The following text, “Bohemia and Socialism,” is an excerpt from Jutta Voigt’s recollections of her experiences with art and the East German art scene, *Stierblutjahre: Die Boheme des Ostens* (Aufbau-Verlag, 2016, *Bull's Blood Years: Eastern Bohemia*). The protagonist is called Madleen—the author’s middle name—and functions as Voigt’s alter ego. In the title, *Stierblut*—bull’s blood—refers to the name of an inexpensive Hungarian red wine that was widely available in the GDR. Please see the glossary at the end of the text, which identifies artists, officials and East German terms with which English-language readers may not be familiar.

Garden gnomes—as the cultural functionary and Caucasus Mountain climber Alfred Kurella explained—garden gnomes are the continuation of a folk tradition; they’re nice for everyone to see and don’t impede the construction of socialism. But, he continued, works of art in dark colors, knives and forks without decoration and lamps without fringes are alienating. As of 1949, the formalism debate had descended upon artists, especially those tied to socialism, like a bombardment of condescension, misunderstanding and prohibitions. A consequence of the officials’ bad taste and devotion to Soviet art of the Stalinist era. The formalism debate was the sharp sword that, over the course of decades, hacked the utopian bond between artists and the Party to little bits. As Brecht noted in his work journal in 1949: “opponents of formalism often rail against new and attractive forms like certain unattractive housewives who readily denounce beauty and efforts to beautify as promiscuity (and a hallmark of syphilis).”

The battle lines hardened, desperation on all sides. “It’s a question of overcoming that dreadful discrepancy between progressive tendencies and mediocre forms of expression,” according to one side. According to the other side: “We don’t want to see abstract images in our art academies anymore; we need images of neither moonscapes, nor rotten fish. The gray-on-gray painting that gives expression to capitalist decline sharply contradicts life in the GDR today.”

*Horst Strempel’s huge mural in the Friedrichstraße train station, Trümmer weg – baut auf! (Clear the Rubble – Rebuild!),* was painted over in the night or disappeared under a cloak of gray. The perpetrator remained unknown, but the painting was no longer visible. It was allegedly painted in the tradition of Oskar Schlemmer, but that was not seen as socialist realism. Strempel was known by everybody, because he had created that larger-than-life worker with a pickax, storming into a better world, in the station near the restrooms. This is not what our workers look like, the Party determined, Strempel's worker figures have a “slavish dullness.” They were purportedly an insult to every class-conscious worker; their feet looked like they’d been painted by Picasso—this was worse than Expressionism, the comparison with the cultural decadence of Ancient Rome was virtually inescapable. Some said that Strempel was made to paint over his mural himself. The painter, a short man with a beret over protruding ears, was ablaze with the idea of socialism and the task of serving it with his art. Strempel, the disappointed communist, left for the West. The Refugee Commission in West Berlin didn’t recognize him as a refugee because he had earned 1,900 Marks a month, “over there in the eastern zone,” and been a member of the SED Party.

Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau’s *Das Verhör des Lukullus (The Trial of Lucullus)* premiered at the Deutsche Staatsoper, even though the SED’s Central Committee had condemned the opera as formalist and decadent. Brecht had prevailed and gotten the performance to take place. “Good and conscious comrades and friends, from whom one could expect a healthy response to this formalist music,” were invited. Many of these handpicked guests were not particularly interested in the fate of the Roman commander Lucullus, however, and sold their free tickets to opera fans, who were not among the

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1 Editor’s Note: The original German title of the text is “Boheme und Zement.” We thought that the title might not work well in English. The author suggested changing it to “Boheme und Sozialismus.”
chosen and were waiting for tickets in front of the Staatsoper. Instead of the flop the Party had hoped for, the spectators experienced a triumph. Twenty minutes of applause, standing ovations. On stage, Paul Dessau jumped for joy: now, he thought, everything is fine again. But he rejoiced too soon. At the next Party conference on formalism, the composer was decried as someone “who confuses, disorients, paralyzes and weakens society’s progressive forces.” Reading the recollections of his former student Christian Bleyhöffer, you can picture how Dessau reacted: “Dessau was choleric. If you made even the quietest remark to another student, he thundered and spontaneously offered to shove a piano up your snout. Or to rip something off you. Then he’d get hold of himself and add: but not what you think.”

