

Textbook Reds?

How East Germans look back on their classroom schoolbooks

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'I form human beings in my own image,' declares Goethe's Prometheus in the poet's famous poem of that title. Marx himself was a great admirer of the rebel god Prometheus – even dedicating his dissertation to 'Prometheus, the god who gave fire to men' – and both Marx and Engels revered the classical German literary tradition represented by Goethe and Schiller.

In this essay, I hope to show that East German educators also had a Promethean ambition. Working out of a Marxist tradition that aimed to develop 'convinced communists' and felt no shame whatsoever about promoting Marxist-Leninist propaganda (or 'agitprop'), German communist educators also set about to 'form' (or transform) East German pupils into model young comrades. They sought to create what I have elsewhere termed 'textbook Reds' through the use of official curricular materials designed and published by the Ministry of Education.

The following excerpts from interviews with eastern Germans consists of oral history material drawn from my travels in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the communist state better known in the West as 'East Germany' during its brief post-war existence (1949–90). Since German reunification in October 1990, I have been travelling throughout post-reunification eastern Germany to pursue research for two books devoted to the history of GDR education and its aftermath.¹

My concern in this essay is with the classroom experience of East German textbooks and the pedagogical goals of both East German teachers and the Ministry of Education, as those aims were reflected in the state-sponsored textbooks mandated for use by the GDR's Communist Party (the SED). In a previous essay in *Paradigm*, I focused largely on the content of GDR textbooks in language and literature. Here I seek to illuminate both East German citizens' reception of the curricular materials and the didactic, indeed proscriptive, aims of Party educators.

How did teachers actually teach once the classroom door was shut and no supervisory administrative staff or senior teachers were observing? Did they teach the textbooks 'to the letter'?

Or did they 'deviate' and ignore – or even defy – Party instructions or pronouncements in the text-

books? What happened to teachers that did not conform and were caught in anti-communist heresy?

And what about the young comrades in the classroom who were the textbooks' explicit target audience? How did pupils respond to the textbooks? Did they swallow them whole? Did they accept the ideological indoctrination willingly, or only grudgingly and under pressure?

In short, did the GDR classroom experience really mould both teachers and pupils into 'textbook Reds'? Did it form 'marxed Menschen' in the image of the exemplary poster child comrades, often described as 'model socialist personalities,' who were so exalted in GDR curricular materials?

The extracts below from my conversations with former GDR teachers and schoolchildren respond to these and other questions. These vignettes present a multifaceted, differentiated portrait of the GDR classroom experience. As this oral history material makes clear, there was an enormous gap between the pedagogical ambitions of Party bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education and the actual acceptance by both GDR pupils and teachers of GDR communist doctrine. Nor were GDR textbooks exclusively agit-prop, though a significantly greater part of them than in Western schoolbooks was dedicated to ideological claims advanced in much blunter terms than their Western counterparts.

A large, persistent question stood behind my interviews with eastern Germans about their experience with GDR classrooms and curricula: How much do textbook contents actually influence peoples' identities?

That question was impossible to answer precisely. What is clear is that the social beliefs of GDR citizens are still alive today amongst eastern Germans. And included in those beliefs – usually in complex form and function – are the GDR textbooks. But it is one thing to claim generally that the ideological contents of the textbooks lives on, and it is quite another to analyze how and why.

The following four interviews attempt something much more modest: to invite reflection on such matters by hearing former GDR citizens muse on their educational pasts. They also discuss and their current troubles both with establishing themselves in the new westernized society and with building up a new social/cultural identity.

1 *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of East German Education, 1945–95* (Oxford UP, 2001) and *Textbook Reds:*

Ideology, Schoolbooks, and Eastern German Identity (Pen State UP, 2006).

Interview 1: A former teacher recalls her ‘history lessons’ for would-be revolutionaries

To what extent does the ‘textbook mentality’ of the GDR school endure in the minds and hearts of pupils? Renate, 35, has brought her old GDR history textbooks and teaching guides to our 1999 interview. She taught history and civics for five years (1986–1990) in a Leipzig POS (elementary school). When the Wall fell, she decided to leave teaching. She has made a new life for herself as a travel agent specializing in *Studienreise* (educational tours) to eastern Europe. But her new career has nothing to do, she says, with anxiety about her activities as a GDR teacher. She believes that she would have passed the *Überprüfung* [the ‘screening’ conducted on all GDR teachers in order to assess their professional competence and political record]. ‘I was in the Party,’ she says, ‘but I had no official position in the school and never had anything to do with the secret police.’ Renate says that she hasn’t thought much about her teaching years since reunification. But she finds herself in a ‘didactic mood’ with me, the curious American. She proposes to ‘begin at the beginning,’ with *Geschichte 5*.

