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ABSTRACT

A study compared the historical awareness of 2,000 East and West German children in the sixth, ninth, and twelfth grades. Because of differing school systems and the general design of the study, researchers analyzed ninth grade data. The study was conducted during the disintegration and reunification of Germany. Students from the two regions viewed some historical eras much differently. For instance, East Germans were more likely to view Martin Luther as a liberator who paved the way for the Age of Enlightenment, but were also more likely to condemn the European settlement of North America. West Germans were ambivalent about the French Revolution, which the Eastern students viewed sympathetically. Among the students of the German Democratic Republic, Nazism was associated with public order and work for all, while their counterparts in the Federal Republic emphasized the extermination of the Jews and the destruction of warfare. East German students seemed somewhat superior in cognition and basic value orientation, but appeared less internationalistic and left oriented than West German students. Such comparisons should continue, not only within Germany and not just among students. A planned European study may help define more precisely the cultural background of historical consciousness in Germany. (LBG)

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COMPARING EMPIRICALLY HISTORICAL AWARENESS IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY

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While the German Democratic Republic was in the process of disintegration and the re-unification agreement being prepared, almost 2.000 students from intact classes in East and West Germany were questioned. The questionnaire was conceived with closed-format questions only - thus avoiding as much as possible the active use of language or writing. Students of the 6th, 9th and 12th grade of different types of schools were questioned in Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein as well as in Saxony (Dresden). Though rather extensive, the study refers to a convenience sample, not a true probability sample. Meanwhile, the complete analysis has been published (v. Borries 1992). Because of the differing school systems and the general design of the study, it seemed to be most appropriate here to compare the data for the 9th grade.

1. Different mental associations and interpretations in East and West

East and West German students are not identical in their concepts of certain historical eras. For example, when rank-ordering their mental associations with Luther, the East German students rank the following statement much higher than their Western peers: "He liberated almost half of Europe from superstition and from medieval papal rule and he opened the way for the Age of Enlightenment" - and only much later they will say: "He was a criminal behind the scene, co-responsible for the massacre of thousands of rebellious farmers." West Germans, on the other hand, when thinking of "industrialization", associate with it "misery of workers" rather than "relief from heavy work". These examples clearly, fail to suggest a success of communist indoctrination.

This impression is confirmed by the fact that East German adolescents associate with the Middle Ages more strongly "impressive church buildings and a reliable feudal system" and with Columbus less strongly "the European genocide of American Indians and the exploit of American colonies for centuries". All that leads to the conclusion that historical concepts and interpretations are more traditional in the East than in the West. East Germans, for whatever reasons, seem to persist in a pre-Marxist position (or fall back onto it), whereas the West

German students appear to have internalized more deeply productive impulses of the "Marxist" theory in terms of critique of ideologies and social history.

Figure 1 a/b

Understandably, the relevance of historical topics and persons cannot be fully alike. The percentages of those who dare express their opinion about Rosa Luxemburg and the Reformation are clearly higher in the East - West Germans, on the other hand, are willing more often to take a stand on Women's suffrage in 1918 and Mahatma Gandhi. This reflects specific East German traditions ("socialism", "early bourgeois revolution") as well as a lack of emphasis on democratic emancipation movements. As for other events and persons - such as the French Revolution, the discovery of America, Charlemagne, and Louis XIV - there are no differences. Therefore, the observed differences appear as gradual rather than fundamental. In any event, much more detailed studies are necessary to confirm or refute this.

There are also serious indications that the students' esteem of persons and events ("exemplary" vs. "appalling") are identical in many cases, but different in some others. East Germans are judging the discovery of America rather positive. Women's Suffrage of 1918, however, less enthusiastic (but not negative) which confirms that their historical interpretations are somewhat conventional and traditional. When judging the French Revolution, the difference is more pronounced. In the West, the French Revolution is rated almost neutral, certainly because approval of human rights and rejection of terror are neutralizing each other. In the East, however, there is a clear sympathy for the French Revolution, possibly referring to the installation of the "bourgeois society" and perhaps reinforced by the students' own revolutionary experience of 1989/90. This item showed one of the greatest differences of all.

