

Chapter One

Author's life and historical background

An examination of Brecht's biography and of the modern German history is necessary for the understanding of this thesis.

I. German brief history in the early 20th century

In 1871, twenty-seven years before Brecht was born, the Germans have already reinforced their sense of nationality by defeating France in The Franco-Prussian War. This victory inspired Germany to accelerate its economy and military ability. The Krupp family, known for their steel manufacturing, was a valuable contribution to the German industrial and military industries. The prosperity of the Krupp family was a sign of the speeding progress of German infrastructure in the late 19th century.

Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) was a Prussian statesman in this German heyday, who founded the Germany Empire in 1871 and served as its chancellor for nineteen years. During this time, Germany developed more confidence and patriotism. At the same time, in Brecht's hometown, Augsburg, heavy industries started to emerge besides its paper and textile mills. KUKA (Keller und Knappich Augsburg), which was founded in 1898, a manufacturer has started to produce industrial machines and automation systems for a variety of industries. MAN AG (Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg AG, Augsburg), which was also found in 1898 according to a merger of two heavy industrial companies into an engineering company, also has started to manufacture vehicles and engines. Both of these major German heavy industrial manufacturers were ambitious in Augsburg in the same year when Brecht was born.

However, these welcome circumstances did not last long. The frustration of diplomacy, and the Scramble for Africa which reached its climax in 1914 and all of

Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been divided by Europeans (Cook 56) foretold the coming of WWII. In 1918, after Germany was defeated in WWI, it was stripped much of its territory and all of its colonies. Parliament members forced Prince Max von Baden, the 8th Chancellor of Germany, to resign, also William II, the last German Emperor, to flee to Netherlands. This revolution led to a republic, proclaimed by a German Social Democratic politician Philipp Scheidemann (1865-1939), which historians refer to as the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) in the end of 1918. As a defeated nation, the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on 28 June 1919, brought Germans a despairing summer. This treaty was not only restricted German military development but also foreshadowed the inevitability of WWII.

In order to make reparations after the war, the Weimar government released their paper currency to meet an urgent need which led to dramatic inflation. The serious inflation and a high unemployment rate caused many large scale strikes and riots in the postwar German society. Besides the turbulence in people's livelihood, the politics left a chaos around 20's. Social Democratic Party of Germany (abbreviate to SPD), the Germany's oldest political party, had new rivals after WWI. First, The Communist Party of Germany (abbreviate to KPD) started in 1918. Second, The National Socialist German Workers Party (abbreviate to NSDAP) started in 1919. Among these political parties, Adolf Hitler not only craftily manipulated the system and his supporters but also had benefited from the wrestling between SPD and KPD. This condition led NSDAP to a dominant position in the parliament. In 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor at the head of a coalition government. Then, with the increasing tension and conflict between KPD and NSDAP, the Reichstag fire (February 27, 1933) created the perfect conditions for the Nazis to overwhelm the KPD. The next year, Hitler became the Führer (the combination of the offices of

President and chancellor into an ultimate power in German) and revealed the prologue of WWII.

After six years devastation of WWII (1939-1945), the Alliance soon breakup and Germany was occupied by two divided camps—Western Allies (capitalism) and the Soviet Union (communism). The Iron Curtain fell on postwar Eastern Europe, and a “Cold War” period which held mainly between the United States and the Soviet Union lasted for decades.

II. Brecht’s biographical background

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was born to a bourgeois family in Augsburg. The emergence of these heavy industries were not only crucial for the industrial transformation in this ancient city but also symbolized the vitality of capitalist class for the up-coming 20th century. Due to such advantageous climate of living environment, Brecht’s grandfather and father were doing well in the paper business. His father was especially outstanding in business, who had become “a typical representative of the solid and respectable bourgeoisie” (Münsterer 17). His mother who was the daughter of a Swabian stationmaster, Protestant and conventionally devout (Thomson 23); and devoted to her children’s education but she suffered from breast cancer dating back to when she was a young lady. His mother, instead of concerning her own chronic ailment, concentrated her efforts to tend the young Brecht because he was physically feeble in his childhood. This experience had a considerable influence in Brecht’s plays, for most of his major works always have maternal characters that possess certain perseverant spirits.

