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Ambivalence and the Illusion of Hegemony

Remembering the Cold War in Germany and Switzerland

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Umberto Eco once wrote, ‘A text yearns for someone to help it function’ (1998, 64). To him, texts are cloths woven from signs and gaps between signs. They call on us as readers to fill in these gaps. At the same time, they provide us with all of the clues we need in order to perform this task. Metaphorically speaking, Eco sees a text as a kind of roadmap showing us where, in the maze-like library of our cultural knowledge, we find the elements implied but not explicitly mentioned in the textual structure we are trying to make sense of. But what happens if these assumptions do not work? How do we, as readers, perform our guesswork when confronted with a text that gives us contradictory clues? How do we deal with ambivalent accounts?

According to insight from memory research, in the plural and fragmented societies of our time we are increasingly faced with ambivalent representations of the past (Ryan 2011). Taking this observation as a

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starting point, I will explore empirically how people coming from different memory cultures – and thus presumably equipped with different cultural knowledge – engage with ambivalent historical narratives. The goal is to provide solid ground for a theoretical reflection on the functions that ambivalent representations of the past can assume. Answers given so far oscillate between the claim that ambivalence helps to stabilise hegemonic narratives by avoiding open conflict (Beattie 2008) and the argument that it may support the emergence of spaces for more complex perspectives (Sturken 1997). Positioning myself somewhere between these poles, I will argue that ambivalent accounts invite readers to produce rather diverse readings, but at the same time they create the illusion of hegemony, encouraging the assumption that there is only one privileged reading.

This argument is based on insights gained from interviews with history teachers from Germany and Switzerland, who were asked to reflect on a textbook quotation about the origin of the Cold War that I read as rather ambivalent. My thematic focus on the Cold War follows from the assumption that this historical period is a likely candidate for ambivalent portrayal, due to still-unresolved contestations and recent discursive shifts. History teachers interest me in their double function as members of memory cultures and as professionals specialised in conveying state-approved patterns of interpretation; they thus occupy a central role in the transmission of memories. Before presenting and discussing my empirical data, I will look into the diverging functions ascribed to ambivalence in different academic debates. I will moreover provide a rough sketch of the competing arguments made by historians about the origins and causes of the Cold War. Finally, I will share my own thoughts on the textbook quotation that the teachers were invited to comment on.

Ambivalence, History, Memory and History Teaching

Ambivalence is touched upon in four different academic debates, and in each one scholars arrive at a different conclusion concerning its value.

Ambivalence and the Debate about History and Memory

For Peter Novick (1999, 4), ambivalence is a typical feature of historical accounts. For him historians are likely to develop complex and ambivalent stories as they are disciplined enough to resist the temptation to focus only on historical facts that would fit best into preformed narratives. His image of the historian prone to painting pictures in many shades of grey owes a great deal to a counter-image of memory in which narratives of the past are manipulated in order to serve present needs. Ambivalence thus plays a crucial role in drawing a clear-cut line between memory and history.

Ambivalence and Hegemony in Discourse Theory

In discourse theory ambivalence is closely connected with political projects of hegemony (Reckwitz 2006). Borrowing Gramsci's definition, I understand the concept of hegemony to describe the ability of a ruling group to rule by consent, consent itself being the result of attempts by rulers to impose their interpretation of reality as the natural state of affairs upon the ruled. Vagueness can become an important tool in this attempt to rule, because it allows a variety of social actors with different agendas to rally behind the same concepts, for example *freedom* or *democracy*. Vagueness – alternatively we could speak of ambivalence – is thus deemed crucial for securing hegemony (Butler 2005, 33).

Ambivalence and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In Critical Discourse Analysis, ambivalence is understood as something that can emerge from the interplay between two features considered common to all texts (Fairclough 1989). Firstly, texts leave open gaps: Neither the relationship between the text and the world, nor the relationship between different parts of the text, can be fully spelled out. As a result, texts require readers to mobilise cultural knowledge, and thus their understanding of usual cultural constructions, in order to fill in these

gaps. This knowledge, which is presupposed but not explicitly referred to by the text (understood as 'situated discourse'), derives from meta-discourses, which constitute particular ways of representing the world. Secondly, texts are seen as being inherently inter-textual themselves, an assemblage of bits and pieces from other texts, each of which may have been shaped by different meta-discourses. Studies show that intertextuality easily leads to ambivalence (Janks 1997), especially in a historical context characterized by discursive shifts when texts are expected to reflect dominant discourses both before and after certain changes.

Ambivalence and the Memory of Contested Pasts

In the field of memory studies, Marita Sturken has explored the effects of ambivalence most carefully (1997, 44–84). Taking a close look at the practices of remembering enacted by different people at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, Sturken claims that the memorial's most outstanding feature is its ambivalence. While for some it speaks to the heroism, honour and sacrifice of those who fought in Vietnam, for others it gives voice to the loss and pain of men who died in an unjust and shameful war. In her more theoretical remarks, Sturken credits ambivalence with the ability to resist a desire for coherence and narrative closure, which, she writes, inevitably leads to the erasure of all the details that may not fit into a neat frame. Ambivalence thus works to keep stories told about the past open and incomplete. In doing so, ambivalence preserves the political aspect of memory, which follows from the fact that memory is inherently selective, partial and contingent on decisions that could have been taken differently. Sturken's concern for the political as something valuable and important but endangered by closure and the illusion of completeness brings her close to theories of hegemony. However, her claim that ambivalence does not necessarily work to stabilise hegemony but instead keeps alive an awareness of how inherently political memory always is sets her apart from those who view ambivalence mainly as a manipulative tool in the hands of rulers.