‘Even to 5th graders studying pre-historic and ancient civilizations, the significance of contemporary socialist history was made explicit,’ Renate says. She turns to the Introduction in *Geschichte 5*, which closes with the observation:

There are many important events in history, and we must know when – on what date – they occurred.

Every student knows:

1949 was the founding of the German Democratic Republic.

1945 was the end of the Second World War and liberation of the German Volk from fascism.

1917 was the Great Socialist October Revolution.

Renate points out how ‘cleverly’ the textbook study questions ‘smuggle’ ideology into even the basics of historiography. For instance, she notes, to elucidate the reckoning of historical chronology and concepts such as *v.u.Z.* and ‘century,’ the editors of the 1982 edition of *Geschichte 5* repeatedly ask questions such as: ‘In which century did the revolt of Spartacus take place?’ ‘How many years ago did the revolt of Spartacus begin?’ ‘How many years before the revolt of Spartacus did Hammurabi reign?’

Renate notes that the Spartacus revolt was considered the exemplary model by GDR historians for all ideological claims involving the major historical revolutions that followed, including the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution, because it symbolized uncompromising resistance to powerful

exploiters – regardless of whether victory was possible. The concept of ‘revolution from below’ was a key one for GDR historians. ‘Revolution’ meant resistance to and defiance of unjust oppressors, and all underclass revolutions shared that feature. Renate illustrates her point by flipping to her teaching guide for *Geschichte 7*, which advises that the French Revolution should teach ‘readiness to fight for the goals of revolution and the liberty of the Fatherland. Our age also knows examples of such behavior. (The Soviet *Volk’s* battle against the fascists, Vietnam’s battle against the US invaders)’ (p. 226).

The teaching guide for the 1983 edition of *Geschichte 7* also stresses the contemporary lessons that the latter two events offer. Teachers are advised to write on the chalkboard about the former:

What feeling do you have after hearing all these cruelties that the population had to suffer?

[Answer:] Sympathy with the tortured people; hatred toward the guilty and the beneficiaries of this war of plunder and conquest (p. 124).

All ‘revolutions’ were part of the East German ‘inheritance,’ Renate says. Just as in the case of Spartacus, they possessed ongoing value and relevance to the present – and taught pertinent lessons.

But most of the ‘lessons’ were drawn from the twentieth century: GDR history classes focused on the twentieth century, Renate says. She pulls out the 1986 edition of *Geschichte 9*. ‘Even German events that occurred decades before World War II and the GDR’s founding were interpreted in a way that could ‘lead up’ to the GDR’s birth,’ Renate says. ‘Every historical event contained a lesson.’ She points out that some chapters in *Geschichte 9* even close by spelling out the ‘lessons’ under headings such as ‘The lessons of the November Revolution.’ For example, *Geschichte 9* draws five ‘lessons’ for would-be revolutionaries from the November Revolution of 1918/19, the post-World War I working-class rebellions led by German leftists in several German cities, which ousted the Kaiser yet failed to establish themselves. The passage reads as though it were written to instruct slow learners like GDR dissident intellectual Robert Havemann on what he called the ‘Central Administration’s Eternal Truths’:

1. The basic question of revolution is *the question of power*, in which it is demonstrated that no ‘third way’ exists between the rule of the monopolistic bourgeoisie and the working class. Only when the power of monopoly capital and militarism is broken and the power of the working class, the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, is established, can peace, liberty, and democracy be achieved and secured.

2. The working class cannot use the *state apparatus* for its purposes, but must rather break it and replace it through organs of the working class.
3. To maintain its rule in the new world-historical epoch, the monopolistic bourgeoisie needs *Opportunism*, so that it can split the working class and prevent its unified action.
4. The working class can fulfill its historical mission only when it is led by a *Marxist-Leninist party of class struggle*, which has been freed of all bourgeois, petty bourgeois, and opportunistic influences. . . .
5. The working class can only triumph in *closest alliance with the Soviet Union*. . . .

Or as the teaching guide for *Geschichte 9*

instructed, under the heading ‘The lessons of the Revolution’: ‘It taught great portions of the *Volk* who their real enemies were and who fought for the interests of the entire German *Volk*’ (p. 78). *Geschichte 9* also includes a section titled ‘The lessons of World War II.’ Among the chief lessons – which make no mention of the Nazi-Soviet pact, the total unpreparedness of the USSR to wage war in 1941, or the positive contributions of the Western Allies – are the following:

1. Only the *closed front of workers of all nations can turn jingoist forces from their course of war*. . . . On the eve of the Second World War, only the USSR, the most advanced section of the working class, and their allied forces in the capitalist countries prepared for the danger of war.²
2. German fascist imperialism embodied the historical survival of a dying capitalism, which had been condemned to death, in its most reactionary, barbaric form. . . . The *defeat of German imperialism was unavoidable*.
3. The most important factor in the defeat of Hitlerite Germany was the heroic battle of the *Volk* of the USSR.
4. After the triumph over fascism and its allies, the *balance of power* in the world altered in *favor of peace and socialism*.

