Chapter 6

The Closing of the Kroll: Weimar Culture and the Depression

The last chapter discussed the Kroll Opera's success, particularly in the 1930-31 season, in fulfilling its mission as a *Volksoper*. While the opera was consolidating its aesthetic identity, a dire economic situation dictated the closing of opera houses and theaters all over Germany. The perennial question of whether Berlin could afford to maintain three opera houses on a regular basis was again in the air. The Kroll fell victim to the state's desire to save money. While the closing was not a logical choice, it did have economic grounds. This chapter will explore the circumstances of the opera's demise and challenge the myth that it was a victim of the political right.

The last chapter pointed out that the response of right-wing critics to the Kroll was multifaceted. Accusations of "cultural Bolshevism" often alternated with serious appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of any given production. The right took issue with the Kroll's claim to represent the nation - hence, when the opera tackled works by Wagner and Beethoven, these efforts were more harshly criticized because they were perceived as irreverent. The scorn of the right for the Kroll's efforts was far less evident when it did not attempt to tackle works crucial to the German cultural heritage.

Nonetheless, political opposition did exist, and it was sometimes expressed in extremely crude forms. The 1930 "Funeral Song of the Berlin Kroll Opera", printed in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, may serve as a case in point. Here the right-wing critic Fritz Stege painted a vivid

picture of what he viewed, literally, as the pollution of German culture by the Kroll's re-interpretations of German art. After comparing the opera's artistic offerings to "anarchy" and "Bolshevism", Stege concludes by hoping that the state will open a "cold water treatment center" to wash away the "slime" conjured up by Klemperer and his colleagues. Only then can the normal German audience feel at ease:

> Lieber Staat! Eröffne bald - 'ne Kaltwasserheilanstalt
> dort wo Schlamm in Fluten schwoll - dort bei Kroll.
>
> Wenn der Schmutz erst abgespült - man sich wieder reinlich fühlt,
> denkt man schließlich ohne Groll - gern zurück an Kroll.
>
> Dear state! Please open soon - a cold water treatment center
> There where the slime swelled in floods - there at the Kroll.
>
> When the dirt has been cleaned away - when one feels pure again,
> one will think without resentment - again on the Kroll.[1]

This tasteless contribution has recently been elevated by Eckhard John into a manifesto of cultural National Socialism, and even into a foreshadowing of the Holocaust in the realm of art. Relying on Klaus Theweleit's work in *Male Fantasies*, John sees the reference to dirt and floods as clearly gendered - a reasonable point, except that John has to resort to speculation and ad hominem arguments in order to sustain his argument:

> Let us assume that the critic St. attended the world premiere of Paul Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage" at the Kroll Opera on June 6, 1929. On stage a soprano sang a song of praise to the Berlin warm water supply; she was dressed in a flesh-coloredleotard. But the fantasies

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[1]Quoted in Eckhard John, *Musikbolschewismus: Die Politisierung der Musik in Deutschland 1918-1938*. Stuttgart 1994. p.279.

> of the strictly right-wing critic were too powerful: the image of a naked woman in warm floods overcame him to such an extent, that that which "swelled" must have been in his pants. Against such 'filth' the only solution was a"cold water treatment center" (similar to the military program of the cold shower), so that one could feel "pure" again.[2]

John further focuses on the following verse:

> Wenn man Kunst mit Gift vergast - wenn der Bolschewismus rast,
> wendet sich der Gast mit Groll - dort bei Kroll.
>
> When one uses poison gas on art - when Bolshevism raves,
> the audience turns away with resentment - there at the Kroll.[3]

One hardly has to sympathize with Stege's politics, cultural or otherwise, to view John's interpretation as ahistorical. The Nazi takeover of 1933, John continues, might have been viewed as a "cold shower" by supporters of the Kroll Opera: "...but this would have been a euphemism if one follows Stege's picture further, given that another part of his fantasy became reality in the Nazi state: together with the majority of the European Jews, one "used poison gas" on artists - and therefore art."[4]

In questioning the genocidal intentions of music critics, I do not mean to deny that language, and particularly rhetoric about the arts, has consequences.For example, a much better case could be made for the idea that Stege is actually referring to gas warfare in the First World War - so that the Kroll represented for him the cultural "stab in the back", the counterpart to the imagined political "stab in the back." However, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, extremely similar rhetoric can be

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[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Quoted in *Ibid*.
[4] *Ibid*, p.280.

found among the Kroll's defenders when they called for sweeping cultural change. The arguments of the avant-garde had, of course, no concrete political effects. Yet it is not difficult to imagine that they could have been effective had avant-garde artists ever been placed in a situation of political power.

