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History 133C

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Source Exploration

**I. Introduction**

**Original Source:**

* Becher, Johannes. ‘Poem by Johannes R. Becher on the Death of Stalin’, German History in Documents and Images, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\_document.cfm?document\_id=4489, accessed Apr. 24 2019.
* *Sinn und Form*, 5/2 (1953), p. 8 ff.

In 1953, German writer, expressionist poet and politician Johannes Robert Becher (1891 – 1958) penned the poem “*Danksagung*” or “Giving Thanks” in honor Joseph Stalin, who had died that same year. The poem was originally published on May 2,1953 in the literature and culture magazine co-founded by Becher called *Sinn und Form* or *Sense and Form.* The GHDI website indicates that Becher was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize (later renamed to the Lenin Peace Prize) in 1953 for his cultural and literary contributions to the USSR, but other sources reveal that he was awarded the prize in December of 1952*.*

**II. Biography**

Becher was born in Munich on May 22, 1891. His father was a judge. In April of 1910, Becher and his lover Fanny Fuss agreed on a suicide pact. Becher shot and killed Fuss before shooting himself in the chest. Becher survived and recovered from his injuries but developed an addiction to morphine and went on to struggle with the trauma of killing Fuss and his failed suicide.

In 1917, Becher began his affiliation with the Spartakist League, which evolved into the Communist Party of Germany, or KPD. He would not become an active member of the KPD until 1924. During this time Becher’s communist zeal increased. He published the anti-war novel *Levisite* in 1925, which led to his prosecution for high treason, but was discharged after wide protests.

Following the Reichstag fire on February 27, 1933 and the outlawing of the KPD many of its members fled. Becher was among those who escaped Nazi persecution in Germany. He fled the country and stayed in Vienna, then Prague and later Paris until 1935 when he moved to the Soviet Union in Moscow. Becher survived Stalin’s purges, which began in 1936, while some of his colleagues and associates fell victim to the purges.

On July 12, 1943 the “National Committee of Free Germany” was established in Moscow. The exiled Germans who were in the Committee included Brecher and future East German presidents Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht. In May of 1945, following the end of the war in Europe, Becher returned to Germany and settled within the Soviet zone of occupation

In 1949 Becher and German writer Paul Wiegler founded the literature and culture magazine *Sinn und Form*. The magazine published literary works like poems as well as philosophical and political essays. Several of Becher’s own works including “*Danksagung*” were published in the magazine. “*Danksagung*” was published in the February 1953 issue of *Sinn und Form*. The magazine is still ongoing today.

Beginning in 1954, Becher held the new position of Minister of Culture of the GDR. The responsibilities of the position were of a representative role. By 1956, Becher’s health and his political influence began to decline. Through his poor health Becher maintained his office as Culture Minister, but his influence waned to the point that he played no further political role. On October 11, 1958, Becher died of cancer in East Berlin. He was sixty-seven years old at the time of his death.

**III. Other Works**

Becher’s major works include poem collections *Verfall und Triumph* (1914) and *Der Glücksucher und die sieben Lasten* (1938), novels *Levisite* (1926) and *Abschied* (1940) as well as collaborating with Austrian composer Hanns Eisler to write the song “*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*” which was adopted as the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany’s national anthem. Eisler created the melody while Becher wrote the lyrics. For Becher’s contribution to “*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*” he was awarded the National Prize of the GDR in 1950.

According to WorldCat.org, there are twenty different works by and about Becher in 4,275 publications in five languages held in 19,177 libraries. His most prominent work is the book *Abschied* or *Farewell* with 103 editions published between 1946 and 2014 in four languages, German, English, French and Russian. The novel is held within 428 WorldCat member libraries, including the UCSB Library, which holds several of the editions. The English edition of *Abschied* was published in 1970 by the Seven Seas Publishers and translated by Joan Becher (no relation to Johannes Becher). *Abschied* was also adapted into a film in 1968. It was directed by German film director and writer Egon Günther. Günther and German film writer and actor Günter Kunert provided additional writing for the film. Below is a graph from WorldCat detailing the timeline of publications of Becher’s works.



**IV. Differing Versions of “*Danksagung*”**

The GHDI website provides a version of “*Danksagung*,” that is significantly different from the original version. At twelve stanzas the version on the GHDI website is significantly shorter than the complete version, which is twenty-seven stanzas long. Another distinction of the GHDI version aside from being shorter is that several of the stanzas are arranged in a different order. Stanzas one through nine of the GHDI version correspond with stanzas eight through fifteen of the original version, with the eleventh stanza skipped. Meanwhile, stanzas seven, eight, ten, eleven and twelve of the GHDI version are respectively stanzas four, six, twenty-three and twenty-four of the original version.

