

# Music, the GDR Military and the GDR Today in the Works of Walter Flegel

Tom Smith

Worcester College, Oxford/Institute of Modern Languages Research, London

## Abstract

This article analyses music in two novels by Walter Flegel from the 1980s set in the GDR army. Flegel shows a diverse range of music involved in the everyday life of the armed forces, and this music exemplifies the way in which characters develop identities in dialogue with both official and popular culture. Classical, folk and rock styles form part of individuals' self-expression, but also integrate them into the military institution. Flegel's writing highlights the ongoing importance of socialist realism in the 1980s, and the multiple musical styles he presents offer a model for approaching the late GDR that does justice to the simultaneity and mutual influence that existed between varying and even contradictory styles and movements. This analysis builds on recent trends in GDR studies to rehabilitate socialist realism, while suggesting that official and institutional culture continued to influence individual identities and even popular culture into the late 1980s.

Recent depictions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have begun reassessing its importance today, over twenty-five years after its collapse. Repressive institutions are at the forefront of such depictions, as writers and filmmakers explore how individuals build personal identities in dialogue with official and popular culture. A prominent recent example, the television series *Deutschland 83* (2015), describes a soldier from the GDR's National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*, or NVA) who becomes a mole in the West German army.<sup>1</sup> The series focuses on similarities between the two militaries, perhaps to attract younger, western audiences with little knowledge of the GDR, but the East-West comparison also challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Berger and Samira Rads, dirs, *Deutschland 83* (Universal, 2015).

viewers to compare the GDR's complexities and contradictions to present-day nations. The programme's contemporary appeal is enhanced by its 1980s soundtrack, but this music is not just a stylish retro feature. Many depictions of the GDR have set popular and youth culture in opposition to official culture, with soldiers as a conventional symbol of the state.<sup>2</sup> By instead coupling NVA service with pop and rock from both German states, *Deutschland 83* presents individuals who are neither wholly in opposition to GDR institutions, nor cut off from popular culture. Involvement with institutions is shown as the product of complex negotiations, with popular and official culture intimately, and often cynically, connected. *Deutschland 83* suggests that the interplay between music and the GDR's military institutions, if explored in texts from the GDR itself, could shed new light on the state's diverse cultural landscape and point to new directions in scholarship.

This chapter focuses on two novels by Walter Flegel (1934–2011), *Es gibt kein Niemandsland* [*There Is No No-Man's-Land*] (1980) and *Das einzige Leben* [*The Only Life*] (1987), both set in the NVA.<sup>3</sup> Flegel's treatment of music exemplifies characters' negotiations of institutions and individual identities, and challenges oppositions between official and popular culture, and between conformity and dissidence. The novels show officials reacting to musical trends, suggesting that political influence on the arts was not unidirectional. Flegel demonstrates the mutual influence of military institutions and civilian society, the popular and official spheres, and different art forms. Such interplay creates and shapes individual identities in ways that research into the relationship between the individual and the GDR state has yet to understand fully.

Flegel's writing challenges debates around GDR literature and music, particularly regarding socialist realism, a style recently rehabilitated by scholars. Perhaps the earliest such

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<sup>2</sup> Leander Haußmann, dir., *Sonnenallee* (Highlight, 1999), is one prominent example.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Flegel, *Es gibt kein Niemandsland* (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1980); *Das einzige Leben* (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1987).

approach was by Julia Hell, who in *Post-Fascist Fantasies* (1997) reacted against Wolfgang Emmerich's categorization of socialist realist literature as a 'Vormoderne' [pre-modernism] in his 1988 article 'Gleichzeitigkeit' [simultaneity].<sup>4</sup> Hell argues that western critics have privileged later GDR literature by using formulations such as 'critical' or 'socialist modernism' which cemented oppositions between conformism and dissidence, realism and modernism, formal conservatism and experimentation.<sup>5</sup> Stephen Brockmann has built on Hell's analysis, calling for renewed study of the early GDR and arguing that East German literature is essential for understanding the post-1945 European cultural and political landscape.<sup>6</sup> Hell and Brockmann have reinstated socialist realism from the early GDR and analysed its complexities as well as its shortcomings, and this chapter is indebted to their approaches.