The closing of the Kroll was certainly a highly charged political issue. This means that one must examine the motives and arguments of all the people involved in the debate, something which has not yet been handled by historians. Sentimentality about the Weimar-era left, combined with lack of attention to historical context, has led to the impression that the Kroll was a unique victim of right-wing policy. I hope to demonstrate that the closing, while it was a regrettable decision, seemed logical in view of the contemporary financial situation. I further intend to explain what the local circumstances were in Berlin. The situation of the Kroll Opera was especially weak due to its competitors in the realm of opera.

The decision to close the Kroll was made as a result of a special investigation by the Prussian *Landtag,* the so-called *Untersuchungsauschuß,* (investigative committee) which examined the advantages and disadvantages of such a procedure. Because of the myths which continue to surround the circumstances in 1931, it is especially important to examine who the protagonists were and what their motives were. In particular, the supposedly heroic role played by the German Communist Party (KPD) must be reassessed. The notion that only the Communists were committed to saving "progressive" art cannot be sustained in light of the evidence.

When the investigative committee was first convened in 1931, rumors had already been circulating for quite some time that the Kroll would be closed. The ruinous effects of the depression led to the closing of opera houses and theaters on a mass scale. Berlin could not indefinitely remain immune from such economic pressures. The continued presence of the Prussian State Stage complicated matters further. If the Prussian state was to sustain its claim that it supported culture throughout Prussia and not only in the capital city, it had to take seriously the complaints emanating from the provinces. Why should other areas of Prussia suffer while Berlin remained a center of cultural life? Unfortunately, this question struck at the heart of the SPD's claim to democratize culture.

It is not surprising that this idea was anathema to those segments of the working class which held that the role of art was to promote revolution and the goals of a future society along socialist lines. As described above, this was the position of the Communists. The KPD was just as opposed to the Volksbühne and its cultural ideals as it was to opera. If culture had to be reshaped to suit the tastes of the proletariat, this meant that the Volksbühne would play an important role, but one very different from the role it actually played in the 1920s. The Berlin Communist deputy Frau Hoffmann-Gwinner, active in city politics, stated in 1927 that "The Volksbühne is a sacred building for the Berlin proletariat. The Volksbühne should fulfill the tasks which were fulfilled by the church in its time. It should rule the life of the proletariat. It should form the will to live, the revolutionary will of the proletariat."[5] Strikingly, this reflects yet another version of the idea of the national theater - in this case more

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[5] Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep 000-02-01, Nr. 324, Stadtverordnetenversammlung, meeting of April 28, 1927.

properly the communal theater. The difference in the Communist version is, that politics is at the center of a recreation of theater and not artistic content. This conflict had been a central one within the Volksbühne itself from the moment of its founding.[6] In the Weimar era, however, due to the expansion of the organization and to changes within Social Democracy itself, those who put politics first were in a minority position. Even those who disagreed with Julius Bab's proposal which stressed the role of art itself in changing society[7] were generally not adherents of the Communist view of the Volksbühne's role, which centered around radical director Erwin Piscator.[8]

The origins of the investigative committee lay in the state's desire to clarify its financial situation and subsidies for culture. By the time it actually heard witnesses, however, from April to June of 1931, the decision to close the Kroll was almost certain. The issue on the table involved whether the Volksbühne should receive compensation for its loss of the opera and, if so, how much. Convened by members of the Prussian Landtag, the committee heard witnesses on all sides of the debate. Klemperer and Curjel both testified, as did Kestenberg, who showed a surprising reluctance to defend the Kroll. Nestriepke was most interested in the financial aspects of the Kroll's fate, because his organization was by 1931 in deep financial trouble.

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[6] Best described by Heinz Selo, *Die Volksbühne in Berlin*. Berlin 1930.

[7] Proposed at the 1924 Volksbühnentag in Hildesheim. Bab's program was accepted over others which argued that radical changes in society had to precede artistic change. Bab stated that artistic experience itself could create the community, an idea strongly similar to the Kroll idea. See 5. Volksbühnentag, Hildesheim 1924 (published Berlin 1925).

[8] A detailed description of the Piscator controversy would go beyond the scope of this work; see *Blätter der Volksbühne*, most issues during 1927 and 1928.