Using Google Translate to translate the omitted stanzas reveals possible reasons why GHDI deliberately excluded them. Stanzas one, eleven and twenty-five through twenty-seven particularly stand out. Here are those stanzas translated:

1

Bow before him in eternal memory!

Oh say you too, my Germany, Stalin Thanks.

He came to give you a new life,

When your land sank in bloody debris.

11

He speaks in the new metallurgical combine.

How fraternal and simple does he say: "Comrades!"

Every word Stalin speaks is fact,

Word and deed are poured out of one piece.

25

Before Stalin, bow down, flags, let down!

Ice should be an eternal memory!

Rise up, banners, and blow in memory

At Stalin all the way to the Rhine.

26

In Stalin's name, Germany will become one.

It is he who receives the peace.

So he stays ours and we are his,

And Stalin, Stalin means the happiness of the world.

27

The nations will rise before you,

Comrade Stalin, and rise to you

My Germany is: in our new life

Living the life of Stalin forever

Compared to the twelve stanzas of the GHDI version, these stanzas from the original are show heavy favor toward Stalin. The GHDI version is far more neutral in terms of sympathy for Stalin. Several lines from these stanzas are particularly striking. From the first stanza, “Bow before him in eternal memory!” From the eleventh, “Every word Stalin speaks is fact.” These lines stray away from the calm, nature imagery evoked by the GHDI Version.

Opponents of Stalin and the communist ideology, especially those from Germany, would find stanzas twenty-five to twenty-seven controversial. From stanza twenty-five the last line reads, “At Stalin all the way to the Rhine,” followed by the first line of the next stanza, “In Stalin’s name, Germany will become one.” These two lines can be construed as possibly hostile, calling for a unification of Germany at the hands of Stalin, or the unification of Germany under communism. The last stanza further builds upon the threatening connotations of the previous two stanzas and is revealing of the cult of personality surrounding Stalin. A final distinction to point out is that despite being called “Giving Thanks,” four of the five stanzas containing lines directly thanking Stalin was omitted in the GHDI version. It is possible that because of their personal feelings toward Stalin, their opinion of the communist ideology or the possible controversy these omitted lines could cause, the curators and editors of GHDI chose to provide their shortened version over the original.

In the following pages are the two different versions of “*Danksagung*.” The first is the English version provided in the GHDI website. The second is the complete version in German.

**Full Text (GHDI): Giving Thanks, Johannes R. Beher, Translated by Thomas Dunlap**<http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4489>

Stanzas 1 - 6 Stanzas 7 - 12

In his works he holds out his hand to us,
Volume by volume arrayed in the libraries,
And his likeness looks down from the wall.
He is present even in the remotest village.

With Marx and Engels he walks through Stralsund,
Near Rostock he checks the tractors,
And over the dark background of a meadow,
He looks off into the distance, as though lost in a dream.

He walks through the factories along the Ruhr,
And on the fields he steps up to the farmers.
The tank furrow – a trail of suffering.
And Stalin says: “It won’t be long now.”

In Dresden he visits the gallery,
And all the paintings bow to him.
The colors shine more beautifully than ever,
And dance a colorful dance of life.

With Lenin he sits on a bench in the evening,
Ernst Thälmann sits down beside them.
And an accordion sings thanks,
They smile, grateful and humble.

The youth shows you its mastery
In sport and games – and you hand out the prizes.
Then you hum along the words “learn and create,”
When in farewell it sings the new song.

There he will be, where the waters
Of the Rhine and the cathedral of Cologne tell of him.
There he will be in everything beautiful, good,
On every mountain, in every German stream.

There you will stand, Stalin, in the full bloom
Of the apple trees at Lake Constance,
And through the Black Forest wanders his kindness,
And beckons to itself a skittish doe.

Already he lives and wanders forth in all,
And his name is carried by the spring wind,
And in the castle ruins is his echo,
And the child is spelling Stalin’s name.

Your name sounds out in the waterfall
And the rustling of the leaves, and your step
Moves onward quietly. We stop and listen
And follow him and go along silently.

Remember, Germany, your friend, the best one.
Oh, thank you, Stalin, no one was like him
So deeply kindred to you. East and West
In him are united. He crosses the sea,

And no mountain throws up a barrier,
No enemy is strong enough to resist
The man called Stalin, for his thought
Become deed, and the will of Stalin will be done.

**Full Text (German): Danksagung, Johannes R. Becher -** <https://sascha313.wordpress.com/2014/03/28/johannes-r-becher/>

**Zum Tode J.W. Stalins**
**DANKSAGUNG**

Stanzas 1-9 Stanzas 9 - 17

Neigt euch vor ihm in ewigem Gedenken!
O sag auch du, mein Deutschland, Stalin Dank.
Er kam, ein neues Leben dir zu schenken,
Als schon dein Land in blut´gem Schutt versank.