The public has been most concerned over the neo-Nazi violence against foreigners in former East Germany, which has its roots, however, in an economical and mental crisis of many young people there rather than in a direct continuity from Nazi time and ideology. Nevertheless, surveys in East Germany during the summer of 1990 (see e.g. Schubarth 1991) have shown that there is a greater tendency to play down the evils of Nazism in the East than there is in West Germany. The history study of 1990 included a number of associations with National Socialism. Relatively low sample sizes in the West (North Rhine-Westphalia) and in the East (Saxonia) (N = just under 600 for Northrhine-Westphalia and Saxony) as well as a certain lack of representativeness have to be conceded (there were certain disproportinalities in the sample of schools

participating). The results are striking, though, and probably correct in their tendencies.

Figure 2

The expected differences are quite obvious in the 9th grade, whereas in grades 6 and 12 the effects are smaller in size, if not different in direction. When thinking of National Socialism, the inquired 15 to 16 year-old students in the East emphasize much less "extermination of jews" and "war and destruction", for instance, but much more "public safety and order" and "work for everybody" than do West German students. The differences in these four cases (which are the strongest ones, even though they are also typical for the other differences encountered) amount to at least 0.8 (partly to more than 1.0) points on a scale ranging between -2 and +2. Playing down Nazi crimes is associated with highly negative mean values in the West and highly positive values in the East, whereas criticism of National Socialism shows slightly positive mean values in the East and high positive mean values in the West.

Figures 3 a/b

East German students have displayed a higher degree of acceptance of the school subject and of historical cognition and they have rejected a number of rather critical descriptions ("appalling accumulation of cruelties and disasters", "heavy load of tradition, of which one has to get rid of" etc.) much stronger than students of the same age in the West, while agreeing to positive characterizations (such as "the sum of human experience", "politics of yesterday as a prerequisite of today's decisions"). Similarly, the East German students' convictions as to the motive forces of history are different in intensity, but not in general tendency. These students attribute much more importance to "ideas and religion" and a little more influence to "social movements of the working population". Obviously, this interpretation is idealistic rather than materialistic, all the more so since the perceived role of "revolutionaries and rebels" shows no relevant difference. "Crop failures and epidemics" as well as "military leaders and war heroes" are awarded even less importance than in West Germany.

2. Similar structures and achievements in East and west

The study demonstrates "cognition", i.e. simple knowledge and skills, "moral principles", i.e. an attitude towards universalism and altruism (as opposed to ethnocentrism and selfishness), and "emotionality", i.e. illusionary and wishful

thinking vs. realism, to be mutually independent factors and thus fundamental dimensions of historical awareness. The essential achievement of learning history, then, can be seen in the acquisition of a "basic value orientation", with "cognition" and "moral principles" as the primary determinants. It appears to be fairly independent of "emotionality", however.

A simple comparison of mean values in these four dimensions shows that the East German students - at least in the 9th grade and compared to the average of the three West German school types - seem to be a little superior in terms of "cognition" and "basic value orientation", whereas there are generally no differences in the moral and emotional field. The East Germans, however, have proved to be a little less "internationalistic" and "left oriented" than West Germans. The observed differences should not be overestimated. In the cognitive field, the differences between metropolitan Hamburg and predominantly rural Schleswig-Holstein, and, in the moral field, those between boys and girls are greater than the effects associated with the East-West comparison. The few scales concerning opinions about the present and the future, which have been used in the present study, generally show greater distances between East and West than the scales concerning historical awareness.

Figure 4

A causal model incorporating the East-West comparison is, on the basis of the available data, best specified for the 9th grade only. It turns out that East German origins have had a positive influence on "conservative complacency" (.14), and especially on "affinity to the subject" (.40). Differences between the then valid systems of political parties and possibly differing grading practices, however, require some caveats. The effects of the East-West dichotomy on achievements specific to history are much smaller. As for "cognition" and "basic value orientation", there are positive influences in the order of the cut-off value for path coefficients (.10). That is, students of East German origin were, during the summer of 1990, likely to show superior achievement in history as compared to West German students of the same age. In this respect, one might consider the tradition of achievement-oriented learning in East German schools on the one hand and the students' own positive historical-political experience during the situation of the radical change in 1989/90 itself as tentative explanations. However, the findings reported are somewhat less than certain, as this was not a truly representative sample (as was mentioned before).

Depending on previous expectations, the far-reaching similarity of dimensions and depth structures of historical awareness in both parts of Germany - which

were found in the 1990 data - will be taken as substance for satisfaction or irritation, for surprise or verification. Due to the methodological limitations of this study, the observed slight differences cannot be considered as statistically confirmed, but only as reasonably likely. The results, however, correspond to findings from other surveys as well as to those from an extensive pilot study conducted during the winter of 1991/92, which is intended to facilitate a subsequent study. Again, more similarities than differences were found. Altogether, it is quite probable that the communist version of history is no longer rooted very deeply in the heads and hearts of East German adolescents.