Ambivalence and History Teaching

How should history teaching position itself towards ambivalence? Should it embrace ambivalent accounts as an indicator of complexity? Should we deliberately use narratives open to competing interpretations in order to prevent narrative closure? Should students be invited to deconstruct ambivalent narratives understood to serve the stabilisation of hegemony?

Peter Seixas (2000) has suggested we can distinguish between three different approaches towards history teaching (2000), which are not only based on different epistemological beliefs (Parkes 2009) but can also be understood as dealing differently with ambivalence. The first aims at conveying the *best story of the past* by including as many different perspectives as possible. Implicitly subscribing to the view that historical accounts are able to mirror past reality, this approach would likely result in closed narratives and a positive assessment of ambivalence as the inevitable outcome of the attempt to give voice to many different historical actors. Starting from the premise that all we have from the past are sources and artefacts as the building blocks from which historians *construct* their accounts, the second approach focuses on equipping students with the disciplinary knowledge they need to check on the robustness of competing accounts with the help of evidence inferred from sources. From this perspective, ambivalence could be viewed either as an adequate reflection of complex evidence or as the result of a 'messy' way of storytelling. The third approach aims to aid students in *deconstructing* historical accounts by rendering visible the traces of the present in narratives about the past. In all likelihood, this would also entail exploring how ambivalence serves present interests or reflects different discourses.

While these three approaches can be expected to yield different ways of dealing with ambivalence, problems may arise from combining them without being aware of the epistemological shifts involved.

Ambivalence and the Political in Stories about the Cold War

The Cold War was contested between East and West right from its start. Since the early 1960s, however, we can also observe a ritualised stand-off between two competing approaches in the West (Lundestad 2014), with traditionalists blaming the USSR for having caused the conflict and revisionists ascribing responsibility for the break-up of the wartime alliance to the United States. Both engage in a debate informed by binary oppositions. While traditionalists portray the United States as having been predominantly concerned with demobilisation in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, revisionists point to the far-reaching expansionist agenda the United States pursued, relying upon, among other things, the Marshall Plan. While traditionalists explain the shift towards a more assertive stance in American foreign policy as a response to the tightening Soviet grip over Eastern Europe, revisionists describe Soviet policies in Eastern Europe as a defensive reaction to the global ambitions of the United States, bolstered by its atomic monopoly and overwhelming economic might. In the 1970s, Gaddis launched an attempt to combine bits and pieces from both accounts into a new narrative (1972; 1987), which later received the label 'post-revisionist'. While pointing to US policies as an important factor in aggravating the conflict, he also claimed that these policies responded to perceptions of Soviet behaviour. Instead of raising questions of guilt and responsibility, he pointed to the role of perception and misperception. He understood political decisions to be the contingent outcome of political interaction between both sides, neither of which could fully control the situation.

Recent trends in writing about the Cold War have rather added new vigour to old arguments and controversies. Shifting the focus of the debate from Europe to the so-called 'third world' and from politics to culture has lent new credibility to old revisionist arguments. Authors have thus argued, for example, that US policies of lending support to postcolonial dictatorships (Engerman 2010) or racial discrimination at home (Dudziak 2011), undermine the American claim of having defended the principles of freedom and democracy against a totalitarian

Soviet Union. We can also observe a revitalisation of traditional discourses in the writings of authors who insist on a crucial difference between an American empire based on invitation and a Soviet empire based on imposition or in the work of those who argue that the Cold War could have been avoided if not for a paranoid Stalin obsessed with world revolution (Gaddis 1997).

Mapping Ambivalence: Reading a Textbook Quotation

The rivalry between competing explanations given by historians on the origin of the Cold War has left its mark on the quotation from the textbook which we asked history teachers to comment on. We did not choose this particular quotation to serve as a catalyst in our interviews because it is representative of current textbooks in general. For us it instead resembles a ‘rich point’ (Agar 1994), as it appears to be particularly illustrative of a larger trend towards ambivalent representations of the past. By comparing what *is* said with what *could* have been said in the quotation, and by comparing our trigger narrative with narratives found in other textbooks, I will explain why I read the following lines as ambivalent.

[1] At the Potsdam Conference of 1945, the USA, the USSR and Britain agreed on a specific approach to be taken towards Germany. [2] After that point, political differences determined their subsequent approaches. [3] In its sphere of influence, the USA championed democracy and economic liberalism. [4] The USSR organised a socialist sphere of influence extending as far as central Europe to meet its security concerns. [5] The Soviet army was stationed in Eastern and Southeastern European countries. [6] There, governments supported politically and economically by the Soviet Union came to power. [7] As in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, a ‘people’s democracy’ emerged in what was to become the GDR. [8] The Western powers regarded these developments as an expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence (Ebeling and Birkenfeld 2011, 190–91).¹

To my mind, this paragraph bears not only the marks of both traditionalist and revisionist accounts, but is also open to different readings.

The systematic difference between the activities ascribed to the United States and the USSR in sentences three and four recalls the traditionalist discourse on the Cold War. While the United States ‘championed democracy and economic liberalism’, the USSR ‘organised a socialist sphere of influence’. Difference is amplified by the particular choice of words here. While the Americans are portrayed as standing up for something and thus as supporting universal values, the Soviets are described as *organising* a sphere of influence that happened to be socialist. The word ‘organising’ conjures up notions of efficiency and says nothing about the values pursued. Quite the reverse; learning that the Soviets invested their efficiency in enhancing their security needs, we see them only as having followed a highly particularistic agenda. The binary opposition introduced here is intensified by sentence five. While it offers details on the deployment of Soviet troops, it keeps silent about the whereabouts of American troops, whose very existence is thus pushed to the back of the reader’s mind.