Er kam, aus deiner Not dich zu erretten,
Wo immer neues wächst, gedenke sein.
Hochhäuser ragen über Trümmerstätten
Und ihr Willkommen lädt uns herzlich ein.

Es wird ganz Deutschland einstmals Stalin danken.
In jeder Stadt steht Stalins Monument.
Dort wird er sein, wo sich die Reben ranken,
Und dort in Kiel erkennt ihn ein Student.

Dort wird er sein, wo sich von ihm die Fluten
Des Rheins erzählen und der Kölner Dom.
Dort wird er sein in allem Schönen, Guten,
Auf jedem Berg, an jedem deutschen Strom,

Allüberall, wo wir zu denken lernen
Und wo man einen Lehrsatz streng beweist.
Vergleichen wir die Genien mit den Sternen,
So glänzt als hellster der, der Stalin heißt…

Dort wirst du, Stalin, stehn, in voller Blüte
Der Apfelbäume an dem Bodensee,
Und durch den Schwarzwald wandert seine Güte,
Und winkt zu sich heran ein scheues Reh.

Am Wendelstein und in den Isarauen
Sind wir begegnet deinem Angesicht.
Wir sind begegnet dir im Abendblauen,
Und sind begegnet dir im Morgenlicht.

In seinen Werken reicht er uns die Hand.
Band reiht an Band sich in den Bibliotheken,
Und niederblickt sein Bildnis von der Wand.
Auch in dem fernsten Dorf ist er zugegen.

Mit Marx und Engels geht er durch Stralsund,
Bei Rostock überprüft er die Traktoren,
Und über einen dunklen Wiesengrund
Blickt in die Weite er, wie traumverloren.

Er geht durch die Betriebe an der Ruhr,
Und auf den Feldern tritt er zu den Bauern,
Die Panzerfurche – eine Leidensspur.
Und Stalin sagt: »Es wird nicht lang mehr dauern.

Er spricht im neuen Hüttenkombinat.
Wie brüderlich und schlicht sagt er: »Genossen!«
Ein jedes Wort, das Stalin spricht, ist Tat,
Aus einem Stück sind Wort und Tat gegossen.

In Dresden sucht er auf die Galerie,
Und alle Bilder sich vor ihm verneigen.
Die Farbentöne leuchten schön wie nie
Und tanzen einen bunten Lebensreigen.

Mit Lenin sitzt er abends auf der Bank,
Ernst Thälmann setzt sich nieder zu den beiden.
Und eine Ziehharmonika singt Dank,
Da lächeln sie, selbst dankbar und bescheiden.

Die Jugend zeigt euch ihre Meisterschaft
In Sport und Spiel – und ihr verteilt die Preise.
Dann summt ihr mit die Worte »lernt und schafft«
Wenn sie zum Abschied singt die neue Weise.

Nun lebt er schon und wandert fort in allen
Und seinen Namen trägt der Frühlingswind,
Und in dem Bergsturz ist sein Widerhallen
Und Stalins Namen buchstabiert das Kind.

Wenn sich vor Freude rot die Wangen färben,
Dankt man dir, Stalin, und sagt nichts als: »Du!«
Ein Armer flüstert »Stalin« noch im Sterben
Und Stalins Hand drückt ihm die Augen zu.

Dort wirst du sitzen mit uns in der Runde
Und teilst mit uns die Speise und den Trank.
Wir heben, grüßend dich, das Glas zum Munde
Und singen dir und sagen Stalin Dank.

Stanzas 18 - 22

Stalin: so heißt ein jedes Friedenssehnen.
Stalin: so heißt des Friedens Morgenrot,
Stalin beschwören aller Mütter Tränen:
»Stalin! O ende du des Krieges Not.«

Wer je wird angeklagt des Friedens wegen,
Aufrecht stehst du in dem mit vor Gericht.
Die Richter aber ihre Hände legen
Vors Auge, denn sie blendet soviel Licht.

Du trittst herein, welch eine warme Helle
Strömt von dir aus und was für eine Kraft
Und der Gefangene singt in seiner Zelle,
Er fühlt als Riese sich in seiner Haft …

Im Wasserfall und in dem Blätterrauschen
Ertönt dein Name, und es zieht dein Schritt
Ganz still dahin. Wir bleiben stehn und lauschen
Und folgen ihm und gehen leise mit.