The 9th grade teaching guide is especially passionate about the Nazi invasion of the USSR. Teachers are to ‘establish the connection between the heroic battle of the peoples of the USSR and the related superiority of the socialist social order. . . . *Pedagogical emphases*: Honoring of the heroic defen-

sive war of the Soviet people. Solidarity with them. Condemnation of the criminal attack on the Soviet Union.’

Geschichte 9 closes with study questions to reinforce these distinctions. For instance:

1. Explain why the signing of a Nonaggression Pact with Hitler’s Germany was, for the Soviet Union at that time, necessary and correct!
2. Show with concrete historical facts that the Second World War was, in its first phase, an unjust imperialistic war!
3. Explain why the goals of the fascists for the invasion of the USSR corresponded to the interests of the most reactionary elements of German monopoly capital!
4. Compare the goals of the conspirators of the July 20 Movement with those of the NKFD [National Committee for a Free Germany, composed of German émigrés based in Moscow], and explain which group’s goals corresponded to the interests of the German *Volk*!
5. Prove that the main burden of the war against fascism lay on the shoulders of the Soviet Army, even in the last period of the war!

Renate and I laugh at the ubiquitous exclamation marks that trumpet the study questions’ messages. She refers to the practice as ‘socialist punctuation.’ ‘Writers in the GDR textbook collectives were not subtle,’ Renate remarks. But Renate is quick to assure me that secondary school texts used in West German history courses during the Cold War had their own shortcomings. Until the 1970s, pupils in history classes were rarely taken beyond World War I. (Although this is certainly no longer the case today, it apparently continued – in at least a few select instances – until the late 1980s in some West German states.)

Here again, Renate is quoting from the actual text that she used in class – the third edition (1986) of *Geschichte 9*. She notes archly that the text was virtually unchanged from its first edition (1970), which had been used when she was a schoolgirl – and that this was generally the case with GDR textbooks of the 1970s and ‘80s. Once aligned with the ‘laws’ of dialectical materialism, says Renate, the ‘lessons of progressive history’ were apparently unchanging and irreversible. ‘Until,’ she adds, ‘October 1989,’ when the East German *Volk* embraced the example of Spartacus as their own.

2. On the face of it, this lesson may be a foolish and unnecessary distortion of history. One is tempted to suggest a different ideological tack to the GDR historians: Why did Soviet (and other Communist) educators simply turn the USSR’s unpreparedness to wage war in 1941 into an advantage? They could more easily (and consistently, given other agitprop claims) have argued that their lack

of preparation testified to the peaceful nature of international communism and the noble, trusting ideals of the model worker state – and also to the obsessive war mongering of the fascist powers and the ‘fascistic’ social democracies? This also would have made the USSR’s initial defeat in the summer of 1941 seem quite forgivable, and rendered their ultimate victory over the Nazis even more heroic.

Interview 2: The strains of silence: a music teacher's brave (new) career

This interview occurred in October 1994 with Frau Christine Ehspanner, 36, formerly a music teacher and currently principal of the Goethe Humanistic Gymnasium in Weimar. Contrary to the strict ideological guidelines ordained by the Ministry of Education for teaching music, Frau Ehspanner taught music without what she referred to as 'GDR dogmas.' She noted, however, that when she was formally evaluated, she said nothing that challenged SED educational doctrines, though she refused to teach according to 'the hard Party line.' Her observations are invaluable, for they shed light on how a teacher maneuvered betwixt and between the pedagogical prescriptions set down by Party educators.

Frau Ehspanner's comments also support my surmise that the contents of GDR textbooks were not always taught 'to the letter.' Nor did those contents automatically flow into the minds of GDR pupils. Rather, both teachers and pupils selectively embraced certain tenets in the textbooks, rejected others, and in general constructed their own meanings, while screening out aspects of the textbooks that did not fit into their mental frameworks. Frau Ehspanner's approach to teaching Beethoven, which defied Party dictates to present him as a progressive and committed composer, is an excellent example of how teachers created their own *Freiraum* and practiced small yet significant forms of heterodoxy.

Q: Why did you never join the Party?

A: My father was in the Party. As a young man in 1949, he believed that he could help in building this new socialist state – far more so than by participating in the capitalist system of the West. He felt hopeful about the social programs that the GDR was establishing, which promoted childcare, kindergartens, and employment opportunities for women. There was a great idealism at that time and there is no doubt that many people were well-intentioned, but what developed led to a communist takeover of these programs, which entailed a silencing or muzzling of the people.

