In a montage of historical narrative and personal reflections, John Rodden has attempted a comprehensive account of the “waves of unlearning and relearning” that comprised a half-century of education in post-World War II eastern Germany (p. xxi). A work of this scope has long been a conspicuous absence in the English-language literature of twentieth-century Germany: although scholars like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have acknowledged the importance of schools in national identity formation, few U.S. writers have given more than a cursory glance at the complex interaction of school and society in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet as Rodden notes, education was a key player in the struggle for (eastern) German identity.

Roden is trained as a literature scholar, and his approach to his research does not reflect traditional historical methodologies or aims. In a telling description of his objectives, he explains that rather than write a “full-scale institutional history of DDR [GDR] education,” he has executed “an unconventional and occasionally idiosyncratic study in comparative education and in the social psychology of re-education” (p. xxx). He seldom cites the historical or pedagogical literature related to his subject, instead using the literary framework of George Orwell’s 1984. Rodden had written on the West German reception of that novel, and in the course of his research encountered eastern Europeans who had experienced the novel as a “living nightmare” (p. xxv); that is, as a literal description of their daily lives. The question he presents as his point of departure for research, therefore, is, “how Orwellian was—and is—eastern German life?” (p. xxv).

This question allows him to highlight the many examples of the GDR’s repressive and authoritarian policies. But after identifying the GDR as “Orwellian,” Rodden does not further analyze this label, the policies, or the state. After passages recounting GDR socialist programs that he deems particularly repressive, for example, he inserts selections from the endless socialist and communist slogans familiar to scholars of European history: “who has the youth, has the future!” (p. 43); and, “you need only to school people properly–then they’ll live right!” (p. 50). Printed in italics and capital letters and block-indented, without further comment, the same phrases appear throughout the book as a reminder that, yes, the GDR was an Orwellian state. In case the reader missed the point, Rodden also includes regular quotations from Orwell in the same fashion, for instance concluding at least three paragraphs with “2+2=5” (pp. xxiii, xxvii, xxix). He does not, however, supply a definition of what an Orwellian state actually is. Who formed GDR policy, how was it implemented, and what combination of forces allowed the regime to exert influence over its citizens?

Roden’s emphasis on dystopian fiction prevented him from a sobering analysis of late-twentieth-century society: by the 1980s, Orwell’s dire warnings paled in comparison to GDR life. By constantly alluding to Big Brother or the Ministry of Truth whenever he describes the East German Secret Police (Stasi) or the GDR socialist party, Rodden has substituted metaphor for an historical analysis of the complex relationship between Moscow, the GDR regime, and its citizenry. More than a decade after German unification, a history of the GDR must move...
beyond outrage at systemic oppression and heroic tales of individual resistance, and begin to examine the multiple factors that brought about a half-century of a relatively prosperous socialist German state and its peaceful dismantling, a program called for by Corey Ross in The East German Dictatorship (2002). Indeed, Rodden’s book can only loosely be classified as an historical work. Part Rodden’s “own … personal meeting of East and West,” part thought piece, the book contains little information on the actual unfolding of events in the area that is the purported subject of the research (p. xxx). This tendency is unfortunate, for the author is at his best in his bare and sober historical prose. His analysis of the East German regime’s almost comical attempts to abandon ineffective policies without actually admitting a mistake accurately conveys the socialist party’s constant struggle to maintain authority (p. 130). Similarly, he succinctly captures eastern Germans’s despair and anger at the broken promises made by western German politicians during the initial period of euphoria following the opening of German-German borders in 1989 (pp. 189-193). And even if his opening chapter begins with a rather meandering description of the significance of bananas as a symbol of consumer culture in Germany, with the first reference to education finally occurring on page nine, his portrayal of eastern German’s delight at being able to buy the previously rare fruit is entertaining (pp. 3-9).

