

12-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Cuomo, Glenn R. (1983) "Some New Facts about Gunter Eich in the Nazi Period and the Importance of Context: A Reconstruction of his Nonextant Radio Play "Rebellion in der Goldstadt"," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 16: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol16/iss3/2>

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Some New Facts about Gunter Eich in the Nazi Period and the Importance of Context: A Reconstruction of his Nonextant Radio Play “Rebellion in der Goldstadt”

Glenn R. Cuomo

While Günter Eich's writing career goes back to the final years of the Weimar Republic, he had his most significant impact on the postwar literary scene, as a founding member of the “Gruppe 47,” a leading representative of the *Naturlyrik* tradition, and as the author responsible for the German radio play's “classic period.” In these same years Eich also gained much notoriety as a voice of dissent during West Germany's “economic miracle.” With its unambiguous allusions to fascism and its disquieting message of universal guilt, Eich's radio play “Träume” elicited an unprecedented barrage of listener protest upon its premier broadcast in 1951, which one critic heralded as the “birth hour” of the provocative radio play.¹ And in his acceptance speech for the 1959 Georg Büchner Prize, Eich once again sparked great controversy by stating that totalitarianism was an ever present danger in the Federal Republic, and by then closing his speech with a call for writers to practice a form of “linguistic resistance” against the establishment. Thus Günter Eich, the lyric poet and radio author, also earned himself the reputation of an “anarchistic nonconformist” — a reputation which he maintained until his death in 1972.

To be sure, Eich's social criticism is only one aspect of his writing and by no means does it constitute the essence of his multi-faceted oeuvre. Yet, as evidenced in much of what has been written about Eich's life, his postwar barbs against the establishment have considerably influenced the perception of his professional activity during the Third Reich — when he wrote almost exclusively for the Nazi radio system. The general view is that the future author of “Träume” must have had many difficulties working in an artistic medium that was under the total control of Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry. Indeed, such an assumption seems to find support in laconic remarks Eich made in the postwar years regarding his role under the Nazis. In an interview with Susanne Müller-Hanpft, he dismissed his broadcasts as “Auftragsarbeiten ohne persönliches Engagement.”² And in a letter to Horst-Günther Funke, Eich emphasized the “insignificance” of his radio writing: “Meine Hörspiele wurden damals kaum beachtet.”³

Accordingly, the tendency has been to downplay, if not completely to ignore Eich's writing in the Nazi era. Critics have stated that in Hitler's Germany Eich's radio plays were merely “tolerated” due to their political innocuity, and that this working arrangement lasted only about three years before Eich ceased writing for the duration of the Hitler regime.⁴ In his study of Nazi literary policy, Dietrich Strothmann goes as far as to include Eich in the list he compiled of authors whom the Nazis considered “undesirable,” even though his name never appeared on any *Verbotsliste*.⁵ In lieu of any evidence that Eich actively opposed the Nazi regime, theories about his alleged “passive resistance” have been based on the belief that shortly after 1933 he deliberately stopped producing lyric poetry.⁶ Such a belief implies that Eich, unlike many other authors who remained active within the Third Reich, managed to avoid the political compromises made necessary by Goebbels' *Gleichschaltung*. As Joachim Kaiser stated in his eulogy for Eich: “Durch die Nazi-Zeit rettete er sich, irgendwie und makellos.”⁷

The above statements, however, are based almost entirely on speculation, or at best on a familiarity with random biographical details and with Eich's rather questionable postwar

account of his activity in the Nazi era. Upon closer scrutiny of the facts, one gains a completely different perception of Eich's role during the Third Reich — a perception which puts Kaiser's term *makellos* in question. My research has revealed that contrary to earlier claims, Eich's work for the Nazi radio was neither minimal nor insignificant. Between 1933 and 1940 he wrote more intensively for this medium than he ever did, producing at least 58 different broadcasts. Among these were two monthly series, *Der Märkische Kalendermann*, which was on the program from July 1937 until August 1939, and *Die Monatsbilder des Königswusterhäuser Landboten*, which he co-authored with Martin Raschke. The latter lasted from October 1933 until May 1940, making it the longest running program of its kind during the Third Reich. This yields a total of 155 individual texts for broadcast, twenty to ninety minutes in length, hardly the accomplishment of a "nobody" in the Nazi radio system, much less of an "undesirable." Quite the contrary. On several occasions Eich's broadcasts — in particular the monthly series — were singled out by Nazi critics as exemplary works.⁸ And finally, theories of Eich's "abstention" from lyric poetry under Hitler must be countered with the fact that as late as December 1938 he was still publishing poems within the Reich.