However, sentence four introduces Soviet ‘security concerns’, a term that is regularly used as a kind of ‘flagship word’ (Hermanns 1982) in revisionist accounts. Ambivalence is further increased by polysemous expressions (Hermanns 1989). When sentence eight emphasises that ‘the Western powers regarded these developments [in Eastern Europe] as an expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence’, this can be understood in two different ways. We can read it as a caveat, reminding us that this statement does not necessarily reflect objective truth but is rather a subjective assessment by one side to the conflict. But we can also arrive at the opposite conclusion, arguing that an assessment made by those in the West appears to be particularly trustworthy.

My impression that the text seems quite ambivalent is corroborated by a comparison with alternative accounts. The traditionalist elements I have identified in the excerpt clearly pale in comparison to the following sentences from a textbook published in West Germany in 1961, during the Cold War:

- [1] Soon after the end of the war, more and more tension arose between the victorious great powers, between the USSR on the one hand and the Western Allies, mainly the USA, on the other. [2] The reason was the

increasingly blatant imperialist drive of the USSR, which imposed the Bolshevik system of rule on one occupied country after another (Ebeling 1961, 259).²

Criticism of the Soviet Union is much more outspoken in the older text, which treats Soviet aggression as a fact beyond all doubt. Furthermore, relations within the Soviet bloc are represented differently. While the current textbook speaks about Eastern European governments that came to power with a little help from Soviet friends, the older textbook talks about Bolshevik systems of rule being imposed on them.

Comparison with a third textbook shows that revisionist discourses can also be expressed much more clearly.

At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union had lost more than 20 million people and was devastated to a large extent. But the Red Army had occupied almost all of Eastern Europe and moved as far as Germany. These territories were under Soviet control and represented an increase in power. The most important goal after the war was the reconstruction of the [Soviets'] own land. In order to achieve this, the Soviet Union wanted to use German reparation payments and American credits. In the long run, the Soviet head of state, Stalin, feared a conflict with the USA and other capitalist states. The military and economic strength of the USA had contributed significantly to its victory over Nazi Germany. It was the only country among the great powers not to suffer devastation. Its factories were producing more than ever before. Unlike after the First World War, the USA firmly decided to help shape the political reordering of the world. Democracy and human rights should be established everywhere. But the Americans also wanted to secure their economic dominance, and to reach this goal they needed free access to the markets and resources of the entire world (Burkard 2010, 72).³

This text makes a greater effort to justify Soviet security needs by reminding the reader of the Soviet experience of the Second World War. Pointing to the military might and economic power of the United States lends more urgency to these needs. Moreover, this textbook presents the United States as not only in pursuit of the noble goal of encouraging the spread of democracy and human rights but also as motivated by the rather egoistic aim to secure access to markets and resources.

Mapping Ambivalence: Teachers Making Sense of a Textbook Quotation

Methodological Approach

How readers approach a text empirically can never be predicted by analysis of the text alone. I therefore invited nine history teachers from the former West Germany, nine from the former East⁴, and ten from Switzerland to share their interpretations of the quotation discussed above with my colleagues and myself. We asked them (i) how they read the quotation, (ii) how they judged its appropriateness, and (iii) what they themselves think about the events represented in it.⁵

When talking with them about their reading, we started with rather general questions but ended by directing their attention to the aspects we found to be reflective of traditionalist, revisionist and ambivalent discourses in the text. Accordingly, we asked them to comment on (i) the activities ascribed to the United States and the USSR, (ii) the emphasis given to Soviet security needs and (iii) the accent placed on the way the Western powers perceived Soviet policies. These questions addressed the teachers in their different roles as both members of a professional group and also as participants of different memory cultures. Being asked to assess a text written by another person clearly reminded them of their daily job grading papers. The invitation to elaborate on their thoughts about the origins of the Cold War as private individuals, however, might have been perceived as interfering with the objectivity and neutrality teachers are often expected to display.

I interpret the data gathered from these interviews in three steps. Since I want to know *whether* and, if so, *how* people deal differently with an ambivalent text, I will first provide an analytical description of the teachers' answers. Since I also want to explore how (mostly) national memory cultures and textbooks influence teachers' own narratives of events, I will then conduct a cross-national comparison. And, since I am interested in the implicit or explicit stances the teachers take with regard to ambivalence, I will finally discuss the way they position themselves in relation to the different theoretical perspectives outlined in the introduction.

Analytical Description

An overwhelming majority of teachers from Germany, 15 out of 18, reads the quotation as blaming the Soviets for having triggered the Cold War. Exactly the same number of teachers argues in line with post-revisionist positions when they discuss the events the text is dealing with. According to them either both or neither of the two rival superpowers is to be held responsible. Reflecting on the quality of the text, ten teachers criticise it for being too pro-American, one denounces the same lines for being too pro-Soviet, two praise it for being well balanced, and two assess it as being appropriately pro-American.

If we compare teachers from East and West Germany, differences appear to be rather minimal at first glance. Teachers from both sides of the Iron Curtain interpret the quote as placing the blame on the USSR. Both even advance similar arguments. They speak ironically about the super-stereotype⁶ of the Americans as the good guys and the Soviets as the epitome of evil⁷; they point to the disturbing silence regarding American soldiers and American spheres of influence⁸; and, finally, they criticize the authors for mixing apples and oranges by contrasting a Western commitment to democracy with an Eastern drive for expansion.⁹

However, as soon as one looks into the position from which this critique is raised, differences come into view. Our West German teachers argue very much from the position of *putting blame on the Americans* by