This was impossible for my father to tolerate. He was an idealist and wanted to do something to help his country, but whenever he advanced criticisms, he was punished. As a teenager, I witnessed this and was hurt at how he was treated and how he was suffering from what he regarded as a betrayal of his ideals and youthful hopes. When he said, 'No, I will not do that', he was then given a command by Party authorities to do it. As a man who respected Party discipline, he felt he had to carry out those orders.

That injured his human dignity. When I attended college in Weimar and was invited to join the SED, I

refused. I told them that I didn't want to be a member of a Party that treated people the way they had treated my father. I had excellent grades, but as a result of that declaration, I didn't receive an offer to teach. This was unusual in the days of the GDR. I would have been preferred for almost any job in the region given that my grades were high.

I was offered a job in outlying areas instead. I had to commute from my parents' home two hours each way to get there. I had to wake up at 4:00 a.m. in order to be at school on time. Because I had openly criticized the state, I began to suffer just as my father had.

I learned that the state would use its power to grind you down if you went against it. I could only get a job teaching music to blind children. Later, for ten years, I taught music at a POS.

Q: Many westerners would imagine music to be a school subject largely free of ideological content – aside, say, from learning to sing the national anthem or some other patriotic or religious hymn in class.

A: The GDR music class, unfortunately, was strongly ideologically conditioned. Sometimes it was hopelessly vulgar. Beethoven was presented as a communist composer, and Mozart was discussed as a revolutionary forerunner of socialism. It was clear to me that I wasn't going to teach these idiotic ideas; otherwise, it would tear my mind apart. The teaching guides prescribed these kinds of socialist pieties. It called for ideological blankets to be draped over these musicians.

Q: Did you teach music in the prescribed manner?

A: I simply refused to do it because it was a lie. Beethoven lived in his time and I wanted to illuminate his period. They wanted to rewrite it to fit the ideological straitjacket of a postwar socialist state.

I believe that it is important to understand art and literature in its own time. To that extent, historical interpretation is crucial, but not to the degree where it is distorted in order to be replaced by GDR dogmas. I couldn't empty Beethoven of his true historical content and fill him back up with the revolutionary bromides of our day. He had nothing to do with communism. The authorities wanted to see him as a fighter for socialism, as a progressive and committed composer, but that was anachronistic. So I never taught him that way.

We were also mandated by the syllabus to present GDR composers who had composed mediocre music. Sometimes I went so far as to shorten the length of time devoted to them or even to say to students, 'What do you think of this?' – rather than deliver the prescribed Party line. We had to cover certain people, but how we covered them was not closely supervised or sometimes not discernible by authorities. I would ask rather innocently, 'Do you like this music or

not?’ The pupils had some artistic sensibility. It was often the case that they would rave about Beethoven and Mozart and deplore the GDR composers. I never contradicted them on that; instead, I indirectly encouraged that preference.

Q: And your defiance of the orthodox pedagogy was never noticed?

A: When I underwent formal observations by other teachers or by the administrative staff, I would not teach in such an open way. Nonetheless, during these evaluations, I still would not deliver the hard Party line. I got by with leaving a lot of things unsaid. If I had acted as I did when they were not there, however, I would certainly have been in trouble with the authorities.

So I never openly defied the prescribed Party line on these composers. My defiance consisted of acts of omission rather than commission. The authorities certainly would have dismissed me if I had been more open. I simply couldn’t reconcile what was in these textbooks with my conscience.

Q: How did you teach a theme such as ‘Beethoven and freedom’? What about the ‘Ode to Joy’? How did you handle a topic such as freedom to travel with the pupils?

A: Yes, that was always a delicate topic. We would discuss French revolutionary ideals such as liberty, fraternity, and equality. We always twisted what these ideals really meant. I sometimes believed that this ‘worker’s paradise’ had achieved these ideals. After all, this was the ‘workers’ state’, and workers did receive preferential treatment in many ways. It was difficult to see through these things in the GDR days. I never visited the West. I could only experience it through television, but how accurate was that? I wasn’t sure.

We knew there were a lot of bad things about the GDR, but we didn’t think everything was bad. We thought it was reformable, so we reconceived freedom to mean, ‘Well, we can’t travel, but we have the freedom of knowing that we’ll never fall into social deprivation because the state provides us with the minimum.’ Here you always have food, shelter, and warmth. Then someone would ask, ‘What’s more important: my life on a day-to-day basis or the ability to travel past the borders for a week?’ Most of the students agreed with – well – our state does have its priorities in the right order. We simply conflated freedom and security and often conceived of security in rather paternalistic, invasive terms.

This, too, was twisted. ‘You can’t have everything. You have to be mature about the available choices and know your limits’. This was the approach that was drummed into us.

Mostly it was propaganda. Yet, when I look at things today, there’s some truth in it. You *can* travel to

a place like Australia if you have a lot of money, but you’ll still spend 50 weeks a year right here at home; so, this great freedom is rather theoretical. Yes, you can – in the abstract – but you really can’t because you don’t have the financial means to take advantage of most capitalist freedoms.

