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## CHAPTER ONE

### SOURCES

Brecht was living in Sweden when, on 1 September 1939, the *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland. Few people at that time had a better right to say 'I told you so.' He had been a vigorous campaigner-in-exile against Nazism, and was uncommonly perceptive about Hitler's tactics and intentions. Until April 1939 he had been living in Denmark, where, in the summer of 1938, he had compiled a sequence of short plays under the general title of *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*. In this work, as he explained in a letter to the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom,

I tried to bring out two points which I thought it vital to make known abroad: first, the enslavement, disfranchisement, paralysis of *all* sections of the population under the National Socialist dictatorship (people living in the democracies have far too little concrete knowledge of this); second, the state of mind prevailing in the army of the totalitarian state, which is a cross-section of the population as a whole (to give people outside Germany an idea of the fragility of this war machine).<sup>1</sup>

A concern for the population as a whole (rather than for its social and political leaders) and an urge to expose false myths about military morale characterise much of Brecht's work before and after the writing of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, but in the summer of 1939 he was primarily concerned to warn his Scandinavian hosts about Hitler's land-lust. It was the fear of imminent occupation that had driven him out of Denmark, and during the early weeks of his residence on the island of Lidingö, near Stockholm, he wrote for the workers' theatre in Copenhagen a one-act political cartoon. *Dansen* is a deliberately crude allegory of the Nazi plan to annex Denmark.

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Also in Lidingö that summer he wrote a companion piece for Sweden, which was staged in Stockholm under the title of *What Is the Price of Iron?* Living in a country whose language he neither spoke nor understood, Brecht was much occupied with thoughts of war.

In the desolate aftermath of the invasion of Poland, Brecht abandoned work on *The Good Person of Szechwan* and, in about five weeks, completed a first draft of *Mother Courage*. The immediate inspiration was a story in Johan Ludvig Runeberg's *Tales of a Subaltern*, which he had heard from the Swedish actress Naima Wifstrand. It was always important to Brecht that his present circumstance should find expression in his writing. When he abandoned projects, it was usually because he had lost faith in their contemporaneity. They no longer spoke for him *now*. Runeberg's story of the camp-following Lotte Svärd, who survives precariously by supplying essential provisions to war-worn soldiers, alerted Brecht to the historical connection between his native and adoptive countries. Never before, and only now since Gustavus Adolphus's powerful intervention in the Thirty Years War, had the fortunes of Sweden (and the unsung segment of its population that formed the Swedish army) and the divided landmass of Germany been so interdependent. For Brecht, the precipitate writing of *Mother Courage* in the autumn of 1939 was the completion of a project begun with *What is the Price of Iron?* His intention was that Wifstrand would play Mother Courage and Helene Weigel, who spoke no Swedish, the specially created part of dumb Kattrin. 'Socialism', Brecht insisted to the more grandiosely idealistic Hermann Greid, 'is nothing but a collection of projects on the part of the proletariat.'<sup>2</sup>

If the initial impetus for the writing of *Mother Courage* was provided by the story of a Scandinavian survivor, the true provenance of the play is German. It was in the divided principalities of seventeenth-century 'Germany' that the hungry troops were most frequently quartered during the dragging winters of the Thirty Years War; and a sense of national pain, of a country whose urge to unity

was wickedly frustrated, of a people constrained and disregarded, is classically sited there. Brecht had witnessed the outcome of the German counter-attack in Europe at the end of World War I. As a pacifist in the 1930s, he had recognised with horror the imminence of a second counter-attack, and the consequent folly of appeasing Hitler. As a student of history – the subject which, with religion, had most fired his boyhood imagination – and a political interventionist, he could not detach the past from the present. Runeberg's story of the sutler, Lotte Svärd, opened windows into both the Thirty Years War and the imminent 1940s. Like many of his fellow-exiles, Brecht never truly left Germany. He was obsessed by it.