Table 13.1 Table comparing East and West German teachers' responses to a text

	Teachers from East Germany	Teachers from West Germany	
Interpretation of the text:	No one: 1	No one: 2	
	USSR: 8	USSR: 7	
Who is to blame?			
Assessment of the text:	Too pro-US: 7	Too pro-US: 3	
	Appropriately pro-US: 1	Appropriately pro-US: 1	
Who is to blame?	Too pro-Soviet: 0	Too pro-Soviet: 1	
	Well balanced: 0	Well balanced: 2	
	Inconclusive: 1	Inconclusive: 2	
Assessment of the event:	No one/both parties: 8	No one/both parties: 7	
	USSR: 1	United States: 1	
Who is to blame?		USSR: 1	

mentioning, for example, the harassment of leftists and communists in the West¹⁰ or reminding us of the United States' economic agenda.¹¹ At the same time, the East German teachers are much more concerned with *taking away blame from the Soviets* by normalising their policies. They point out that what the Soviets did was nothing but natural, since the side that wins the war always pushes through its interests¹² and ideals,¹³ imposes its own political system on others¹⁴ and dictates its will.¹⁵ To reframe the contrast once more: While the critical teachers from West Germany we spoke to accuse the text of not being persistent enough in its moral reasoning, the critical colleagues from East Germany we have interviewed take offence with what appears to them as an unnecessary high level of moralising.

Differences among West German teachers come to light especially when we focus on how they relate the text's emphasis on Soviet security needs and on Soviet expansionism. Diverging answers on how to account for the tension between these two statements seem to correlate with differences in the assessment of the text. Those who are very critical of the quotation because they perceive it as being one-sided and pro-American downplay the relevance attributed to Soviet security needs. Some even claim that Soviet security needs are clearly referred to as a sheer pretext.¹⁶ For them they function as a mere excuse for further expansion. Others argue that the quotation purposefully constructs the Soviets as maniacs, crazy enough to fear even the democracy- and freedom-loving Americans.¹⁷ Those, however, who appreciate the quotation as being relatively balanced cite the text's emphasis on Soviet security needs as the decisive factor that marks a clear-cut break from the black-and-white stories about the thoroughly evil Soviets to whom they had been exposed as children.¹⁸

The teachers from East Germany show different patterns of reasoning. Unlike us, their interviewers from the West who raised the question in the first place, they do not construct a morally charged opposition between having legitimate security needs and pursuing an expansionist agenda. Indeed, they are generally hesitant to make moral claims. Most of them simply state that the two motives do not exclude but rather complement each other,¹⁹ or they argue that expansion naturally follows from security needs.²⁰ Others talk openly about their struggle with a question²¹ that raises too many moral issues.²² They defend the emer-

gence of clearly demarcated spheres of influence not only as a legitimate process but also as a necessary precondition for the preservation of peace.²³

The degree of removal of some of the East German teachers' discourse from West German standards becomes especially visible at moments during two interviews, when the West German interviewer and both East German interviewees talk past each other. One of these moments occurs in an interview with a teacher born in 1961, here referred to as Kristin Schreiber.²⁴ Everything begins with her claim that the emphasis the quotation gives to Soviet security needs serves an alibi function. Initially, she remains quite vague on what she actually means: 'This is an excuse for what one does; this kind of alibi function', she says, without specifying who the culprit might be, who is in need of an 'alibi, an excuse'. Only at a later point in the interview does she identify the United States as the party seeking an alibi to cover up its evil deeds. In that moment she is thinking aloud about a question that appears rather troubling to her against the backdrop of what she has previously learned to be historical facts. She tries to understand why the Western power could have perceived Soviet policies as being expansionist and why the text would give so much emphasis to this perception. She argues:

It is a su-, a subjective thing, because, I mean it is a kind of excuse for having built the Iron Curtain, right. I mean, it is a kind of excuse: 'We wouldn't have done that if the security needs of the USSR and the expansion of their sphere of influence hadn't been so significant. We didn't actually want it at all'.²⁵

By implying that the Americans built the Iron Curtain and then invented Soviet expansionism as a kind of retrospective justification, she completely inverts the version usually told in the West about the division of Europe. At the same time, Schreiber argues as if her explanation were not only the dominant one but also the one the textbook authors had in mind when writing these lines.

Something very similar happens in an interview with another East German teacher,²⁶ referred to here as Matthias Fürst. Asked to sum up

the textbook quotation in his own words, he produces the following account:

Okay, in principle it is about, uh, the representation of, the development of, uh, the Soviet sphere of influence. Not only the representation, but also a certain assessment, how the Western powers, how, I guess, it is also made clear, how the authors perceive this. Um, that the Soviet Union in Southern and Southeastern Europe, through their policy of occupation, which, uh, ultimately resulted from and is still resulting from the course of the war, how it was pushed into it, that such a [...] a Soviet sphere of influence was established there.²⁷

Fürst also reads the text as a confirmation of something he clearly believes himself: Soviet policies in Eastern Europe were not simply an outcome of the Second World War. These policies, which led to the establishment of a 'sphere of influence', arose as a result of the Soviets being 'pushed' to do something, something they would not have done otherwise and which was not for their own sake but rather the outcome of external, rather than internal, pressures. To this teacher, such a conclusion is hardly new or surprising. Like the GDR discourses he grew up with, Fürst takes it for granted that everybody sees the Soviets as the ones who liberated Eastern Europe from the Germans, as the ones who occupied it. At the same time, the rest of the interview reveals two things clearly. First, the West German interviewer has a hard time catching up with all of the assumptions and ideas Matthias Fürst implicitly relies on without explicitly stating them. Second, as soon as the interviewer articulates her bewilderment, as soon as she reminds him – without realising it – of the discursive shift that had turned his version of historical events into a story too strange to be comprehensible, he retreats:

I: So, you just said that the Soviet Union was pushed to establish a sphere of influence [...]