It is unfortunate that the posthumous publication of Eich's *Gesammelte Werke* has contributed to rather than eliminated the general misconception of his professional activity during the Third Reich. For one thing, the allegedly "complete index of all of Eich's radio broadcasts," which Heinz Schwitzke compiled for the volume of radio plays, lists less than half the texts Eich produced from 1933 to 1940. Moreover, by omitting several poems from the Nazi era and misdating others, actually published under the Hitler regime, as postwar works, Horst Ohde, who edited the volume of Eich's lyrics, gives the impression that Eich curtailed his poetic productivity after 1933. We are indebted to Hans Dieter Schäfer for corrections of several misdated poems, as well as for information about a hitherto unknown publication from the Nazi period, Eich's story "Die Schattenschlacht" (1936).⁹

Knowing this background, we can now proceed to the focus of this essay, Eich's "Rebellion in der Goldstadt" (*Deutschlandsender*; May 8, 1940), his last new radio play broadcast over the Nazi airwaves.¹⁰ This broadcast not only marks the end, but also, in my opinion, the culmination of Eich's seven-year collaboration with Goebbels' radio system.

As with 95% of his Nazi-era broadcasts, the text of "Rebellion" is nonextant, the outside information about it is very limited, and in the postwar period Eich himself contributed nothing to our knowledge of this missing work. According to one account he claimed not to remember "Rebellion."¹¹ Another simply states that this radio play was Eich's last "prewar" production.¹² Solely on the basis of the title "Rebellion in der Goldstadt," Schwitzke, the editor of the volume of radio plays in Eich's *Gesammelte Werke*, makes the unlikely speculation that the work might have shown the influence of Bertolt Brecht, since it apparently dealt with social unrest.¹³ This seemed to be all that could be said about Eich's broadcast.

No one has yet been able to discover an intact manuscript of "Rebellion." But by making full use of the few data at our disposal, one can arrive at some telling conclusions. And as we shall see, these conclusions alter considerably Eich's reputation as either an active or passive opponent of the Nazi regime.

My most important source of information was the daily schedule of radio programs published in the Berlin magazine *Die Sendung: Rundfunkwoche*, which lists the following characters for Eich's broadcast on May 8, 1940, at 9:00 p.m.: two miners from Johannesburg and their wives; Lord Pembroke, the principal stockholder in the Goldmining Corporation; his daughter Lillian; an agent of the mineowners named Thompson; Jan Smuts, the Prime Min-

ister of the Union of South Africa, together with other miners, members of parliament, and soldiers. The program also states that "Rebellion" was set in the year 1922.¹⁴

Anyone familiar with South African history does not need more than the mention of this date along with Jan Smuts, goldminers and soldiers in order to ascertain the basic plot of Eich's radio play. In 1922 the South African Chamber of Mines attempted to cut the mineowners' operating costs by relaxing the job color bar, a labor restriction which until then had protected white workers in certain skilled positions from being replaced by lower-paid oriental and Indian migrants. This move precipitated a wave of strikes and mine takeovers in the goldmining region of South Africa. It ended in a five-day battle at the Witwatersrand Mines outside of Johannesburg, after Prime Minister Smuts sent in troops to subdue the strikers. The confrontation resulted in almost 200 fatalities.¹⁵

Confirmation of my assumption that the Witwatersrand strike played a major role in "Rebellion" is found in another radio publication, *Westfunk*, which contains a brief preview of Eich's Wednesday evening broadcast:

Das Hörspiel, das in Johannesburg in Südafrika spielt, zeigt den Kampf der unterbezahlten weißen Arbeiter gegen die unmenschlichen Methoden der englischen Minenbesitzer. Die einzelnen Charaktere der im Hörspiel auftretenden Personen und die ausgezeichneten Milieuschilderungen lassen diese beiden Welten des Arbeiters und des Plutokraten deutlich hervortreten.¹⁶

It is clear, then, that the goldmine strikes played a central role in "Rebellion." However, there is no way to delve into the details of Eich's plot, into the interaction between the two classes of characters. Such specific questions cannot be answered with the limited information available. But there are broader, yet no less important questions that can be explored in light of the context in which "Rebellion" was produced.