The ministerial director Nentwig had identified the state's problem in a report dated April 30, 1929. The Ministry of Culture, he wrote, had to consider the finances of all the theaters it subsidized. Nonetheless, the closing of the only opera house devoted to *soziale Kunstpflege* would mean political embarrassment.[9] The Prussian Minister President Nentwig took this fact into account when, in March 1930, he argued for the closing of the City Opera. The funds freed by this diversion would, however, be used primarily to support "cultural German-ness" in beleaguered cities such as Breslau and Königsberg.[10]

The problem was that the state had no direct control over the City Opera, and that institution had powerful supporters. The Kroll supporters proved far too weak. The long-standing conflict between Klemperer and the Volksbühne also became all too apparent in the course of the committee hearings. The testimony of each side is instructive, so it must be examined in detail. Klemperer was largely concerned with justifying his own behavior toward the Volksbühne. While the organization had long been anathema to the extreme right, so had the Kroll, and politicians from these parties were willing to accommodate the Volksbühne's wishes for compensation. Klemperer's attitude toward his public was frequently contradictory but was marked throughout by condescension. Siegfried Nestriepke, for his part, repeated the Volksbühne's grievances against the Kroll dating back to 1927-28 and emphasized that its members had had no voice in the selection of Klemperer as GMD. That had been largely Kestenberg's responsibility, which raises the question of why he did not make more of an effort to defend Klemperer. Peter Heyworth attributes

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[9] GStPK, I. HA. Rep. 90, Staatsministerium
[10] *Ibid,* Bl.

this to cowardice, but this seems unduly harsh, particularly as he argues that the hearings were more about long-standing battles over cultural politics than they were about actual financial decisions.[11] Kestenberg must have been well aware that his political career was nearing its end, and did not see the point of speaking out. The fatal lack of communication between the Volksbühne and proponents of the "Kroll idea" here became especially apparent.

The positions of the different political parties represented in the Landtag reflected their attitudes toward the Volksbühne and, by extension, toward the whole project of *soziale Kunstpflege*. Here it is particularly important to examine the Communist attitude, as I indicated earlier in the chapter. The KPD was not committed to the Kroll project. Hans Curjel, among others, was fully aware of the basic antagonism between the Kroll and Communist-approved aesthetics.[12] The charge of "cultural Bolshevism" launched by some on the right was particularly inappropriate in view of the party's lack of sympathy with everything the opera represented - imposing "elite" art on the working class, diverting funds from social projects, and other objections mentioned in Chapter 3. That the Kroll Opera was itself a social project was something the KPD would never recognize. In this light, its defense of the opera seems puzzling. Landtag deputy Karl Schulz of the Neukölln district of Berlin emerged as one of the Kroll's most energetic supporters. This is a fact frequently cited as proof of a significant link between the left and the avant-garde.

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[11] Peter Heyworth, *Klemperer: His Life and Times*. Cambridge 1983. pp. 343 ff.
[12] "Otto Klemperer und die Kroll-Oper", manuscript of a radio program broadcast on Westdeutscher Rundfunk in 1960; in DLA Marbach, Nachlaß Hans Curjel.

Eckhard John attempts to establish such a link when he interprets Curjel's remarks as proof of his anxiety in the Communist-phobic atmosphere of the 1960s - but it is John, not Curjel, who is the revisionist. Curjel stated clearly that the Kroll's aesthetics did not make it a politically left-wing institution. In attempting to explain and pin down the construct of "cultural Bolshevism" John makes the common mistake of assuming that aesthetics viewed as objectionable by the extreme right must be in some sense politically "progressive." In my discussion of *Zeitoper* in Chapter 4 I indicated the problems of this approach. The same problems exist with the alleged alliance of the KPD with the Kroll. Because Curjel, in one interview, chose not to mention this aspect of the Landtag debates, his attitude shows, according to John, "how strong the fear of identification with that implied by the ideological conglomerate 'cultural Bolshevism' still haunted [Curjel] in the beginning decades of the Federal Republic."[13]

Curjel was, of course, not a Communist but a Social Democrat. Thus it is worth asking what role antipathy to the SPD and its policies played in the Landtag debates. Schulz's tirades are an excellent source of information on this issue. The fate of the Kroll was of little interest to him except insofar as it could be used as a weapon to discredit the mainstream political parties. His attitude throughout the Landtag debates was one of deep suspicion toward the whole project of *soziale Kunstpflege*. "It is clear," he claimed, "that when the old system collapsed in 1918 and capitalist circles were trying to confuse the working class and keep it from carrying out a social revolution, a few things had to happen in the realm of

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[13] John, *Musikbolschewismus*, p.277.

artistic policy."[14] The Volksbühne, according to Schulz, had acted as the state's willing partner in corrupting the workers: "Therefore, primarily bourgeois operas and plays were to be offered to the workers...This ideological corruption of the working class through *soziale Kunstpflege* succeeded to a certain extent."[15]

As discussed in Chapter 3, the KPD was unable to accept the notion that workers might be genuinely attracted to "bourgeois" art. Yet even Schulz had to concede that they had shown an affinity for opera. His main goal was to prevent Otto Braun's government from compensating the Volksbühne, which would be a prerequisite for the closing of the Kroll. To this end, he engaged in a great deal of stormy rhetoric in defense of the opera. Schulz claimed that the feeble version of *soziale Kunstpflege* endorsed by the SPD and the Center had become too controversial and that these parties wanted nothing more than to get rid of an embarrassing institution. However, his claims were misleading. The KPD had nothing to offer that would really help preserve the Kroll or the project of *soziale Kunstpflege* itself. He connected the Kroll's problems to the controversy surrounding Piscator and the Junge Volksbühne, when in fact the two were unrelated.[16] In defending a version of *soziale Kunstpflege* which took aesthetic issues into account, Schulz made reference to the paintings of George Grosz, but developed no discernible theory regarding aesthetic education in general. Even if he had done so, it would not have been the Kroll's version of aesthetic education, because the opera was not

