German for the East Germans
Language, literature and ideology in the former GDR

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Reading – that is class struggle!
Brecht, ‘In praise of communism’ (1932)

Books are weapons
My concern in this essay is how what might be termed ‘Textbook Reds’ were formed by communist educators through the use of official curricular materials. How did the activity of reading promote ‘class struggle’? How did books serve as ‘revolutionary weapons’? More specifically, to what extent were communist textbooks a form of agitprop?

My examples are from the German language and literature curricula of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Communist state better known in the West as East Germany during its brief existence (1949–90), where I spent three years in the 1990s conducting research for two books devoted to education and culture in modern Germany.1 East German educators prided themselves on the central place of the German language in the curriculum. GDR schools devoted more hours per week (in some grades, twelve or more) to German than any other subject. Moreover, whereas instruction in all other subjects (except mathematics) started in the middle or upper grades, German was taught in every grade, beginning in the first. East German schools also dedicated 40–80 per cent more instructional time to German than did any West German state. For instance, whereas Hamburg schools (grades one to ten) during the 1980s devoted a total of 1,576 hours to German per year, GDR students in the POS that decade received an average of 2,853 hours annually.

Were GDR textbooks nothing but agitprop? Not at all. And yet, they did aim quite openly to further class struggle on the culture front – and to function as ideological weapons in the cold war of words. Indeed, even a casual glance through them makes clear that a significantly greater part of them than in the case of western schoolbooks was devoted to ideological claims that were usually advanced in far sharper, blunter terms than in their western counterparts. As one retired GDR professor of German said to me (and as the analysis of this essay will demonstrate), ‘Even the penmanship, spelling and vocabulary exercises were drenched in Marxism-Leninism!’ That above all should tell you, Herr Rodden, that our Party educators meant business!’ Indeed they did, and that fact needs to be acknowledged and evaluated, while avoiding both red-baiting and whitewashing.

Maintaining that critical stance is especially important when one assesses the GDR German curriculum. The curricular importance that GDR educators accorded German as a school subject reflected its key role in the (East) German ideology. Indeed its significance in molding ‘textbook Reds’ – particularly through its emphasis on socialist virtue – cannot be exaggerated. German class, noted a second-grade teaching guide, contributes to ‘the all-around development of the socialist personality, the growth of young socialist citizens’.

And what was the specific content of German for the East Germans?
Whatever the grade level, German classes were integral to GDR weltanschauliche Erziehung (education for a world outlook), which, like Soviet nospitanie, was essentially character training or moral education devoted to forming ‘socialist personalities’. While all elementary textbooks throughout the industrial world focus on such virtues as, for example, honesty, courtesy, and respect for property, East German textbooks put special emphasis on qualities such as team spirit, sobriety, industriousness, a high sense of public duty, intolerance of actions harmful to the public interest, good physical hygiene, and respect for manual labour and the military. East German textbooks held to a hard-line, Marxist-Leninist Weltanschauung whose great commandment was socialist patriotism. The precepts included revolutionary Communist morality, militant atheism,

devotion to the Party, the collectivist attitude toward labour, the class-oriented approach to social life, the international brotherhood of Communist nations, undying solidarity with the Soviet Union, faith in the historic superiority of socialism over capitalism, an irreconcilable opposition to bourgeois ideology, and hatred toward the imperialists and other enemies of the socialist Fatherland.

Why Johannes could read

The following close reading of GDR curriculum materials proceeds chronologically through the school grades. The analysis devotes extended, separate attention to selected topics such as the language arts, culture, and role models in the primary and middle school years, before it addresses the German curriculum of the upper grades.

German instruction had three parts: reading, letters, and culture, of which reading was the most important and received the most attention. GDR educators outlined the elementary German curriculum in three stages:

1. first through fourth grades, which focused on heroes and enemies, increasingly emphasizing historical context and current affairs in the higher grades;
2. fifth through seventh grades, which introduced literary genres, including longer selections (e.g., the novella); and
3. eighth through tenth grades, which added literary history, focusing upon the socialist and GDR heritage.