Yet certain assumptions about socialist realism remain, resulting in continued neglect of writers such as Flegel and a simplified view of the GDR's diverse cultural scene. For example, Hell's return to the GDR's '*foundational narratives of antifascism*' is justified by their importance for Christa Wolf's later work. Hell establishes the modernity of socialist realism and its legacy, but retains a chronological movement away from socialist realism.<sup>7</sup> Brockmann, too, by ending with the 1959 Bitterfeld Conference, suggests that subsequent literature began to abandon socialist realist models and political commitment.<sup>8</sup> However, socialist realism did not disappear after 1959, nor even with Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* [*The Quest for Christa T.*] (1968). In certain genres, including military fiction,

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Emmerich, 'Gleichzeitigkeit: Vormoderne, Moderne und Postmoderne in der Literatur der DDR', in Heinz Ludwig Arnold, ed., *Bestandsaufnahme Gegenwartsliteratur* (Munich: Text+Kritik, 1988), 193–211. See Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 11–13.

<sup>5</sup> Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, 13–17.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Brockmann, *The Writers' State: Constructing East German Literature, 1945–1959* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), 1–23.

<sup>7</sup> Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Brockmann, *The Writers' State*, 6.

socialist realism remained influential well into the 1980s for exploring relationships between the individual, society, and GDR institutions.

To understand how Flegel's 1980s socialist realism fits among the conflicts and contradictions in GDR culture, it is helpful to return to Emmerich's 'Gleichzeitigkeit' essay. His attempts to categorize GDR literature according to its modernity prevent him from discussing the 'simultaneity' of literary movements and traditions implied by his title, and he and other scholars soon abandoned an interest in simultaneity after reunification in favour of periodizations and generational models.<sup>9</sup> Yet Emmerich's title encourages us to view the GDR like any other cultural environment, with numerous traditions existing simultaneously and in dialogue. This approach allows works to be historicized without recourse to models of progress towards and beyond modernism. Karen Leeder has recently described 'a spectrally split mode' of contemporary writing that allows for multiple interpretations of the GDR and its 'haunting' of post-reunification Germany. She uses Michael Wesely's long-exposure images of Berlin as a visual demonstration of the GDR's spectral 'afterlife', represented by the ghostly impressions of demolished and newly constructed architecture in Wesely's images.<sup>10</sup> Leeder's approach invites an analysis of the GDR even before its collapse that acknowledges the coexistence and interaction of different artistic movements and media throughout the state's history.

Flegel was among the GDR's most prominent writers of military fiction. The NVA was formally established in 1956 and conscription was introduced in 1962. Conscription was presented as essential not only for defence, but for creating so-called 'socialist soldier personalities' who would return to their families and workplaces as good socialist citizens.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Emmerich's and other contributions to Karen Leeder, ed., *Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), which offer various conflicting periodizations or models based on generations. Emmerich even argues for the *homogeneity* of GDR literature.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Leeder, 'After-Images—Afterlives: Remembering the GDR in the Berlin Republic', in Leeder, ed., *Rereading East Germany*, 214–37 (here 230–3).

<sup>11</sup> See *Vom Sinn des Soldatseins: Ein Ratgeber für den Soldaten*, 16<sup>th</sup> edn (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, [c. 1975]), 92–3.

In Mary Fulbrook's terms, military service was an essential part of men's 'participation' in the GDR dictatorship.<sup>12</sup> Flegel joined the NVA in its early years and served as a Lieutenant-Colonel until retiring in 1986, apparently out of frustration with the NVA's reluctance to acknowledge its problems.<sup>13</sup> Flegel's career thus echoes a pattern of conflict with official cultural policy usually associated with the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, given that Flegel's work deviates little from socialist realist norms, his novels signal a need to update official culture to properly address societal problems. Flegel's work largely affirms the NVA's values and place in society, but he explores with increasing urgency the complex relationships between military and civilian milieus, institutions and individuals, and the NVA and the arts. Bernard Decker has grouped Flegel's fiction among works of supposedly dubious aesthetic quality by NVA officers. Yet he also points to improvements in the 1980s when writers turned to 'die die gesamte Gesellschaft betreffenden Schwierigkeiten und Probleme—eingebunden und verwoben in den Alltagsdienst der Streitkräfte' [the difficulties and problems that affected the whole of society—incorporated into and interwoven with everyday service in the armed forces].<sup>15</sup> Flegel's interest in the NVA's relationship with wider society began before the 1980s, but his works since *Es gibt kein Niemandsland* prioritize most centrally the interconnectedness of military and civilian society.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Stefan Kahlau, *Volksarmee im Wandel? Die Darstellung der NVA im DEFA-Spielfilm von den 1950er bis zu den 1970er Jahren* (Munich: Akademischer Verlagsgemeinschaft München, 2015), 95. See also Rüdiger Wenzke's brief comment: 'Zwischen Bestenabzeichen und Armeeknast: Wahrnehmungen und Forschungen zum Innenleben der DDR-Volksarmee', in Hans Ehlert and Matthias Rogg, eds, *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR: Forschungsfelder, Ergebnisse, Perspektiven* (Berlin: Links, 2004), 497–530 (here 500).