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[14] GStPK, I.HA Rep. 90, Staatsministerium, Bl. 372. Meeting of Prussian Landtag on June 22, 1931; column 437.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*

concerned with exposing the evils of capitalism.[17] For Schulz, the Kroll was essentially a bourgeois institution which had been abandoned by the bourgeoisie. The Landtag hearings provided him with an opportunity to promote the KPD's vision of theater. In March 1931 he stated that "We Communists must defend bourgeois cultural goods against the bourgeoisie and the SPD!"[18] The reason for this was that workers needed the theater as a political instrument. This is an argument on the coattails of the Kroll, so to speak. If the opera were saved, not only the workers would benefit, but also the many left-leaning intellectuals who had spoken out in its favor. Schulz was well aware of this and no doubt hoped to create a climate in which aesthetically radical theaters such as Piscator's might gain a broader audience. In this context, theater which actually had Communist connotations, unlike the Kroll, could become more mainstream.

Not only the far left, but also the far right managed to thoroughly blur the distinction between political and aesthetic issues. Julius Koch (DNVP) delivered a diatribe in April 1930 associating the Kroll with "Jewish pessimism" and "the Negroid trend of our times." Most of his speech had little to do with the Kroll's actual productions; indeed, Koch should not have been participating in the debate at all, since he sat on the board of the City Opera and therefore had a significant conflict of interest. But the opera's repertory did disturb him. The progression from Hindemith to Krenek and Milhaud was, for him, equivalent to the progression "from Social Democracy to Spartacus."[19] The actual politics of those involved in setting up the Kroll were for him largely irrelevant.

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[17] Meeting of December 15, 1930.
[18] Meeting of March 6, 1931
[19] Staatsministerium, *Ibid.*

Koch also praised the "healthy instincts" of the workers and the *Kleinbürger*. They had rejected the Kroll's staging of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman" for good reasons: "They did not want to see the poor folks' spinning room in 'The Flying Dutchman'; because they had enough of their poor folks' room at home." He held that the contract with the Volksbühne should never have been signed.

While both right and left engaged in political grandstanding, Klemperer was concerned to secure his good name and defend his actions at the Kroll. While falsely stating that he had no way of acting independently at the Kroll, he blamed Tietjen for the organizational problems the opera faced and the Volksbühne for the controversy over selected productions. He did not believe the organization had high artistic goals. Instead, it was simply a means of selling cheap tickets.[20] Further, he felt that the state should have helped the Volksbühne educate its members.[21] The organization had fulfilled its obligations financially, but not in questions of morale and mentality, "...because it had the obligation to do everything to keep the public in line."[22] Klemperer described the Kroll's task as "more than social" [*übersozial*]. This suggests that Klemperer did not devote very much time to thinking about the opera's social mission or what a social opera would look like in practice. Strikingly, he then went on to contradict himself by stating that he had always had the impression that the audience was enthusiastic. The complainers in the Volksbühne were, he said, a minority, and the

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[20] Meeting of April 21, 1931
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*

leadership underestimated its members.[23] Siegfried Nestriepke's testimony on the same day addressed some of these criticisms. For example, he remarked that "In the case of opera, they [Volksbühne members] have a certain traditional concept which serves them as a guide. In the case of spoken theater, they are much more willing to go along."[24] For the most part, however, Nestriepke repeated the criticisms he had already made as early as 1928. The Volksbühne had been offered too many "small" and "played-out" operas, and Klemperer had been hired over their heads.

While these cultural-political battles played themselves out, the mainstream parties were gradually abandoning the Kroll, for reasons which made good economic sense. The opera's weak position was in large part due to decisions made in the Ministry of Culture in the immediate postwar period (see Chapter 2). The ambitious project of redeeming German identity through culture could not be maintained in the context of the depression. A look at the changing position of the Center party helps to clarify the issues involved here.