First through fourth grades

German textbooks for the lower and middle grades introduced pupils to life in socialist society. The primers in first through fourth grades were organized by theme, as shown by the section headings in the table of contents of a third-grade primer:

1. Blowing in the Wind, Our Blue Flag!
2. Our Energy and Our Love for Our Socialist Fatherland!
3. Fighters for Peace, Progress, and Socialism!
4. Through the Seasons
5. I Want to Tell You
6. Excerpts from Children’s Books

These section titles furnish a good idea of the contents—and of the relative distribution of overtly ideological and non-ideological selections; at least half was devoted to the former. (Here and elsewhere, the exclamation points are in the original.)

In first through third grades, such themes as collectivist virtue and socialist fellow-feeling also occupy more than half of every primer section.

These selections are usually simple message-poems or tendentious agitprop stories, sometimes even two-page ‘memories’ (credited to leaders such as Walter Ulbricht, the head of the GDR Communist Party [SED] from 1945–73). By the way, here again, while American elementary textbooks from an earlier era have had the same kind of simple-minded ideological stories about the founders of the nation, GDR textbooks differed: unlike George Washington, Ulbricht was in reality a brutal and unjust dictator. Moreover, GDR textbooks mythologize numerous living Party leaders, such as Ulbricht, whereas no American presidents or statesmen have been similarly enshrined in American textbooks for at least a century or more.

A scattered survey of early postwar readers suggests that agitprop literature in primers was less prevalent before the 1970s, but the 1965 Education Act specified that the study of literary genres begin only in the upper grades. As a result, few lower-grade readers of the 1970s and 1980s include any examples of ‘literature’ at all; even exalted German communist authors, such as Johannes Becher or Bertolt Brecht, rarely appear. Instead the elementary school readers contain numerous nonliterary selections. For instance, solidarity with the USSR is another recurrent theme in these early years, e.g., a letter from ‘Misha in Moscow’ explaining the origin of the name of the ‘October Pioneers’ in the Great October Revolution (‘That’s why we proudly call ourselves ‘October Children’), or ‘A Sunday of Friendship’, which celebrates the help given by a child to Soviet soldiers devoting their Sunday to building a bridge in a GDR village. Some selections make clear that power worship survived the Nazi era. One story, titled ‘The German Democratic Republic Has Strong Friends’, begins: ‘The Soviet Union is the biggest and most powerful nation of the earth’.

Often the Soviet theme is expressed in poems such as ‘We young pioneers maintain friendship with the children of the Soviet Union and all countries’:

I greet the children in the Soviet Union
Our friendship is firm
I extend my hand to all the children of the world
in the east, north, south, and west.

The readers in the early grades do not contain any fiction, at least not identifiably so; all stories are presented as dramatic nonfiction and therefore ‘true’. Some stories are situated historically, so that the USSR is not depicted merely as a current ally but a long-time friend. (Some of these selections are translations from the Russian.) For instance, in a story in Lesebuch 2 titled ‘Dimitri saves two German children’, a tank gunner rescues a German boy and girl from a burning house at the close of the war. The story concludes: ‘And both children, who are long since
grown up, will certainly not have forgotten Dimitri. And you can be sure that they are good friends of the Soviet Union.'

Such an historical context – often established through stories that presented the official SED view of major events in German history or current affairs – becomes predominant in primers for grades three and four. For example, *Lesebuch 3* exalts a border guard killed on patrol of the Berlin Wall in 1964, and personalizes the Vietnam War by featuring ‘Doan’, a North Vietnamese boy whose family was killed by US bombers. *Lesebuch 4* includes two powerful agitprop documents, both delivered in the first person. The first is a report from an East German soldier on a joint manoeuvre conducted in 1966 with his Czech and Hungarian brothers-in-arms. (Neither the story nor the editors allude to the GDR’s unbrotherly – or Big Brotherly – suppression of the Prague Spring two years later.) The second selection is eyewitness testimony from two soldiers about the building of the Berlin Wall and its aftermath. One soldier tells of provocations at the Wall by American military units in October 1961:

Right here American soldiers sought to push their way through [the border control]. They wanted to force open a passageway for one of their vehicles. When they couldn’t achieve that, they took off. Then they set up a chain of tanks. Terror ran through every part of my body.