<sup>14</sup> Brockmann, *The Writers' State*, 336.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Decker, *Gewalt und Zärtlichkeit: Einführung in die Militärbelletristik der DDR, 1956–1986* (New York: Lang, 1990), 61. All translations are my own.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Claus Dobberke, dir., *Ein Katzensprung*, screenplay by Walter Flegel (DEFA, 1977). See Tom Smith, 'Narrative and the Body in Uniform: East German Military Masculinities in Claus Dobberke's *Ein Katzensprung* and Jürgen Fuchs's *Fassonschnitt*', *Modern Language Review*, 110 (2015), 204–21.

Music is central to Flegel's explorations of the relationship between military and civilian values. As in literary studies, scholarship on GDR music has moved away from privileging supposedly dissident works, especially rock and punk, over works more overtly committed to socialism. For example, Laura Silverberg identifies a 'nuanced relationship between political ideology and musical language' and challenges any opposition between conformity and dissidence.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, David Tompkins has shown how interactions between state and society shaped 1950s concert programming.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, musicologists share certain assumptions about socialist realism with literary scholars. Like Hell, Silverberg focuses on socialist realism's influence on canonical figures: composers Hanns Eisler and Paul Dessau. And like Brockmann, Silverberg and Tompkins identify socialist realism with the early GDR and neglect its continuing importance after the 1960s. More fundamentally, musicologists tend to separate popular and classical music, generally justifying analysis of one by citing its neglect (by GDR authorities, by scholars) in comparison with the other.<sup>19</sup> More recently, however, musicologists have explored the co-existence of diverse trends. Elaine Kelly, for example, distinguishes 'socialist modernism' and 'late socialism' but insists that 'the two currents could, and did, coexist'.<sup>20</sup> This move chimes with my approach: music in Flegel's work offers a blueprint for understanding GDR artistic cultures as plural, consisting in many mutually influential strands, and always in dialogue with the institutions, ideals, and failings of 'really existing socialism'.

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<sup>17</sup> Laura Silverberg, 'Between Dissonance and Dissidence: Socialist Modernism in the German Democratic Republic', *Journal of Musicology*, 26 (2009), 44–84.

<sup>18</sup> David Tompkins, 'Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society', *German History*, 30 (2012), 412–28.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Kyle Frackman and Larson Powell, 'Introduction: Music and Heritage in the German Democratic Republic', in Frackman and Powell, eds, *Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic: Production and Reception* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), 1–19 (here 1).

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic: Narratives of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22–3.

In *Es gibt kein Niemandsland*, music is soon established as a link between soldiers and their civilian surroundings. The novel centres on Colonel Karl Schanz overseeing a divisional manoeuvre. Flegel's narrative moves between military and civilian milieus, following a specific platoon and Schanz's family in the garrison town. Frequent shifts in perspective and between plot elements echo the broad Tolstoyan narrative attempted by socialist realist classics such as Erik Neutsch's *Spur der Steine* [*Traces of Stones*] (1964).<sup>21</sup> Like many socialist realist writers, Flegel employs an apparently omniscient third-person narrative instance that often inhabits characters' perspectives and rarely draws attention to itself. Several elements link the novel's strands: the manoeuvre determines the experiences of civilian and military characters alike; all are presented in relation to Schanz; and music connects the three major characters: Schanz, his daughter Friederike, and young Private Fichtner.

The novel opens with Friederike musing on the soldiers dancing each evening in the bar where she works. She describes how the soldiers use music to cover their insecurities and their disappointment at not finding dance partners:

Finger trommeln den Takt der Musik gegen die Tischplatten, und Füße stampfen ihn auf den Dielen mit. Gesang und Gläsergeräusche. Bewegung an der Oberfläche, während ein Steinchen mehr auf den Grund sinkt, Zuwachs an Bitterkeit<sup>22</sup>

[Fingers are drumming the beat of the music onto the tabletops, and feet are stamping along on the floorboards. Singing and the sounds of glasses; movements on the surface while one more pebble sinks to the bottom, an increase in bitterness]

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<sup>21</sup> Erik Neutsch, *Spur der Steine* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1964).

<sup>22</sup> Flegel, *Es gibt kein Niemandsland*, 6. Hereafter referenced in the text.