The Center had been instrumental in helping to set up the Preußische Landesbühne (see chapter 2) and had closely cooperated with the SPD in this context. The Bühnenvolksbund, widely regarded as an organization connected with the Center, was the main participant in this cooperative work. By 1931, however, the party appeared to have abandoned its earlier support for the Kroll. A major sticking point in the Landtag debates was the insistence of Klemperer and some of his supporters that the original contract of the Volksbühne remained valid

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[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*

unless all state theaters ceased to operate (*Einstellung des Staatstheaterbetriebs*). Those who favored closing the Kroll claimed, on the other hand, that the word *Staatstheaterbetrieb* referred only to one theater, the Kroll.[25] Ex-Minister of Culture Otto Boelitz stated his belief that closing the Kroll while leaving the Linden Opera intact was perfectly valid according to the terms of the Volksbühne contract. The Kroll, he argued, became something quite different from what the state had originally intended.[26] Such complaints had not surfaced earlier. The Center wanted to defend the institution of *soziale Kunstpflege* in principle, but made unrealistic suggestions concerning its future. Deputy Grebe suggested that there was no reason the City Opera could not take over the Kroll's responsibilities because "first of all, the concern for *soziale Kunstpflege* is really the responsibility of the city of Berlin, and second of all, the city of Berlin has an institute, the City Opera in Charlottenburg, which is obligated to serve *soziale Kunstpflege*..."[27] This was disingenuous. While the social profile of the City Opera had never been entirely clear, under *Intendant* Kurt Singer it had become virtually indistinguishable from the Linden Opera, with a similar repertory and similar reliance on international star singers.[28] The state would not have been successful in persuading the city to take over its cultural responsibilities, because such efforts had failed in the past. Grebe also overlooked the fact that the Weimar constitution emphatically stated that

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[25] Meeting of April 23, 1931.
[26] Meeting of April 27, 1931.
[27] Meeting of May 11, 1931
[28] See Meyer zu Heringdorf, *Die Charlottenburger Oper*.

the highest levels of government *were* responsible for funding the arts. They were not simply a communal issue.

Deputy Schulz accused the Center of cynically letting the Volksbühne disintegrate now that it had lost so many members. It was no longer useful as a tool of capitalists attempting to distract the working class.[29] Schulz himself wanted nothing better than to see the Volksbühne disintegrate, which explained his position on the Kroll. But he was also wrong on this larger issue. The actions of pro-democratic parties can only be viewed in light of the fact that they were rapidly losing support and had to contend with all kinds of issues which made maintaining a flourishing cultural life impossible. Their actions show more cluelessness and confusion than cynicism. The Kroll was not the only battleground, although it is often presented as such. Theaters and opera houses all over Germany were forced to close or to consolidate. The issue of the Kroll only reached the Landtag because of the opera's dual status as an aesthetic and as a political institution. The SPD's inaction can be explained in similar fashion.When Peter Heyworth condemns Leo Kestenberg for failing to save the opera, he does not consider the possibility that Kestenberg was in no position to act.

Klemperer was thus mistaken when he expected help from the Center. He recounts in the radio program "Experiment Krolloper" how he went so far as to contact Chancellor Brüning hoping to save the Kroll at the last minute. The Chancellor explained that he could not get involved. The renovation of the Linden Opera had itself been a violation of Germany's responsibility to pay its war debts.[30] Klemperer was left

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[29] Meeting of June 22, 1931.
[30] "Otto Klemperer und die Kroll-Oper" Nachlaß Hans Curjel, DLA Marbach.

without supporters. A massive press campaign to "rescue the Kroll" was unsuccessful.[31] So was his suit against the Prussian financial administration, intended to prove that he had a right to a position as GMD at the Linden Opera. He was nonetheless hired for a brief period before a scandalous production of Wagner's "Tannhäuser" in 1935. Klemperer chose to repeat the approach he had used in 1929 with "The Flying Dutchman" and this "Tannhäuser" caused an equal amount of outrage.[32] While it is a mystery why Tietjen chose to engage Klemperer in the first place, after this production it was clear that he had to leave Germany. His years in the United States and later have been amply documented by Heyworth's biography.[33]

What do the Landtag debates tell us? The Kroll's closing was largely determined by the disastrous economic situation, but it was also the result of the cultural policy developed directly after 1918, which had always had practical problems. Economic conditions dealt the final blow because such an idealistic policy could no longer be sustained. The Kroll's identity, as I have stressed throughout this study, was bound up with the project of restructuring German culture. Politicians from mainstream parties, while initially supportive of this project, were on the defensive in 1931 and retreated from their goal. The task of rebuilding German culture had been abandoned by all except the extreme right. As a result of this situation, the Volksbühne had also fallen on hard times. The organization's membership sank from 118,000 to 60,000 between 1928

