ERNST TOLLER AND GERMAN SOCIETY: THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL AS LEADER AND CRITIC

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There is a terrible sadness to the years in Germany between 1914 and 1945, from the Second Reich to the Third with the failure of Weimar democracy sandwiched in between. It is if we were to watch a heart wrenching movie whose events we already knew and whose end we would like to erase. We are at once desperate to see but dreadful of what we know will be found. We know its conclusion: millions dead, exterminated, starved, tortured. We know what has been done is done and yet we keep staring at it in disbelief. The story is difficult to watch, but impossible not to and dreadful in its telling.

To breathe the air of Germany is to be truly aware of the tragic nature of the twentieth century. It was Nietzsche who in the nineteenth century analyzed many of the coming century's contours, Freud who discovered its under-side, Einstein who helped discover a possible means of its destruction, and Hitler who dedicated a part of his life to the elimination of much of its population. "The modern mind," observes Erich Heller, "speaks German. Not always good German, but German none the less." 1 This book is a study of the victim of such a century, a German, the "tragic expressionist figure,"2 Ernst Toller.

In pictures taken long ago, Toller's eyes stare out from faded black and white photos. Inquisitive eyes. Eyes deeply set under prominent brows, large eyes, vivid and questioning, like chipped clear diamonds. Behind those eyes was a massively creative force. He had a striking exotic quality that attracted people, something that gave Toller a quiet air of authority, and yet conveyed rare warmth. He was a formidable public speaker, speaking with dramatic outrage that excited audiences into emotional fervor. His speeches were performances and his powers of rendition formidable. He had an actor's sense for the dramatic and used pacing, juxtapositions, aggregations of tone to form a shaping presence. He had this down to an art. Someone who heard him observed his manner of speaking was a transformational event. "Ernst Toller transforms the old unspoken yearnings of the workers into words, and the heat of his tongue the words become a springboard for the rage

of the exploited. He stands there in the park, like fire in the trees—young, dark-haired, electric, almost stuttering with emotion, the epitome of the Expressionist…He is shaken by flaming hatred, of war and the war-mongers. He is in tears, he is moved and his expression moves the masses. They know this is no mere Paganini of rhetoric…this is Ernst Toller."3 He was the equivalent of a rock star. He had talent, natural charm, the gift of persuasion and an incredible energy behind his skills. He was neutral in nothing.

During the years of Weimar and the Third Reich, Toller was one of the more active of the "other Germany's" left-wing intellectuals. A leader of the Bavarian Soviet of 1919, he had in addition won the Kleist prize and was recognized as one of Germany's best playwrights. Indeed, during the years of the Weimar Republic, the popularity of his works was unquestioned and they were translated and circulated on the grand scale which befitted that of an author of international stature. His first play, Die Wandlung, was soon sold out and required a second edition; his dramatic works and poems were eventually translated into twenty-seven languages. When he was released from prison in 1925, after serving a five year term for his role during the Bavarian Soviet of 1919, authorities had to plan the beginning of his freedom carefully. He was placed in a sealed train, and escorted out of the Bavarian state to forestall excessive celebration of his release in Bavaria. Brought to the Saxon border, Bavarian authorities were well aware that even in prison Toller had become one of the most celebrated dramatists of his time.4 During the 1920's it was not an exaggeration to say that he "dominated the German and Russian theatre" or that he was the "most spectacular personality in modern German literature."5 It was not uncommon for contemporaries to classify him as one of the foremost German writers of the Republican era, and even a more recent critic placed him among the top twelve authors of the 1930's.6 Nor was his reputation limited to Germany. Between his release from prison to the mid-1930's, Toller was recognized in Europe and beyond; he was carried on the shoulders of enthusiastic Yugoslav students in Zagreb, greeted by labor leaders as "Comrade Toller" in the more radical of London's pubs, recognized by cab drivers in Tripoli, and carefully watched by Mussolini's police in Italy.7

However, it is Toller the social critic rather than Toller the dramatist with whom we will be concerned, his ideas, his visions for Germany and Europe as transmitted in his works of fiction and prose. While the present generation, perhaps grown cynical through the sobering

experience of Nazi atrocities and ever greater wars, may reject as naive the themes of peace, love, and brotherhood so passionately expounded by Toller, his oeuvre aptly suited his time: revolutionary in 1918, disillusioned in the 1920's, branded as degenerate in the 1930's, Toller fits as well into the years of German history that began in 1918 and ended with the outbreak of war as do the caricatures of Grosz, the architecture of Gropius, or the song of Horst Wessel.