- It could be argued, of course, that less than optimal instruments were used in the study so that important differences may have been left out for reasons of method. In this case, it is not easy to explain, however, why the observed differences in students' historical awareness are greater by age, type of school, gender, party preference, and other predictors.

- Perhaps, historical instruction - as later reported by many East German teachers - was not as affirmative and dogmatical as insinuated by the official guidelines. There is clear evidence of a clandestine erosion of loyalty towards the system since the late seventies and an accelerated decline since the middle of the eighties. This may have influenced schools, too - and thus represent more than a mere protective argument.

- Moreover, the experience of the "peaceful revolution" of 1989/90 itself was probably suited to extinguish, or at least dampen, rather quickly any Marxist interpretations of history. If history is really a dialogue with the past with regard to the future, such accelerated social and mental processes will certainly leave their traces in historical concepts and interpretations. In fact, evidence from the Hamburg project (comparing the studies of 1988 and 1990) suggests that the actual experience of changes in Eastern Europe and East Germany has changed also a number of historical perceptions referring to the more ancient times.

- Finally, East German pupils might have given, to a larger degree, "socially desired responses". One might, in fact, suspect a special readiness for conformity. But this does not necessarily apply to the summer of 1990. In any event, it is most exciting and enlightening to see what East German students - who for geographical reasons were not able to watch West German TV up to the summer of 1990 - have considered as "socially desired".

3. Common traits and assumptions in East and West

In view of the rather superficial configuration of effects and the relatively small differences in terms of depth structure it is necessary to think about basic common traits which might have gone unnoticed, because there is no background against which to portray them. As opposed to the field of social values, there are no international and cross-cultural studies of historical awareness as of today which would have produced comparative material suitable to determine specific features of the German historical culture, taking Germany as a whole. Such studies are urgently needed, especially in a phase of simultaneous integration in West Europe and disintegration in Eastern Europe. At present, the particularities of historical consciousness among German adolescents can only be hypothesized and clarified by confronting observation with given expectations derived from normative and theoretical considerations.

Four main traits appear to be empirically plausible when trying to portray the historical culture among German adolescents:

- modest levels of knowledge and interpretative skill,
- requent withdrawal of loyalty and refusal to identify oneself with "natural" and historical predecessors,
- almost complete loss of fascination, excitement, and curiosity about historical phenomena, and
- a basic attitude of anachronistic moralizing,, instead of historical explanation and differentiating consciousness of change.

Here, only the second and third trait can be considered. The crucial problem is, of course, with whom adolescents identify themselves, to whom they are loyal, i.e. ultimately, how they define and categorize themselves.

The study (including th pilot study of 1991) shows very clearl that the respondents - both in East and West Germany - do not associate themselves with the causes of their biological, cultural, and historical predecessors, but that they support what they consider to be morally valuable and superior. In the historical dilemmata posed, they do not identify themselfed with the crusaders of the Middle Ages, but against them, not with the British in China, but against them, not with the colonial power, but against it, not with the Germans during

the time of National Socialism, but against them, not with Frederick II of Prussia during the Silesian conflict, but against him. This is all the more true, if the respondents do not stand in a clear continuity with the "responsible actors" (instead of the "victims"), e.g. in the cases of farmers and feudal rulers, witches and witch hunters, Northern and Southern states during the American Civil War.

Figure 5

To refuse identification with the "winners" of one's own tradition, however, does not appear to imply a symmetrical turn in favor of the victims. With increasing age and level of knowledge, the respondents have also expressed a greater distance from Muslims, Chinese, Maria Theresian of Austria and the Northern States in the Civil War. Moral support for these groups seems to stand for a somewhat romantic and nostalgic attitude, which is independent of the main trend of cognitive development. The students do not necessarily stand up for the foreigners, the weak, the attacked - at least not the older and more informed ones - but for non-aggression, human rights, and tolerance. This process can hardly be overestimated: During earlier times, German adolescents have been likely to identify themselves - though perhaps with moral scruples - with the founder of the Prusso-German Power (Frederick the Great) or with the colonial powers in America and China, and this not only at the times of Bismarck and Hitler, but at the times of Ebert and Adenauer as well.