Before the line of [enemy] vehicles . . . an officer in our People’s Army stood with his hands behind his back.

The first American tank rolled with lowered cannons right toward him. My thoughts at that moment were: Will the Americans dare? Will the officer stand fast? Will it come to war if they shoot?

But our officer didn’t move a single step. He forced the American tanks to stop on that spot.

**Fifth through seventh grades**

Ideologically oriented material in German language and literature was also found in the middle grades, but beginning in fifth grade, the balance begins to move toward letters and away from crude politics; German readers now include ‘literary’ selections, not merely tendentious verse and prose. The fifth-through-seventh-grade German texts draw from the ‘literary heritage’ and ‘socialist youth literature’, organized by genre. The aim is to give the pupil a socialist sensibility and a ‘literary-aesthetic picture of humanity’.

*Lesebuch 5* is divided by genre into five sections: fairy tales, fables, poems, stories, and excerpts from children’s books. Poems and stories from Goethe, Theodor Fontane, Theodor Storm, Brecht, Becher, Erwin Strittmatter, Stephan Hermlin, Gorky, and Mark Twain (a snippet from *The adventures of Tom Sawyer* appear next to agitprop prose (‘A Good Deed’, ‘Red Berries’) and verse (‘To A Soldier of the People’s Army’, ‘You Must be Useful to the Workers’ State’). The fifth-grade teaching guide prescribes the genre criticism for the textbook selections: fables are meant to contribute to the ‘moral training’ of the young socialist; pupils should learn that narrators of fairy tales ‘come from the working people, and that literary characters furnish insight about our ancestors and their status in society.’ The fairy tale also provides readers with ‘experiences of the methods of exploiters and oppressors of the People. These methods are condemned [in the tales] as ‘inhuman, low, and small-minded’.

As these guidelines suggest, ideological concerns remain overwhelmingly dominant in fifth-grade German. For example, a fifth-grade teaching guide of the 1970s opens with a quotation from ‘Comrade’ Erich Honecker on the value of literary works ‘characterized by fidelity to reality, solidarity with the People, and partisanship’, though no mention is made in the guide that ‘Comrade’ Honecker is the SED chief and the head of state. (Honecker succeeded Ulbricht and ruled from 1973 to 1989.) The teaching guide then distinguishes GDR literature from that of West Germany, ‘where imperialistic mass literature, with its glorification of crime, brutality, and sex, influences the masses and especially the youth, day after day’. By contrast, the teaching guide notes, GDR authors can and should adopt a stance of partisanship or ‘partymindedness’ toward all texts. Teachers should stress, whenever possible, ‘the struggle against fascism’, and should ‘place the qualities of the socialist view of humanity in the foreground’, themes that will ‘fulfill the motto “Books are weapons.”’

*Lesebuch 6* expands the range of genres taught in German class. For example, the study of legends (about Prometheus, from passages from *The Odyssey* and the *Niebelungenlied*), invites ‘a stronger historical approach to literature’. Even more significantly, sixth graders encounter texts belonging to the national [GDR] heritage and socialist literature from other lands’. Here the word ‘literature’ is fully justified: the ideologically oriented prose and verse have almost disappeared. Instead, communist doctrine is now expressed near-exclusively through distinguished Marxist writers and SED supporters such as Brecht, Becher, Strittmatter, Anna Seghers, Kurt Bartel, and Louis Fürnberg, whose works appear alongside ballads, nature poems, and stories by classical writers such as Goethe, Theodor Fontane, Eduard Morike, and Johann Peter Hebel.

