin. The Association of Berlin Artists of Germany (Verein Berliner Künstler Deutschlands, or VBKD) was established in June 1950, with Otto Nagel serving as its first president until 1952. At its founding congress, the VBKD resolved to foster closer ties with the Soviet art world, to build on the Soviet example by reconnecting with realist artistic traditions of the past, and to work toward the development of a progressive democratic culture of the future. The VBKD also formally declared its militant commitment to defending socialism against "the growing cultural barbarism of American imperialism in all its forms."[11]

The Soviet art world assigned the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture an important role in combating such "cultural barbarism" emanating from the West. In East Germany, fostering of the fine arts assumed even greater urgency as a frontline bulwark against the powerful allure, especially among young people, of an American culture industry of pop music, Hollywood film, and consumer products that flooded into West Germany as part of the Marshall Plan. The capitalist art market that had continued to function in occupied eastern Germany ceased to exist under East Germany's

4 In its first incarnation, from 1947 to 1949, the journal was published using all lowercase for its masthead design; in its second incarnation, starting in 1953, the journal used regular capitalization. The present catalogue follows scholarly precedent in preserving this distinction.

5 Hermann Müller, "Die Frau in der bildenden Kunst," *bildende kunst* 1, no. 2 (1947): 15–22.

6 Karl Hofer coedited *bildende kunst* along with Oskar Nerlinger. As a staunch defender of artistic autonomy, he threatened to resign over the publication of Schnittke's essay. Hofer became a favorite target of Dymschitz and others in later antiformalism campaigns. See Alexander Dymschitz, "Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei," *Tägliche Rundschau* (November 24, 1948), and Feist and Gillen, *Kunstkombinat der DDR*, 12–13.

7 Anatol Schnittke, "Dreissig Jahre Sowjetische Malerei," *bildende kunst* 1, no. 7 (1947): 4–7.

8 Joseph Stalin, "XVI S'ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza," *Pravda* (June 27, 1930). Cited in Elena Kornetchuk, "Soviet Art under Government Control: From the 1917 Revolution to Khrushchev's Thaw," in *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 37.

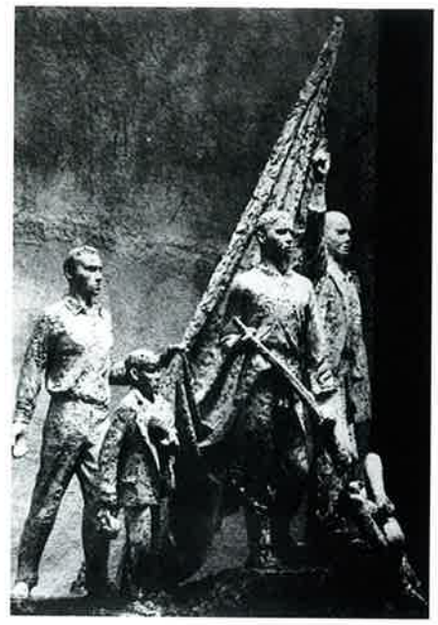
9 Susan Emily Reid, *Destalinization and the Remodernization of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953–1963* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 104–9.

10 Gerhard Bergen, "Ein reiches Erbe und neue Impulse: Wesenszüge der Sowjetischen Gegenwartskunst," *bildende kunst* 3, no. 8 (1949): 243–45.

11 Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus*, 34.

Fritz Cremer, *Erster Entwurf zum Buchenwald-Denkmal* (First Version of the Model for the Buchenwald Memorial), 1952 / Cat. 83

Fritz Cremer, *Model for Buchenwald Monument*, 2nd version, 1953



12 Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1990* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 60–65.

13 N. Orlow, "Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst," *Tägliche Rundschau* (January 20, 1951).

14 In the mid-1930s, the Soviet government inaugurated the Stakhanovite movement, named after Aleksei Stakhanov, a miner who in 1934 was reported to have produced fourteen times the normal amount of coal in one shift. Workers were exhorted on to the same achievement in exchange for membership in the Stakhanovites and the social prestige the movement extended to its members. The movement was reinforced by a government propaganda campaign designed to extract ever-greater degrees of sacrifice from the Soviet citizenry.

