

Introduction

These three plays, written only a little over forty years ago, seem to come from a very different world to our own. They were written in a country that no longer exists, and for a kind of theatre that would scarcely seem possible today. Their subject is the historical past, but a past viewed with an eye to its relevance and usefulness to the present, a past that still holds discoveries that might transform life as it is now lived - and not, as seems so often the case today, merely confirm it. Their relation to theatrical tradition itself is also different, treating it as living thing, to be developed and critiqued, rather than as a dead canon, to be quoted and pastiched. And behind all this lies a fundamental presupposition of the efficacy of art to act upon and change the social world, and the power of theatre as uniquely political institution.

At the same time, they stand on the brink of the dissolution of all those assumptions, and register, perhaps unconsciously, their approaching collapse. The developments they make to the theatrical tradition are equally symptoms of its disintegration, while the subjects they address have for us today the curious quality of seeming both vitally important and impossibly remote - remote not so much because they have been resolved, but because they have been accepted as intractable. Their common theme of political violence is today treated with a kind of offhand cynicism, as something that everyone 'knows' to be always wrong in principle, but - given the nature of the world - indispensable in practice. The plays come from a time when some people at least were less willing to accept such contradictory formulations, and were ready to pose the question of political violence seriously, as something that must in principle have an answer. In this sense they reveal not so much that we have moved

on from their preoccupations, as retreated from them, and offer, if nothing else, a reminder that things were quite recently very different - and that if they were so then, they might be again.

At the same time, it also needs to be borne in mind that these works came out of a very distinct historical experience. Their author was a German playwright whose life, like many others', was - in his words 'intruded upon' very early on by some of the better-known catastrophes of European history. Heiner Müller (1929-95) lived most of his life under two dictatorships, first growing up under the Nazi one, and then coming of age and making his career under its Communist successor. In his autobiography he recalls that one of his earliest memories was of the arrest of his father by the Gestapo; through a gap in his bedroom door, the four-year-old Müller watched his father being beaten up and taken away, something he describes as a 'key scene' for the work that would follow. It also perhaps played a role in his decision to remain in East Germany after the rest of his family had emigrated. This was, he later claimed, was a consciously political decision, and made with few illusions; though the East German regime was clearly a dictatorship, it was, as he put it, 'a dictatorship against the people who had damaged my childhood'. Though it was far from certain that it would actually build a better society, it was at least an instance of 'the new bad... and that was better than the comfortable old. That was my position at the time.'

It was a precarious position, not least because the dictatorship had little patience for critical or even ambiguous support. But it was probably not Müller's only reason for staying either; equally important to him must have been the presence of Bertolt Brecht in the new state, who had returned after the war to settle in East Berlin. Brecht's influence on Müller's work

cannot be overestimated, and much of it is concerned with developing the new dramatic forms devised by the older playwright. Müller's earliest plays are a series of attempts to combine Brechtian dramatic methods with the socialist realist aesthetics prescribed by the new Communist state. Even at this stage, however, a tension between the two is already detectable. For Brecht's concept of drama were inherently critical; it aimed at getting audiences to examine, reflect on and imagine alternatives to what they saw on stage. Socialist realism, by contrast - at least as it was understood by the East German authorities - was essentially an affirmative aesthetic, concerned with holding up examples for its audiences to admire and emulate. Müller's early so-called 'production plays', which deal with the challenges of building socialism in the German Democratic Republic, embody this tension. The challenges they face - acute material shortages, a working class distrustful of the authorities that claim to govern in their name - seem almost insurmountable, while the solutions they find to them are only too clearly imperfect and unstable. Thus *Der Lohndrucker* (*The Scab*, 1957), his first major play, has as its hero the stock socialist realist figure of the model factory worker who inspires his workmates to meet the production plan; but halfway through it is revealed that the same hero worked just as enthusiastically for a Nazi munitions firm during the war, drastically undermining the 'moral example' he sets. Müller's next play, *Korrektur* (*Correction*, 1958), went even further, showing an honest Party official who falls foul of corrupt working practices in the building industry. Though his talent was quickly recognised, he became subject to increasing political criticism, so much so that he was forced to rewrite *Korrektur* before its performance would be permitted. However, it was his third play, *Die Umsiedlerin* (*The Resettler*, 1961), a

comedy about the government's land reform policy, that evidently persuaded the authorities its author had gone too far, and needed to be made an example of. Accused of 'counter-revolutionary and anti-Communist tendencies', it was closed down on after its opening night, and its actors and director forced to perform public self-criticisms. Müller himself was expelled from the Writers' Union, placing him under an effective ban from publishing or staging any of his work.