Augsburg is an ancient city with a modern mask since the beginning of 20th century. In Brecht’s childhood, his family was a microcosm of local society for his parents were represented as two pillars of Augsburg, a city with both tradition (his

mother) and new prospering technology (his father). Encouraged by this stimulating milieu, young Brecht had a comfortable school life until the First World War broke out. After which he developed a critical attitude toward his society.

The first half of twentieth century was a tough period for many European countries. From 1914 to 1918, the mass destruction of WWI resulted in great casualties in Europe. In 1916, Brecht was a patriotic, young freshman enrolled in university. His early manhood stirred him to enlist in military service, yet Brecht's father did all he could to prevent him from fighting in the war. Moreover, Brecht knew many of his classmates had died on the battlefield. His father asked Brecht to find a loophole for the deferment from active service, which was to register for an additional medical course at the University of Munich (Thomson 24). However, Brecht did not pay much attention to his medical lessons for he was interested in literary and critical activities. It was not until 1918, when he was twenty years old, did he enlist as a medical orderly in Augsburg. Also in 1918, Brecht wrote "The Legend of the Dead Soldier", a satirical poem, to criticize the war and express his antiwar ideas. Obviously, WWI had shifted Brecht's attitude toward the war, which was not only caused by his own life experience in the wartime but also by the disappointment of the German people toward the worsening war situation.

After Brecht was discharged from the army, there were some amusing episodes in his life, which might display his characters. One incident had taken place, according to his diary in September 1920 that some apples were stolen from his family orchard, the young Brecht defended the theft by saying that "a tree's produce should not be privatized." Facing his son's response, Brecht's father was angry and chided him for his communist thought (Leach 103). From this incident, we might detect some of the young Brecht's rebellious spirit. And it is also very true that after

being demobilized from the army, Brecht was still under the influences of communist ideas, whether from Party activities or his communist mistresses.

His early poems about the horrors of war and his first play, *Baal* (1918), about the hypocrisy of the bourgeois morality were written with his early personal experiences. The year 1924 can be considered as the beginning of Brecht's literary career because some of his well-known plays were started to emerge from the stage. For easy discussion I shall divide the prime of his life into two periods, from 1924 to 1933 and from 1934 to 1948. It was between the year 1924 to 1933, when Brecht settled in Berlin, (besides *Baal* was premiered on December 8, 1923), other famous plays like *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), and *The Mother* (1932), were also had premiered during this period. *The Mother* was premiered on January 17, 1932 in Berlin; however, this play was considered as an agitprop performance and was banned by the police in February the same year. After the Reichstag fire took place, Brecht and his wife Weigel fled from Berlin in the next morning and started his exile days.

During Brecht's second heyday of his career (1934-1948), WWII, one of the deadliest wars in human history, had dragged on for six years (1939-1945). Hitler's military power swept from Poland in the east then to France in the west. People from Germany including intellectuals fled to other countries to escape from Hitler's persecution. Brecht no exception, after the Reichstag fire he first traveled to Paris then settled in Denmark in June 1933, he had traveled back and forth between Denmark and Paris to prepare some rehearsals till the end of that year. From October to December in 1934, Brecht first visited London, and was impressed by its culture. He also made a first visit to New York on October 15, 1935 to work on the production of *The Mother* and left New York in the near end of that year. After

1935, Brecht still continued to create new plays and to collaborate with producers on productions. The expansion to northern Europe from Nazi Germany was at hand, Brecht moved to Stockholm on April 23, 1939 with his family members. It is also the same year that Brecht completed *Mother Courage and Her Children* in November. Again, Brecht moved to Helsinki on April 17, 1940, eight days after the Nazis invaded Denmark and Norway. However, the invasion of Nazi Germany seemed unstoppable. Brecht had no choice but to exile himself in order to further avoid destruction; he left Helsinki for America via Leningrad and Moscow with his family and his entourage. They finally reached America in 1941 and settled in California on July 21 in the same year. His well-known plays like, *Mother Courage and Her Children (1941)*, *The Good Person of Setzuan (1943)*, *Life of Galileo (1943)*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1948)* were premiered on the stage during this second period. There is no evidence to indicate these plays are the direct reflection of German society in 40's. However, there are some clues in these stories could make readers to associate with the situation in Germany at that time.