*Lesebuch 7* features the first systematic presentation of ‘socialist’ literature from ‘the present [i.e., GDR literature] and the heritage’. Gone are most of the genre distinctions; the sections are divided simply
into ‘stories’ and ‘poetry’. Lehrbuch 7 introduces a wide selection of postwar literature. It also contains Oliver’s famous plea for more porridge from Dickens’ Oliver Twist, a full novella (Gottfried Keller’s Clothes make the man), and lengthy excerpts from three juvenile books (a Russian and a GDR author, along with Victor Hugo’s Gavroche). Outright Marxist-Leninist selections amount to less than twenty per cent, such as the poems ‘A Tractorist Regales’, ‘Socialist Spring in the Village’, ‘We Saw Sputnik First!’, ‘Cuban Ballad’, ‘How Far is Vietnam, Mother?’, Becher’s ‘The State’, and Brecht’s ‘The Great October’. The mature selections, notes the seventh-grade teaching guide, ‘confront the pupil with a variety of human and social problems of adults. . . . The socialist hero – of the kind that the pupil meets in everyday life – is placed in the center of literature class’. The socialist hero ‘teaches [the pupil] human greatness and exemplary behavior in daily work, and [how] to recognize and live similarly in his own actions’. The juvenile book excerpts faithfully fulfill Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko’s prescription that the child reader ‘distinguish and recognize heroes at first glance’ who will stimulate ‘positive or negative feelings’. Teachers are instructed to present authors such as Keller in a ‘bourgeois-humanist’ light. Keller’s Clothes make the man shows ‘the progressive actions and humanity of the literary hero in an antagonistic class society [as he engages in his] passionate struggle against the ruling class’s moral norms’.

Mother-tongue education

The textbook Muttersprache [Mother tongue] indicates the tasks in GDR German language units. In its first- and second-grade editions it is organized into sections devoted to grammar, vocabulary, and parts of speech; literary style; and spelling and penmanship. The grammar and penmanship sections warrant particular attention.

Grammar

Grammar exercises in all grade levels of Muttersprache mix ‘politics’ with ‘letters’. Lessons on verb usage, sentence structure, and adverbial modifications are treated as opportunities for weltanschauliche Erziehung. For instance, passages on ‘Productive work’ and ‘The Vietnamese people’s struggle for freedom’ are occasions for building simple and complex sentences; ‘Murder of a fighter for the human rights of the colored people in the USA’ (Martin Luther King) teaches proper comma usage; a text on the ‘slave work’ suffered by Cubans under an American puppet regime before Castro’s revolution treats active and passive voice.

Quite literally, GDR children were schooled in a GDR version of Orwellian Newspeak (‘Ostspreek’) from their earliest years. One learned the mother tongue by learning the ideological syntax and semantics of Marxist-Leninist – or rather, that was the intention of the Party. That the SED’s intention often went unfulfilled, or at best only partly fulfilled, was not for lack of sustained effort.

For example, here are a few seventh-grade grammar exercises:

1. Substitute appositives for any word groups in these sentences!
   (a) In 1917, revolutionary Russian workers stormed the Winter Palace.
   (b) In 1959, the Soviet Union put the first ship powered by atomic energy into service.
   (c) On October 7, 1975, a treaty for friendship, cooperation, and mutual support was signed by the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union.
   (d) In the furnaces of Eisenhüttenstadt factory, ore from the Soviet Union and coal from the People’s Republic of Poland are refined into valuable steel.

2. Use das [adj. the] or dass [conj. that, because]! Support your choice!
   (a) It was in the last days of April 1945. . . . Terrified and distrustful, we waited; _______ first Soviet soldiers were coming. . . . An interpreter told us _______ the war was over. The soldiers took care _______ we received food. The angst dissolved, and ______ feeling of trust in the Soviet soldiers grew fast. . . . When I later heard of the endless suffering ______ fascist army had inflicted on the Russian people, I thought back to my first meeting with the Soviet soldiers.
   (b) We know ______ the Soviet Union struggles insistently for the preservation of the peace.
   (c) The Soviet Union is ______ land with the most modern weapons.

Grammar exercises in other grades are similar:

1. [Fifth grade; keywords.] Socialism and socialist. Use the substantive in sentences! Write: ‘In the GDR ______ is being built up. . . .’

