

**Remembering the Socialist Past:  
Narratives of East German and Soviet Childhood in German  
and Russian Fiction and Autobiography since 1990/1**

Submitted by Rebecca Louise Knight to the University of Exeter  
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## **Abstract**

This study compares German memory of life in the German Democratic Republic with Russian memory of life in the Soviet Union, as represented and created within fictional and autobiographical narratives of childhood, published since the collapse of each regime. The chosen texts are, to varying degrees, fictionalized and/or autobiographical. A comparison between German and Russian narratives is particularly interesting because the socialist past is remembered very differently in each country's public discourse and culture. An examination of narratives about childhood allows for a complex relationship between the post-socialist present and the socialist past to emerge. I study the texts and their reception, in conjunction with an analysis of the dominant ways of remembering the socialist past circulating within German and Russian society and culture. This allows the analysis to go beyond a straightforward comparison between the representations of the socialist past in the two groups of texts, to also explore how those representations are interpreted and received. It also demonstrates how the surrounding memory cultures appear to be producing quite different approaches to representing memories of broadly similar socialist childhood experiences.

Chapter 1 explores the role of literary texts in revealing and shaping both individual and collective memory with a review of relevant research in the field of memory studies. Chapter 2 draws on existing scholarship on post-socialist memory in German and Russian society and culture in order to identify dominant trends in the way the socialist past has been remembered and represented in the two countries since 1990/1. The analysis in Chapters 3 and 4 reveals a more detailed picture of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in looking back at childhood under socialist rule through the example of the chosen texts, and in the ways they are received by critics and by readers (in reviews posted online). I demonstrate that, in line with the surrounding memory cultures, questions of how the socialist past should be remembered are a more central concern in the German texts and their reception than in the Russian texts and reception. I show, however, that the nature of the Soviet past is often portrayed indirectly in the Russian texts and I explore how critics and readers respond to these portrayals.

### **Note on Transliteration and Translation:**

The Library of Congress system without diacritics is used for the transliteration of Cyrillic. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own and references are made to the original source. Quotations from the primary texts in the original language can be found in the Appendix. Quotations from secondary material are given in translation only.

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