15 For a detailed account of this commission, see Volkhard Knigge, "Fritz Cremer: Buchenwald-Denkmal," in *Auftragskunst der DDR, 1949–1990*, ed. Monika Flacke (Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1995), 106–18.

16 Wilhelm Girnus, "Die Entwürfe zum Buchenwald-Ehrenmal," *Neues Deutschland* (July 2, 1952).

17 For more on the complicated political duplicity of East Germany's handling of this memorial site, see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 72–79.

centralized art world. Socialist realist doctrine, now institutionalized in East Germany, compelled artists to leave the isolation of their studios and align their art with the demands of the party, labor, and mass organizations that henceforth constituted their sources of patronage. No longer beholden to the elite interests of collectors, connoisseurs, and dealers, their efforts were now to further the interests of East Germany's triumphant working class and its project of socialist reconstruction.

This restructuring of the East German art world paralleled the SED's institution of its first Five-Year Plan. The plan forced collectivization of agriculture and the handicrafts and increased production norms in heavy industry. It also cut wages, social welfare programs, and consumer goods to compel popular compliance with the SED's draconian efforts to overtake West Germany in postwar economic development. Jail sentences were handed out for insulting Stalin, and the tide of émigrés from East Germany began to swell.[12] Meanwhile, a new and heightened phase of Stalinist repression in the arts was announced by the publication of N. Orlow's inflammatory "Paths and Wrong Turns in Modern German Art" in the *Tägliche Rundschau* (Daily Review) in January 1951.[13]

Orlow's antiformalist tirade instructed German artists to follow the lead of their Soviet counterparts by reconnecting their art to their own realist traditions of the nineteenth century, including the examples of Adolph Menzel and Anselm Feuerbach. The "wrong turns" to be avoided were not only the expressive exaggerations of modern art, but also the socially engaged works of Barlach, Dix, Kollwitz, John Heartfield, and other leftist artists of the Weimar era. Their images of immiserated proletarians – as well as the critical thrust of their art – belonged to a prehistory of the revolutionary workers' struggle now resolved by the end of capitalist exploitation and the triumph of socialism in the GDR. Horst Strempel, one of the artists attacked by Orlow as a formalist, saw his mural in the Friedrichstraße train station painted over in February 1951. Commemorative exhibitions honoring Kollwitz and Barlach also came under official attack. In March 1951, the SED Central Committee formally adopted a resolution against formalism. Against this backdrop, art produced by East German artists assumed its most coerced and coercive character. Honorific portraits of workers who exceeded production quotas emulated similar imagery produced by Soviet artists in support of Stalin's Stakhanovite movement.[14] Murals celebrated collective labor, and graphic cycles, paintings, and sculptures paid tribute to workers' brigades, socialist heroes of the past, and Communist leaders of the present.

The discrediting of Germany by Nazi atrocity provided the Soviets and the SED with both the need and the opportunity to fashion new myths of nationhood on East German soil. Foremost among these myths was that of antifascism, which recast all East Germans, regardless of their allegiances under Hitler, as victims of Nazi repression. Liberated by the Soviets, East Germans joined the citizens of the USSR and the other people's democracies in an antifascist, internationalist framework of socialist reconstruction. Key to this invented tradition was the appropriate handling of the death camps, concentration camps, and other sites of Nazi atrocity within East Germany's borders. Of most importance was Buchenwald, which had served as a center for the detention of Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands; KPD) members under the Nazis. It is also where KPD leader Ernst Thälmann was murdered in August 1944. At war's end, a group of Communists organized a revolt at Buchenwald, giving rise to the important story of the camp's "self-liberation" (*Selbstbefreiung*) through the heroism of the KPD shortly before American troops arrived. Fritz Cremer was among those GDR artists who submitted designs for a government-sponsored competition to commemorate the site as a founding monument of the East German nation.

Trained as a stonemason and sculptor in the Weimar years, Cremer became a KPD member in 1929. After Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933, he joined protests over Kollwitz and Heinrich Mann's dismissals from the Prussian Academy of Art. He then traveled to Paris, London, and Italy before serving in the German army beginning in 1940. Cremer was imprisoned at the end of the war. Following his release in 1946, he went to Vienna to head the sculptors' division at the Academy of Applied Arts. In 1950, Cremer returned to Berlin where he was inducted as a member of the Academy of Art.