MF: No, they pushed it forward, [it was] that way around.²⁸

Very quickly, without further remarks, Matthias Fürst adapts to what he perceives as the dominant discourse. In his newly adopted narrative,

the Soviets are no longer pushed by others; they are the ones to push. Some minutes later, another case of hastily correcting a 'mistake' occurs in the same interview. When Matthias Fürst comments on the relation the text constructs between the security needs and the expansionist drive ascribed to the Soviets, the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee again runs into trouble:

- I: Now, there is also something else, if one looks at how the USSR is portrayed and its motives. [The text] says, 'it expanded its sphere of influence and it met its security concerns' [...] How (MF: Mhm) do these two things relate to one another from the perspective of the text? Are they presented as motives that can go hand in hand? Can one have security concerns and expand at the same time? Or are they motives that mutually exclude each other because one is rather defensive and the other aggressive? [...] From the perspective of the text?
- MF: Well, it implies that, um, in the end it was wanted by the Eastern European countries as well.
- I: Mhm [...] So there was a security concern, but it was not [...] there?
- MF: For their security/no, nonsense, (I: Yes), yes. For their, um, it is about the Soviet Union (I: Yes). For their security concerns. Well, that is this cordon that they would like to have today (I: Mhm) again too, yes.²⁹

Again, the misunderstanding is mainly caused by the fact that interviewer and interviewee draw on completely different background knowledge to fill in the gaps left open by the text. Whereas Matthias Fürst automatically thinks of the Eastern Europeans as the ones who had security concerns, the interviewer no less automatically identifies the Soviets as the ones concerned about their security. Interviewer and interviewee mobilise completely different stories from their cultural repertoires in order to make sense of the same lines. Again in line with GDR historiography, Mathias Fürst constructs the Eastern Europeans as the concerned beneficiaries of protection offered to them by the Soviets. The interviewer, on the contrary, draws on revisionist accounts of the Cold War, which regu-

larly mention Soviet security concerns. In the end, however, it is again the interviewee who steps back and bows to the new hegemonic discourse with which he is confronted, because he realises the power difference between the two narratives.

Summing up, we can conclude that the quotation leads the teachers from both parts of Germany to position themselves in different ways. The teachers from Lower Saxony (West) are pretty much divided. Some read elements of revisionist accounts within, or into, the textbook lines and appreciate the quote for its balance and fairness. Others fail to see traces of revisionism and reject the same quote for being too one-sided. As we can see, it is rather differences in interpretation but not differences in evaluative standards that account for the divide in their assessments. Interestingly, the same does not apply to the teachers from Saxony-Anhalt (East). Most of these teachers project onto the quotation a sceptical and morally neutral view of a world inhabited by countries, for them understandably, invested in their own self-interest. Occasionally, we observe these teachers drawing upon moral narratives from the GDR period. However, this seems to happen exclusively in situations when the teachers being interviewed temporarily seem to lose control and react almost automatically. As soon as they recognise the bewilderment their answers have caused, they immediately withdraw from their initial position – as if they sense that they had crossed a line demarcating what may be said.

To a certain extent, the Swiss teachers we interviewed do exactly the opposite of the German teachers. Whereas the majority of German teachers read the quotation as blaming the USSR, 8 out of 10 Swiss teachers

Table 13.2 How teachers from Switzerland react to a text

	Teachers from Switzerland	
Interpretation of the text:	No one: 8	8
Who is to blame?	USSR: 2	2
Assessment of the text:	Too pro-Soviet:	5
Who is to blame?	Too cautious:	1
	Too pro-US:	2
	Well balanced:	2
	Inconclusive :	
Assessment of the event:	No one:	7
Who is to blame?	USSR:	3

come to the conclusion that neither superpower is ascribed any blame for having caused the conflict. And while only 1 out of 18 German teachers criticised the text for being too pro-Soviet, 5 out of 10 Swiss teachers do so.

In contrast to the case study of German teachers, a closer examination of the arguments put forward by the Swiss teachers does not undermine the first impression of unanimity. Most of them do not only read the quotation in line with post-revisionist accounts, as emphasising structural causes of the Cold War, but most of them also do so for similar reasons, drawing mainly on a rather general knowledge concerning human behaviour and interaction. One teacher characterises the alliance between the Soviets and the Americans during the Second World War as a marriage of convenience that could not help but break up as soon as Germany, the common enemy, was defeated.³⁰ Another compares the conflict to an argument between children in the 'sandbox'.³¹ A third one claims, 'one always ends up with the same human drive for power and self-preservation'.³² At the same time, these teachers have no difficulty emphasising the fundamental differences between the United States and the USSR.

From this perspective, the difference between the majority of eight teachers, who read the text as being rather neutral, and the minority of two, who read it as either blaming the Soviets³³ or being biased towards the United States,³⁴ begins to diminish. All of these teachers agree that the United States was in pursuit of morally superior goals compared to a USSR which they perceive as following a much more egoistic agenda; the only thing they disagree about is whether the quotation reflects this belief or not.

Something similar can be observed with regard to the assessments the Swiss teachers give to the text. On the surface we observe a variety of statements, with 5 teachers rejecting it for being too pro-Soviet, 2 embracing it as well balanced, 2 giving inconclusive answers and only 1 criticising it – as over half of the German teachers do – for being too pro-American. The teachers who accuse the textbook authors of being too cautious with regard to the USSR refer to a historical reality missed by the text. The Soviet approach in Eastern Europe, they insist, could have been described in a much more drastic and outspoken way.³⁵ The label 'people's democracy' to describe the Soviet-style regimes, they con-

tinue, is highly misleading, rendering invisible the pure dictatorship to which the text is actually referring.³⁶ Others are offended by the casual way in which the text depicts the establishment of dictatorships in the satellite states without giving voice to the oppressed Eastern European people.³⁷ Considering all of these omissions, which he describes as incomprehensible, one teacher even assumes that the text must have been written by a person born in the former GDR and still very much influenced by everything he or she had learned back then.³⁸

Overall, the teachers who criticise the text for casting the Soviets in too positive a role, do so on the basis of the same distinction – equally upheld by the rest of their colleagues – between a morally superior United States and a morally questionable USSR. Furthermore, even the most outspoken critics of the text paint rather complex pictures of the historical reality. For example, of the group of Swiss teachers, the two individuals who draw a line of continuity between the aggression of Soviet Russia and Tsarist Russia,³⁹ and who portray the Soviet Union as a society never touched by the Enlightenment and thus deeply enmeshed in autocratic traditions,⁴⁰ are particularly sympathetic to the socialist idea of justice and equality.