Du Freund der Völker, du, ihr allerbester,
Was je war rühmenswert, blüht dir zum Ruhm.
Es spielt, den Weltraum füllend, ein Orchester
Das hohe Eied von Stalins Heldentum …

Stanzas 23 - 27

Gedenke, Deutschland, deines Freunds, des besten.
O danke Stalin, keiner war wie er
So tief verwandt dir. Osten ist und Westen
In ihm vereint. Er überquert das Meer,

Und kein Gebirge setzt ihm eine Schranke,
Kein Feind ist stark genug, zu widerstehn
Dem Mann, der Stalin heißt, denn sein Gedanke
Wird Tat, und Stalins Wille wird geschehn.

Vor Stalin neigt euch, Fahnen, lasst euch senken!
Eis soll ein ewiges Gedenken sein!
Erhebt euch, Fahnen, und weht im Gedenken
An Stalin bis hinüber an den Rhein.

In Stalins Namen wird sich Deutschland einen.
Er ist es, der den Frieden uns erhält.
So bleibt er unser und wir sind die Seinen,
Und Stalin, Stalin heißt das Glück der Welt.

Die Völker werden sich vor dir erheben,
Genosse Stalin, und zu dir erhebt
Mein Deutschland sich: in unserm neuen Leben
Das Leben Stalins ewig weiterleben

**Annotated Bibliography**

"Free Germans' In Russia." *Times*, July 23, 1943, 3. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed May 30, 2019). <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/AAJpx6>.

* Becher is among the members of the National Committee of Free Germany, an organization of anti-Nazi Germans exiled in the Soviet Union, who had signed a manifesto calling for an end to the war. Among others who signed the manifesto were Major Karl Hertz, Major Heinrich Foman, Wilhelm Pieck, and Walter Ulbricht.

 “Stalin Peace Prizes Awarded To Paul Robeson, Six Others.” *The Register-Guard*, December 22, 1952 (accessed May 20, 2019). [https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1310&dat=19521222&id=- iRWAAAAIBAJ&sjid=xeIDAAAAIBAJ&pg=5204,3678878](https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1310&dat=19521222&id=-%09iRWAAAAIBAJ&sjid=xeIDAAAAIBAJ&pg=5204,3678878)

* *The Register-Guard* is a newspaper based in Eugene, Oregon. The article states that a special international committee awarded the Peace Prizes in a ceremony that coincided with the closing of the Vienna Peace Congress. The Vienna Peace Congress likely refers to the 1952 World Congress of People in Vienna. This ceremony also fell in line with Stalin’s 73rd birthday, which is on December 18th. Recipient of the awards were also granted 100,000 rubles, which according to the article amounted to 25,000 dollars at the time. Becher and six others were given the award. The other recipients were American Paul Robeson, Soviet Ilya Ehrenburg, Canadian James Endicott, Brazilian Eliza Branco, Indian Saifuddin Kichlu, and Frenchman Yves Farge. This article is available through Google news archives.

"Stalin Peace Prizes" *Times*, December 22, 1952, 4. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed May 18, 2019). <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/AAJqf5>.

* This short article lists the recipients of the Stalin Peace Prizes for 1952. It lists the same people as above. It mentions how the winners receive 100,000 rubles but in addition a diploma and a gold medal. According to the article the award ceremony was held at the Kremlin.

"An East German 'Unity Commission'." *Times*, January 8, 1954, 6. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed May 19, 2019). <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/AAJqe7>.

* This article notes how the East German Cabinet “set up a ‘commission for German unity’ to prepare a peace treaty and reunification of the country.” It mentions that “Herr Johannes Becher, was appointed to head a new Ministry of Culture.”

"Dr. Johannes Becher." *Times*, October 13, 1958, 19. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed May 18, 2019). <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/AAJrw4>.

* This article is an obituary for Becher. It reports that he “died on Saturday after a long illness.” The article provides a brief biography, highlighting his education in Munich, Jena and Berlin. His affiliation with communism and his 1924 trial for high treason is mentioned. His work on the GDR national anthem and his awarding of the Stalin Peace Prize is noted.

Sinn und Form. <https://sinn-und-form.de/>

* This is the website for *Sinn und Form*. From the site one can order single issues of *Sinn und Form* or choose to subscribe to the magazine. It holds an archive of all the past publications. Publications are organized by date of issue, but it is also possible to view history of publications by author. The archives confirm the GHDI citation that “*Danksagung*” was published in the 2/1953 issue of the magazine and that the poem is on the eighth page.

Shirer, Robert K. “Johannes R. Becher 1891-1958.” *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, by Matthias Konzett, vol. 1, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000, pp. 74–76.

* This is a biography of Becher. It briefly shares his early life and focuses on his middle years, during his education and political activism. The biography also serves as a timeline of the works that he has released throughout his life, giving background to each of his publications. It gives a short summary of his political career after returning to the Soviet Occupation Zone.