2. [Second grade; suffixes.] [Note the] adjectives with suffixes: -ig, -lich, -isch, -bar, -haft, and -sam. Many citizens of our Republic spend their vacation in other socialist countries. The people that they meet there are friendly and diligent. We experience feelings of friendship toward them. A vacation on the coast of the Bulgarian or Romanian Black Sea, or spent enjoying any of the wonderful landscapes of our neighbours, is not
only refreshing, but it also leaves one with many enduring impressions of the beauty of nature.

3. [Ninth and tenth grades; verb tense.] What tenses are used in this resume? 
   . . . In eighth grade, I joined the Society for 
   German-Soviet Friendship. As president of 
   the Russian club of our school, I sought to make con-
   tact with the House of the DSF [German-Soviet 
   Friendship]. . . . Last year I was elected secretary of 
   our youth group. I am responsible in this function 
   for our political-ideological education and for the 
   improvement of learning performance. . . . I have 
   the desire to become an officer in our National 
   People’s Army (NVA).

A variety of grammar exercises guided pupils to simi-
larly predictive ‘conclusions’ about the United States, 
West Germany, and capitalism:

1. [Ninth and tenth grades.] Put adverbs in the 
   blanks!
   [1945.] Anglo-American bombers _____
   dropped their death cargoes on German cities 
   and residential areas . . . In the morning shift 
   he ____ performed his work, and was ready to 
   protect his city, his family, and also his fac-
   tory from the attacks of the Anglo-American 
   bombers. . . .

2. [Ninth and tenth grades; main and dependent 
   clauses, infinitive formation.] 
   (a) The coloured population of the USA is strug-
   gling to receive the same rights as their white 
   fellow citizens.
   (b) The battle of the coloured population for 
   equal rights.

3. [Ninth and tenth grades; main and auxiliary verbs.] 
   . . . West Germany had a greater population, 
   and the political, business, and military leaders 
   of German capitalism had concentrated there. 
   The reactionary forces thus believed that the 
   capitalist West Germany would, with the help of 
   the American imperialists, gain superiority, 
   so that, in the short or long run, the German 
   Democratic Republic would have to buckle 
   under the massive pressure.

Military motifs were especially favored in the upper 
grades in GDR mother-tongue education:

1. [Ninth and tenth grade.] Practice the forms to 
   have and to become in the present and imperfect 
   tenses:
   . . . His brother was a good student. After fin-
   ishing his apprenticeship, he became a soldier.

Now he studies. And what is your desired 
occupation?

2. [Ninth and tenth grade.] Underline the words that 
   occur in the future! Examine exactly how the words 
   attempt and seize are used to express future action!
   Dear Fighter!
   In our manoeuvre today, we assume that 
   enemy agents are hiding in the forest, beyond 
   the canal. The enemy will attempt to cross the 
   canal in the dark. By 17.00, Group 1 of our 
   unit will seize the Lenin Bridge. Groups 2 and 
   3 will secure the canal bank. . . . Pay attention 
   to every noise! At 24.00 the manoeuvre is over. 
   Now: Synchronize your watches!

3. [Ninth and tenth grade.] Name the predicate in 
   every sentence. . . . Decide which word is the subject. 
   . . . Underline the predicates and their corresponding 
   subjects . . .
   Bernd’s father is a member of the military unit 
   of his factory. On many a Sunday he gets up 
   early, puts on his uniform, and goes to his 
   manoeuvre. His Comrade Fighters register 
   themselves, arrive at the site, and receive their 
   assignment.

4. [Ninth and tenth grade.] After the war the soldiers 
   of the Soviet army helped the German population. 
   They distributed food. . . . The people thanked 
   their liberators for this great assistance.
   (a) Determine the predicates and objects!
   (b) Name the verbs in each sentence! Determine 
   the objects!