The Trial of Lucullus was not theater, but rather a hybrid of Meyerhold and Proletkult, Brecht was told. And it was removed from the program. The dissonances in this opera were allegedly “aimed against the beauty of Classicism.” Only one official, Wilhelm Pieck, intervened: “Comrades, what if we are wrong here?” A photo from the old days shows Pieck standing next to the anarchist and bohemian Erich Mühsam. Anyone who sees the photo will wonder whether some of that bohemian intellectual generosity might have rubbed off on Pieck the functionary. Thanks to a brave technician, who did not erase the live recording as ordered, the original Lucullus performance and the ensuing jubilation have been preserved. The fissured cultural arena of the 1950s was a miserably managed circus of betrayal, with epochal accomplishments wasted.

The formalism debate threaded through Madleen’s youth like a demarcation line. Abstract painting, modern literature, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll and beat music, black cups, white walls, black stockings, cylinder vases—anything modern and young was suspected of betraying socialism. It was said that austere forms were a danger to an optimistic attitude toward life. The Bauhaus tradition was likewise not to be followed: it was meaningless. Even the young designers of the Weißensee Art Institute were victims of the anti-formalism campaign. Characterized by enthusiasm for socialist forms, they had taken up the cause of usability and durability, they wanted to create “real things for real life,” they could not stop designing and discarding. A generation had arrived to clear out all that was petit bourgeois: the fringed lamps, the flowered plates, the radios covered by obligatory lace doilies atop their brown housing, which were meant to make you forget about their hollow sound. The new form-giving-guard was convinced of the connection between content and form: the clearer the form, the truer the content. This pertained to socialism as a whole: out with the junk, in with the new era! For forty long years they tried to realize their concepts in production. “Never have there been so many ideas and so little implementation” (Stefan Wolle).

Very little got through: a few vases, a few lamps, the Wartburg 353 automobile, with no names to accompany the designs. An entire generation was discouraged. Four-fifths of our car designs were not approved for production, report the once-inspired creators of a better world, old men with ascetic faces and close-cropped gray hair who were prevented from achieving their plans and dreams by uneducated, narrow-minded officials with petit-bourgeois tastes. The designs remain in the massive Industrial Design Collection depot and peer with helpless regret upon the everyday objects that attest to the fruitless abilities of their forgotten creators. “In hunting down formalism, they hounded art to death,” said Vsevolod Meyerhold in a speech about the freedom of art, for which he was shot to death during Stalin’s Great Purge.

Madleen was nineteen when the Ministry of Culture once again announced the fight against Western decadence in dance music. Sixty percent of all music played in public had to come from socialist countries. Madleen was twenty when the Ten Commandments of Socialist Morality were proclaimed. She knew the Ten Commandments from confirmation class: I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me. Of the Ten Commandments of Socialist Morality, there was one she knew in particular: You must do good deeds for socialism. She had often encountered three others: You shall not dance freestyle. You shall not listen to jazz. You shall not wear black stockings. The missing six came along soon enough: You shall resolutely oppose the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. You shall denounce white vases as degenerate. You shall honor Soviet art, no matter what happens. You shall not paint the walls in your apartment white or put flowers in cylinder
vases. You shall learn to dance the Lipsi and believe in the Party.

All this hardly bothered Madleen; commandments and prohibitions could largely be circumvented. She had never believed in the Party and, to listen to jazz, she followed the Blue Music Brothers, who later called themselves the Jazz Optimisten, in remote company cafeterias that fitted “American un-culture” into a publicly-owned frame.