In the first place, why did Eich decide to write a radio play about this incident in South African history? Why would it interest German listeners or the station managers (*Intendanten*), who determined which manuscripts would be broadcast?

A survey of the broadcasts that preceded and followed "Rebellion" during late 1939 and early 1940 reveals that Eich's subject matter was neither unusual nor fortuitous. In the first months of World War II, the program of the *Deutschlandsender*, the Reich's most powerful middle-wave station, which broadcast "Rebellion," featured a number of radio plays with historical themes and exotic settings. Three are especially pertinent: Rudolf Brunngraber's radio play "Opium," about China during the Opium Wars from 1839-42, which premiered on December 21, 1939; A. Arthur Kuhnert's comedy "Erika ganz groß!" about British diplomats, troops and gold speculators in nineteenth-century Persia, which was broadcast on January 23, 1940; and R. Kurtz' radio play, "Die Greuel von Denshawai: Ein Gespräch mit Bernard Shaw," which was broadcast March 13, 1940. The latter work is particularly interesting because it was based on George Bernard Shaw's "The Denshawai Horror," a strong critique of British colonial mis-administration in Egypt at the turn of the century.¹⁷

What these radio plays have in common with Eich's "Rebellion in der Goldstadt" is that they all treat historical incidents that would be damaging to Great Britain's international prestige and could, thus, negatively affect the alliance against Hitler's Reich, especially throughout the Commonwealth. In short, these broadcasts were all part of a propaganda campaign to expose the "evils of British imperialism." Now the tone of the *Westfunk* preview of "Rebellion" and its mention of *Plutokraten*, the Nazis' favorite term for Britain's capitalists, are clear. In fact,

earlier, on the same evening of the premiere of "Rebellion," the Frankfurt radio station featured a broadcast entitled "Volk im Kampf: Freiheit unter englischen Plutokraten."

Although I have not located any explicit plan to employ the radio play in an anti-English campaign, the parallels between the above broadcasts are too numerous to be coincidental, and there is some fragmentary information to support the premise that such a propagandistic design existed. In regard to the radio play "Opium," a biographer notes that Rudolf Brunngraber, who had frequently been in disfavor with Nazi censors, was prevailed upon to seek "suitable subject matter" for his writing. Brunngraber's radio version of his novel *Opium* was considered a "step in the right direction," thanks to its anti-English plot.¹⁸ In addition, the *Bundesarchiv* holds reports by Party organizations which indicate that in early 1940 the Nazis were monitoring the propagandistic effect of broadcasts such as "Rebellion."

A report by the *Sicherheitsdienst* branch of the SS, dated April 5, 1940 — just a month before the broadcast of "Rebellion" — comments on A. Arthur Kuhnert's radio play "Die Mission des Dr. MacKenzie," an "exposé" of England's alleged plot to hasten the death of the ailing Crown-prince Friedrich III. The report closes with this observation:

Die Äußerung ist immer wieder zu hören, solche Hörspiele öfter zu bringen, da sie einmal sehr unterhaltend und lehrreich sind, zum andern für eine der besten Propagandawaffen gegen England gehalten werden.¹⁹

And another report published in *Meldungen aus dem Reich* summarizes on May 16, 1940, just eight days after Eich's "Rebellion" was broadcast:

Zusammenfassend ist aus allen Berichten festzustellen, daß das politisch-geschichtliche Hörspiel vor allem für die breiten Kreise der Bevölkerung ein wichtiges Aufklärungs- und Propagandamittel ist.²⁰

At this juncture a defender of Eich's memory might raise the following questions. If Eich was indeed willing to apply his writing talents in a propaganda campaign, and if these anti-English radio plays were as effective as the above reports claim, why, then, was "Rebellion in der Goldstadt" the last radio play Eich wrote during the Third Reich? Was there a limit to his opportunism? Or, as one critic posits, did Eich, at this late date, finally gain insight into his complicity in Nazi cultural politics and withdraw his services?²¹ The answers to these questions seem to be as follows.