We can learn two things from these conclusions. Firstly, anti-communist sentiment seems to be deeply internalised by all of the Swiss teachers, including those leaning towards the political left. Secondly, although they argue in line with traditionalist accounts and clearly take sides with the West in what they consider to be a conflict between Western democracy and Eastern dictatorship, the Swiss teachers also tend to talk about aspects such as social justice and equality, issues which often go unrecognised by pure traditionalists. The combination of anti-communism and a concern for complexity thus creates a position that all Swiss teachers can identify with, even if they may differ with regard to nuances.

This impression is reinforced when we look at the ways in which Swiss teachers talk about the United States. Some engage in criticism of the Western superpower, but all the Swiss teachers stop short of drawing an equal sign between the United States and the USSR. Speaking openly about the Americans having lost their image as saviours of the world, and admitting that the same Americans are now perceived as the ‘policemen’

of the world, mainly motivated by their interest in oil, one teacher nevertheless insists on the crucial difference between American democracy and Soviet one-party rule.⁴¹

In contrast to their German colleagues then, these Swiss teachers' individual narratives share many similarities. Minor discrepancies among these narratives do not refer to core beliefs or evaluative standards but rather to the degree to which these teachers read the quotation as either confirming or questioning their own beliefs. Half of the teachers appreciate the neutral treatment of both superpowers on the part of the text but simultaneously point subtly to the moral differences between them. The other half equate subtlety with caution and argues that this caution is bought at a dear price as it entails a silence in regards to what was endured by the people of Eastern Europe under the Soviet regime.

To my mind, there are two compelling insights to be gained from a comparison of the interview data: The textbook quotation triggers many different and, at times, openly contradictory reactions. At the same time, the variation we observe follows a clearly recognisable national pattern.

The most obvious contrast is probably between the 11 teachers who read the quotation as blaming both superpowers for causing the Cold War and the 17 teachers who understand it to ascribe responsibility exclusively to the Soviet Union. If we look at how the text is assessed, we can distinguish between those who appreciate it and those who reject it

Table 13.3 Table comparing the responses of teachers from the different countries to a text

		WG	EG	CH
Interpretation of the text: Who is to blame?	No one	2	1	8
	USSR	7	8	2
Assessment of the text: Who is to blame?	Too pro-US	3	7	1
	Appropriately pro-US	1	1	0
	Too pro-USSR	1	0	5
	Well balanced	2	0	2
	Inconclusive	2	1	2
Assessment of the event: Who is to blame?	No one/both	7	8	7
	USSR	1	1	3
	United States	1		

or even suspect that it was written by an ideologically brainwashed person from the East. Furthermore, among the critics, 11 teachers blame the text for being too pro-American, while six others perceive it as being too pro-Soviet. Something similar happens with the teachers who are positive towards the text. While two teachers praise it for being appropriately pro-American, 4 teachers like the text for being well balanced.

To my mind, all these differences support the thesis that the textbook quotation is indeed ambivalent, in the sense that it is open to many different readings. Teachers obviously read opposite meanings into the same lines, most vividly exemplified by the different understandings of the quotation concerning the Western powers' perception of Soviet behaviour as aggressive. All of this points to the fact, that even schools, as institutions expected to convey consensual knowledge (Höhne 2003), cannot easily reach any consensus on how to make sense of the Cold War.

However, we see considerable variation between national samples. While the Swiss sample is far more homogeneous with the majority of teachers stressing – in line with traditional accounts on the origins of the Cold War – a crucial difference between the democratic United States and the dictatorial USSR, the German sample displays strong heterogeneity. While most of the German teachers read the quotation as blaming the USSR, they tend to strongly disagree as to whether this represents an adequate reflection or a distortion of historical reality. Furthermore, since it is mainly West German teachers with these clearly diverging views, the phenomenon can hardly be explained with reference to the former divide between East and West alone. It also seems to point to the social effectiveness of textbooks, which, in the case of Germany, display rather diverse viewpoints, each mixing traditionalist, revisionist and post-revisionist accounts on the origins of the Cold War in multiple ways (Christophe 2017). In line with a theoretical argument according to which textbooks simultaneously shape and mirror societal discourses (Williams 2014), we can expect teachers to be influenced by the textbooks to which they are exposed and with which they work on a daily basis, and we can also assume that textbook authors are themselves influenced by the cultural environment they share with the teachers and students for whom they are writing.

Yet, despite the diversity of narratives offered in German textbooks, there still seem to be certain limits on what can be legitimately said. East German teachers, at least, perceive these limits, as we can see in moments when they find themselves saying something that would have been normal in GDR times but appears almost incomprehensible to the West German interviewer. It is in these moments that they seem to feel compelled to correct themselves immediately.

Discussion

As we have seen, none of the teachers interviewed gives voice to the possibility of reading different meanings into a text that has clearly enabled rather different interpretations. From interviews with these teachers, it is clear that their belief in hegemonic narratives seems to have outlived even the end of the hegemonies themselves. Although all of the teachers appear to hold different positions when discussing the textbook quotation, each seems to believe that there exists only one appropriate position from which to speak the truth.