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[31] Many of these articles are collected in Hans Curjel's papers.
[32] Heyworth, pp. 402-03
[33] *Ibid.*

and 1931.[34] It was not only heavily in debt to the city of Berlin, but also unable to fulfill its obligations with regard to the Kroll. If members could not pay for their tickets, the Volksbühne was in turn unable to pay the state. It was at this point that the original twenty-five year contract drawn up in 1923 became a liability for the Prussian government. Under these circumstances the Volksbühne began to press for the closing of the Kroll and the provision of adequate compensation from the state. A Nestriepke memorandum from 1931 shows that members were not avoiding the Kroll in particular; they were withdrawing from all their cultural engagements because the economic situation was simply too severe. If anything, they were somewhat more loyal to the opera than to the Volksbühne's own theater on Bülowplatz or to the others which it occasionally attended. The number of "no-shows" at the Kroll was a mere 4.5% in September 1929. By December it had risen to 10% and skyrocketed throughout the 1929/30 season to reach 41% in June 1930.[35] In the same period, the Bülowplatz theater went from 5.5% no-shows to 46.4%. The major factor in this development is nothing other than the crash of October 1929, which threatened to wipe out the Volksbühne financially. Even many of those who retained their membership simply ceased attending performances, leaving the organization helpless, as members had not been obliged to pay ahead for individual performances.

Weimar opera, and the Kroll in particular, simply had to come to terms with the fact that a unified public was an illusion. Social expansion

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[34] Ruth Freydank, "Zwischen den Fronten: Die Politik der Berliner Volksbühne zwischen 1917 und 1939" in Dietger Pforte, ed., *Freie Volksbühne Berlin: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Volksbühnenbewegung in Berlin*. Berlin 1990.

[35] "Denkschrift über die Sicherung der Volksbühne vor Mitgliederabfall", in Volksbühne collection, Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Universität Köln.

meant that the audience would necessarily be fragmented. The only unity lay in the "organized" public of theater-goers' organizations, who represented a continuation of the cultural idea of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. This idea, however, faced so many challenges and so much skepticism that it was difficult to defend. Artists defined themselves against the ideals of the *Bürgertum,*, just at the point when it most needed a renewal of its status as a cultural category. Ironically, so many people had been impoverished by the economic upheavals of the 1920s that any status they might claim as members of this group could only be cultural. Cultural self-image does not, however, go hand in hand with economic status and should not be expected to. The death of the *Bildungsbürgertum* was prematurely announced. A new public was ready to take its place by means of its membership in theater-goers' organizations before this new public itself became impoverished.

The Kroll Opera was an example of the continued survival of the idea of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in the Weimar era. Both aesthetically and politically, it aimed to bridge the gap between opera and ordinary people. Its failure was due to a combination of ill-advised artistic policy and the lack of a strong lobby that would support the opera when it was threatened with closure. Though the closing of the Kroll is generally assumed to have been a one-sided political move, in fact its demise must be viewed in the historical context of the depression and its impact.

Because the Kroll was the result of a cultural policy which tended to privilege the heroic, autonomous artist, the Kroll idea also contains problematic features. As I showed in chapter 5, it had its own elitist and anti-democratic elements, further indicating the contradictions in the

Ministry of Culture's original vision. Artists were themselves least suited to supervise the project of democratizing the arts. The Kroll's status as a symbol of the avant-garde meant that it became a myth, a fruitful one for both the postwar avant-garde in the Federal Republic and, somewhat later, for the "heritage" policies of the GDR.

The Kroll Opera closed its doors in May 1931 with a performance of "The Marriage of Figaro." It became a legend almost immediately thereafter. The physical and spiritual obliteration of the house completed this process. Used after the 1933 Reichstag fire as the site of Nazi-dominated Reichstag meetings, the building could not have been further removed from the Kroll idea. No more opera was performed there until the bombing of the Linden Opera in 1943. The Kroll served as a substitute until it was itself hit in 1944. By the time the house was demolished in 1957, only rubble remained.[36]

The Kroll idea was, however, kept alive by the memories of those who had sustained it for four years. According to Hans Curjel's 1962 radio program, even Heinz Tietjen felt consistently guilty that he had undermined the opera's prospects, and called for a "*Kroll redivivus* " until his death in 1967.[37] Curjel himself, however, acknowledged that this was not possible for one very important reason: the distance between the general public and the avant-garde had simply become too great in the years following the war. The Nazi suppression of "degenerate art" may, as some recent accounts have suggested, have seemed unremarkable in the

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[36] See Hans-Joachim Reichhardt,...*bei Kroll 1844 bis 1957: Etablissement, Ausstellungen, Theater, Konzerte, Oper, Reichstag, Gartenlokal*. Berlin 1988.
[37] "Otto Klemperer und die Kroll-Oper", p.15.

provinces.[38] In Berlin, however, a promising new synthesis of high culture and popular culture was stifled. What re-emerged after the war was an avant-garde of a different character. The Schönberg school reigned supreme in the West. The serial style of composition, supposedly free of any taint from the Nazi era, served as a new beginning for many composers and acquired immense moral authority thereby.