Soldiers' often frosty reception by local communities features prominently in post-reunification memoirs, but Flegel is unusual within the GDR for so candidly depicting soldiers being rejected.<sup>23</sup> Friederike sees through soldiers' façades to their loneliness and frustration, with the poignant sinking stone metaphor encouraging empathy with their emotions. Flegel also uses Friederike's thoughts to introduce her relationship with Fichtner, describing their sexual encounter after one such dance and establishing a conflict between her rejection of Fichtner in the opening pages and his naive ongoing quest to win her over. The novel thus begins by suggesting a connection between music and sexuality, even licentiousness, before undermining this link and associating music with soldiers' difficulties finding love or acceptance.

The novel's first chapter also introduces Colonel Schanz, whose military career first seems at odds with his previous ambitions as a pianist. Before leaving for the manoeuvre, Schanz contemplates his memories. He remembers the accident that forced him to stop playing:

Wenn er damals weiter zur Musikschule gegangen wäre, wenn er nach dem Sturz mit dem Fahrrad, bei dem er sich das Handgelenk gebrochen hat, den Klavierunterricht nicht aufgegeben hätte... (15)

[If he had gone on to music school back then, if he had not given up piano lessons after breaking his wrist in the motorcycle accident...]

Despite the wistful ellipsis, Schanz seems alienated from his piano playing, as if contrasting his military role with his earlier creativity. He imagines himself playing, 'als würde er einem

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. Stefan Wolter, *Hinterm Horizont allein—Der 'Prinz' von Prora: Erzählungen eines NVA-Bausoldaten* (Halle: Projekte, 2005).

anderen über die Schulter sehen' [as if he were looking over someone else's shoulder], and feels that '[s]eine Hände haben sich verändert. Schwer sind sie geworden und die langen Finger ungelenk vom Umgang mit groben Dingen, mit Geschützen und Panzern, Granaten und Schaufeln' [his hands have changed. They have become heavy and the long fingers awkward from handling rough things, weapons and tanks, grenades and shovels] (15–16). Yet music is entirely compatible with the military hierarchy, as a Major-General demonstrates when he forces Schanz to play (17). Moreover, Schanz applies his discipline and self-control to his dreams about piano playing: he consciously creates dream-like situations in which he 'macht sich zu seinem eigenen Medium' [turns himself into his own subject] (15). He has reached a peaceful accommodation with his previous life as a musician: 'Schanz ist diesen Träumen gegenüber längst nicht mehr empfindlich. Sie gehörten zu ihm, sind gute Erinnerungen, die sein Gedächtnis der Vergessenheit entreißt' [Schanz has long ceased to be affected by these dreams. They were part of him, good memories that his mind wrests from oblivion] (17). This comfortable yet authoritative approach to his musical past exemplifies the quiet power that he exerts in both family and military milieus. In Friederike's words, '[s]eine Ruhe und Konsequenz, seine Logik, die gedankliche wie auch die gefühlsmäßige, gleichen sonst vieles aus, machen nachdenklich und überzeugen' [his calm and consistency, his logic in both thoughts and feelings balance things out, encourage careful reflection and are highly persuasive] (96). When Friederike attends a concert, she sums up the link between music, order and control that Flegel links to Schanz: 'Die Musik rührt Friederike zuallererst durch ihre Ordnung und Poesie an' [above all, the music moves Friederike with its order and poetry] (86). Thus, Schanz's skills as a pianist, father and commander are woven together to depict him as a leader who is kind, cultivated, quietly authoritative and above all self-controlled.

With Fichtner, Flegel goes further, suggesting that playing music is not just compatible with military discipline and command structures, but can even integrate conscripts into the

military unit. One storyline describes Fichtner's difficulties adjusting to military life. In contrast to the popular music in Friederike's reflections or Schanz's classical piano, Fichtner's comrades associate him with folk traditions because of his harmonica:

Er ist ein wandelndes Liederbuch, denn er kennt fast alle Texte auswendig und behauptet, in seinem Heimatdorf würden abends auf dem Dorfplatz noch Volkslieder gesungen. Das erscheint den anderen im Zug so kurios und außergewöhnlich wie Fichtner selber und sein Beruf. (51)

[He is a walking songbook, who knows almost all the lyrics by heart and claims that in his village people still sing folk songs in the village square in the evening. To the others in his platoon, this seems just as curious and extraordinary as Fichtner himself and his job.]