The situation we are faced with simultaneously resembles and differs from the memory practices Marita Sturken has observed at the Vietnam Memorial (1997). Like her, we observe people drawing on competing discourses in order to fill in the gaps left open by an ambivalent representation of the past; like her, we are able to witness the emergence of many different voices on how to make sense of the past. But there is one crucial difference. While contestation and thus the political character of all memory is in the open in the case of the Vietnam War, the illusion of hegemony, which is encouraged by these teachers, still renders invisible the degree of conflict and competition extant in the study of the Cold War. We can assume that under these conditions, ambivalence does not contribute to smoothing the sharp edges of which everybody remains painfully aware; instead, ambivalence helps to circumvent the recognition of those edges.

Concerning the question of what keeps the political out of the teachers' discourses on the Cold War, epistemological beliefs about the relationship between history as events past and history as the narrative told

about these events seem to play a role as well. When thinking aloud about how to assess the textbook narrative, all of the teachers refer to the complexity of historical reality sooner or later. And while they arrive at rather different conclusions, all of them perform the same kind of evaluation exercise. In the spirit of historians like Peter Novick (1999), all check whether the shape of the narrative adequately reflects what they know about the shape of historical reality; additionally, all of them seem to be convinced that this reality is accessible to them. For someone standing on this epistemological ground, history is about truth, narratives are not fully negotiable, and the political has only limited relevance for the historical.

Again, the German teachers are an exception to the general rule. The epistemological positions from which they argue appear to be much more ambivalent. Like their Swiss colleagues, they also evoke images of the historical past in order to either approve or disapprove of the textbook narrative. But, especially among the most outspoken critics of the quotation, some switch the epistemological position from which they argue and engage in the discourse-analytical enterprise of deconstruction. Instead of comparing the textbook story to an image of historical reality, there are instances when they identify absences in the narrative by scrutinising it in light of possible alternatives. From here it would be only one small step to recognise the political nature of history and memory. However, they do not take that step, perhaps because they can always fall back on the first strategy of evoking images of historical reality in order to evaluate the appropriateness of a narrative.

As we can learn from our interviews with the German teachers, shifts in epistemological assumptions can create a certain ambiguity, which may then prevent teachers from fully exhausting the potential of ambivalent representations. As long as the teachers aim to tell the most inclusive or appropriate story about the past, they embrace the ambivalent narrative as an adequate response to complexity. As soon as they aim to deconstruct stories, they criticise the same ambivalent narrative for the absences or imbalances it entails. But unless the teachers recognise that their guiding assumptions about the status of historical facts change when pursuing these two aims, the operations they perform may easily interrupt each other. History teachers seem to be stuck between two

opposing epistemological positions. We may even assume that the competing demands they face require them to dwell on the shifting ground between those two poles. In the end, they hardly have a chance of attaining a third position, one that could be rather appealing in the age of increasingly plural and ambivalent memory cultures: They do not read the ambivalent text as Umberto Eco (1998) suggests, as an invitation to generate a multitude of different interpretations. To accept such an invitation would require acknowledging the political in teaching history. It would moreover involve a readiness to remove persistent limits on what can be said – limits of which some of our East German teachers remain all too aware.

Notes

1. 'Auf der Potsdamer Konferenz 1945 vereinbarten die USA, die UdSSR und Großbritannien ihre gemeinsamen Positionen im Umgang mit Deutschland. Danach bestimmten die politischen Gegensätze das weitere Vorgehen. In ihrem Machtbereich setzten sich die USA für Demokratie und wirtschaftlichen Liberalismus ein. Die UdSSR organisierte bis nach Mitteleuropa für ihr Sicherheitsbedürfnis einen sozialistischen Machtbereich. Die sowjetische Armee stand in den Ländern Ost- und Südosteuropas. Dort kamen Regierungen an die Macht, die von der Sowjetunion politisch und wirtschaftlich gestützt wurden. Neben Polen, der Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn, Bulgarien und Rumänien vollzog sich auch in der späteren DDR die Entwicklung zu einer Volksdemokratie. Die Westmächte sahen diese Vorgänge als Expansion des sowjetischen Einflussbereiches an'.
2. 'Schon bald nach Kriegsende kam es zu immer stärkeren Spannungen zwischen den siegreichen Großmächten, der UdSSR auf der einen Seite und den westlichen Alliierten, besonders den USA, auf der anderen. Der Grund war das immer unverhülltere imperialistische Streben der UdSSR, die einem von ihr besetzten Staat nach dem anderen das bolschewistische Herrschaftssystem aufzuzwingen'.
3. 'Am Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges hatte die Sowjetunion mehr als 20 Millionen Kriegstote zu beklagen und war in weiten Teilen verwüstet. Doch die Rote Armee hatte fast ganz Osteuropa besetzt und war bis

nach Deutschland vorgestoßen. Diese Gebiete standen nun unter sowjetischer Kontrolle und bedeuteten einen großen Machtzuwachs. Das wichtigste Ziel nach dem Krieg war der Wiederaufbau des eigenen Landes. Dazu wollte die Sowjetunion deutsche Reparationsleistungen und amerikanische Kredite nutzen. Langfristig fürchtete der sowjetische Staatschef Stalin einen Konflikt mit den USA und anderen kapitalistischen Staaten. Die militärische und wirtschaftliche Stärke der USA hatte entscheidend zum Sieg über das nationalsozialistische Deutschland beigetragen. Als einziger der großen Staaten war das Land ohne Zerstörungen geblieben. Seine Fabriken produzierten mehr als jemals zuvor. Anders als nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg waren die USA fest entschlossen, die politische Neuordnung der Welt mitzugestalten. Demokratie und Menschenrechte sollten dabei überall durchgesetzt werden. Die Amerikaner wollten aber auch ihre wirtschaftliche Vorrangstellung sicherstellen; dazu brauchten sie den freien Zugang zu den Märkten und Rohstoffquellen der Welt’.