Many Brecht's important plays in this period reveal a lost and reluctant attitude toward the world. After experiencing the cruelty of WWII, Brecht found America a safe haven for many European intellectuals to settle. However, an embarrassing situation occurred when the United States determined to compete with the Soviet Union for leadership. Unfortunately, a playwright, like Brecht, whose plays with the quality of communist agitprop was not welcome in the United States. Brecht was under pressure from U.S. authority for his communist thoughts. Brecht fled to Paris again to continue his productions, the next day after he was questioned by the US House Committee on Un-American Activities in Washington in 1947. Therefore, Brecht's exile life came to an end at the near end of 1948 when he went back to East

Berlin via Salzburg and Prague. However, Berlin at that time had been separately occupied by France, U.K., U.S.A and soviet Russia till year 1990. After Brecht went back to East Berlin, he continued his dedication to drama development; nevertheless, in this period he mainly worked on adaptations and in January 1949, Brecht established Berliner Ensemble in Berlin to stage his own plays. Now Brecht reached a remarkable achievement: a playwright owned a troupe and needn't to write scripts for others but for his own theatre. However, Brecht was not satisfied with his efforts. Despite his kidney trouble, Brecht still worked on new plays or adapted others into his own version. Brecht mainly stayed in East Berlin in his late years and died on August 14, 1956. His wife, Weigel, succeeded his position to run Berliner Ensemble after his death till 1971 when she died. Till today Berliner Ensemble still performs many wonderful masterpieces to audiences all over the world, and continues its inaugurator's theatrical ideas and passion.

III. Brecht's relationship with ladies

It is important to understand Brecht's romances before studying the maternal characters in his plays. Besides his affection toward his mother, Brecht's relationship with women is more amorous than sincere. Actually, Brecht started to visit brothels frequently since he was sixteen years old. His own explanation in his diary was to expand his "life experiences". In 1918 before he enlisted in the army he met his first love—Paula Banholzer, whom Brecht used to call "Bi", and they had a baby boy named Frank on 31 July, 1919 out of wedlock (Leach 104). Again, at the end of WWI, Brecht was involved with other women, the most notable one among them was an Austrian opera singer named Marianne Zoff. They finally married in November 1922, four months before their daughter, Hanne, was born. But, at the same time Brecht was still dallying with other women. Brecht's divorce from

Marianne Zoff was postponed until 1926; however, the marriage was in disarray from 1924, when he was involved with both Helene Weigel and Elisabeth Hauptmann (Thomson 28).

Elisabeth Hauptman, a collaborator in his repertory, got to know Brecht in 1922 before his exile to northern Europe, and it is believed that his Marxist ideas were enlightened by this female activist at the time. However another mistress Margarete Steffin, a member of the working class with whom Brecht had worked with in 1934, and she was the only one Brecht considered as a conventional lover. Unfortunately, this young and talented lady died of tuberculosis in Moscow in 1941, right before Brecht embarked to America (Thomson 29).

Another collaborator was Ruth Berlau; she met Brecht in 1933 and still worked with him after they went to America. During his exile in America, Brecht traveled to many different places, either to join the preparation for productions or to dally with his mistresses; Brecht went to New York on February 8, 1943 to stay with Berlau, and not until the end of May did he go back to Santa Monica, California. Berlau's commitment to communism reinforced Brecht's communistic ideas in his plays, especially in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Again, another woman named Helene Weigel, a Jewish communist and became a leading actress in most of Brecht's plays, who stood out above the others and this relationship lasted till Brecht died since she had associated with him from 1924. She became his second wife on April 10, 1929, and gave birth to two children, Stefan and Barbara. The diversity of these three mothers' experiences in love and marriages are just as versions as Brecht's personal experience. For example, all three *Mother Courage's* children have different fathers; just as unconventional as Brecht's four children have three different mothers.

It is interesting that Brecht had many women in his life, and their relationships

with him often overlapped one another. Peter Thomson properly explained this phenomenon, “He (Brecht) was not, in any obvious way, prepossessing. There was, of course, immense power, not divorced from sexuality, in the unbending confidence in his own rightness to which Bernhard Reich refers. Added to that was Brecht’s abnormal, and from one perspective flattering, determination to retain his interest in anyone who had genuinely commanded it” (Thomson 27). Therefore, these intelligent women were attracted to Brecht not for his appearance, but for his solid determination in his working attitude.