5. [Ninth and tenth grade.] The soldiers of the NVA 
   defend [verteidigen] our Heimat. Day and night 
   they are prepared for defense [zur Verteidigung]. 
   (a) Write the words with the prefix ‘ver’. . . . 
   Some grammar exercises were phrased more subtly. 
   Note the buildup to the ideological point in the 
   following two examples:

1. [Ninth and tenth grade.] [Note the buildup to the 
   last two examples.] Practice words with g and ch: 
   (a) dive [tauchen] into the depths 
   (b) smoke [rauchen] the pipe 
   (c) guard [bewachen] the border 
   (d) risk [wagen] the jump

2. [Ninth and tenth grade.] Name the verbs that must 
   be completed with an object if the statement is to be 
   complete! . . . Decide the case of the object . . . [Note 
   the buildup to the concluding examples.]
   (a) We compose in class.
   (b) Pioneers arrive.
   (c) Pioneers receive.
(d) We are writing in class.
(e) The freight train arrives.
(f) NVA soldiers defend.
(g) NVA soldiers march.

Penmanship.
The pupil should recognize that socialist art and literature help him to master his life, and that they possess great significance for the development of the human being in socialist society. What in late bourgeois society, which is characterized by the alienation of human beings, is often pushed into the sealed sphere of private interest, receives in our socialist social order a publicity that it was never before granted. An essential educational task of the literature curriculum, therefore, is to lead the pupil to the insight that the humanism of art and literature is inhibited from its full developmental flowering when it is only cultivated in isolation. One of the greatest achievements of our socialist social order is to have created the preconditions whereby the most various expressions of humanity needn’t any longer hide in the shadows; because of the triumph of the revolutionary worker class, they have entered the public stage. This constant interaction is required if real humanism is to develop to its fullest.

But ‘real humanism’ does not imply any relaxation of ideological fervor or tolerance toward opposing political viewpoints, as an eighth-grade textbook emphasized:
The pupils will therefore be able to approach the role of literature in the class struggle from a partisan position, and in this context to grasp the different conditions of the social function of the writer.

Not only were world classics taught alongside Party literature, however; an eighth-grade teaching guide also stressed that the classics themselves were to be approached for their ‘progressive’ ideas. Pushkin, for example, was highly recommended because Lenin and Gorky admired him. On introducing Goethe and Schiller, the teaching guide for eighth grade advises:
Special value should be laid on their historically progressive ideas, their discoveries about the human being and his life. . . . [This approach] can furnish the first insights into how classical German literature developed its Weltanschauung and morality in opposition to feudalist-absolutist society.

Thus, for example, the pedagogical approach toward the ‘Easter Stroll’ scene in Faust II, in which Faust soliloquizes that ‘the streams and rivers are being freed from ice by the sacred, life-giving eye of spring’, should emphasize the investigation of this process, its dialectical character, and above all the optimism that one can draw from it. For in this process, the classical humanistic conception is recognizable:
There is genuine progress in the world, and it will ultimately win out. This optimistic world

Examples of exercises in rhetoric and composition for the upper grades include:

1. [Ninth and tenth grades.] Present in a short composition your main ideas on the topic ‘Young Revolutionaries Yesterday and Young Revolutionaries Today! . . . ’ Try to include the following quotation: ‘Whoever seeks the truth, must fight lies; whoever wants the good must have contempt for the bad; whoever loves man, must hate his enemies.’

2. [Eighth grade.] To what conclusions about the value of human rights . . . in the USA do the following facts lead you?
   - The USA / one of the richest industrial nations of the world / many millions of unemployed people / poverty across the broad mass of the population / exclusion of a great part of the people from the possibility of an all-around education and the development of personality; racial discrimination. . .

Canon fodder for young revolutionaries
Upper-grade school syllabuses specified that the curriculum should ‘strengthen socialist ways of behavior, especially striving for knowledge and readiness both to assume full responsibility and to make class-conscious decisions’.
A teaching guide further advised:

‘Letters’ was not without politics even in units on handwriting, as the main examples of suggested penmanship exercises in three teaching guides establish. Teachers were often required to devote several minutes of class time to the practice of ideologically conditioned topics, such as ‘Lenin: Our Model’. Vocabulary and spelling lessons had a similar flavour:

1. [Second grade; vocabulary.] Fill in the blanks with those words that complete the meaning of the sentences!
   - The Vietnamese Volk are building their land up again. _____ are supported by all decent human beings in the whole world.
   - The opposition between socialism and imperialism is incommensurable. Because of _____ there can’t be any ideological co-existence.