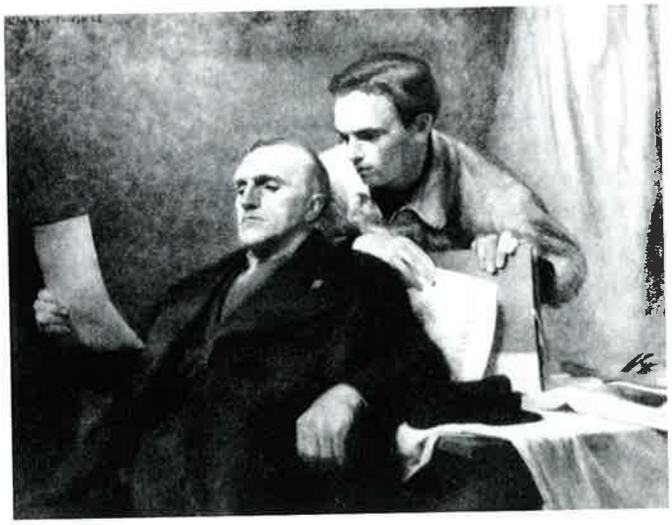
For his contribution to the Buchenwald memorial competition, Cremer looked not to the precedent of socialist realism, but rather to that of Auguste Rodin and his *Burghers of Calais* bronze sculpture group of 1889.[15] His model, which he completed in 1952, commemorated the KPD members who had led the camp's "self-liberation" at the end of the war. Adopting Rodin's gestural handling of surface texture, Cremer portrayed eight male figures with sunken cheeks and tattered clothes arranged nonhierarchically on a low plinth and assembled into a compact wedge. With straight backs, squared jaws, and clenched fists, the men look together, each with a resolute stare, in the direction of an unseen enemy. One among them raises his hand with two fingers outstretched in a declamatory gesture, symbolizing readiness for personal sacrifice in commitment to a higher ideal. The gesture linked Cremer's Buchenwald monument design not only to the French Revolutionary precedents of Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *Oath of the Tennis Court* (1790), but also to the more recent example of Kollwitz's antiwar lithograph *Nie wieder Krieg!* (Never Again War, 1924).

Despite its honorific treatment of Communist fighters at the camp, Wilhelm Girnus, coeditor of the journal *Sinn und Form* (Meaning and Form), assailed Cremer's effort. A particularly rabid exponent of the East German antiformalism campaign, Girnus condemned the design for its thinly disguised "naturalism" and "hysterical-expressionist tendencies." The work also lavished too much attention on traces of hardship and suffering evidenced in the "shabby clothes" and "short-cropped hair" of Cremer's figures. A "distorted band of the dying and hungry," the sculpture group failed to grasp the greater historical import of *Selbstbefreiung*, namely "the struggle, the triumph."[16] Despite the fact that American troops were responsible for the liberation of Buchenwald, Germans – so the Stalinized SED maintained – owed their salvation from Nazism above all to the Soviet Red Army.[17] Cremer's work would therefore assume a different and more incisively "typical" character, Girnus ventured, with the inclusion of a Soviet soldier. In 1953, Cremer made a "study trip" to Moscow; he also developed a second version of his Buchenwald memorial design. Completed in 1953, this second attempt included Ernst Thälmann – his hand raised in the ideal-laden gesture of the oath – leading camp inmates over a barricade with a party flag unfurled triumphantly behind them.

In 1953, the art journal *Bildende Kunst* reappeared under the new editorial direction of the VBKD, and, later, the State Commission for Art Affairs. Reproductions of Soviet socialist realism, including parade paintings and honorific portraits of Stalin, now more thoroughly saturated the journal's

Hans Mayer-Foreyt, *Ehrt unsere alten Meister* (Honor our Old Masters), 1953, oil on canvas, 42½ x 70⅞ in. (108 x 180 cm)