Although the writing of accurate history was never Brecht's purpose, a reading of *Mother Courage* is enhanced by some familiarity with the confused motives and priorities of the Thirty Years War. C. V. Wedgwood's classic account of it was first published in 1938. Twenty-five years and a world war later, she wrote in the Foreword to a new edition:

The dismal course of this war still seems to me to be an object lesson on the dangers and disasters which can arise when men of narrow hearts and little minds are in high places.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict that had arisen in 1618 as a dispute over the kingship of Bohemia, and that was sustained for three decades, with falling and rising intensity, by the associated rivalries the original dispute spawned, finally petered out in 1648, with the still-peremptory struggle for supremacy between Spanish Hapsburgs and French Bourbons unresolved. The throne of Bohemia had, at the outset, served as a pretext for a trial of strength between the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. By the end, the two greatest Catholic powers in Europe were squaring up to each other. This was not, that is to say, one war, but a series of small wars, some consequent on each other, some simultaneous. The common factor was that victory usually went to the generals who kept their troops best provisioned. These are the 'heroes' of conventional

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history: Gustavus Adolphus on the Protestant side, Wallenstein on the Catholic. Tilly, whose private life was governed by moral rigour and a devotion to the Virgin Mary, was too ill-supplied to contain the pillaging urge of his armies, and has therefore had to carry the blame for the atrocities that followed the capture of Magdeburg in 1631. Mansfeld, a mercenary general in command of a mercenary army, succeeded only so long as his suppliers kept faith with him. Captured soldiers were easily enlisted in the armies of their better-stocked captors. Priests and pastors were especially liable to victimisation, since the war's religious origin, though often dimly remembered, was never entirely forgotten. Cooks were popular so long as there was food, but sacrificial lambs when it ran out. (The Chaplain in *Mother Courage* is a frightened man, as ready to turn his coat as was the Vicar of Bray, and the Cook's improbable name is Lamb.) Not military tactics, but the provision of food, was the guiding consideration of warfare. Wedgwood cites the recorded comment of a sutler – it might have been Lotte Svärd or Anna Fierling – after the signing of the Peace of Westphalia: 'I was born in war. I have no home, no country and no friends, war is all my wealth and now whither shall I go?'<sup>4</sup>

Brecht would have known the history of his own home-city of Augsburg. At the outbreak of the Thirty Years War, this was one of the 'free cities' of the principalities, by some accounts the greatest Lutheran city of all, but perilously placed in Bavaria, whose Elector, Maximilian, was one of the richest and most constant suppliers of the Imperial (Catholic) armies. In 1629, when Wallenstein forced on the city Ferdinand II's Edict of Restitution, Augsburg was forbidden to exercise Protestant forms of worship and its Lutheran ministers were exiled. Three years later Gustavus Adolphus entered the city in triumph, to the rapturous welcome of stubbornly Protestant Augsburgers. Within six months Gustavus Adolphus was dead, and in 1635, after a six-month siege by the Imperial army, Augsburg surrendered to Catholicism again. The city, whose population in 1620

had stood at 48,000, was reduced to 21,000 in 1650.<sup>5</sup> In this decline, Augsburg was representative of the German principalities as a whole. A population of twenty-one million in 1618 had sunk to less than fourteen million by 1648.

Two classics of German literature lie, with Runeberg's *Tales of a Subaltern*, behind *Mother Courage*. The earlier is Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, a sprawling picaresque novel whose narrator becomes uncomprehendingly embroiled in the Thirty Years War. Its graphic description of atrocities, delivered often with a disturbing blandness, forces home to the reader Grimmelshausen's horrified recollection of his war-experience. *Simplicissimus* was published in 1669, when the German territories were still rebuilding. In the following year Grimmelshausen brought out the first of its sequels, *Trutz-Simplex*. The sub-title relates it to Brecht: 'Life-story of the arch-swindler and trouble-maker Courage'. *Trutz-Simplex* shows, most importantly, something that Brecht might have made of the story of *Mother Courage*, but elected not to. In *Simplicissimus* we saw the untrained wild boy – as 'natural' almost as Mowgli or Tarzan/Greystoke – newly minted by the deviousness of the Thirty Years War. By the end he no longer merits the nickname, simplest of simpletons, that gives the book its title. In the sequel he has a liaison with the adventuress Courage, who eventually admits that she has tricked him into believing himself the father of her child. She then tells him the story of her extraordinary life: how, disguised as a page, she served a young captain, became his mistress and married him on his death-bed; how, after further liaisons with a count and an ambassador, she married a captain of dragoons and fought alongside him in battle; how, when her husband was killed, she was first courted and then whipped by a handsome lieutenant; how, when the lieutenant deserted her, she fought on and was personally responsible for the capture of a major; how she learned from her old nurse that she was of noble birth; how she married a third captain, whom she lost in

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the Danish campaign; how she was put in charge of prisoners, among whom was the major she had captured; how their relationship, fondly begun, culminated in horrific physical abuse, from which she was rescued by a Danish captain; how the gentle Dane took her to his castle, where he cherished her lovingly; how his jealous relations drove her out, forcing her to return to Germany in poverty; how her next lover, a common soldier, was executed for killing a corporal who lusted after her; how she then paired with a musketeer, accompanying him when his regiment was sent to Italy; how she there survived by setting up as a *vivandière*; how she returned to Germany, where she married her fourth captain; and how, after his death in battle, she came to the spa town where she and Simplicissimus are now together. We later learn that her final husband is a gipsy, and that she ends her days as a gipsy queen.