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   There is genuine progress in the world, and it will ultimately win out. This optimistic world
outlook… can be presented as a general law…. The development of nature proceeds contradictorily; it is a battle of opposites: the new against the old, the outdated, and the inhibited. Faust’s feeling of happiness and his optimism correspond to his perception that the spring, the new, the developing – will triumph over the winter, the old…. 

Progressivist themes received even sharper accent in the study of nineteenth-century literature belonging to the GDR heritage. For instance, Heine’s ‘Silesian weavers’, written out of sympathy for a worker’s uprising in 1844, was presented as ‘an impressive artistic picture of the decisiveness of the proletariat, who regarded the extant feudalist-capitalist order as ‘the false Fatherland’ and resolved to send it through force to its grave’. As a supplement to the class hour, teachers were instructed to play a recording dramatizing the relationship between Heine and the young Marx in Paris. The poem achieved canonical status partly because it was originally translated into English and given a Marxist interpretation by Engels, who also admired Heine for his fierce criticism of the church and German nobility.

GDR literature is frankly chosen and presented in the textbooks for its potential influence on young revolutionaries. According to the eighth-grade teaching guide, Brecht’s one-act play ‘Señora Carrar’s Rifles’ (1937), an anti-Falangist tract set in civil-war Spain and arguing that force must be met with force, represents literature as a weapon of the international proletariat, in that it affords [the teacher] various means of showing the way of the revolutionary worker from an oppressed and exploited person to a fighter and victor…. [The play shows that] every person must decide to engage in the class struggle. Pupils should experience and deeply understand the significance of active intervention for human progress and the avoidance of tragic events. They comprehend that it is fatal, after temporary setbacks, to give up the struggle, and that it is impossible to remain neutral toward an uncompromising class enemy.

The GDR program known as ‘education for hate’ (toward ‘capitalists’ and ‘imperialists’) is well-expressed by the play; as the teaching guide notes, Teresa Carrar’s ‘transformation’ into a woman of ‘decisive readiness for militant action’ is ‘triggered by her insight’ about the Falangists:

Those aren’t people. They are a leprosy, and they must be burned out like a leprosy.

The pedagogy guide does not mention that Brecht himself considered the play a large step backward in his dramatic development.

Early bourgeois literature centers on Shakespeare’s Macbeth, which is not discussed in terms of Renaissance faculty psychology or ideas about regicide, but rather for its ‘dialectical interplay of individual and social attributes’ and its ‘optimistic ending’, which ‘Shakespeare chooses… in order to express his commitment to a humanistic picture of mankind, against which the title character stands in crass contrast.’ The guide recommends Shakespeare as a ‘model’; ‘He was against every kind of dictatorship, possessed bourgeois-humanistic convictions, and had a bourgeois-progressive conception of freedom, happiness and the relationship of human beings to one another.’

Progressive bourgeois literature – referred to as ‘our classical national literature’ – is treated at greater length, e.g., Goethe’s Prometheus (1774), regarded as important not least because Marx, in the epigraph of his doctoral dissertation, explicitly declared Prometheus as his inspiration and model. But GDR teachers did not stress how the poem expresses Prometheus’ harsh portrait of modern humanity, his feeling of isolation and tone of bitterness, and his championing of individuality. Rather, Goethe’s Prometheus is ‘the triumphant rebel, who is superior and triumphs not only in the long run, but in the present’ and thus ‘expresses the revolutionary potential of the young bourgeois class of 1770’.