Translated by Faye Stewart

Jutta Voigt was born in Berlin in 1941. After studying philosophy at the Humboldt Universität, she worked as a film critic, columnist and editor for weekly magazines, including Sonntag (later renamed Freitag), Die Wochenpost and Die Zeit. Since 1989, she has published many books about her life in East Germany and is known for her entertaining feuilleton writing style. Voigt, who was married to documentary filmmaker Peter Voigt, was awarded the 2000 Theodor Wolff Prize for her 1999 story “Grosses, Fettes Puddingland” (“Big, Fat Pudding Country”), about humorous East-West German encounters before unification.

Jutta Voigt’s Stierblutjahre: Die Boheme des Ostens (Aufbau-Verlag, 2016) is a collection of short feuilleton stories that center around East Germany’s Bohemian scene. In the widely-reviewed book, Voigt shares her radical views and rebellious experiences while searching for a different, adventurous life in a controlled and walled-in country.

The DEFA Film Library thanks Jutta Voigt for her permission to translate and use this text on its 2018 DVD release entitled Dusk: 1950s East Berlin Bohemia.
Index of Names & Terms
Compiled by the DEFA Film Library

Bertolt BRECHT (1898-1956) was a German playwright, poet and theater director. Because of his leftist beliefs he had to leave Germany when the Nazis came to power in 1933. In 1949, he moved to the GDR and, together with Helene Weigel, founded the groundbreaking and influential Berliner Ensemble theater in East Berlin.

Paul DESSAU (1894-1979) was a German composer and conductor. In 1933, he emigrated to France and then the USA, returning to settle in East Berlin in 1948. He is best known for his operas and other vocal works written in collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, including Das Verhöhr des Lukullus. Although East German officials tried to ban a premiere of the opera, Brecht insisted and the opera premiered at the East Berlin Deutsche Staatsoper on March 17, 1951.

Alfred KURELLA (1895-1975) was the director of the Institut für Literatur in Leipzig, East Germany, from 1955 to 1957, before he became the head of the Culture Committee and then the Commission for Ideology within the Politburo of the SED’s Central Committee. He was a strong advocate of socialist realism and Stalinist cultural policies in the GDR.

Vsevolod MEYERHOLD (1874-1940) was a Russian actor and theater director. He is known for his provocative and innovative experiments in unconventional theater productions that made him an important force in modern theater. He was executed during Stalin’s Great Purge in 1940.

Erich MÜHSAM (1878-1934) was a German antimilitarist and anarchist essayist, poet and playwright, who also performed in cabarets during the Weimar Republic period. The Nazis labeled him as one of “those Jewish subversives.” They arrested him in 1933 and murdered him a few months later.

Wilhelm PIECK (1876-1960) became the first president of the GDR in 1949 and held this office until his death in 1960.

Oskar SCHLEMMER (1888-1943) was a German painter, sculptor, designer and choreographer associated with the Bauhaus school.

Horst STREMPEL (1904-1975) was a German painter and graphic artist who studied under Otto Mueller and Karl Hofer. He was influenced by modernist artistic approaches and did not conform to official cultural policies in East Germany. When he was strongly criticized by officials and then ordered to paint over his mural, he relocated to West Berlin.

Stefan WOLLE (b.1950) is a German historian who focuses on East German history. In different capacities, he has been involved in the process of coming to terms with the East German past. Since 2005, he has been the head researcher at the DDR Museum in Berlin.

BLUE MUSIC BROTHERS, founded in 1957, was the first Dixieland jazz band in East Germany. In 1959, they changed their name to Jazz Optimisten Berlin. This band, which played in several DEFA films and theater performances, broke up in 1968. Four decades later, in 2008, the band got together again and has been performing ever since.

DEUTSCHE STAATSOPER (now Staatsoper Unter den Linden) was a legendary and prestigious opera house in East Berlin. It was the premiere state opera of East Germany.

LIPSI was an East German pair dance that was introduced by East German officials in 1959 as a communist alternative to American styles of rock ‘n’ roll dancing. Young people ignored the dance and it never became popular.

SED or Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (German Socialist Unity Party) was the name of the leading East German Communist Party.