

Teaching the GDR.

Transmission of knowledge about the GDR in France and Germany after 1990.

Summary

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The former German Democratic Republic (GDR) is a subject of history lessons in boarding schools both in Germany and in France. As the remembrance of the GDR is a highly debated topic, history lessons on the socialist state reflect conflicts of interpretation that circulate between the spheres of academic and public discourse and political education. The study looks on interpretations of the GDR developed in history lessons and the influence of the various plots of the state's history in mass media, academic discourse and history politics on the lessons.

The teaching of GDR history is influenced by five spheres: policy, academic history, public discourse, the textbook market and the family's communicative memory. The actors who mediate between academia, public discourse and history/educational policy show the biggest influence on contents and forms of teaching: they are curators in museums, members of curricular committees or teachers at schools. How pupils appropriate GDR history is more influenced by family, the educational market with its textbooks and by public discourse, less by academia and policy.

The study showed that the agency of teachers as filters of curricular knowledge has more impact than the political control of curricula and textbook suggests. Besides their duty as knowledge filters teachers have to moderate between different sources of knowledge which become visible during the lessons.

In the field of transmission of knowledge at school, the same conflicts appear as in the field of education in memorials and museums. Whereas the memory of dictatorship has become dominant since 1990 and the tandem of repression and rebellion remain the most important aspects of GDR history in curricula and public discourse, the so-called 'memory of

arrangement' survived as the East German counter-memory. It still appears in the case of a grammar school class in Leipzig in 2014, whose pupils were born in 1997 and 1998.

It has become clear that pupils do not relativize the GDR as a dictatorship due to a lack of knowledge on the former state. In fact, most adolescents know more than a questionnaire could show. Their images, stories and interpretations that did not fit into the lessons were activated in the context of focus group discussions. More than that, there is no causality between little knowledge and putting things into perspective. In the Leipzig class, this was more a sign of loyalty towards family members and an emotional connection to the devaluated material and social heritage of GDR culture. In Frankfurt and Paris, where there was more distance, family memory was far less important and the judgement was more self-reflective. Where the teacher proposes mediating concepts of the GDR, as in Frankfurt, the pupils appear to learn the most. In Leipzig, a mediating concept as 'participatory dictatorship' or 'welfare dictatorship' (Konrad Jarasch) helped to come to terms with contradictory aspects. The content learned is just one element of the successful teaching on GDR history, the other being an irritation of stereotypes: the competence to question one's own first judgement.

The transmission of GDR history in school will, in the long term, remain important, especially if the GDR is integrated in wider contexts such as the twentieth-century history of ideas. As seen in the field research, the more mediating concepts between different sources and interpretations are discussed, the more educational success to be expected, both in learning about the GDR and learning about oneself.