Early socialist literature is divided into two categories. The first type is titled ‘Writers from capitalist countries who chose peace and humanism’ (elsewhere called ‘Bourgeois-realistic literature in the battle against imperialism and war’) – e.g., Hemingway’s story ‘The old man at the bridge’, written in 1938 in Spain when the ‘bourgeois-humanist writer’ Hemingway was a war correspondent.

The second and more important type is ‘Socialist humanism in Soviet literature’ – e.g., Nikolai Ostrowski’s How steel is made hard. Ostrowski’s 1934 novel was one of the biggest sellers throughout the Communist world. Its protagonist, Pavel Korchagin, a patriotic supporter of the Russian Revolution and model of the young hero in new Soviet literature, was based on Ostrowski himself, a former soldier and Komsomol leader. GDR teachers were advised that Korchagin represents ‘the essence of the uncompromising, fearless fighter for Communism and the embodiment of the moral superiority of the communist Weltanschauung.’

Not all of the writers in the twentieth-century GDR school canon were faithful Party supporters, let alone Party members; but all of them were socialists or social democrats. For instance, while Friedrich Wolf did join the SED, ‘bourgeois-realistic writers’ such as the Mann brothers (Heinrich and Thomas) and Kurt
Tucholsky were viewed sympathetically as fellow travelers in fundamental agreement with the Communist Weltanschauung and the aspirations of the GDR.

The Senior High School Curriculum

The limited openness in the German curriculum of the GDR’s advanced high schools should not be exaggerated. To weigh properly the pedagogical accents, I believe, it is invaluable to supplement analysis of senior high school textbooks (grades 9 to 12) with examination materials – and also conversations with GDR-era teachers and pupils. Freya Klier, a prominent GDR dissident, found during her survey of the cultural literacy of GDR senior high school pupils (grades 9 to 12) in *Lug Vaterland* (1990) that practically none had ever even heard of dissident or exiled GDR authors whose works were published in small GDR editions or unavailable. My own informal survey of a dozen teachers and students during my visits to the collapsing GDR in 1990 likewise indicated that the even admittedly narrow latitude suggested by the textbooks proved largely illusory: the teacher’s room to maneuver was greater in theory than in practice. As a result of the focus in GDR syllabuses on the socialist ‘heritage’, reported my interviewees, pressure to ‘cover’ all the required material led to a time shortage, so that GDR émigrés and Western authors ‘sceptical’ toward socialism were seldom discussed in class – even if to rebut them. Teachers still ‘taught by the book’) the syllabuses and, above all, the *Abitur* school-leaving examinations.

Indeed, perhaps the most conclusive evidence as to what ‘counted’ in German class was the *Abitur* leave-taking exam, which was taken by twelfth-grade pupils. The following are the two main questions for the 1986 German *Abitur* exam.

1. ‘Our life demands a socialist realist literature and art characterized by Party loyalty, the spirit of the People, and high socialist ideals. It must also convey new enthusiasm for thinking, feeling, and action in practical activities.’

   From: Report on the Central Committee of the SED, by Comrade Erich Honecker.

   *In order to reflect more deeply on the function of socialist literature, address these aspects of the content of any literary work that has especially engaged you.*

2. *Interpret the following 1985 poem of Uwe Berger:*

   In our work live on
   those who once stood at the barricades,
   who in the face of persecution, hatred, and murder
   discovered in the struggle for our rights,
   that their dying words
   were of the Red Flag.

   We oppose the night with
   the bond that unites us;
   thus do the People enjoy happiness and power
   thus do flowers bloom from stones
   thus is freedom prized
   which we value as humans, not as wolves.

   We must cast all our energies
   on good days and on hard days,
   with those who liberate themselves,
   who as comrades prove themselves
   and what we have will prosper
   because we will preserve and increase it.

   Such *Abitur* exam questions should indeed leave no doubt about the ideological orthodoxy ultimately expected in senior German classes. Yes, as GDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl declared in this essay’s opening epigraph: ‘Books are weapons.’

   Or as Friedrich Wolf expressed it in his play *Cyankali* (1929):

   Shatter the wall of your silence!
   Demand your life, your joys,
   Create them yourself, Proletarian!
   Art is a weapon!