

# *Germany Celebrates a Singer Who United East and West*

A show at the German Historical Museum honors Wolf Biermann, whose music and moral stance endeared him to audiences across the once divided country.



**By Christopher F. Schuetze**

Christopher Schuetze tried to keep up with the 86-year-old songwriter during a two-hour walk through Biermann's old East Berlin neighborhood. It wasn't easy.

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If passers-by on a busy bridge in central Berlin on a recent summer afternoon recognized East Germany's most famous songwriter, poet and dissident, they did not show it.

Posing for this article's photographs in front of a huge wrought iron eagle that featured on one of his best known record sleeves, Wolf Biermann, 86, smiled and tried joking with the afternoon crowd. But the office workers and tourists ignored him and continued their journeys across the river.

Nearly five decades after Biermann was thrown out of East Germany for criticizing its totalitarian Communist government, the German Historical Museum is honoring him with a major exhibition. Biermann may not be recognized on the street, but the show, which opens Friday and runs through Jan. 14, 2024, proves he is far from forgotten: He is the first living person in recent memory to be the subject of such an exhibition at Germany's national history museum.

In a life that crisscrossed the East-West border that once divided Germany, Biermann's music and principled moral stance made him a rare figure who transcended that barrier. Now, his tale is a perfect one for the united Germany to celebrate.

"His story is both East German and West German history," said Monika Boll, the exhibition's curator. "You can't get more German than that."

Biermann was born under Nazism, in 1936, and raised in West Germany. As a teenager, he defected to the East and made a career as a singer of witty, folk-inspired songs — until an anti-authoritarian streak in his music began to trouble the Communist authorities. For a decade from the mid-60s, Biermann's songs, many of which he recorded in his East Berlin apartment, were smuggled to the West and released by record labels there, then smuggled back behind the iron curtain.



After a 1976 concert in Cologne, West Germany, in which he criticized the government of East Germany, Biermann was barred from re-entering that country, where he had made his home. Barbara Klemm/Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Yet Biermann wanted to stay in the German Democratic Republic, or G.D.R. Although he was the subject of a yearslong state surveillance operation, he was never imprisoned, unlike many other critics of the government. The authorities worried about a backlash from West Germany, where the press was taking special note of Biermann's career.

In a speech at the exhibition opening on Wednesday, Claudia Roth, Germany's culture minister, compared Biermann to a "raised middle finger" aimed at the "pride of the G.D.R. leadership." The opening's guests included many former East German dissidents, and Angela Merkel, Germany's former chancellor.

In an interview, Biermann said that his life story was instructive for anyone who wants to understand Germany's complicated postwar past. "I'm the ideal counterpoint," Bierman said, to what was typical in those decades. "To recognize what was normal, you need to look at the exception," he added.

Right from his childhood, he did the opposite of everyone around him, he added. His family was staunchly communist, he recalled, and his father was Jewish. Naturally, he said, they detested the Nazis — unlike most German families at the time.

Even the British fire bombing of his hometown, Hamburg, which he only survived by diving into a canal with his mother, did not stop Biermann rooting for the Allies. In a song, he later wrote:

And because I was born under the yellow star  
In Germany  
That is why we took the English bombs  
Like gifts from heaven.

His father, Dagobert Biermann, a labor organizer, was murdered in Auschwitz by the Nazis when Biermann was 6.

In 1953, swimming against the historical tide, the 16-year-old Biermann moved, alone, from West Germany to the East, just as thousands were fleeing in the other direction in search of a better life. But as a convinced Communist, Biermann thought it was the G.D.R., not the capitalist West, that offered a more just and moral vision.



Right from his childhood, Biermann said, he did the opposite of everyone around him. Gordon Welters for The New York Times

A talent for music was recognized during his tenure as a production assistant at Berthold Brecht's Berliner Ensemble theater, where he had been hired by Brecht's widow. Supported by politically connected sponsors, Biermann had gained minor notice as a singer-songwriter by 1960. If his lyrics offended some, he got away with it because of his communist bone fides, including the fact that his father was killed by fascists.

But soon his lyrics and texts became too critical of the government and, in 1965, the authorities — which had tight control over cultural life — de facto banned Biermann from performing, recording or publishing in East Germany.

During the 11 years in which he was also not allowed to leave the country, Biermann's apartment became his stage and recording studio, and he was under constant watch. Over the decades, the East German state security services, known as the Stasi, watched and bugged his home, followed his car, listened to his phone calls and tried to recruit his friends and lovers.

“You could say he was in the champion league — such a level of surveillance was atypical,” said

Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, a historian who has studied Biermann's Stasi file.

Biermann responded ironically with "The Ballad of the Stasi," in which he commiserates with the poor "Stasi dogs" monitoring him, who would probably end up singing his songs in bed.

East German fans who were caught with Biermann's music on bootleg cassette tapes or handbills of his verse could be arrested and locked away for years. But his apartment, which was close to the main border crossing point into West Berlin, still became a gathering place for dissident artists and thinkers. American stars, like Joan Baez and Allen Ginsburg, also visited him there.

A turning point in Biermann's career came in 1976, with a three-and-half-hour concert he gave to a sold-out hall in Cologne, on a rare visit to West Germany. He came out swinging against the "old comrades" who ran East Germany, and painted a bleak picture of life behind the wall. Three days later, while watching the news on television, he learned that he had been permanently barred from re-entry to East Germany.



Demonstrators in Leipzig, East Germany, in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall Fell. The placard, in German, reads, "We want our old singer Biermann back!" Archiv Wolf Biermann; Staatsbibliothek-PK/Abteilung Handschriften und historische Drucke

Biermann said he was crestfallen to be shut out of the country he held so dear, despite all its shortcomings. While hundreds of people were risking their lives crossing illegally to the West, Biermann's heart pined for the East. "With me, everything was always the other way around — that's almost the fundamental law," he said.

Biermann's expulsion led to protests by East Germany's most famous artists, writers and actors, and the government reacted with further repressions on artistic expression that remained in place until the fall of the Berlin Wall, 13 years later.

After Germany's 1990 reunification — in which he played an important role — Biermann

remained active, though less in the spotlight. He continued to be a respected figure on the German left, even as he voiced unpopular opinions among his comrades: He supported the American-led war in Iraq, and criticized the peace movement that grew against it.

Standing in front of the bridge's wrought iron eagle in Berlin, Biermann recalled writing one of his most popular songs, "The Ballad of the Prussian Icarus," after he and Ginsburg crossed the bridge in 1976 and took pictures in front of the bird. They made a bet over which of them would bring the iron creature into verse, Biermann recalled.

That song, which became one of his best known, is typical Biermann, a lyrical critique of the East German state that notes:

The barbed wire slowly grows deep  
Into the skin, the chest and bone  
Into the brain's gray cells

As tourist boats passed under its perch on the bridge, the same eagle looked out on a very different world. If Biermann now has an official place in German history, it's because of the part he played in shaping it.

#### **Wolf Biermann: A Poet and Songwriter From Germany**

Through Jan. 14, 2024, at the German Historical Museum, in Berlin; dhm.de.

**Christopher F. Schuetze** covers German news, society and occasionally arts from the Berlin bureau. Before moving to Germany, he lived in the Netherlands, where he covered everything from tulips to sea-level rise. More about Christopher F. Schuetze