Harald Hellmich and Klaus Weber, *Die jüngsten Flieger* (The Youngest Pilots), 1953, oil on canvas, 94½ x 137¾ in. (240 x 350 cm)



pages. Before 1949, artists, Soviet administrators, and SED cultural functionaries had debated the implications of socialist realism's entry into the eastern occupied zone. Was it, as some had argued, a universally applicable doctrine to be freely taken up and adapted by German artists committed to the socialist cause? Or was socialist realism instead, as others maintained, nothing more than a pernicious agent of Soviet dictatorship and cultural imperialism? In 1953, such debates were brought to an end. *Bildende Kunst* articles extolled socialist realism as the most progressive—and most Soviet—form of art in the world, now to be closely emulated by East Germans.[18] Essays also made clear that the "typical" was no longer to be gauged simply on the extent to which an artwork grasped the ineluctable forces of historical progress. In a *Bildende Kunst* essay titled "The Problem of the Typical is Always a Political Problem," Soviet Party Secretary Georgi Malenkov explained that Soviet socialist realism, in accord with Marxism-Leninism, was beholden to Communist Party political needs and control.[19] Appearing in *Bildende Kunst* under the impress of East Germany's State Commission for Art Affairs and VBKD, Malenkov's essay also made plain that East German art would henceforth be similarly subject to the interests of the country's Stalinized SED leadership.

Opening in Dresden in March 1953 just days before Stalin's death, the *Third German Art Exhibition* served as a memorial tribute to the Soviet leader. *Bildende Kunst* joined the official chorus of voices that declared the Dresden show a "triumph" of socialist realism. In the words of Helmut Holtzhauer, president of the State Commission for Art Affairs, the *Third German Art Exhibition* also confirmed formalism's demise, "a defeat from which it would not recover."[20] Some four hundred artists from throughout Germany submitted nearly six hundred paintings, sculptures, and graphics to this first major display of distinctly Soviet-style socialist realist works produced by German artists. The *Third German Art Exhibition*'s contrived stylistic homogeneity (formalist works were excluded) served programmatically to forecast the eventual reunification of Germany under a socialist system aligned with the Soviet Union.

In his opening address, Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl singled out Hans Mayer-Foreyt's *Ehrt unsere alten Meister* (Honor our Old Masters) for special praise.[21] Rendered in accord with academic principles of rigorous draftsmanship and compositional balance, Mayer-Foreyt's image portrays a young art student peering over the shoulder of his teacher. The teacher wisely examines a sheet of the student's work while the young man, in turn, anxiously clutches in his right hand a portfolio emblazoned with the name of his other "teacher," the nineteenth-century German painter Adolph Menzel. Mayer-Foreyt's work emulated Soviet example by reconnecting German art with its own nineteenth-century realist heritage. In its form and content, it confirmed not only the artistic, but also the political convergence of East Germany with the Soviet Union under a now triumphant socialist realism.

Other works, such as Harald Hellmich and Klaus Weber's *Die jüngsten Flieger* (The Youngest Pilots), drew strongly on the style and repertoire of themes current in Soviet socialist realism. Here, a group of Young Pioneers (the party's youth organization) and their mothers play with toy airplanes in the sun-filled outdoors. The painting's combined metaphors of youth, illumination, and flight render this ordinary scene "typical" in its unabashed message of future of possibility guaranteed by an optimistic present. Works such as Werner Ruhner's *8. Mai 1945* (May 8, 1945) celebrated German liberation by the Soviet Red Army at the end of the war. Featured as the first illustrated work in the *Third German Art Exhibition* catalogue, Ruhner's image portrayed a Soviet soldier leading a German inmate through the barred gate of his camp imprisonment. The two stride forward with their hands clasped together in solidarity. Their confident postures and illuminated faces assure us of their bright—and shared—future that lay ahead.

Other sculptures, drawings, and paintings celebrated the "people's" heroes, including tractor drivers, builders, Young Pioneers, teachers, soldiers, and the people's police. With the exception of portrait busts featuring Marx, Thälmann, and the GDR's first president, Wilhelm Pieck, images of Communist Party leaders, past or present, were absent in the exhibition catalogue. None of the catalogue's images, moreover, depicted party leaders surrounded by adoring masses such as could easily be found in the parade paintings common in Soviet socialist realism under Stalin. Cultic portrayals of charismatic leadership and compliant masses were taboo in a German context, given their uncomfortable resonance with the Nazi past. This taboo, however, did not prevent contributions to the *Third German Art Exhibition* by artists who had enjoyed professional success under the Third Reich.[22]