This secular change, the intentional break with tradition and continuity has been caused, most probably, by the political and moral disaster of National Socialism, and it has been accelerated by the critique of ideology and the self-criticism within the "1968 generation". In a small teacher survey accompanying the pilot study of 1991 (which allows only very limited conclusions, however), an even clearer dissociation from the biological and historical reference-group was observed. The fact that teachers refuse to offer this "natural loyalty" implies that the "traditional" constitution of historical meaning has been replaced by an "exemplary" mode - and as such it represents a rise to a new level of historical reasoning in the sense of Rüsen. This phenomenon certainly marks a generalization from the burdening, though inevitable, task of understanding and thus overcoming National Socialism. If it is compelling in one case to negate and to break intentionally with one's own tradition, in spite of knowing about it and having to bear its consequences, it appears to be possible and meaningful for history as a whole.

Certainly, this is a painful process, as emotions expressed or admitted by the respondents are showing. Students are "concerned" considerably by the aforementioned conflicts (regret, horror, protest), almost no matter in which grade they are. On the other hand, feelings of "fascination" (curiosity, excitement, adventure) are demonstrated only at a much lower level, and, moreover, they are almost completely extinguished during the socialisation process. Factor analyses (expecially referring to data from the pilot study of 1991) suggest that "concern" is an entirely moral phenomenon ("tendency to criticize"), whereas the "loss of fascination" turns out to involve both cognitive and moral components ("basic value orientation"). In one respect, this behavior is desirable. Yet, one will question, what the extinction or suppression of historical curiosity, hunger for sensation, fancy, and fascination imply both psychologically and in terms of historical consciousness. If "delight in history" has almost disappeared, does this mean, that comprehension has really been achieved? Or have paralysis and rejection been inculcated as "socially desired behaviors" and are now being demonstrated by the students in conformity with the norm?

This question becomes even more relevant as there are no historical reconstructions of past mentalities, motives, and actions corresponding to the universalistic support of human rights and to the conclusions drawn. The study has clearly shown that the respondents are hardly (and decreasing with age) willing to immerse into historical situations and to reason within that context. Their judgements are increasingly "contrafactual": Even if explicitly asked to assume a historical role, their present-day perspectives dominate in strictly rejecting crusades and witch hunting, the invasion of Silesia and Robert E. Lee's decision to enter the US Civil War on the side of the South.

Of course, the moralizing, present-day related conclusions in the sense of universalistic, human-rights oriented decisions are not to be criticized. In view of the late violence against foreigners they should even be reinforced. What is questionable here is rather the confounding of contemporary situations and possibilities with historical settings, which manifests a lack of understanding of the distant other and a lack of awareness of change. Strictly speaking, the students apparently do not distinguish between a historical explanation and an assessment related to the present. Their initial moral evaluation overrides, so to speak, their historical understanding. At this point, however, teachers and students disagree, if the aforementioned small teacher survey of 1991 can be trusted. True enough, history teachers, being after all experts for historical explanations, do make a distinction between historical and moralizing reasoning. But their historical reconstructions are as moralizing as the students'

statements, and their conclusions related to the present even by far more so. Being epistemologically necessary, it is not the relatedness to the present itself which is doubtful, but its hasty or inconclusive use.

Moralizing should complement explanations instead of replacing them. Otherwise, understanding of the distant other and the awareness of change will suffer. If the particular situations of crusaders, witch judges etc. are not perceived, it will be difficult to understand the specifically different situations and traditions of today's politics.

As compared with the results from this study, in fact, a very similar mixture of moralization and lack of understanding (and accompanying helplessness) has become apparent with respect to the Gulf War and the Yugoslavia conflict - and this not only among adolescents! So, it may also be worthwhile considering if such strict and allegedly transtemporal moralization does not bear traces of presumption and assumed moral superiority. Perhaps, it is necessary to image oneself as a crusader under the given circumstances of that time, as a judge, as a colonial exploiter, as a Nazi criminal to be sufficiently sensitized and immunized against seduction and force.

It will be clear that the empirical investigation of historical awareness has to be continued - not only among adolescents and not only in an East-West German comparisons. This study is just the second in a series of trials, and it still bears all signs of an exploratory undertaking. It is planned to proceed with a fully representative study in 1992 - including both East and West Germany which will be funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science under cooperation of many East and West German specialists in the field of teaching history. A European study is also under preparation in cooperation with colleagues from several different countries. Hopefully, this will allow to define more precisely the cultural background of historical consciousness in Germany.

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