In the spring of 1940, the escalation of the Western Offensive brought radical changes to the radio system. The variety of programming hitherto offered by regional and municipal stations was replaced by a uniform national program of *Reichssendungen*. This programming consisted almost entirely of music, and with the exception of frequent bulletins from the Front, word-broadcasts such as the radio play were virtually eliminated. The genre's fate was sealed on May 21, 1940, when Goebbels decreed that from now on only light music would be broadcast after 8:15 p.m.²² The evening program segment had been the prime time for broadcasting radio plays.

There were several motives behind Goebbels' decree. In the first place, he had always preferred the film medium over the radio play, and despite the positive reports about the anti-English broadcasts, he still doubted the genre's importance as a propaganda instrument. Secondly, Goebbels was confronted with an embarrassing situation. Wehrmacht members and, in particular, Luftwaffe pilots returning from bombing raids were ignoring his ban on listening to foreign broadcasts and were tuning in to the BBC because of the "schmissige Musik" it offered.²³ It was obvious that the Nazi radio had to have the same appeal, and as a 1939 listener survey had indicated, the radio play was most popular with Hausfrauen and middle-class professions but

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least popular with soldiers and members of the Reichsarbeitsdienst. They, understandably
enough, preferred to unwind with music than to be “enlightened” about British atrocities.

As a result of Goebbels’ directive, the radio play ceased to be a source of income for writers. Eich was thus put out of work before he could make any oppositional gesture by quitting.

Moreover, there is evidence that Eich not only left the Nazi radio scene in good standing but also might have sought an outlet for his writing in the Nazi film industry after he could no longer sell radio texts. A *Sicherheitsdienst* report from October 1940 concerning the demise of the radio play contains an additional remark that is very revealing. The document relates that once the genre was revived in the programming (after Hitler had won the war), it would be difficult to lure writers back to the medium, since now all the good authors of radio plays have begun working for film companies. Notably we find Günter Eich among the handful of “good authors” mentioned in this report.²⁵

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NOTES

- 1 Heinz Schwitzke, “Günter Eichs ‘Träume,’” in *Über Günter Eich*, ed. Susanne Müller-Hanpft (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 106-7.
- 2 Susanne Müller-Hanpft, *Lyrik und Rezeption: Das Beispiel Günter Eich* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 31.
- 3 Horst-Günther Funke, *Die literarische Form des deutschen Hörspiels in historischer Entwicklung*, Diss. Erlangen-Nürnberg 1963 (Erlangen: privately printed, 1963), p. 108.
- 4 Cf. Horst-Walter Krautkrämer, *Das deutsche Hörspiel 1945-1961: Grundthemen, künstlerische Struktur und soziologische Funktion*, Diss. Heidelberg 1962 (Heidelberg: privately printed, 1962), pp. 27-28; and Egbert Krispyn, *Günter Eich* (New York: Twayne, 1971), p. 38.
- 5 Dietrich Strothmann, *Nationalsozialistische Literaturpolitik: Ein Beitrag zur Publizistik im Dritten Reich* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1960), p. 444, Tabelle 7a.
- 6 Cf. Krispyn, *Günter Eich*, pp. 40-41; and Müller-Hanpft, *Lyrik und Rezeption*, pp. 30-31.
- 7 Joachim Kaiser, “Günter Eich, der Poet, ist gestorben,” in *Günter Eich zum Gedächtnis*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 83.
- 8 The earliest indication of Eich’s Nazi-era reception is the following commentary which appeared after his radio play “Lustiges Lumpenpack” premiered on December 14, 1933:

Mit verblüffender Einfühlungskraft hat Günther [sic] Eich aus dem noch funkelndem ‘Schatzkästlein’ Johann Peter Hebels sein neues Hörspiel ‘Lustiges Lumpenpack’ gehoben und damit dem deutschen Rundfunk ein wahrhaft ideales Werk geschenkt.... Der Deutschlandsender hat mit dieser Aufführung einen absoluten Höhepunkt erreicht (“‘Lustiges Lumpenpack,’” *Die Sendung: Rundfunkwoche*, 10, No. 52 [1933], 1139).