Because he does not carefully define “Orwellianism,” his comparisons between the National Socialist era and GDR socialism are not compelling. Many of his interview subjects connect the two regimes, particularly when discussing educational reforms. But the superficial similarities warrant a more nuanced evaluation of Nazis and socialists than Rodden’s descriptive anecdotes permit. The discouraging stories of elderly eastern Germans twice forced to undergo reeducation programs—once in 1945, and again in 1989—and the numerous examples of absurd socialist and capitalist bureaucratic regulations underline the grim realities of idealistic reformers’ plans in both periods. In one instance, the author uses the voice of a friend to illustrate German’s frustration with their fate: the elderly Frau Saupe explains that many eastern Germans of her generation cry out, “First Hitler, then the communists! Sixty years! They’ve stolen my entire life, these dictators!” (p. 244). This former school principal eventually receives an official apology in 1992 from her school board for her 1958 dismissal—a consequence of her adherence to Christian views—but she fails to receive official recognition and financial compensation as a victim of the socialist state (p. 244). Such everyday tragedies cannot be dismissed as isolated incidents; the problems of unification extended into the infrastructure of the educational system itself. Here, too, Rodden’s stories of political posturing and mud-slinging of academics on both sides of the 1989/90 unification process recall the chaotic atmosphere of post-1945 university reforms, when professors in the western zones struggled to assert their ideologically clean pasts to American occupiers (a subject recently treated in Steven Remy’s Heidelberg Myth [2003]). In the years following 1989, western German professors accused their eastern peers of an inability to learn anything new besides socialist ideology, while eastern German academics complained that they were being held to standards unattainable by their western counterparts (p. 193). In one of his more successful phrases, Rodden dubbed the debates about university reform in the new German capital the “battle of Berlin” (p. 195). His call for post-1945 and post-1989 comparisons provide thought-provoking material, but Rodden’s insistence on the similarities between the Nazi era and the socialist era ring hollow. Still, the many parallels of educational reform in post-crisis situations support Rodden’s implicit call for contextualizing German unification within a broader German-German postwar narrative.

When Rodden specifically addresses education, the underlying subject of his study, he often recounts facts without explaining their significance, or else fails to interpret his findings within the existing scholarly literature. We learn that educators in post-1989 eastern Germany recommended that pupils read “Hochhuth’s Wesis in Weimar, Anna Seghers, Christoph Hein, Guenter Kunert, Stefan Heym, Vladimir Mayakovksy, and even Wolf Biermann’s ballads;” we do not learn what kind of a change these authors implied for the curriculum (p. 208). Rodden’s generous definition of education as “schooling, acculturation, and agitprop” (p. xxx) ultimately leads him to lump kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, university education, socialist youth organizations, church youth associations, music groups, workers’ revolts, and neo-Nazi organizations into the same category, without regard to their interaction or different structural abilities to influence young people. His analysis of schooling, too, suggests an exaggerated understanding of the ability of schools to indoctrinate pupils, even against their will—without reference to the tradition of rich literature in this area, which includes L. S. Vygotsky’s, Thought and Language (1962), and Mind in Society (1978), as well as Jean Piaget’s The Language and Thought of the Child (1928). The ten “school portraits” that comprise the second half of the book—vignettes of friends
such as Frau Saupe (pp. 228-248), a discussion with a teacher in Berlin’s Jewish upper secondary school who was the daughter of an SS officer (pp. 313-326), a speculative essay on the meaning of Nietzsche after 1989 (pp. 286-312)—are charming and even insightful journalistic exposes. Yet they remain disjointed from the more historical narrative in the first half. This bifurcated structure, although perhaps appropriate for a book about a divided nation, prevents Rodden from using this material effectively because it does not provide an interpretational framework for his descriptive evidence.

Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse is an impressionistic account of an author’s perceptions of the effects of a half-century of socialism on a state. Despite the title, the book is less interesting as historical literature and more intriguing as Rodden’s own narrative. As a memoir, the small conceits that Rodden allows himself, such as asking the reader to imagine a society in which the Boy and Girl Scouts are spies for the FBI and CIA, are forgivable (p. 62). As an historical work, even Rodden’s editing decisions weaken its usefulness. The constant use of easily translatable German words excludes too large an audience, despite Rodden’s three and a half-page German-English glossary at the end of the book. Rodden goes beyond the accepted bad habit of using the German abbreviation “DDR” instead of the English-language “GDR.” The German words that pepper his work include Ausländerfeindlichkeit (translated in the glossary as “hostility towards foreigners,” rather than xenophobia), Entnazifizierung (denazification) and Erdkunde (geography)—none of them words that defy translation, but all of them words that add to the very personal feel of the book.

Finally, Rodden’s innocent retelling of beloved but apocryphal stories, such as the young East German who did not know to peel the banana first (p. 5) or the claim that the first East German teachers barely knew how to spell even simple words (p. 390), positions him securely in the circle of his eastern German contacts who were offering their friend Rodden the most intimate secrets of their lives. But the historian Rodden did not find enough critical distance to analyze the deeper, more significant meaning of such precious legends. To be sure, Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse offers a wealth of interesting stories about the process of unification as experienced by individual Germans and about Rodden’s personal grappling with the merits and disadvantages of socialism and capitalism. In this sense, the work is a unique and enjoyable contribution to the literature on the aftermath of German socialism.

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