The connection between Fichtner and his civilian occupation as a shepherd is continually reinforced, emphasizing his difficulties adjusting to military life. Fichtner's comrades routinely refer to him as 'der Schäfer' [the shepherd] (ibid.), and his military experiences are filtered through metaphors of sheep and shepherding. For example, marching in formation is described in free indirect style as 'mitgehen [...] wie das einzelne Schaf mit der Herde' [going along ... like the lone sheep with the herd] (48). References to music characterize Fichtner as out of place in the NVA; the 'Liederbuch' metaphor turns him into a collection of music and associates his folk melodies with his very identity. Soldiers' bewilderment at his connection with folk culture marks him as rural, anachronistic, but also a source of fascination: the words 'kurios und außergewöhnlich' encapsulate this ambivalence.

Fichtner's playing gradually becomes less of an idiosyncrasy and eventually integrates him into the collective. Flegel uses Fichtner's folk tunes in two ways. First, he brings soldiers

together with his familiar, traditional songs. His comrade Private Litosch is surprised when he remembers 'Am Brunnen vor dem Tore' [At the Well by the Gate] as Fichtner begins to play it, a folk melody originating in Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* [*Winter's Journey*] (1827), presumably chosen for its reflective melancholy. The narrative moves from Litosch's perspective into a more generalizing perspective to evaluate Fichtner's playing: 'Der Schäfer bläst die Töne rein und leise, und manchmal klingt es, als ob er Flöte spiele' [The shepherd plays the notes purely and softly, and it sometimes sounds like he is playing a flute] (252). This passage still seems like free indirect style, but the lack of a single perspective suggests that the unit is united by a shared impression. When a corporal from a neighbouring vehicle joins in Fichtner and Litosch's discussion of the song, Flegel demonstrates the broader unifying effect of Fichtner's music outside his own platoon.

The second function of Fichtner's folk music is to integrate him into the unit. The manoeuvre ball at the end of the novel completes Fichtner's development of an identity as a soldier, redirecting his efforts in pursuing Friederike into the cause of military cohesion. Fichtner is not invited to the ball, but in a scene reminiscent of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1837), he sneaks up to the building, sees Friederike dancing with a Major, and realizes that she has chosen him instead of Fichtner. He is overcome with emotion, draws his knife, and runs away as if to harm himself. Litosch and another soldier chase Fichtner, stop him, and encourage him to come into the ballroom and play his harmonica. His playing silences the room, and the music is linked to memory, just like Schanz's piano playing earlier in the novel: 'Die Melodie zieht wie eine Erinnerung durch den Raum, Erinnerung an etwas, das nie wiederkommt' [The melody floats through the room like a memory, a memory of something never to return] (334). The effect is a powerful demonstration of camaraderie, as the soldiers begin humming along: 'Die Mädchen und Frauen schweigen, überlassen das Lied ganz den Männern' [The women and girls stay silent, leaving the song just for the men] (*ibid.*). Flegel

shows Fichtner's folk music binding the men together in a masculine community supported by but ultimately separate from women and the civilian sphere. Fichtner, meanwhile, finally finds his place in the unit as the others join his song.

The pathos of this scene is exaggerated and the depiction of music idealized, yet *Es gibt kein Niemandsland* suggests initial conclusions regarding the role of music in Flegel's work. First, it demonstrates the difficulty in separating military and civilian roles: Schanz's power and control draw on his musical discipline just as Fichtner's development is linked to his folk music and shepherding. Second, the connotations of different musical genres, from classical to folk and even popular music, are used to reflect and shape characters' individual and collective identities. Little has been written about music in the NVA, and scholars generally focus on its military music and its resident musical troupe, the Erich-Weinert-Ensemble.<sup>24</sup> Flegel does not associate the military with stereotypical military marches: his soldiers' identities are shaped by a wide range of styles, each highlighting characters' relationship to military service in a different way. Finally, Flegel repeatedly introduces and then undermines the idea that music is opposed to military identities. He shows music as part of the military's institutional framework and soldiers' development of military identities, breaking down oppositions between civilian and military identities, popular and officially sanctioned music, and conformity and opposition.

Flegel further explores these concerns in his later novel, *Das einzige Leben*, which centres on a rock group, Python, hired for a tour of NVA installations. After a long-term illness, Major Rolf Martin has just returned to the NVA in time for a manoeuvre. His illness seems to have destabilized his military identity, and he views the manoeuvre as a chance to prove that he has recovered his fitness and appearance: 'Für die Übung hatte er sich vorgenommen, die

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<sup>24</sup> E.g. Manfred Heidler, 'Die Militärmusik der DDR zwischen Ideologie, sozialistischer Wehrerziehung und künstlerischem Selbstverständnis', in Sabine Mecking and Yvonne Wasserloos, eds, *Musik, Macht, Staat: Kulturelle, soziale und politische Wandlungsprozesse in der Moderne* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2012), 239–58; Rüdiger Wenzke, *Ulbrichts Soldaten: Die Nationale Volksarmee 1956 bis 1971* (Berlin: Links, 2013), 631–8.