It might be argued that traces of Grimmelshausen's *Courage* remain in the sheer capacity to survive exhibited by Brecht's, as well as in the multiple fathers of her children. But there is no hint of noble birth or of social mobility in Brecht's Anna Fierling. She is a *vivandière* for life, not in a picaresque episode merely. There is more of Grimmelshausen's *Courage* in Yvette Pottier than in *Mother Courage* herself. What has been insufficiently noticed, though, is the effect on Brecht's dramaturgy in this play of the picaresque novel as a genre. Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, more completely than his *Courage*, is a war-created rogue, a *pícaro* of the kind who first appeared in fiction as *Lazarillo de Tormes*, in 1554. More often acted upon than active, the *pícaro* survives on his wits, cheating cheats in one episode and death in the next. The reader is on his side because he is never a villain except through the circumstances of a villainous world. Wherever he goes, and he tends to travel widely, he meets trouble, and it is through wit and energy, not through a firmness of moral purpose, that he survives.

The episodic nature of picaresque fiction is emphasised in Grimmelshausen's narrative by his chapter-headings. We may take as exemplary the anticipatory titles of Chapter 27 in *Trutz-Simplex*:

Courage's husband is killed in battle. She herself escapes on her mule, meets a troop of gipsies and is taken by their Lieutenant for his wife. She foretells the future to a young lady in love, robbing her of her jewels the while. But her success is short-lived. She is soundly beaten and made to give them back.<sup>6</sup>

The totality of the chapter's narrative is here prefigured. All that will be added is the colouring. Brecht's scene-titles in *Mother Courage*, though rarely as full and often more provocative, signal his interest in the narrative techniques of the picaresque novel:

Two years have passed. The war has spread far and wide. With scarcely a pause Mother Courage's little wagon rolls through Poland, Moravia, Bavaria, Italy, and back again to Bavaria. 1631. Tilly's victory at Magdeburg costs Mother Courage four officers' shirts. (Scene 5)

To be sure, the sacking of Magdeburg cost the lives of many and the livelihoods of all of its citizens. Within the ironically limited horizons of the picaresque, it is sufficient that Mother Courage lost four shirts. But there is, in these advertisements for Scene 5, a concealed explanation of the theatre's comparative neglect of the picaresque. As the demand for pictorial staging came to dominate theatres across Europe, questions of scenery intervened in the determination of subject-matter. Multiple settings and swift changes of location, simply accomplished on the page, may strain the credulity of an audience set in its ways of seeing. Brecht's play has sometimes (mistakenly) been performed in the grand style, as Mother Courage's *Odyssey*, but there is an assurance about Homer's epic that Brecht's assertively lacks. It is time, perhaps, to recognise in *Mother Courage* a rare masterpiece of picaresque drama, a dramaturgical relative of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, rather than seeking to relate it exclusively to the epic theatre, about which Brecht wrote so much.

The second German classic to inform *Mother Courage*, whether consciously or by silent assimilation, is the extraordinary first part of Friedrich Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy. *Das Lager* (*Wallenstein's Camp*) is, in fact, misrepresented by its traditional

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incorporation in a 'trilogy'. It is, rather, a one-act prologue, in which, before the beginning of a two-part tragedy about an Aristotelean hero, the military rank and file of the Thirty Years War are given a hearing. The setting prefigures *Mother Courage*: a canteen-tent with tables spread around it; soldiers at the tables, their children playing dice on a drum; mercenaries cooking on an open fire; the sound of singing from inside the tent; and the canteen-woman pouring wine. This canteen-woman, Gussie from Blasewitz in F. J. Lampport's resourceful translation, has one fatherless child to Mother Courage's three, but she also employs a nubile niece to attract and serve the soldiers and, like Mother Courage, she follows the war wherever it takes her. There is, however, a significant difference between Gussie and Mother Courage. In the overall design of Schiller's sequence of plays, the nature and the cost of loyalty are under scrutiny. Gussie is faithful to the Catholic cause. As she explains to her old friend, Lanky Peter from Itzehoe:

To Temesoara and back again  
 I followed with the baggage-train  
 When we were harrying Mansfeld's heels.  
 When Friedland laid siege to Stralsund, to his cost,  
 I was there too – and my business was lost.  
 I was with the relief of Mantua  
 Came away with the Duke of Feria,  
 And with a Spanish regiment  
 On the way back I stopped at Ghent,  
 Now in Bohemia my luck I'm trying.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, when Gussie's fortunes have sunk as low as Mother Courage's, she will purvey to Protestants and Catholics alike. But she has not yet come to Mother Courage's awareness of 'the purely mercantile character of war' (p. 393). She even offers drinks on the house when the soldiers resolve their differences in a chorus of loyalty to Wallenstein.

Although Schiller's attention is not focused on the financial underpinning of the Thirty Years War, he is not unaware of it. The



common soldiers are attracted by the idea of their leader as a great man, but they are finally united by the recognition that Wallenstein has kept them better supplied than any other general. This is a mercenary army, encamped outside Pilsen. There are Irishmen, Walloons, Englishmen, Lombards, Swiss, Croats, Ulans and, of course, Bavarians. A typical soldier, like Lanky Peter, has already fought for the 'enemy' on occasions:

When I served Gustavus, that miserable Swede!  
 His camp was more like a chapel, indeed,  
 Prayers every morning, straight after reveille,  
 Each night at Lights Out, and before every sally;  
 If we got a bit merry, like any good Germans,  
 He was up on his horse and preaching us sermons.<sup>8</sup>

Compared with the interferingly godly Gustavus Adolphus, the Catholic commander-in-chief appeals to Lanky Peter as a liberator:

For Tilly knew all about commanding,  
 On himself he was strict and demanding,  
 But the soldiers he would never cozen,  
 And if he didn't have to foot the bill,  
 His motto was: Live and let live! with a will.<sup>9</sup>

As one of the victorious army, Lanky Peter looks back with relish on the sacking of Magdeburg. Schiller's preliminary purpose is to explore the rift between the adherents of the Holy Roman Emperor and the adherents of Wallenstein through the eyes of the common soldier, and he carries it out in the roistering, deceptively doggerel rhymed verse that Goethe also deployed in *Faust*. These are Wallenstein's soldiers and, despite the ranting antagonism of a Capuchin friar, they come down on their general's side in the end. But even they realise that Wallenstein's officers are self-interested:

They spent far more than they could earn,  
 Thought it would bring them power in return.  
 And they will be ruined one and all  
 If the head that leads them, the Duke, should fall.

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For Gussie, the issue is clear:

Oh, God save me! That won't be funny!  
 Half of the army owes me money.<sup>10</sup>

Mother Courage is cannier than Gussie.

Grimmelshausen and Schiller are literary and cultural antecedents of Brecht rather than direct sources for *Mother Courage*. Unlike Shakespeare, Brecht always adopted an oppositional stance towards his source-material. If the writing of this play came unusually easily to him, that was primarily because he had long maintained a view of war as a capitalist project, 'the continuation of business by other means' (p. 339). Two years before embarking on *Mother Courage*, he had been planning a play on Julius Caesar. By November 1937 he had read Plutarch, Suetonius and Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome*, but, largely helpless in Danish libraries, he was seeking research assistance from a Paris-based acquaintance, Martin Domke. In a letter to Domke, Brecht outlines a possible scenario, much of which was later incorporated in the uncompleted novel, *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Caesar*. The third act, for example, will be set in Gaul:

According to Mommsen, the quantities of gold pouring in from Gaul caused a drop in the gold price. The war must be carried on with the utmost caution because of the requirements of the gold speculators. There must be a connection between this and the defeat at Aduatuca, where a whole region is lost.<sup>11</sup>

'How do I make the Gallic War a business?', he enquires of Domke. 'I need to know what sort of business was carried on between C. and the Gallic ruling class.' But the cynical exploitation of soldiers had been a theme of Brecht's writing since long before 1937. His poem 'The Legend of the Dead Soldier', written in 1918, had caused a scandal when he set it to music and sang it in a Berlin cabaret in 1921. There is nothing surprising about that. In a country still mourning its thousands of dead 'heroes', Brecht sang of a soldier