There followed several years of financial hardship and professional isolation, during which Müller's efforts to get his work back on stage or in print were repeatedly frustrated. It was also a time of personal tragedy; after his next major play, *Der Bau* (*The Building Site*, 1966) was rejected from the theatre, Müller's wife and collaborator Inge took her own life. The three plays in this volume come from this time. In certain respects they develop further themes already present in the earlier works; but in another more obvious way they mark a decisive break with them. The contemporary settings of the 'production plays' are replaced by archaic and mythical ones, their robust demotic dialogue by an archaic language set in rhythmic verse. Perhaps the most important change, though, was in their use of form, for in these works Müller returned to the *Lehrstück* or learning play, a radical form of political theatre had first been developed by Brecht forty years earlier.

All Brecht's theatre sought to instigate radical social change, but none more emphatically than the *Lehrstück*. It stood, so to speak, in the vanguard of his 'non-Aristotelean theatre' which aimed at instilling among audiences a critical consciousness of what they saw on stage by rejecting one of the most basic devices of western theatre, the manipulation of the audience's empathy for its characters. Actors were encouraged, not to

associate themselves with the parts they played, but to 'alienate' themselves from them: to depict rather than embody their characters, to quote their lines rather than enact them. It was a kind of theatre that aimed at breaking the spell of the theatre, a kind that 'revealed its own device' the better to divert audiences' attention away from the fortunes of the individual character to the sober and critical reflection upon his or her actions. To facilitate this, Brecht would divide up the action of his plays into discontinuous scenes, so that the stages of its narrative could be separately analysed and examined.

The *Lehrstück* took these methods and applied them to the presentation of overtly political and social themes, producing an extremely stark and rigorous kind of theatrical text in which everything extraneous had been stripped out. The result has frequently been misunderstood as, in Jonathan Kalb's words, a 'heavy-handed form of ideological indoctrination'. In fact, the *Lehrstück* was anything but this: rather than telling its audiences what to think, it offered them practical means for working out their own thoughts and attitudes towards the subjects presented. The plays primarily did this by rejecting the traditional division of theatre into actors and audience. A *Lehrstück* is a play written first and foremost for performers, not spectators, and the opportunities for learning that it offers require an active involvement. Players would rehearse, perform and discuss its text in a kind of master class, with different performers taking up different roles at different times, and all of them discussing changes and revisions to the text where necessary. As Brecht put it, what a *Lehrstück* had to teach was 'learnt by performing, not watching it'. It therefore did not require a theatre at all, and indeed was conceived for

use in schools and educational institutes, rather than conventional theatre.

It was to this collectivist, participatory, radically democratic form of theatre that Müller turned at a time when his plays had been all but banned from the stage. No doubt there was a deliberate irony in this, but there was also a distinct purpose: the very 'impossibility' of staging such plays made them interesting to him, not only for what it revealed about the society in which he lived, but also about the very possibility of political theatre itself. Reviving the form meant reassessing and critiquing it, as his note at the end of *Mauser* makes clear: the three plays are 'an experimental series' that aims to 'examine/criticise Brecht's theory and practice of the *Lehrstücke*'.

Brecht's plays were written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and were concerned with the critique of bourgeois society and the need to struggle against it. Müller's, by contrast, written forty years later, have as their subject the actual societies that struggle brought into being. Brecht was writing in the aftermath of the October Revolution and the possibilities for social and political transformation it seemed to open up; Müller with the knowledge of how far those possibilities had been disappointed and betrayed, as well as of the crimes and atrocities committed in their name. Thus while Brecht wrote in a context of historical opportunity, Müller's was rather one of missed historical chances. This, as he would later make clear in an interview, had profound consequences for theatre and its practice:

'when the chances are missed, what was a plan for a new world begins differently anew - as dialogue with the dead. [...] Against

the background of world history, for which communism is a requirement, the dialogue stands for a freeing of the past.'

Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, with their 'plan for a new world', spoke directly to the future; Müller's, by contrast, must pursue this task more obliquely, by turning first to the past. Only by coming to terms with it can another route be found out of the dead end of the present. But for this, a very different approach to Brecht's pragmatic, commonsense, matter-of-fact rationalism is required. A 'dialogue with the dead' demands an engagement with the irrational, with magic, incantation and ritual, with dream and nightmare, with paradox and irresolvable contradiction. All of these are to be found Müller's *Lehrstücke*, but perhaps the first paradox to note is between the very form and content of the plays themselves. The *Lehrstück* form presupposed conditions of free and open debate among its performers; but Müller's works combine it with a content that was, at the time of writing, politically taboo. As we have noted, the paradox is deliberate, and draws attention to a fundamental contradiction between the emancipatory claims and repressive reality of the societies of 'real existing socialism'. It also has another consequence: since the subject of the plays cannot be discussed openly, they must assume the form of allegory, an element that was absent from Brecht's original *Lehrstücke*. The *Lehre* or lesson of Müller's plays is allegorical in form, because the practical models of behaviour they offer can only be grasped by a proper understanding of the past. [The *Lehre* of Müller's plays only acquire their real significance in the light of the historical allegory they present. The teaching they offer in part a teaching about the past, because the present can no longer made sense of without reference to it.]

The other striking difference of Müller's plays is their hermeticism. Brecht's works were designed for ease of use: their rigorous, machine-like structure, whereby narrative was divided up into smaller component parts, aimed at serving the needs of their performer-users, enabling them to dismantle and reconstruct them at will. Müller's plays preserve and develop this mechanical quality, but in a quite different direction: rather than a useful tool, they are more like a powerful but sealed engine, one that excludes the intrusion of any human agency. The compulsive, driving rhythms of *The Horatian* and *Mauser* are machinery in which their performers might get trapped rather than contraptions they might adapt for their own use. The texts themselves are awkward, angular, and cumbersome; they do not readily lend themselves to being performed, but if anything operate in opposition to their own staging. Conflict is thus partly shifted from within the text to between text and the physical stage itself; as Müller puts it, the 'translation of text into theatre' should be 'a test of endurance for the participants... the body's struggle against the violence of the expediency of ideas'. While Brecht's plays tend to integrate text and actual performance, making the one open and adaptable to the other, Müller's insist on their incompatibility. Although his note to *Mauser* concludes with detailed suggestions for how the play might be performed, a more accurate description of how he 'envisaged' its performance can be found in a late interview:

Mauser was the first time that I didn't have the slightest idea how it was going to be done on stage. Not the remotest idea. There was a text, and in my imagination there was no space, no stage, no actors for this text, nothing. [...] I mean, basically these are plays or texts only for staging inside my brain or my head. They're performed inside this skull.

Here the collective unity of the *Lehrstück* group of committed activist-players is supplanted by the isolated unity of the author's individual mind, in what appears as an extreme inversion of Brecht's original intentions. The *Lehrstück*, in Müller's handling of it, becomes a kind of negative of itself; something enclosed, uncanny and sinister.

These various mutations - the turn towards allegory, the revival of archaic themes and forms, the growing hermeticism of the texts - might thus be thought of as the outcome of a rigorous test of endurance to which Müller subjected the form; a test that aimed at determining whether a genuinely political theatre could survive in the circumstances in which he wrote. It perhaps is for this reason that they come across as works that exist under such a high degree of formal tension, a tension that seems constantly to threaten to implode and turn them into the opposite of what they were supposed to mean. But at the same time, the tension is a necessary precondition to the clear, consistent and logically developed series of political lessons they aim to convey. For in essence these plays are a set of reflections upon the legacy of Stalinism, and a series of proposals for a politics aimed at addressing it, a politics that calls for pragmatism mixed with idealism, an open debate about the crimes of the past, and maintains the need for a harsh revolutionary ethics while clearly distinguishing this from the ideology that justified the atrocities of Stalinism. It is a politics that, above all, requires a reconception of what it means to be human, one that reveals Müller as a Marxist anti-humanist in the mould of Louis Althusser or Theodor Adorno. In what follows, we shall briefly consider each of these plays in turn.