kränkliche Sauberkeit seiner Hände loszuwerden, die blasse, erschlaffte Haut frisch und gesund zu straffen' [He had undertaken to get rid of the sickly cleanliness of his hands for the manoeuvre, to firm up the pale, drooping skin to make it fresh and healthy].<sup>25</sup> To Martin's dismay, his superiors instead assign him to supervise Python. Initially he rejects their music and its relevance to the NVA, while the musicians dismiss Martin as a representative of stuffy officialdom. The novel describes the two parties learning about one another: the musicians come to accept Martin and the NVA, just as he comes to appreciate their music and its potential in military training. This rapprochement is emphasized by Martin's extramarital affair with the lead singer, Hannelore. The novel opens after Martin's wife has left on holiday and closes before she returns, so that the plot develops as a sort of wish fulfilment. The older Martin develops a fantasy relationship, apparently without negative consequences, with the young Hannelore, who becomes a catalyst in Martin's increasing understanding of rock music and himself.

The theme of music is introduced with Frau Voß, wife of the regiment's cultural attaché and Martin's neighbour, singing operatic arias in the next-door apartment. Martin grudgingly tolerates her singing, and she jokes about his philistinism: 'Sie halten wohl nur was von Marschmusik?' [I suspect you only like military marches?] (14). This opening scene deals in condensed form with stereotypes about music and the military. Martin's stiff and formulaic approach to discipline is associated with marches, a central part of the NVA's musical life which Flegel has ironized elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Rock music is treated with disdain and incomprehension by Martin and other officers. At the time of publication, rock and pop were emerging as a subject of mainstream discussion and academic interest in the GDR, and Flegel draws on these

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<sup>25</sup> Flegel, *Das einzige Leben*, 11. Hereafter referenced in the text.

<sup>26</sup> See Bodo Fürneisen, dir., *Zum Teufel mit Harbolla: Ein Geschichte aus dem Jahre 1956*, based on a treatment by Walter Flegel (DEFA, 1989).

debates in depicting officials' ambivalence towards rock.<sup>27</sup> The novel suggests that rock could appeal to soldiers, while musicians might learn from the military's values.

Hannelore initially resents the tour and views the NVA as unnatural: 'Wenn sie erwachsene Männer strammstehen oder andere Bewegungen ausüben sieht, die der körperlichen Harmonie des Menschen widersprechen, wird sie mißtrauisch' [She gets suspicious whenever she sees grown men standing to attention or moving in other ways that go against the physical harmony of the human body] (25). By contrast, Hannelore and her singing are associated throughout the novel with natural imagery and nudity, as well as temptation and seduction due to the snake costume she wears on stage. Yet the General who meets with Python emphasizes that the group's task is not to distract soldiers but to politicize them:

'wir dürfen einfach nichts auslassen, was den Soldaten hilft, jeder Stunde ihres Dienstes, der oft unvorstellbar hart ist, Sinn zu geben, das Land zu lieben, in dem wir leben, wie es in einer Reihe eurer Lieder geschieht' (30)

[we simply cannot rule out anything that might help soldiers find meaning in each moment of their service, which is often unimaginably arduous, and help them to love the country we live in, and this is exactly what happens in many of your songs]

The military's aims in the novel correspond with GDR youth policy earlier in the 1980s, when the annual 'Rock für den Frieden' [Rock for Peace] festival enlisted rock and youth culture in efforts to produce committed young socialists.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Peter Wicke, *Rockmusik: Zur Ästhetik und Soziologie eines Massenmediums* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Rauhut, *Rock in der DDR* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2002), 94–5.

Python's music is at first loud, overpowering and sensual, accompanied by Hannelore's snake dance: 'Der harte Klang, an dem alle Instrumente mit voller Lautstärke beteiligt sind, schlägt in die Zuhörer, und sie zucken zusammen wie nach einer Explosion' [the hard sound, produced by all the instruments together at full volume, hits the listeners and they jump as if there had been an explosion] (39–40). The crowd does not warm to their heavy rock, and Hannelore instead chooses a folk-inspired song, 'Die Linde' [The Linden Tree], apparently inspired by 'Am Brunnen vor dem Tore'. As with Fichtner's playing of the original folk song in *Es gibt kein Niemandsland*, Python's acoustic rock version causes 'eine Bewegung aufeinander zu' [a movement towards each other] for the band and the soldiers (42). The combination of musical traditions in this song gestures once again to the simultaneity of musical styles: a classical *Lied* that had entered the folk repertoire and now inspires rock music. Flegel gives the rock song's entire refrain, which reveals the influence of official policies and clichés:

Der Baum soll wachsen und die Liebe auch,

und wachsen soll das Kind im Bauch.