While alive, Toller was continually a figure of controversy, more political than literary. His failure in the Bavarian revolution and his role as a left-wing intellectual did not endear him to the nationalistic Right, the German bourgeoisie, or the extreme Left. Despite doctrinal distinctions, both Right and Left managed to cover their differences in a cadenza of common denunciation. His play, Hoppla, Wir Leben**,** for example, found disfavor with the Right because of its "Bolshevik undermining of the stage," while the Left found it "too humanistic."8 His second play, Masse Mensch, was deemed counter-revolutionary by some and "pure Bolshevism" by others. 9 For his part in the Bavarian revolution, the Communists alternately denounced Toller as a petit bourgeois intellectual, a traitor, a half-fascist or a romantic revolutionary anarchist. To the Right, he was a traitor to the values of all good Germans, a Jew Literat, and a Communist. To his nationalist critics, he was a Communist because he participated in revolution; to his Communist critics, he was a traitor because he refused to follow the party line.10 The puzzled historian then has a wide selection: Toller the traitor, Toller the revolutionary, Toller the counter-revolutionary, Teller the anarchist, Toller the fascist, Toller the Communist, Toller the anti-Communist.

If Toller's inclination toward controversy during his life was well known, it cannot be said that Toller after his death was, until recently, well remembered. Toller's life, one of a series of cataclysmic explosions—war, multiple imprisonments, revolution, civil war, Hitler—after his death, faded as enigmatically as it had come, leaving little but his name. The extensive translations of his work into languages as diverse as Armenian and Yiddish may have attested to his once cosmopolitan vogue, but three decades after his greatest accolades, it was noted that Toller was almost forgotten, hardly ever played or read.11 This has changed dramatically. There is a Toller web site, a revived interest in Toller as a dramatist, excerpts of his plays on the internet and even a Toller novel.12

Interest in Toller began to revive in 1959 with the publication of an East German

selection of his work.13 Two years later, a larger anthology was published in West Germany and was extremely well received by critics.14 It was in response to these republications that Wolfgang Frühwald suggested a re-evaluation of Toller.15 Echoing this, John Spalek three years later called for a "new estimate" of Toller that would take into account his entire literary activity.16 The further publication of Spalek's comprehensive bibliography on Toller makes such a task particularly convenient. It contains an excellent listing of the secondary literature on Toller and also indicates the vast quantity of the works he produced, both published and unpublished.17

The earliest general work is William Anthony Willibrand's Ernst Toller and His Ideology.18 Published six years after Toller's death, Willibrand's was a slender volume which made use only of Toller's published works and little effort to place Toller in the perspective of the historical milieu under which he wrote. Willibrand, moreover, was hampered by lack of access to much of Toller's writing. Toller has shared the fate typical of many an emigrant author vocally opposed to the Nazi government; his work was suppressed, and much of Toller's writing never appeared in German or remained unpublished.19 In later studies, attention has been focused on Toller the writer or Toller the revolutionary. Both views are fragmentary at their best, and at their worst distorted. Literary critics know the first Toller, the expressionist dramatist, author of Die Wandlung and Masse Mensch. The evaluation of their subject is confined to Toller's plays, most of which were published between 1917 and 1927.20 Toller's work during the 1930's was either forgotten or unknown. Historians, on the other hand, have studied the second Toller, the revolutionary, and know him best for his part in Bavaria's short-lived Soviet of April, 1919.Much of the work of this era was doene by East German historians, crudly Stalinist in outlook and more concerned with indicting Toller for not following the party line of 1919 than with giving an accurate account of his part in the Bavarian revolution.21 I have used the records of the Bavarian archives in Munich, the Rehse Collection on Toller at the Library of Congress and material on Toller in the National Archives in Washington.22