This insight makes everything about the GDR past more difficult to judge, that is, everything is a matter of comparisons. Everything needs to be looked at from different perspectives. So, despite all the abuses, some ultimate condemnation isn’t so easy to pronounce.

Q: Was the old GDR preferable to the current eastern Germany – was it, as old socialists had always hoped it would be, ‘the better Germany’?

A: I would still say that we’re now living in something much closer to a democracy. Everything that involved the secret police was ultimately a betrayal of the ideals of freedom. That was criminal. But most of us never experienced that and certainly not on a daily basis. We were happy, more or less, because we had food, clothing, shelter, a sense of security, a job, and *Gemütlichkeit*.

Walking through our supermarkets today, I often ask myself, ‘Why does everyone need three dozen choices for one product?’ Consumerism can’t be the meaning of life or the center of one’s existence. It can’t furnish any deep satisfaction. I feel that the deception of consumerism – that it can somehow prop up your identity – is worse than most of what happened in the GDR. There is much more free space for teaching today than there was in the days of the GDR. This doesn’t mean that there is an unlimited freedom – that teachers and students can do as they please. Although this is not the case, it sometimes is the misunderstanding. There are still regulations and rules that apply. There are limits that need to be respected. Education is partly a matter of receiving and understanding discipline.

Interview 3:

‘My postcommunist Brecht’: a Weimar student’s *Weltanschauung*

In October 1996 I first spoke with Stefan, 20, a 12th grade pupil in the Goethe Gymnasium in Weimar. He expresses his view of Brecht after a German class devoted to Brecht’s poetry written in exile. I told him that I’m especially interested in the GDR textbooks and the GDR era. Unlike in the GDR days, Stefan notes, his literature class uses no textbooks; the ‘textbook’ is a selection of Brecht’s poetry, prose criticism, and dramas. Stefan notes that using the primary text allows the class to read Brecht ‘unfiltered.’ Stefan’s teacher, a western German from Bremen, has just returned Stefan’s essay (on Brecht’s poem ‘To Posterity’) with a grade of 15 points, virtually the

highest mark one can receive and only rarely granted in German schools.

Q: I notice that you have no textbook in this class. I've been told you always did during the GDR era. Which is preferable to you?

A: Almost everyone would rather read the primary texts because you encounter the author himself – unbridged and without the filter of ideologically slanted editorial commentary.

I want to know what I'm reading and to have it available in its entirety – and not have it excerpted or bowdlerized by censors. For instance, my old German teacher told me that the GDR edition of *Galileo* did not end with the last sentence of the play, but rather with an earlier sentence: 'Pity the land that has no heroes.' Whereas the play as written by Brecht actually ends: 'Pity the country that needs heroes.' That alteration was in a Brecht edition; that was a school textbook selection from the GDR Ministry of Education.

Q: That's intriguing. How do you interpret that alteration?

A: The GDR authorities changed it because they held that the 'positive' or antifascist hero is necessary and desirable. Brecht's original closing line seems to sweep aside the positive hero along with other kinds of heroes. That would have been undesirable to GDR pedagogues. So much in the GDR referred to heroes – heroes of socialist labor, workers' heroes, and so forth – that Brecht's last line would have been an implicit criticism of Marxist-Leninist (M-L) orthodoxy.

Everything in the GDR promoted a will to perform heroic acts for socialism. Soviet heroes like Stahkanov, or Adolf Henneke in the GDR, performed heroic acts against fascism during the Second World War. We also heard *ad nauseam* about heroic acts by underground resistance figures like Ernst Thälmann and other communist leaders. It was a goal of GDR pedagogy to educate young people to perform similar heroic acts for socialism and the socialist state. We took regular trips to Buchenwald for the *Jugendweihe* [socialist youth confirmation ceremony] to reinforce our commitment to live lives of heroic excellence in the socialist tradition. A giant sculpture by Fritz Kremer at Buchenwald depicts resistance fighters in the camp heroically defying their Nazi oppressors. We were supposed to imitate them.

So 'Pity the land that needs heroes' would have implied that it's a sad, sorry event when a country has to hold up such models. It implies that the people themselves can't be expected to be heroic in their own way, that they can't develop their personalities to the full without these pressures. So that's why this sentence would have been excised.

Q: To return to Brecht's 'To Posterity,' consider this line, 'Don't let yourselves be tempted.' Does that refer to the temptations of Western capitalism?

A: Yes, in the GDR we interpreted the poem's lines that way.

Q: Who are the tempters?

A: Brecht's and the GDR answer would have first been religion, Marx's 'opiate of the masses'. The idea that the afterlife will be more beautiful than this one is reversed in Marxism. The message is: We will create a socialist paradise here on earth. Heaven is brought to Earth and any non-material heaven of the afterlife disappears. The reality is that life consists of the here and now and there's nothing beyond it. Make everything possible out of the here and now. Seize the day.