Es regt sich schon und zeigt: Ich bin am Leben!

Und was für eines wollen wir ihm geben? (ibid.)

[Let the tree and our love grow, and let the child grow in the womb. It's moving  
as if to say: I am alive! And what sort of life do we want it to have?]

The Linden tree often connotes togetherness, love, and community. Yet whereas Wilhelm Müller's poem 'Der Lindenbaum' and Schubert's setting link the tree with memory, love-sickness, and melancholy, Python associates it with childbirth, growth and a responsibility to

future generations.<sup>29</sup> The song thus draws on the ecological and anti-war movements in the 1980s as well as GDR rhetoric concerning a utopian communist future. Rock music may be at odds with the NVA in some respects, as soldiers are initially unresponsive to the hard sound, but Flegel also shows the potential for rock to develop engaged ‘socialist soldier personalities’.

Python’s style gradually changes through their encounters with Martin and their audiences. For example, the drummer, Benny, produces another peace song beginning ‘Ich habe den Frieden gesehn, | ein lächelndes Kindergesicht’ [I have seen peace, | its smiling, childlike face] (167–8), and the musicians praise the lyrics but disagree over whether it is even a rock song. The change in Martin’s relationship with the group is clear when the musicians ask Martin for his opinion and, surprised, he responds: ‘ob Rock oder nicht, dafür weiß ich von Musik zu wenig. [...] Aber ich meine auch, das Lied muß verstanden werden, jedes Wort muß zu hören sein’ [whether it’s rock or not, I don’t know enough about music to say. ... But I agree that the song needs to be understood; every word needs to be heard] (169). Martin is flattered to be included in the band’s creative process, and NVA’s effect on their music is clear in the stylistic shift of Benny’s song. Unlike the loud, rhythmic, wordless rock of their first concert, here the song’s lyrics and message are judged too important for a loud accompaniment, blurring the boundaries between rock and other genres. Contact between military figures and rock musicians seems to enhance the music and make it more complex as rigid divisions between genres give way to an organic music-making process that draws on multiple conventions: the *Lied*, rock, but also the acoustic, folk-inspired tradition of Wolf Biermann and a socialist tradition of collaborative art.

At the premiere of Benny’s song, Python show their ability to adapt at the last minute to an unexpected audience of older couples and even children. As Martin notices, ‘Die

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<sup>29</sup> See Susan Youens, *Retracing a Winter’s Journey: Schubert’s Winterreise* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 151–69.

Lautstärke ist zurückgenommen, und nur wenige reine Musiktitel sind im Programm geblieben' [The volume has been turned down and there are few instrumental songs left in the programme] (204). Hannelore even replaces her snake costume with a more reserved, but still stylish dress: 'Heute trägt sie ein beigefarbenes langes Kleid mit engem Rock und Ärmeln, die bis an die Handgelenke reichen, aber die Schultern frei lassen' [Today she is wearing a long, beige dress with a narrow skirt and sleeves down to her wrists but off the shoulders] (203). These changes correspond with Benny's new song: the lyrics carry a message that the volume, costumes and rock showmanship of earlier concerts supposedly risk obscuring. In short, their aesthetic comes in line with the NVA's educational intentions. Yet it does so not because of orders or prescriptions, but a process of artistic development caused by their encounter with the army.

This concert is also an important moment for Martin's development, as he realizes the value of popular music and its place alongside the NVA in GDR society:

Rock und Armee begegnen sich. Die Musik, die Gruppe und Hannelore gehören zu dem, wofür sie die Uniform tragen und sich bei langen, schweren Übungen quälen (205)

[Rock and the army meet. Music, this band and Hannelore are some of the reasons why they are wearing their uniforms and why they struggle through long, arduous manoeuvres]

Martin reflects on what he has learned from Hannelore, and even envies the band for their close relationships and uninhibited, intense creativity: 'Sie können ausgelassen sein bis zur Ekstase, wenn sie Musik machen, und sie schaffen gemeinsam Texte und Melodien, die weder läppisch noch oberflächlich sind' [They can let go to the point of ecstasy when they are making music,

and they create lyrics and melodies together that are neither silly nor superficial] (207). After this concert, Hannelore and Martin develop their affair, with Hannelore even taking Martin shopping for civilian clothes, an important symbolic moment in his realization that he cannot separate his military role from wider society. The novel's message that the military is part of a wider, more complex society, is thus portrayed through the loosening of genre divisions between rock, classical, and folk styles.