Until the 1970's Toller was primarily analyzed on the basis of his dramatic works. Yet, as one observer notes:

". . . a comprehensive survey of Toller's entire literary production; including

> unpublished works and those published in a variety of journals and news-papers, suggests that an estimate based on his dramatic output alone does not do him full justice. The survey shows that Toller had been publishing essayistic prose in German and other languages since his release from prison in 1924; after 1930 this trend increased at the expense of his dramas until in exile his nonbelletristic prose actually exceeded his dramatic works in quantity and significance."23

These essays, most of them on political topics, are a particularly fruitful source in discovering Toller's views on German society between 1924 and 1939, and their consideration should serve to fill the considerable lacunae Kurt Hiller noted that exists in Toller's activity during these years.24

Yet, Toller was more than a writer; he was also an intellectual. Historian Istvan Deak has written about long neglected problem of the twentieth century left-wing German intellectuals of which Toller was one of the leading representatives.25 A recrudesce of interest in Toller started in the 1968. with German playwright Tankred Dorst's Drama Toller. Following two years after Spalek's call for a new estimate of his work, the play put Toller literally back on stage. It was in many ways an unflattering estimate, despite its elements of truth. Toller is portrayed as a vain (probably true), a narcissist (possibly), an impressive speaker (definitely true) and a naïve, irrational person responsible for the failure of the revolution (definitely untrue). Dorst's work was a success, partly because of elaborate productions in West Germany and partly because the theme of revolution was topical. This was, after all, 1968.

The late 1970's and the decade of the 1980's began to see some serious work done on Toller. The 1970's produced slew of dissertations on aspects of Toller's life and work.26 In 1981 Jost Hermand, a noted German scholar, collected a dozen scholarly articles on Toller's work as a "manifestation of revolution, imprisonment, the Weimar Republic, fascist take over and exile." This was the most comprehensive analysis since Willbrands's earlier work. 27The best work, however, was done by British writers Steven Lamb, Frank Trommler, Richard Dove and Keith Bullivant.28 In the 1990's with the establishment in Germany of The Ernst Toller Society dozens of scholarly articles

have been done on all aspects of Toller's activities.29

This study builds on that work in an exploration of Toller as a Jewish, German, and left-wing intellectual. Each of these three rubrics, Jewish, German and left-wing, is significant and deserves attention. Political history and the history of ideas can make extensive contributions to the understanding of literature. The author's reaction to the events of his time as well as the type of sensibility that goes with this are fruitful sources of inquiry both for literary interpretation and historical analysis. Istvan Deak, in his study of Weimar Germany's left wing intellectuals, has made a great contribution towards understanding the thought of many Weimar writers. How Toller fit into this group, a question as yet unexplored, is a main theme of my own study. It does not claim to be strictly political or literary or historical. It is rather partly a cultural, partly a psychological study, what the Germans call Ideengeschichte.

In dealing with Toller, I have been aware of historical analysis and literary interpretation, but less of the aesthetic merits of Toller's work than of their social significance. In reading Toller I have reflected on the responsibility an intellectual-critic has when writing about a troubled democratic society tottering between survival and annihilation. Toller was furthermore a Jewish intellectual, a characteristic he shared with many other German intellectuals during the 1920's. How did his religions tradition shape his views? He was also German and this raises a whole host of specifically Germanic patterns of looking at the world which are dealt with in Chapter Three. A related reflection is to ask what difference did it make? How much of an influence do intellectuals have in the development of society? What is the relationship between intellectuals and their readers in a troubled society? Weimar was particularly troubled. Its ambiguous founding, its attempt to deal with the new, spontaneously founded Councils, its violent repression of the Council movement affected the thought of all intellectuals about the relationship of art, politics and social change.30 These are old questions and issues, some of which have been addressed academically and philosophically; but I am not sure academic commentary and philosophy have answered them very vividly. Toller was more than just another left-wing Weimar intellectual. This has been over-looked and needs to be emphasized. He was also a leader in ways his colleagues were not. He was a literary leader, a leader in social criticism, one of the leaders of "the other