Secondly, don't let yourselves be tempted by the promises of the class enemy. Even our literature textbooks promoted this hard, antagonistic, class-based analysis. History textbooks did the same. Class was the decisive mode of interpretation.

Brecht was easy to turn toward these ends. One could always refer to other agit-prop writings of his that were overtly M-L [Marxist-Leninist].

Q: Did your class discuss his agit-prop?

A: We read his poem 'Questions of a Well-Read Worker'. This poem lent itself quite directly to such treatment. Such poems were spotlighted by the GDR to portray Brecht as a writer of and for the proletariat, for a classless society, and for socialism and communism.

Q: What's your view today of that portrayal of Brecht?

A: It's very partial and limited. That textbook image of Brecht excluded all of the conflicts that he had in the 1950s with Party leaders. It also excluded all his critical writings against the regime and how his private life defied many of the regime's edicts and orthodoxies. All of this was airbrushed out of any discussion of Brecht's personal or literary history. Our old Brecht image was based on concepts such as revolution, class, the proletariat, international worker's solidarity, and socialist peace among nations.

Q: How did your textbooks present such a partial view to you?

*A: Teachers rarely said to us, 'You must understand it this way'. It was a matter of perspective, of a Marxist worldview utterly enveloping us in such a way that no one could really think outside those terms. That was a textbook mentality: the world was cut to fit the textbook definition of reality. The fit was near exact. Since the aspects of Brecht that wouldn't fit were unknown to us, those aspects we did learn were designed like a key to fit into the keyhole of a M-L *Weltanschauung*. At the same time, we pupils had been schooled to give the teacher the interpretation*

that he wanted. We knew what direction all interpretations should go in. We knew what concepts, what terminology, and what basic elements he wanted to hear. And the prescribed literature in the textbooks invited the use of those concepts. Everything was structured in such a way as to minimize any other critical standpoint being voiced.

Q: For example?

A: For instance, in a textbook section devoted to proletarian writing, we read a great deal of carefully selected worker literature. Of course that literature championed the proletariat and portrayed life in class terms and saw socialism as the system that honored and represented the workers and featured writers such as Brecht and Erich Weinert. It also included sayings of Marx and Lenin, heralding the cause of the worker.

Q: What was your experience of other aspects of GDR ideology?

A: Of course, I can really only speak of the GDR in its final years, beginning with my school years in 1983. By this time the GDR was extremely liberal in its policies in comparison with the 1960s and '70s. But even in my time the teachers had lesson planners and grading books in which there were columns for commenting on academic performance and on ideological orthodoxy or conformity.

Q: So even a grading book was a kind of textbook for the teachers, explicitly instructing them how to judge the pupil.

A: Right. They would also make note of your social class. They would mark down the abbreviations for working class or intelligentsia. They wrote your name and next to it, they'd write your class position or affiliation. That fact alone suggests the role that class played in the estimate a teacher formed of a student and also the way in which workers' families received preferential treatment.

It wasn't as crudely done as it had been done in earlier decades but it still played a role in my time. It was almost a throwback to old status distinctions prior to the French Revolution. There were different estates – nobility, clergy, and so on. It was the same kind of categorization and narrowness in the classification of human beings. We were classified according to our [economic] class origin and then we were handled accordingly. I was the child of professionals. I came from an intellectual family. This made it difficult for me to obtain a university position – especially one in medicine or biology. If I didn't come from a working-class family and my parents weren't in the SED, I had grave problems.

There were quotas. A certain percentage of students had to come from working-class families. I

believe the minimum was two thirds. The educational system gave working-class children strongly preferential treatment.

Interview 4:

'My teachers ignored the ideological crap'

This closing conversation is another exchange with Stefan, now 29. We had become friends and maintained contact during the course of my writing this book. Hearing about my research, Stefan voiced interest and we spoke at length in October 2003 about his memories of GDR schoolbooks. He told me that he wanted to 'challenge' any simplistic notion that the GDR was a giant schoolroom consisting of orthodox, 'true believers' a.k.a. 'textbook Reds.' Instead he insisted that teachers in most subjects (except civics) ignored the ideological imperatives laid down in the textbooks and teaching manuals.

Q: Did you ever encounter a subject being taught 'to the letter' according to the ideological content of the textbook?

A: My experience as a pupil in the GDR from class 1 to 7 [7 years from 1983–1989] was simply that teachers would leave out everything that openly smelled like stupid ideology. This might sound weird – since nearly every page was infested with that openly ideological crap. But all teachers – except the teacher for *Staatsbürgerkunde* (civics), who was the only one who went through the book page by page – ignored that stuff.