The legacy of the Kroll's visual style is more ambiguous in both East and West. Wieland Wagner's "new Bayreuth" is often viewed as a mainstream version of Kroll ideals.[39] While I indicated in chapter 5 that the whole idea of a "Kroll style" is an oversimplification, the cool, abstract style of Ewald Dülberg may be reflected in some of the spare designs of the "new Bayreuth." This is striking insofar as the younger Wagner was using abstraction precisely in order to indicate political neutrality. The Bayreuth festival, so compromised by its association with the Nazis, could not afford to be identified with any particular political position in the postwar years. The most common interpretation of the Kroll's politics, by contrast, assume that abstraction is to be associated with the left. There is no basis for this claim other than the outrage expressed by some right-wing politicians and critics concerning a handful of productions. Abstraction may just as well reflect an explicit refusal to take a political stand. Dülberg's "Fidelio", for example, discussed in chapter 3, did not present a leftist or revolutionary reading of Beethoven.

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[38] Konrad Dussel, *Ein neues, ein heroisches Theater?: Nationalsozialistische Theaterpolitik und ihre Auswirkungen in der Provinz*. Bonn 1988.

[39] This is stated explicitly in Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer*, p. 371. I have been unable to uncover any direct reference made by Wieland Wagner to the Kroll. For background on the new Bayreuth, see Wieland Wagner, ed., *Richard Wagner und das neue Bayreuth* (Munich 1962) and Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner at Bayreuth: Experiment and Tradition*. (London 1976).

Indeed, it is difficult to tell what sort of reading of the opera is intended. Ironically, the Kroll's greatest influence on post-1945 productions was in the aesthetic realm. Such influence does not lend itself to concrete political interpretations.

The social mission of the opera proved much harder to duplicate. It is true that subsidies for high culture were an accepted part of the postwar political landscape in Germany. However, the project of winning over a new audience was not. Tietjen was back in place as *Intendant* of the new City Opera as of 1948, and he was succeeded by Carl Ebert in 1954. Neither had been particularly concerned with the social role of opera before 1933, and the old City Opera was essentially revived as the showpiece of West Berlin, becoming the Deutsche Oper in 1962.[40]

Political considerations certainly played a greater role in the East, with the founding of the Komische Oper in 1947. Although some authors assert an ideological connection between the Kroll and the Komische Oper, it is in fact difficult to establish any direct link.[41] Early partisans of the Komische Oper went out of their way to avoid the comparison, no doubt because it would have been politically unacceptable and an example of "bourgeois formalism." In a 1954 article, Karl Schönewolf instead chose to emphasize Hans Gregor's Komische Oper as an influence.[42] Why would an opera established in a monarchical Germany have better suited the GDR's political needs? Schönewolf's language provides some clues:

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[40] Werner Bollert, *50 Jahre Deutsche Oper Berlin*. Berlin 1962.

[41] This is despite the implications made by Stephan Stompor in his article "Die Idee kann man nicht töten: Otto Klemperer und die Berliner Kroll-Oper" in *Jahrbuch der Komischen Oper* (Berlin 1963).

[42] The current location of the Komische Oper on Behrensstraße is not the same as that of Gregor's opera, although it is a short walk away. The institution known as the Komische Oper in the Weimar period did not present opera, but cabaret and variety programs.

"The term 'Komische Oper', as Gregor used it, should basically be understood in the sense of the Paris 'Opéra comique', which emerged from the protest of the young revolutionary bourgeoisie against the representative nature of court opera and which became the courageous challenge to...representative grand opera."[43] Gregor's realism, so shocking in his own day, clearly needed updating: "Today, after half a century, we look at [photographs of the old Komische Oper] with a puzzled smile...They look to us like fashion photos yellowing with age."[44] Of course, the experiments of the Weimar era, and especially the Kroll, were a crucial factor in making Gregor's approach, once so radical, appear mainstream.

The most important figure in the creation of the Komische Oper, long-time *Intendant* Walter Felsenstein, argued similarly and justified the founding of a third opera house in Berlin by referring to Gregor's house: "What we want is not new. About forty years ago, the Komische Oper on the Weidendämmer Brücke, under Hans Gregor, achieved exemplary things with similar goals."[45] Once again, the Kroll is written out of the picture.

The Kroll was not incorporated into the cultural ideology of the GDR until the 1960s, when Stephan Stompor, dramaturge of the Komische Oper, portrayed it as a noble experiment and a victim of "German fascism."[46] Like the works of Wagner, it became a symbol of

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[43] Intendanz der Komischen Oper, ed., *Die Komische Oper 1947-1954*. Berlin 1954. p. 13.
[44] *Ibid,* p. 15.
[45]Walter Felsenstein, *Die Pflicht, die Wahrheit zu finden.:Briefe und Schriften eines Theatermannes*. Frankfurt 1997. p. 25.
[46] Stompor, "Die Idee kann man nicht töten", p. 145.