Flegel's novels focus on the intricate interconnections between the NVA and wider society, suggesting that military values are beneficial outside the base but also that the NVA must adapt and avoid dogmatically insisting on certain policies. As one Lieutenant remarks in *Es gibt kein Niemandsland*, '[i]mmer wieder wird von der Herausbildung sozialistischer Soldatenpersönlichkeiten gesprochen. [...] In Wirklichkeit aber verbirgt sich dahinter bei dreißig Soldaten dreißigmal etwas anderes' [everyone talks about creating socialist soldier personalities. ... In fact, these take thirty different forms for every thirty soldiers].<sup>30</sup> The prominence of music in Flegel's explorations of such questions may stem from the perceived contrast between artistic creation and the NVA's harsh and often dogmatic training regime. By focusing on musicians, Flegel disrupts these assumptions, depicting music as a social practice that brings soldiers together, shows how their civilian selves are part of their military identities, and thus binds them simultaneously to military and civilian society. Despite the affirmative and conciliatory tone of these novels' portrayal of the NVA, with little acknowledgement of the physical and psychological abuse experienced by many conscripts, Flegel's novels still challenge the NVA and the reader to question their assumptions.

The power of music to form communities and encourage experimentation with identity is greatest in *Das einzige Leben*. Here, musical genres begin to blur and interact, mirroring the processes of learning, compromise and mutual understanding that develop over the novel.

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<sup>30</sup> Flegel, *Es gibt kein Niemandsland*, 120.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that Martin's transformation happens only while his wife is away. His development occurs in a discrete moment and may be unsustainable, not unlike Flegel's idealized image of the NVA or the utopian socialism to which he and many of his contemporaries still subscribed. Flegel uses music to imagine how the military might restore its relation to society, instead of growing ever more remote from the changing cultural environment of the late 1980s. His writing shares many features with earlier socialist realism, and yet his exploration of the official appropriation of rock music demonstrates that the late 1980s were not, or not simply, defined by a gap between an aesthetically impoverished official culture and increasing formal experimentation elsewhere. Flegel uses music to explore how updating genre categories could offer appropriate criticisms and political messages in a changing society. The novels are not divorced from stylistic developments in other media and in popular culture, but highlight the simultaneity of many diverse artistic forms and conventions.

Flegel's works have been largely neglected or dismissed, as with much of the GDR's military fiction, and yet they offer compelling ideas about where GDR studies could turn as the Berlin Republic approaches its thirtieth anniversary. Later socialist realist novels require us to question the idea that after a caesura in the 1960s, the GDR's founding literary traditions were superseded by more critical, experimental forms. Instead, Flegel's depiction of music encourages us to see the productive mixing and mutual influence that characterized the increasingly diverse literary sphere in the GDR's final decade.

Flegel's writing is in some senses a remnant of an earlier utopian socialism, like the trace of a long-demolished building on the long-exposure photographs in Leeder's essay on the GDR's 'afterlives'. *Das einzige Leben* tackles the increasing irrelevance and obscurity of such literature, showing the need to engage with an evolving and diversifying realm of popular culture. Hannelore's snake dance even gestures to punk, which by 1987 had surpassed rock as

a vehicle of radical criticism. Flegel's novels remain both conscious of and unwilling to abandon their anachronistic character, focusing resolutely on bending rock music to the socialist project. Yet this apparently anachronistic, in Leeder's terms 'spectral', trace suddenly becomes current with the return to utopian socialist activism in 1989 by writers like Christa Wolf or Heiner Müller often set apart as 'socialist modernists'. Focusing on postmodern trends in the 1980s, as Emmerich suggested just before the events of 1989, or ignoring the undercurrent of socialist realist writing in the 1980s as scholars have done since, makes the naivety and fervour of those autumn months difficult to comprehend. To understand the contradictions of the GDR that persisted right up to its end, a more nuanced approach is required that explores the simultaneity of movements, styles, and conventions, and that signals new possibilities for GDR research today.

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### **For Notes on Contributors**

*Tom Smith was awarded his PhD from University College London in March 2016, for research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council examining representations of*

*masculinities in films and literature depicting the East German military. The research for this article was completed at the Institute of Modern Languages Research at the University of London, where he was Sylvia Naish Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow in 2016. His current research focuses on the relationship between music, gender, and nation in literature since 1945. He was Stipendiary Lecturer in German at Worcester College and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, from 2015–16 and is currently Teaching Fellow in German at Newcastle University.*