Philoctetes, the first play in the series, was written over a period of six years, from 1958 to 1964, thus partially predating the period of Müller's 'internal exile'. It is based on a tragedy by Sophocles, and deals with an incident from the Trojan war. On the journey to Troy, Philoctetes saves the Greek fleet from a vengeful sea-god by sustaining a serpent's bite. But the poison from the wound leaves him consumed by ravaging pain, and his cries prevent the Greeks from completing their sacrifice. To save their mission, Odysseus, the expedition's leader, decides to have him marooned on a barren island. Ten years later, with the Trojan war still raging, Odysseus hears a prophecy that the Greeks will not be victorious without Philoctetes' aid. He therefore he returns to the island, accompanied by Achilles' son Neoptolemos, to persuade Philoctetes to follow him back to Troy.

This is the starting point for Müller's play, whose dramatic interest essentially resides in the question of whether its three protagonists will be able to overcome their mutual distrust and loathing to cooperate in their common interest. Neoptolemos, the young idealist, wavers between his commitment to the mission and his ethical qualms about the methods used, a situation complicated by his personal hatred for Odysseus. Philoctetes, embittered and driven half-mad by his years of isolation, sways between his desire to escape the life-in-death of exile, and an understandable reluctance to rejoin the society that put him there. In this situation, Odysseus, the cynical pragmatist, attempts to coordinate these two antagonistic positions to achieve the outcome needed for victory over Troy. The possibility of this emerges and then retreats several times throughout the play, brought on by Odysseus' skilful machinations and then frustrated by Neoptolemos' naïve sense of personal honour. Eventually, the miscarrying of the plan ends in

catastrophe: political expediency forces Neoptolemos to kill Philoctetes, whom he pities, in order to save Odysseus, whom he loathes.

At first sight it might seem that the lesson of the *Lehrstück* is the necessity for Odysseus' political cynicism over the 'individualistic' positions represented by the other two. But as Müller clearly stated in an interview, the play presents 'three false attitudes to reality, to history': Odysseus' position is thus just as false as the others'. And indeed, on closer inspection it becomes clear that he too contributes to the outcome precisely through his attempts to control the situation. For Odysseus' pragmatism is of a kind that has lost sight of its own purpose, and become pure manipulation. The result is that he cannot offer Philoctetes any reason to return with him beyond mere physical survival, and the prospect of being used again in another tactical game. And for Philoctetes, who has already suffered so much from being treated this way, it is ultimately not reason enough to go on living.

Philoctetes has been commonly interpreted as an allegory of the rehabilitation of Party members who were imprisoned or persecuted under Stalin. In the wake of Khrushchev's secret speech, there was growing recognition in eastern bloc countries of the crimes committed under Stalin. But it was recognition of a limited kind: while the injustices were recognised, the deeper reasons behind them, such as the crushing of Party democracy and the exclusion of Soviet citizens from all political decision-making, never were. In the figures of Odysseus and Philoctetes, Müller presents the allegory of a Stalinist Party official trying to bring one of his victims back into a polity that remains committed to the politics of cynical pragmatism that led to his persecution to begin with. Thus the 'correct' attitude to

history that his audience is to derive from the three 'false' ones is that, without a revival of genuine radical politics, the victims of the regime will refuse reintegration back into it.