"progressive" German art and authors tended to overemphasize the links between the opera and the political left.[47] Subsidized culture was a point of pride in both halves of divided Berlin, only to be rapidly called into question once the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989.

In the context of reunified Berlin, the 1920s remain a powerful, almost mythic image of what might be achieved in a democracy. The problem is that the mistakes made in this era seem more likely to be repeated than its successes. All three houses are plagued by personality conflicts which do little to enhance their position, the best example being the well-publicized feud between Daniel Barenboim, head conductor of the State Opera, and Christian Thielemann, his counterpart at the Deutsche Oper, over anti-Semitic remarks allegedly made by Thielemann. The State Opera and the Deutsche Oper have never clearly defined how their missions differ and which audiences they are trying to reach. In the years after 1989 only the Komische Oper clearly articulated a sense of artistic mission. Former *Intendant* Albert Kost stated in 1995 that outreach to young people and to those with no experience of opera were his most important priorities.[48] Such efforts are, however, minimal in the context of the Berlin opera scene. Artistic standards, finally, are as conservative as any to be found in Germany. The failure of the avant-garde to firmly establish itself in Berlin, despite the experiments of the twenties, is here painfully apparent. The current senator for culture, Thomas Flierl of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) is sometimes viewed as a promoter of the culture of the former GDR, as reflected in hiring decisions. The

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[47] See especially Bärbel Schrader and Jürgen Schebera, eds., *Kunstmetropole Berlin 1918-1933: Dokumente und Selbstzeugnisse*. Berlin/Weimar 1987.

[48] See Ruth Freydank, *Das Theater als Geschäft: Berlin und seine Privattheater um die Jahrhundertwende*. Berlin 1995. p. 222.

problems he faces, however, do not differ from those faced by earlier occupants of this post, a fact that explains why so many of them have quit in frustration. Manuel Brug of *Die Welt* has recently made the alarming statement that "The last thing that the hierarchical art form of opera can use is democracy."[49] A solution is missing, just as in the 1930s, but most politicians insist that they have no intention of closing one of the three operas.

What can be learned from the experience of the Kroll? Further, what are the implications for the position of high culture in a democratic society? In a culture as fragmented as the present Berlin republic, the mission of redefining German art lacks relevance, in spite of the many debates concerning German identity that have take place in the past fifteen years. This may simply mean that the end of the Cold War brought an end to the representative role of opera in Germany. However, opera still enjoys an amount of prestige that often surprises American visitors. Alex Ross, writing in *The New Yorker*, reported his amazement when leading politicians engaged him in serious debate about the Berlin "opera crisis", a term that is almost as widely used today as it was in the 1920s.[50] The very prominence of the debate contrasts with the situation in the United States, in which the very existence of the National Endowment for the Arts is continually under attack. Conservative politicians often echo arguments made by both the far right and the far left in Weimar Germany. Support for the arts is controversial not only because it may result in funding of "immoral" works but because funding high culture is bad for the working class, which lacks interest in opera and similar art forms. Those who value

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[49] Manuel Brug, "Andauernder Amoklauf" in *Die Welt,* March 4, 2005.
[50] Alex Ross, "Operapolitik" in *The New Yorker,* December 16, 2002.

high culture can only hope that European governments continue to support it so that not only the wealthy will have access to it. Without continual outreach, experiments such as the Kroll will be unworkable.

In this study I have traced the Kroll idea to the foundations of German liberal and democratic ideals. The call for a national theater, intimately related to the call for a unified and democratic Germany, produced the Kroll Opera at an unfortunate historical moment. Germany had just been defeated in war, and the postwar government was viewed as illegitimate by wide sectors of the population. The mission of democratizing culture thus became associated with "outsiders" - that is, Jews and leftists. Nonetheless, even this situation did not pose an existential problem until the depression forced massive changes in cultural life. A fruitful combination of high culture and mass culture could have come about in Germany had it not been for the Nazi takeover in 1933. Those composers and artists who were productive in exile, most notably Kurt Weill, bear witness to this lost possibility.

The legacy of the Kroll Opera is contradictory. On the one hand, because it was instrumental in emphasizing the theatrical aspects of opera, it had a considerable influence on the way opera is performed today. On the other hand, it was essentially a creation of its time and place. The 1920s in Germany witnessed an unprecedented attempt to combine aesthetic innovation with a sustained effort to expand the audience for opera. This political project collapsed along with the Weimar Republic. The role of Berlin as the center of artistic creativity in Europe turned out to be short-lived. This was because the city did not have a strong tradition of supporting artistic innovation in the first place. Ultimately, one must

say the same thing for civic culture. The city of Berlin still has no strong sense of its identity or of its future.