For example, consider music. You spoke to Frau Ehspanner, she was actually my teacher in grades 5, 6 and 7. We talked in class about Mozart and Beethoven and their music, but not about their music as examples of socialist revolutionary theory. Teachers – in my school at least, but I strongly doubt it was different elsewhere – simply blocked out the ideological part of the books and constructed their own curriculum. Yes, my teachers just ignored the ideological crap! It is hard to believe – but that was my experience and that of many others.

Q: Travel restrictions and the state-controlled official media limited access to outside sources of information. Did that render GDR textbooks more important as sources of knowledge and information?

A: Well, historical research since reunification into the GDR as a media society has shown that, by the late 1970s, West German TV and radio stations effectively replaced the East German media as the primary source of information. In 1983, when the GDR was granted a billion dollar credit by West Germany, it was the beginning of the end, since that move made clear that the GDR was effectively bankrupt.

Also, everyone who traveled to the USSR could see with his own eyes the reality of the alleged ‘superiority’ of the USSR. My father traveled to Moscow twice in the 1960s. He came back with horrible stories about the poor living standards of Russians. People there were lying on the street, had no shoes, and were begging for money from the tourists. These stories were then transported back into the GDR and told in families and in offices amongst colleagues. Thus, that knowledge (Western media, traveling to the USSR, and so on) was influencing decisively the worldview of many GDR citizens – not the textbooks. Everyone – including the teachers – knew that the textbooks were written by Party officials and that the textbooks did not adequately mirror the reality of the outside world.

Q: It was the intention of the Party that every child learned to read and write according to the ideological syntax and semantics of M-L. But to what extent did that aim of the Party actually match the reality in the classroom?

A: Not at all. My German and history teacher from class four to eight [in the Goethe Gymnasium in Weimar] was Frau Mühlfordt, a woman with a strong humanistic-bourgeois background (as were indeed many of the humanities teachers in towns and cities like Weimar, Dresden, and Leipzig). Her husband worked in the Museum and Research Centre in Weimar on German literature of the Weimar classical period (18th- early 19th-century). When we talked in class about Goethe’s poetry, we would analyze it along the lines of a young man fighting against the older generation and against oppressing powers exerted ‘from above’ as in the case of the ‘Prometheus’ poem, or in terms of angst, superstition and human reactions to imaginations (as in the case of ‘Erk König’ poem).

Q: How did that differ from the way these poems are discussed in classes today?

A: In the 1970s and 1980s, everyone knew that the Party wanted us to interpret these poems along the lines of the working classes. The teaching material told teachers like Frau Mühlfordt to do so.

But did she? No, she did not. No one really abided by the rules of Red ideological teaching aims – at least in my school (except my *Staatsbürgerkunde* teacher).

My recollections are that both teachers and pupils silently and implicitly agreed on ignoring and masking the ideological parts of the textbooks. It was a quiet agreement that emerged over decades in the GDR.

Q: Here’s a quote from the 5th grade geography teaching guide of the 1980s: ‘Teachers should mention the dialectical aspect of physical geography.’ Did they?

A: Seldom. I was in that class [which used Geography 5] in 1987. My teacher was Frau Ludwig. I can’t remember that we ever talked about ideology.

True, we were introduced to the existence of the RWG (Comecon, or the Soviet-led version of the Common Market) as the counterpart of the EU, but in a straightforward, factual language. A teacher who actively taught what was written in the teaching guide would have made a fool out of himself! And everyone knew that. It was this silent agreement to be guided by selective perception that defined GDR reality, not the blunt ideological content of Party pamphlets, textbooks, official TV speeches, and so on.

Q: What about civics? You said earlier that your civics teacher did follow the Ministry of Education approach in his classroom. Was he typical of GDR civics teachers?

A: Yes. Unlike the cases of music or geography, *Staatsbürgerkunde* textbooks were taught ‘to the letter.’ Most civics teachers were ideological hardliners. But that’s why both *Staatsbürgerkunde* and its teachers were perceived amongst pupils in our school as naive, stupid, rigid, outdated, ideological, and so on. *Staatsbürgerkunde* textbooks left no space for un-ideological interpretations or discussion of exceptions.

Indeed, after autumn 1989, the only teacher that had to leave my school for political reasons was the *Staatsbürgerkunde* teacher, Herr Lebede. All the other teachers were kept. That actually applied to most of the schools in my home state of Thuringia. Principals of GDR schools were dismissed (or were demoted to simple teachers), and so were teachers whose main subject was *Staatsbürgerkunde* as well as teachers who were Party hardliners, but nobody else.

Q: Here’s a quote from a 5th grade history teaching guide: ‘5th graders should be instructed about the revolutionary difference between bourgeois and progressive history.’ Was this actually taught?

A: No. I was in that class with Frau Mühlfordt. These things just did not come up.

Q: What about the sciences?