In his lengthy *Bildende Kunst* review of the *Third German Art Exhibition*, Kurt Magritz drew special attention to those artists who, having established their careers during the period of "formalism's hegemony," were now finding

their way to an art in service of the people and the nation.[23] Among them were Fritz Cremer (praised for overcoming his missteps of the recent past), Walter Arnold, and Rudolf Bergander, whose *Hausfriedenskomitee* (House Peace Committee) was illustrated in the exhibition catalogue. A former student of Richard Müller and Otto Dix at the Dresden Art Academy in the late 1920s, Bergander joined the KPD in 1928. He served in the military between 1940 and 1945, and in 1947 became a member of Das Ufer (The Riverbank) in Dresden, along with Fritz Tröger, Hans Grundig, and Otto Griebel. Das Ufer was one of several artists' groups that emerged in the critical ferment of the immediate postwar years. Headed by leading figures of the proletarian-revolutionary artists' movement of the 1920s, members of the group saw their tradition of critical realism discredited in the antiformalism campaigns that unfolded in the first years of the GDR. By the time the group disbanded in 1952, Bergander had begun work as a professor and rector at the Dresden College of Art.

Bergander's *House Peace Committee* referred to the international peace movement that was launched in Wrocław, Poland.[24] Though ostensibly nonaligned, the peace movement was covertly organized by the Soviet Union in an effort to curb Western nuclear armament in advance of the buildup of its own arsenal. The movement claimed at various times the allegiance of leading intellectuals and artists throughout Europe, including for a time Pablo Picasso. The Soviet Union propagandistically declared its commitment to the peace movement and prescribed support of its efforts among its satellites, including East Germany.

In Bergander's work, a family household of older and younger generations sits around a table in a modest, unadorned interior space. *House Peace Committee* makes oblique reference to Gustave Courbet's *After Dinner at Ornans* (1849) and the gathering of weavers captured in Kollwitz's *Beratung* (Council) lithograph from her *Weaver's Uprising* series of 1898. However, the clearly didactic framing of Bergander's family scene and the presence of the SED newspaper *Neues Deutschland* (New Germany) at the painting's compositional and thematic center diverge significantly from Courbet's critical realism and the conspiratorial import of Kollwitz's work.

Using an embodied rhetoric of hands, faces, and postures, Bergander transforms *House Peace Committee*'s simple gathering into an engaged encounter. An older man brandishes a copy of *Neues Deutschland* and draws the attention of the others seated at the table to its contents, while a younger man, his back turned toward the viewer, addresses the young girl seated to his right. Leaning toward her, the young man interrupts the girl's solitary reading from her book. His gesturing right hand, which he uses to punctuate his words, echoes the girl's left hand, now dropped to her side as she listens to him. The two older women and the older man assembled at the table also lean into the discussion with looks of thoughtful consideration and knowing approval. Bergander adapts the expressive intensity of Kollwitz's art to an image dedicated not to resistance, but instead to acceptance on the part of East Germany's younger generation to take up the task of working toward "international peace" as defined by the interests of the SED.

In his *Bildende Kunst* review, Magritz praised *House Peace Committee* as an important contribution to the theme of peoples' and workers' collectives on display at the *Third German Art Exhibition*. He nonetheless reproached Bergander's handling of the composition and negatively compared *House Peace Committee* to Alfred Fritzsche's *Parteizirkel* (Party Circle), which

18 See, for example, D. Pisarewski, "Das Stalinsche Prinzip des Sozialistischen Realismus als höchste Errungenschaft der Kunstwissenschaft," *Bildende Kunst* 2 (1953): 8–16.

19 G. M. Malenkow, "Das Problem des Typischen ist stets ein politisches Problem," *Bildende Kunst* 1 (1953): 12–13.

20 Helmut Holtzhauer, "Die III. Deutsche Kunstaustellung in Dresden," *Bildende Kunst* 2 (1953): 30.

21 Damus, *Malerei der DDR*, 83.

22 Ibid., 85–86.

23 Kurt Magritz, "Die Wahrheit der Kunst ist die Wahrheit des Lebens: Zur 3. Deutschen Kunstausstellung in Dresden," *Bildende Kunst* 2 (1953): 34–44.