Germany" opposing National Socialism, a leader in his work for the Spanish Republic, an organizational leader. Yes he was all these things. But he was also something the intellectuals of the left did not have the misfortune to be. He was a political leader, a founding father of the abortive Bavarian Soviet of 1919 and, in fighting for it, a military leader too. He applied these leadership lessons to his work after 1919. Intellectual work begins, and usually ends, with ideas published in books, some of which may even be read. If so, they may become influencial ideas, like those of Marx or Adam Smith or Plato. But their implementation is left to others. Marx never was director of economics for a communist country, Smith never headed a multi-national company and Plato never became a head of state. 31

Men of thought are seldom men of action, but men of action are frequently both. This view of Toller as both intellectual and as leader has never been really noticed so I have asked some leadership questions also. What is the nature of leadership? What qualities did Toller share with other leaders that scholars of leadership have observed? Was Toller a successful leader? All these issues are treated in the conclusions of Chapter Eight. Toller certainly provided a vivid answer to these questions and, if you keep reading I promise these important questions, and others, will be answered. I hope this work might be one that asks theoretical questions but answers them practically, one that asks a critic's questions and offers a historian's answers.

I have not confined myself to studying only the relation of the intellectual to Weimar. Weimar culture lasted longer than the years of the Weimar Republic--a fact Peter Gay recognizes when he writes that the spirit of Weimar found its "true home, in exile."32 How Toller responded as an exiled Weimar intellectual and the problems and frustrations he faced also form a part of this study. Moreover, I have, as my sub-title indicates, concerned myself with the role of the writer-intellectual as a critic of society and have prefaced my discussion of Toller by what I think a necessary analysis of the social role of intellectuals in general and of German intellectuals in particular. In addition, Toller is seen in his dual role as an individual concerned with working for practical social change and as an intellectual involved in the more rarefied concerns of Geist. The clash between politics and the intellectual is a major theme and particular emphasis has been placed on the contradictions of these two diverse and frustrating roles. Their aspirations to change society led Toller and other German intellectuals to reshape their German intellectual heritage into an ideology that would be

capable of serving their desires, one that would combine the man of power with the man of ideas; from such a heady brew there was to emerge a democratic and humanistic society. It was the failure of this society to emerge after 1918 that sparked Toller's criticism of post-war Germany and led him to seek ways to change that society into one that would conform with his ideals. Toller became the unhappy champion of a noble but, nevertheless, lost cause.

As a critic, Toller's response was to the immediate; indeed, most of his essays are rejoinders, much of his dramatic literature a blend of art and advocacy for the left-wing cause. As an author, he was more discussed during the 1920's than Bertolt Brecht, but he has not achieved that lasting fame which fell to his left-wing contemporary. Toller's real significance was as the ideal type in the history of the Left in Weimar and after, the best representative of his generation. He had a box seat with two performances at the Götterdämmerung: World War One and the Third Reich. His life was a chronological unfolding that for twenty years "tore apart not only their author but, German society, and ultimately, in World War Two, the comity of nations." 33 Born too late to have taken part in the intellectual renewal of the 1890's, but old enough to have participated in the cultural awakening of the pre-war years, his generation was one whose intellectual outlook was determined by the First World War and its revolutionary aftermath, one converted by the first into pacifism and embittered by the results of the second into criticism. Under the impact of National Socialism, Toller's generation finally disintegrated. Some, like Ludwig Marcuse, found a new home in exile; some, like Carl von Ossietzky, refused to leave Germany and found themselves at the mercy of their Nazi captors; and some, like Toller, found it impossible to go on living and in the end took their own lives. "Who is the poet?" rhetorically asked Thomas Mann. "He whose life is symbolic."34 As a symbol of his generation, Toller becomes more than just an individual and his story easily becomes a significant part of German Intellectual history.