Eich’s and Raschke’s *Königswusterhäuser Landbote* series was honored frequently during its seven years on the radio. In October of 1935, 1937 and 1938, respectively, the *Deutschlandsender* observed the series’ second, fourth and fifth anniversaries with commemorative broadcasts. The third anniversary was marked by the publication of an anthology of prose and poetry from the monthly programs, *Das festliche Jahr* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1936), whose significance is underscored by the rarity of publication of radio manuscripts during the Nazi years.

- 9 See Hans Dieter Schäfer, "Die nichtfaschistische Literatur der 'jungen Generation' im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland," in Horst Denkler and Karl Prümm, eds., *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), p. 500, n. 161. Schäfer also rediscovered Eich's poem "Erstes Eis," which first appeared in the magazine *Die Koralle: Wochenschrift für Unterhaltung und Lebensfreude*, NS 6, No. 50 (1938), 1812. In addition, I have located four poems, "Tag im Herbst," "Nacht," "Mittag," and "Zu einer sehr alten Photographie," which Eich published in *Der Bücherwurm*, 19, No. 1 (1934), 23-24. Only the poem "Nacht" is included in Eich's *Gesammelte Werke*, where it is listed erroneously as an unpublished work from the years 1945-1955. See Günter Eich, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Ilse Aichinger et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 1, 229.
- 10 The last scheduled broadcast of a text by Eich was "Der Falke. Spiel nach Boccaccio von G. Eich mit alter Musik" (Leipzig: May 31, 1940), according to *Die Sendung: Rundfunkwoche*, 17, No. 22 (1940), n.p. Unlike "Rebellion," however, this was not a new work but a rebroadcast of one of the four tales that Eich adapted in his "Rührende and tolldreiste Geschichten um Liebe: Für den Funk umgedichtet" (Leipzig: October 4, 1937).
- 11 Stefan Bodo Würffel, *Das deutsche Hörspiel*, Sammlung Metzler Band 172 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978), p. 61.
- 12 Heinz F. Schafroth, *Günter Eich*, Autorenbücher I (Munich: Beck, 1976), p. 16.
- 13 See Schwitzke's commentary about Eich's radio plays in Eich, *Gesammelte Werke*, III, 1414.
- 14 *Die Sendung: Rundfunkwoche*, 17, No. 19 (1940), n.p. (program schedule for May 8).
- 15 W.K. Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force 1919-1950* (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1968), pp. 62-84.
- 16 *Westfunk*, 15, No. 9 (1940), 2.
- 17 Shaw's "The Denshawai Horror" was first published in his "Preface for Politicians" in the 1906 edition of *John Bull's Other Island*. In their exploitation of Shaw's criticism of British imperialism, Nazi propagandists went so far as to publish a book called Bernard Shaw's *Die Greuel von Denshawai: Und andere britische Greuel* (Leipzig: Lühe & Co., 1940), as volume 7 in their "England ohne Maske" series.
- 18 Thomas Lange, Preface, *Karl und das 20. Jahrhundert*, by Rudolf Brunngraber (Kronberg/Ts.: Scriptor, 1978), pp. 3-4.
- 19 Published in Christian Hörbürger, *Das Hörspiel der Weimarer Republik: Versuch einer kritischen Analyse* (Stuttgart: Akad. Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1975), p. 409.
- 20 Published in Hörbürger, p. 416.
- 21 Stefan Bodo Würffel, "'...denn heute hört uns Deutschland' — Anmerkungen zum Hörspiel im Dritten Reich," in *Kunst und Kultur im deutschen Faschismus*, ed. Ralf Schnell (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978), p. 151.
- 22 Willi A. Boelcke, *Kriegspropaganda 1939-1941: Geheime Ministerkonferenzen im Reichspropagandaministerium* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966), p. 747.
- 23 Boelcke, pp. 299 and 748.
- 24 Gerhard Eckert, *Der Rundfunk als Führungsmittel*, Studien zum Weltrundfunk und Fernsehrundfunk I (Heidelberg, Berlin, Magdeburg: Kurt Vowinkel, 1941), n.p. (table labelled "Die Wünsche der verschiedenen Berufsgruppen an das Rundfunkprogramm").
- 25 Published in Hörbürger, pp. 418-19.