24 Formerly called Breslau under Hapsburg and then Prussian rule, the city became a Nazi stronghold in World War II. Following the Potsdam Conference, Silesia was ceded to Poland, and the city became known once again as Wrocław.

Rudolf Bergander, *Hausfriedenskomitee* (House Peace Committee), 1952 / Cat. 53

appeared opposite Bergander's work in the exhibition catalogue. Depicting a training forum for SED functionaries, *Party Circle* reinforced the hierarchical relationship between the party and its members by positioning the party instructor standing behind a podium while speaking to and gesturing toward the initiates seated before him. Those assembled listen respectfully, stroke their chins in thoughtful contemplation, and take notes. In accord with established academic – and socialist realist – principles, Fritzsche's work displayed careful draftsmanship in its realist style and appropriately foregrounded its core theme by allowing the viewer direct visual access to the speaker's face and the reactions of those listening to him.

The exacting, Soviet-style realism and bureaucratic calm of Fritzsche's image contrasted tellingly with the gestural brushwork and expressive tension present in Bergander's work. Subjecting *House Peace Committee* to the scrutiny of socialist realist aesthetics, Magritz found the work lacking in the

Käthe Kollwitz, *Council*, between 1893 and 1897, from *A Weaver's Uprising*, chalk lithograph, 10¾ x 6⅝ in. (27.5 x 17 cm), Galerie St. Etienne, New York

Alfred Fritzsche, *Parteizirkel* (Party Circle), 1953, oil on canvas, 37⅜ x 51⅛ in. (95 x 130 cm)

good composition and narrative clarity exhibited by Fritzsche's painting. However laudatory in its theme, *House Peace Committee*'s overall message had become garbled by Bergander's provocative decision to impede direct viewer access to the main event, namely the interaction between the young man, who is seen only from behind, and the young girl, whose emotional response to him we glean from a limited profile view of her face.

Magritz's extended discussion of Bergander's *House Peace Committee* underscored the pedantry of socialist realist doctrine and the mechanical manner in which official critics chose to apply its "scientific" principles in 1953. His assessment of the work's failures also, and more importantly, illuminated the profound problems – artistic, political, and conceptual – that faced Bergander and other artists during this period as they explored the possibility of a distinctly East German socialist realism. For them, Soviet-inspired socialist realism remained all too resonant with the style and content of Nazi art, on the one hand, while modernist formalism had now become discredited by its association with Western capitalism, on the other. Bergander's contribution to the *Third German Art Exhibition* attempted to steer a middle course by looking beyond Soviet example to a broader tradition of leftist art, including that of the recent German past. In its didactic content, yet restrained modernist style, his work tested the limits of socialist realist doctrine in 1953; it also forecast the later confrontations between artists and SED cultural functionaries that fitfully transformed East German socialist realism in the ensuing years.

Magritz's *Bildende Kunst* review also drew attention to the work of Otto Nagel, whose *Junger Maurer (Maurerlehrling Wolfgang Plath)* (Young Bricklayer [Apprentice Wolfgang Plath]), also on display in the *Third German Art Exhibition*, had come under attack in the state-regulated press as a vapid, unrepresentative depiction of labor. Magritz nonetheless defended Nagel as an important example of those artists who had recognized the errors of their artistic pasts and were now aligning their work with socialist realism. Nagel also enjoyed a preeminent stature in the East German art world for his long-standing commitment to communism (he joined the KPD in the early years of the Weimar Republic) and for his role as a leading figure of the proletarian-revolutionary artists' movement of the 1920s. He became known for his visual critiques of class exploitation and his many sensitive and highly individualized images of workers in Weimar Berlin. Nagel suffered persecution under the Nazi regime, including internment at Sachsenhausen in 1936 and 1937. In 1950, he became a founding member of the Berlin Academy of Arts and was elected president of the VBKD; he also won the East German National Prize for the arts in that year.