A: The same holds for the sciences. Sure, teachers were *supposed* to do that. But very few of them did. I’d estimate that 70 percent of maths and science teachers seldom mentioned the so-called laws of M-L.

Whenever there was a mathematical question in the textbook that featured Russian tanks or the overwhelming achievements of the Bulgarian computer industry, math teachers would just ignore the problem in the textbook, go to the blackboard, and replace the tanks with everyday real-life examples.

The same applied to chemistry: we never talked about atoms as examples for the truth of dialectical materialism; we talked about atoms and molecules, period. The fact that the teaching manual advised

chemistry teachers to teach dialectical materialism does not mean it was actually taught!

Q: How much did all this change after reunification?

A: A great deal, especially in subjects such as history. Of course, *Staatsbürgerkunde* ceased even to exist by 1990. In fact, after November 1989, nobody paid attention to schoolbooks in civics and history. When

I was at the Goethe Gymnasium between 1992 and 1995 we used West German history textbooks. The old GDR ones were superseded by events – and we hadn't yet received new textbooks. Everything was in a state of upheaval and educators hadn't yet decided what to enshrine as the new curriculum. We learned from mimeographed materials and from discussions – which I much preferred to dry textbooks.

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Comparative treatments in Soviet and post-Soviet textbooks

John Rodden and Cristen Reat

Soviet educators had an ambivalent relationship to their native literary genius and his *chef d'oeuvre*: Leo Tolstoy and *War and Peace*. Tolstoy and his masterwork were too ideologically incompatible and too artistically powerful simply to co-opt as exalted socialist precursors – and yet too culturally significant simply to ignore. They had to be embraced – but partially, in both senses of the word: a partial image of the whole – to which orthodox educators were extremely partial.

In light of those ideological and cultural tensions, let us examine how schoolbooks have differed between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras via a single significant example: how two textbooks treat the masterwork of the leading Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy.

This essay compares and contrasts Soviet and post-Soviet pedagogical treatments of Tolstoy by examining *War and Peace* as it is presented in secondary school literature textbooks. It is an attempt to place the textbook within the world of Soviet and post-Soviet pedagogy and education.¹ The schoolbooks selected for analysis are from two representative moments in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras: a 1973 ninth-grade literature textbook (edited by Boris Bursov) and a 1996 tenth-grade literature textbook (edited by Yuri Lebedev). Our attention to the treatment of Russia's greatest author and greatest work – Tolstoy, then and now – does not merely illuminate the changing historical approach to Tolstoy and his work, but also sug-

gests further how ideology reflects both state cultural policy and conceptions of national identity.

For it warrants emphasis that the Soviet textbook was integral to the goals of the Ministry of Education. As one literary scholar put it: 'At all times the teacher is supposed to bear in mind that the subject outline and the textbook are his main tools in the teaching of literature.'² Although Soviet instructors did have access to supplementary teaching materials, the textbook was the primary source for class lessons: 'The textbook is the only source of literary history encountered by a pupil at school, and therefore the manner in which it is presented is of utmost importance for understanding the material covered.'³ Such convictions have re-emerged in the Russian pedagogy of the post-Soviet era with a Tolstoyan accent on the existential power of art. Lebedev writes in his 1996 edition that Tolstoy regarded literature as 'the textbook of life.'⁴

An examination of the historical and institutional context of our two secondary school literature textbooks from the 1970s and 1990s raises first this question: How did Soviet literary critics of the Brezhnev era and post-Soviet textbook authors approach Tolstoy?

In the 1910s and 1920s, Georgi Plekhanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky sharply criticized Tolstoy largely because of his doctrine of non-resistance to evil and his calls for moral self-perfection.⁵ This critique came

1 It is worth mentioning the difference between the textbook 'collectives' of the Soviet era and how this process is undergoing change in post-Soviet Russia. For example, the 1996 *Russkaia literatura* for tenth graders indicates that the publishing house *Prosveshchenie* contracted Yuri Lebedev, an individual author, to produce the textbook. The one-author system reflects a shift to the Western model of how textbooks are produced. However, both volumes of the 1996 *Russkaia literatura* for eleventh graders list more than twenty authors as contributors. Such diversity indicates that textbook production in Russia is a hybrid of Soviet and Western practices, a mix of communism and capitalism that

reflects the competing ideologies and methodologies also prevailing in other institutions of the post-Soviet era.

2 Shneidman N. N. 1973a, *Literature and Ideology in Soviet Education*. Toronto, 333.

3 Shneidman N. N. 1973b, 'Soviet Approaches to the Teaching of Literature,' 332.

4 Lebedev, Iu. V. 1996. *Russkaia Literatura, desiatyi klass* [Russian Literature textbook for the tenth grade], 296.

5 Shneidman N. N. 1973a, *Literature and Ideology in Soviet Education*, 47.