The next play, *The Horatian*, is both a development and expansion on this theme. Its subject is also taken from the classical past, this time Livy's history of early Rome. The two warring city states, Rome and Alba, find themselves faced by the common threat of an overwhelming Etruscan army. To preserve their strength against this common enemy, they decide to resolve their differences by a single combat between two representatives chosen by lot from each side. Rome chooses a Horatian, Alba a Curiatian; they fight, and the Curiatian is wounded. The Curiatian begs for mercy, reminding the Horatian that he is betrothed to his sister; but the Horatian replies, 'my bride is Rome', and kills his opponent. He returns home victorious, only to find his grieving sister refuses to embrace him. Enraged, he kills her as well, at which point the cheers of the Roman people fall silent. The rest of the play is concerned the their deliberations over what to do with this 'victor-murderer', who has killed 'once for Rome and once not for Rome'.

The Romans are divided over he should be 'honoured as a victor or punished as a murderer'. Several solutions are proposed, including the one that both his victory and crime should be simply forgotten, but these are rejected. Eventually it is determined that the Horatian be judged as both victor and murderer, and honoured and punished as such. Accordingly, he is first crowned with laurels while the entire Roman people kneel before him. Then the laurel crown is torn from his brows and he is beheaded. The same procedure is used in the treatment of his corpse: his reassembled body is borne aloft on his comrades' shoulders, and then thrown to the dogs. Discussion then turns to

how the Horatian is to be remembered by posterity, and the conclusion mirrors the judgement passed upon him. He is to be remembered as both a victor and a murderer, and those who acknowledge the one fact and not of the other are to be punished. This, it becomes clear, is not only a measure aimed at preserving truth and justice but language itself, and the capacity it offers for making sense of the world:

For our words must remain pure. For

A sword can be broken and a man

Can also be broken, but words

Fall irrevocably into the workings of the world

Leaving things knowable or unknowable.

In contrast to *Philoctetes*, *The Horatian* shifts the role of judge of the events from the audience to the performers themselves (an innovation that partly lies behind its combination of all speaking parts into a single verse block, whose lines are to be distributed at the players' own discretion). In an interview, Müller made clear that this change was inspired by contemporary events:

My earlier plan provided for an open end: the audience as judge. At the end of 1968 the freedom of choice no longer seemed to me to be a given... the terribly simple (naïve) solution seemed realistic.

The date of the play is crucial to its allegory. For 1968 was the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of its brief period of reform Communist government known as the 'Prague Spring'. Rome and Alba thus now appear in the guise of the two Communist states, their common enemy the

Etruscans as the western powers facing them. It is notable that Müller's treatment of the allegory does not - as one might expect - clearly come down on the side of the reformists against the conservatives. Rather it proposes a way for both sides to successfully resolve their differences by coming to terms with a common past. The figure of the Horatian is thus revealed as that of Stalin himself - or perhaps more accurately, of the 'Stalinised' Communist parties that were his legacy. Coming to terms with that legacy means grasping in it in its full contradictory nature, as one of both victory - notably over Germany in the Second World War - and murder, of the killings of many thousands of innocent people. At the same time, it also requires the recognition that this resolution will never be complete: there will always be a 'remainder... that cannot be unmade', an irreducible residue of trauma and pain that cannot be made amends for or overcome.

Just as *The Horatian* takes a theme from *Philoctetes* and develops and expands it, so *Mauser* does the same with *The Horatian*, in a process of clarification and refinement that approaches most directly basic problematic behind all three plays, that of revolutionary violence itself. Perhaps this is one reason why *Mauser* feels like a consummation of the series, a sense confirmed by its apparent abandonment of classical allegory for a twentieth century subject-matter taken from the Russian Civil War. But despite this change, *Mauser* remains an allegory like the other two, albeit in a more complex and ambiguous sense than the first two.

Its subject, as Müller informs us in his note, is taken from the Soviet writer Mikhail Sholokhov's novel *Quiet Flows the Don*, and

deals with a Party activist caught up in the violent events of the 'Red Terror' that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. But its more important literary model are Brecht's *Lehrstücke* themselves - its text reads like a bricolage of quotations and allusions from several of these - and most specifically his famous, not to say notorious, *Lehrstück* from 1930, *The Measures Taken*.