4. ‘West German’ refers here to individuals born in pre-1990 West Germany, who currently teach in states that were part of that territory; ‘East German’ teachers were born in the GDR and currently teach in states that were part of the former East Germany.
5. The following section is based on interviews I conducted between December 2013 and August 2014 together with my colleagues Kathrin Zehr and Nora Zimmermann. I thank them for their support not only in gathering but also in discussing and coding the data. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and rendered anonymous by giving code names to persons and places mentioned and assigning each interview a number. As a rule I cite each interview by its number, date, and the interviewee’s country of origin (WG for western Germany, EG for eastern Germany and CH for Switzerland). Only in cases where I discuss answers from a single interview in more detail is the interviewee’s code name mentioned. The interviews in Germany and Switzerland were conducted in German using the original quotation in German.
6. WG 8 (6 May 2014).
7. EG 1 (15 July 2014); EG 2 (15 April 2014); EG 6 (19 June 2014); WG 5 (11 February 2014); WG 9 (29 April 2014).
8. WG 1 (13 May 2014); WG 8 (6 May 2014); EG 4 (13 May 2014); EG 6 (19 June 2014).
9. WG 8 (6 May 2014); EG 7 (18 June 2014); EG 9 (26 June 2014).
10. WG 1 (13 May 2014).

11. WG 5 (11 February 2014); WG 8 (6 May 2014).
12. EG 5 (19 May 2014), EG 8 (19 May 2014).
13. EG 4 (13 May 2014).
14. EG 2 (15 April 2014); EG 8 (19 May 2014).
15. EG 3(27 March 2014).
16. WG 9 (29 April 2014).
17. WG 8(6 May 2014).
18. WG 10 (15 July 2014).
19. EG 2 (15 April 2014)
20. EG 3 (27 March 2014; EG 6 (19 June 2014).
21. EG 4 (13 May 2014); EG 5 (19 May 2014); EG 8 (19 May 2014).
22. EG 6 (19 June 2014).
23. EG 5 (19 May 2014).
24. EG 6 (19 June 2014).
25. EG 6 (19 June 2014): 'Es ist eine su/ subjektive Sache, weil, ist ja auch eine Art Entschuldigung dafür, dass sie dann äh den eisernen Vorhang (I: Mhm.) errichten, ja. Also es ist ja auch eine, eine Art Entschuldigung. "Wir hätten es ja nicht gemacht, wenn das Sicherheitsbedürfnis der UdSSR und der Ausbau des Machtbereichs nicht so groß gewesen wäre. Wir wollten das ja eigentlich gar nicht'.
26. EG 7 (18 June 2014).
27. EG 7 (18 June 2014): 'Okay, na ja, es geht im Prinzip hier um die, äh die Darstellung der, der Entwicklung des äh s/ sowjetischen Machtbereichs. Nicht nur Darstellung, auch eine gewisse Wertung, wie es a) von den Westmächten, wie es, hm, denke mal, wird auch deutlich, wie es, wie es die Autoren sehen. Ähm dass also die Sowjetunion in Süd- und Südosteuropa durch ihre äh Besatzungspolitik, die durch den Kriegsverlauf letztendlich zus/ äh sich ergeben hat oder auch noch weiterhin äh ergibt, ja, dazu getrieben wurde, dass dort so eine, (...) ein sowjetischer Machtbereich aufgebaut worden ist.'
28. EG 7 (18 June 2014): I: Ähm Sie hatten gerade gesagt, dass die Sowjetunion getrieben wurde dazu, einen Machtbereich zu errichten. MF: Nee, sie haben das vorangetrieben, so rum.
29. EG 7 (18 June 2014): I: Jetzt ist ja dann noch so was, also wenn man sich anguckt, wie die UdSSR dargestellt wird und ihre Motive. Da steht: "Sie erweitert ihren Einflussbereich und sie erfüllt Sicherheitsbedürfnisse". [...] Wie (MF: Mhm.) stehen diese beiden Dinge aus Sicht des Textes miteinander in Beziehung? Werden die als Motive aufgefasst, die miteinander einhergehen können? Also man kann ein Sicherheitsbedürfnis

haben und gleichzeitig expandieren? Oder sind das Motive, die sich gegeneinander/ äh gegenseitig ausschließen, weil das eine defensiv ist eher und das andere aggressiv? [...] Also aus Sicht des Textes?

MF: Na ja, es impliziert, dass ähm das letztendlich durch die osteuropäischen Länder ja schon auch gewollt wurde.

I: Mhm. [...] Es gab zwar ein Sicherheitsbedürfnis, aber das war nicht [...] da?

MF: Für ihr Sicherheits. Nee, Quatsch, (I: Ja.) ja. Für ihr, äh/ Hm, es geht ja um die Sowjetunion. (I: Ja.) Für ihr Sicherheitsbedürfnis. Ähm na das ist dieser, dieser Gürtel, der/ den sie heute auch (I: Mhm.) gerne wieder hätten, ja.

30. CH 1 (1 April 2014).

31. CH 2 (1 April 2014).

32. '... und da landet man ja letztlich ja eigentlich immer beim selben menschlichen Urtrieb von Macht und Erhaltung', CH 9 (17 April 2014).

33. CH 7 (10 June 2014).

34. CH 6 (2 October 2014).

35. CH 2 (1 April 2014).

36. CH 1 (1 April 2014); CH 9 (17 April 2014).

37. CH 3 (14 May 2014); CH 4 (20 May 2014).

38. CH 3 (14 May 2014).

39. CH 2 (1 April 2014).

40. CH 10 (14 April 2014).

41. CH 1 (1 April 2014).

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