Nagel's *Young Bricklayer* joined a host of works by other artists during this period dedicated to the construction of Stalinallee. Begun in 1952 and completed in 1957, the Stalinallee rose phoenix-like from the rubble of war to become the principle embodiment of socialist reconstruction in the GDR; it also served as a powerful metaphor for East Germany's relationship to the Soviet Union. The whole was planned as a grand boulevard to serve as a parade route for mass spectacle, with its east-west axial orientation symbolically linking East Berlin's Alexanderplatz to Moscow. Undertaken with the help of Soviet building and urban planning advisors, one of Stalinallee's first housing blocks was dedicated to the Society for German-Soviet Friendship. The plan also included a commemorative statue of Stalin elevated on a pedestal and decorative panels and bas-reliefs to be affixed to Stalinallee's

Otto Nagel, *Junger Maurer (Maurerlehrling Wolfgang Plath)* (Young Bricklayer [Apprentice Wolfgang Plath]), 1953 / Cat. 239

Heinz Drache, *Das Volk sagt „Ja" zum friedlichen Aufbau* (The People Say "Yes" to the Peaceful Reconstruction), 1952 / Cat. 87

buildings in celebration of workers and the achievements of the GDR's Five-Year Plan.[25]

In his rendering of Stalinallee (p. 104), Heinz Löffler provides a bird's eye view of the construction site dotted with workers shoveling gravel, manipulating cranes, and working among the buildings' scaffolding. The massive structural blocks of Stalinallee extend seemingly without end along the avenue's axial recession. In another depiction of Stalinallee, Heinz Drache brings us down to the level of the workers engaged in the construction of the Weberwiese, the first apartment complex to be constructed in East Berlin. His image celebrates the workers' camaraderie as they cheerfully and energetically go about their labors. In *Young Bricklayer*, by contrast, Nagel monumentalizes a single young male worker, dressed in an immaculate white worker's uniform and cap, before a background of tall, as-yet unfinished buildings. A few diminutive figures on top of the scaffolding at left indicate that construction is steadily underway. The young bricklayer, however, pauses from his work and assumes an aristocratic mien familiar from European portraiture conventions of the past. In such portraits, the elite enforced their superior status by having themselves portrayed before a backdrop obligingly filled with their land, their paintings, and other markers of their wealth and entitlement. With his hand on his hip and a demeanor both dignified and aloof, Nagel's young bricklayer symbolized the new, youthful, working-class man under socialism. His ownership of the means of production – evidenced by the massive blocks of the Stalinallee that rise up behind him – now displaced the class privilege of the past.

The confidence and optimism of Nagel, Drache, and Löffler's images was soon belied, however, by the workers' revolt that began at the Stalinallee construction site in June 1953. Protesting the excessive production norms and lack of consumer amenities instituted under the SED's Five-Year Plan, some twenty thousand Stalinallee construction workers instigated the first serious rebellion against Communist party rule among the people's democracies. The uprising was quickly crushed. Some were imprisoned and sentenced to death; another 120,000 East Germans fled to the West.

In the wake of Stalin's death and the 1953 uprising, the SED inaugurated a "New Course" that eased production quotas, the collectivization of farms, and, to a limited degree, dogmatism in the arts. In 1954, the USSR formally recognized East Germany's sovereignty. Bergander's *House Peace Committee*, earlier criticized for its unorthodox approach, appeared on the cover of *Bildende Kunst* in 1954 and was thereafter celebrated as an important model for the theme of discussion in East German art. A similar "thaw" ensued in the Soviet Union, especially following Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the Stalin cult in 1956. In both East Germany and the USSR, there was greater tolerance of Western artistic traditions. Exhibitions of Picasso, the Mexican muralists, the Italian realists Renato Guttuso and Gabriele Mucchi, and German proletarian revolutionary art of the 1920s were put on display in a period that spelled an opening of socialist realism to new impulses. In East Germany, the time when the "cultural heritage stood at attention before Menzel" was over.[26] Though socialist realism remained the official designation of East German art, it was henceforth less

25 For a discussion of Stalinallee as an example of East German socialist realist architecture and urban design, see Greg Castillo, "Building Culture in Divided Berlin: Globalization and the Cold War," in *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 181–205, and Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 119–25.

26 Lothar Lang, quoting Lea Grundig, in his *Malerei und Graphik in Ostdeutschland* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002), 43.

Fritz Cremer, Buchenwald Memorial, 1958

beholden to a narrow Stalinist vision of art grounded in Soviet example. East German socialist realism instead became increasingly integrated into a larger international tradition of leftist art making. East German artists were also, and more consequentially, now able to revisit their own formerly proscribed national traditions of proletarian-revolutionary art, critical realism, and expressionism.