The play takes the form of a dialogue between three Communist Activists and a Control Chorus, representing the central Party authorities. The Activists have just returned from a mission to China, where their task has been to spread propaganda among the workers. The mission has been successful, but they report that during the course of it they were forced to kill one of their own supporters. The Activists ask the Chorus to give its judgement on this decision, and the Chorus consents. They then relate their story by performing it on stage in front of this audience. In China, they explain, they meet a young sympathiser - the Young Comrade - who offers to help them in their work. The activists give him a series of tasks to perform - spreading propaganda, arming the workers, organising for an uprising - at which he successively fails. In each case, his failure is caused by an 'excess of humanity': the Young Comrade puts his feelings of empathy - sympathy for the workers and loathing for their oppressors, indignance at their suffering and impatience to end it - before rational reflection and tactical consideration. On each occasion, his comrades discuss with him where he went wrong, and encourage him to do better the next time. His final error, however, is catastrophic: he organises a premature uprising of workers which is brutally suppressed by the authorities. Forced to flee, the activists decide that their only way to evade capture and save the mission is to kill the

Young Comrade and destroy his body. They propose this to him and, having considered the alternatives, he consents. He is shot and thrown into a chalk pit and the mission is saved. The Party committee, having heard their account, approves their action.

Mauser also takes the form of a dialogue between an individual activist, known only as A, and a Chorus, but in this case the task facing them is quite different. They are not preparing the way for a revolutionary uprising, but defending a revolutionary government that has come to power. Their task is no longer the vanguard one of agitational and propaganda work among the masses, but the 'struggle in the rear': the suppression and extermination of the new government's political enemies.

It is a struggle that has simultaneously grown more violent and more abstract than the one in Brecht's play. *Mauser* sets aside all the tactical questions explored in *The Measures Taken* to concentrate on the single issue of political murder. In contrast to the variety and complexity of the tasks the Young Comrade is required to perform, A's have shrunk to the grotesquely repetitive one of endlessly killing prisoners; the process of learning and teaching is here reduced to the monstrous 'lesson... of the bullet'. This alienating and dehumanising work offers few opportunities for lessons, or for considering alternative forms of action, which for A have narrowed to the single choice of killing or not killing, in circumstances where, as the Chorus reminds him, his task 'must be / Performed by someone else if not by you'. At the same time, refusing the task barely seems an option for A at all: the stakes are already too high, the moral pressure too overwhelming, to really act any differently. Meanwhile, this narrowing of the scope for action has been accompanied by a vast expansion in the scope for error. In *The Measures Taken*, the Young Comrade commits three mistakes before

his final, fatal one; A, by contrast, is killed for just one - if mistake it can be called at all. This change in the nature of the revolutionary tasks demanded by the situation also has the effect that the error committed by A is different. While the Young Comrade's mistake arises from an excess of humanity, a placing of empathy before rational calculation, A's might be called an excess of inhumanity, an instance of uncontrollable and violent psychic breakdown, which he is able to anticipate but not avoid.

It is notable that the debate between A and the Chorus is simultaneously one over the concrete immediate issues of the necessity of killing and dying, and the apparently far more abstract one of the definition of a human being, and that it effectively interweaves the two. The paradox of the Revolution is that it is made in the name of a humanity that does not yet exist, a humanity that the very making of the Revolution is supposed to bring into being. A's first appeal against his sentence of death is ultimately that of his own fallibility, which he explains in terms of his own humanity: 'I've made a mistake... I'm human'. But when asked to define what being human means, he can only come up with his own capacity to die, and his desire not to ('I don't want to die'). The Chorus does not consider this definition false, so much as irrelevant. It does not offer a counter-definition, but rather an injunction: that A must learn. What needs to be learnt is that no definition can be given until the preconditions for producing the 'human' are met. And they will not be met unless the political tasks necessary to bring them about are met.

A appears to be able to accept this argument in theory, but in practice it is not enough to sustain him. The sacrifices demanded of him - of his conscience, and then of his life itself

- seem impossible to make in the absence of a guarantee that they will not be made in vain. But it is precisely this that he must act in the absence of. The Chorus' reply to this vital question, the one that might sustain him in his work, is unequivocal, and hardly reassuring: 'We know what you know, you know what we know.' Guarantees are not to be found through definitions or access to special knowledge, but rather through collective praxis: the truth of the situation will be created by their acting upon it.

A is in a sense caught between the existence of what might be called the human as it actually exists, as a suffering, finite being - and the human as it might be. This position - the position of the revolutionary - is one of radical exclusion from both, and it ultimately proves unbearable. Like the Young Comrade in the Measures Taken, it is precisely the suspension of empathy that A cannot sustain; but unlike him, A is able only to ignore his feelings of 'humanity' at the cost of transforming them into their opposite: into an excess of 'inhumanity'; empathy turns into wild aggression.

The mistake that condemns him is not, as with the Young Comrade or his predecessor B, a substantive disobeyal of orders: in the play, A only ever kills those he has been ordered to kill. The difference consists rather in the *manner* in which he kills them, for it is this that which reveals that he is unable any longer to draw the distinction between 'human beings' - which do not yet exist - and 'enemies', which are only too real. It is a matter not of the individuals themselves but the *subjects addressed* by his killing: A's crime is to kill prisoners *as if* they were people (that is to say, with an irrational excess of violence), rather than *as if* they were enemies (that is to say, with proportionate, rational violence). The distinction seems

abstract, but for the Party it is crucial. An inability to distinguish between human being and enemy makes A himself an enemy: it excludes him from the revolutionary collective, and from the future society that collective is trying to create. That, according to the Chorus, is why he has to die.

Like Brecht's play before it, Müller's quickly became the subject of considerable controversy, finding itself condemned, although for very different reasons, in both east and west. The East German authorities took no time in labelling it counter-revolutionary, and *Mauser* became the only one of Müller's plays to be subject to a formal legal ban in his own country. By contrast, several West German critics condemned it as an apologia for revolutionary violence in general, and for Stalin's crimes in particular. The account of its arguments outlined above, however, suggests a quite different conclusion: *Mauser* is neither a condemnation nor a glorification of revolutionary violence, but rather an exploration of its nature and implications.

To see this, it is important to grasp that the argument of the Chorus is emphatically *not* a Stalinist one. For its insistent position of historical ignorance is one that Stalinist ideology would never have tolerated. The Stalinist justification for acts of political violence was always made from a position of privileged knowledge, one that provided the objective meaning of their own and others' actions. In the Stalinist view, the Party can see the present with historical hindsight, as if it occupied some notional future point from which it could look back on the present, revealing it in its 'objective' significance, and guaranteeing the correctness of all the decisions it might take, including political murder.

As we have seen, this is not at all the argument of the Chorus in *Mauser*. Instead of offering certainties, it insists it has no privileged view of things; instead of defining the humanity in whose name the Revolution is being made, it insists that it cannot be known. This is a far harsher position to the Stalinist one, in that it requires that one accept the moral consequences of one's actions in circumstances where one cannot know what those consequences will be. Indeed, if anyone's position could be called Stalinist in *Mauser*, it is that of A himself, who demands to know 'here and now' what a human being is and when the Revolution will eventually triumph, and who finally asks for assurance that his death, and the deaths of those he has killed, will not have been in vain.

Thus *Mauser* rejects both the liberal and Stalinist positions regarding revolutionary violence. The methods of the revolution are not to be justified in terms of its inevitable triumph or the 'objective guilt' of its enemies. We might recall at this point the manner in which the *Lehrstück* is supposed to be performed: the argument it sets out is not designed to be passively accepted by an audience, but analysed and debated by those performing it. This does not preclude them rejecting the Chorus' arguments, or claiming answers to the questions that it considers unanswerable. But it is at this point too, the present in which it is performed, that the question of its allegory poses itself most relevantly. *Mauser* clearly alludes to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, that paroxysm of blood-letting that finished off for good the revolutionary hopes of October, but it is not itself an allegory of those events. Rather it might be seen as a utopian or perhaps counter-factual allegory - an allegory of events that never happened, but might have. For

in it, it is the revolutionary collective that triumphs, and the Stalinist reactionaries that are led to the wall.