Though the most repressive phase of Stalinism thus eased in the mid-1950s, the vestiges of East Germany's Stalinized art world still remained, but now within a more debative artistic environment. Fritz Cremer was among those who argued for a widening of the definition of socialist realism during this period. In the final version of his Buchenwald memorial design, however, Cremer's work reprised the clear didacticism and heroic content familiar from earlier socialist realist art. Unveiled on September 4, 1958, the monument, consisting of eleven greater than life-size figures, was hailed by Peter Feist in *Bildende Kunst* as "a masterpiece of socialist realism."[27] Abandoning the wedgelike arrangement of his 1952 version, Cremer now positioned his figures as a human wall of resistance set before the commemorative tower crowning the memorial complex. Depicting a range of emotions from despair and skepticism to perseverance and defiance, his figures convey an unfolding narrative of revolt. The narrative culminates in a figure that stands above the rest on a small mound of earth, holding his hand high in the declamatory gesture of the oath. Surrounded by the armed and courageous, he calls the group forward to triumph over the enemy under an unfurling party banner. Set within a bombastic ceremonial complex modeled on the Soviet War Memorial at Berlin-Treptow, Cremer's sculpture defined Buchenwald not as a site of Nazi atrocity, but as a testament to victory, liberation, and East Germany's enduring identity as an antifascist state.

Throughout East Germany's subsequent history, the SED periodically eased – and periodically retightened – its control over the arts. One instance of retightening unfolded in April 1959 with the inauguration of the so-called Bitterfeld Way, in which the SED called on artists to redouble their efforts to bridge the gap between art and life. The Bitterfeld Way introduced artists into the workplace with the aim of producing images directly responsive to the experiences, needs, and interests of "the people." Heinrich Witz was among those who came to prominence under the Bitterfeld Way. He received a commission for his painting *Der neue Anfang* (The New Beginning) from the IG Wismut firm, a subsidiary responsible for the extraction of uranium used in the Soviet atomic energy industry.[28] His work portrays two Wismut miners' brigades in an evening of comradely celebration. Roundly criticized for his poor painting technique and mechanical composition, Witz was among a host of artists in the Bitterfeld Way whose art also harked back in its form and content to 1953 and an increasingly disdained Soviet-style socialist realism of the past.

The character of East German socialist realism changed significantly in the ensuing years. In the 1960s, new themes appeared that addressed the changing realities of East German modernization. Scenes devoted to leisure, youth culture, and private life – instead of work, collaborative effort, and the public sphere – paralleled the SED's growing emphasis on socialist consumerism in competition with that of the capitalist West. In its gradual opening to stylistic experiment, East German socialist realism also incorporated once-taboo modernist artistic traditions, most especially that of German expressionism.

In the 1950s, the GDR had based its legitimacy on the Soviet promise of universal emancipation under communism. By the time it signed the Basic Treaty with West Germany in 1972, however, East Germany had surrendered such aspirations and turned its attention instead to the forging of a collective national culture, now formally recognized as an independent nation by its western counterpart. Such dramatic changes also affected the arts in East Germany. Called on by the regime in the 1950s to advance socialism, East German artists had attempted to dismantle barriers between artists and audiences, art and social life, and national traditions and international socialism. By the 1970s, however, and as a sad legacy of the SED's Stalinist crimes, the country's artists diverged increasingly from the utopian vision of a better, more egalitarian world that had defined East Germany's socialist realism in its earliest years. Leading up to the regime's demise in 1989, East Germany's culture converged increasingly not with the Soviet Union, but with the capitalist West and its art of compensation for the enduring problem of social injustice that remains.

I thank April Eisman and Fred Evans for their thoughtful comments on this essay.

27 Peter H. Feist, "Buchenwald—Mahnung und Gedenken," *Bildende Kunst* 12 (1958): 805.

28 For a full discussion of this work and its commission, see Karsten Borgmann and Christa Mosch, "Heinrich Witz, Der neue Anfang. Auftraggeber: IG Wismut," in Flacke, *Auftragskunst der DDR*, 119–26.

Heinrich Witz, *Der neue Anfang* (The New Beginning), 1959 / Cat. 392