STUDYING:

ICH FÜHL MICH SO FIFTY-FIFTY
KARIN KÖNIG

MUTTER COURAGE UND IHRE KINDER:
EINE CHRONIK AUS DEM DREISSIGJÄHRIGEN KRIEG
BERTOLT BRECHT

SOPHIE SCHOLL – DIE LETZTEN TAGE
DIRECTED BY MARC ROTHEMUND

ZONENKINDER
JANA HENSEL
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## USING THESE RESOURCES

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INTRODUCTION AND RESOURCE RATIONALE

These resources have been developed in response to changes in the content of the AS/A2 curricula for modern foreign languages (French, Spanish and German), which are effective from September 2016. They have been designed to give support and guidance to MFL teachers in selecting and teaching the film and literature content of the curricula.

There are five sections to this resource:

1. Why teach this text?
This section explains the relevance and benefits of teaching this text/film for teachers and their students. It also describes how the text/film fits in to the A-level as a whole, as well as its links with other A-level subjects.

2. Ways to read this text
This section briefly describes the different critical lenses for reading a text/film, as well as outlining different themes. This section will be particularly useful for the A2 exam questions, which are theme-based. Topics from previous exam questions have been integrated into this section.

3. Students
This section suggests how this text/film can appeal to certain students, according to interests, studies and background. For example this film will appeal to students who may be interested in studying social policy.

4. Useful passages/sequences
This section highlights specific sequences/passages from the film/text that are especially rich and point towards the ways in which these can be used for teaching.

   a. Characters
   This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of characterisation and character relationships in the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the AS exam questions, which focus on character analysis.

   b. Themes
   This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of a major theme in the context of the whole text/film. This selected sequence/passage is normally an effective inroad for the discussion of the wider concerns/themes of the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the A2 exam question, which is based on wider analysis of themes/contexts.

   c. Language
   This sub-section highlights a linguistically rich and/or interesting passage/sequence in terms of grammar, style, tone, genre, register, dialect, pronunciation etc. This sub-section is not exam-focused but teachers may find it useful for other focuses i.e. themes, characterisation, genre.

   d. Cinematography/form and genre
   The cinematography sub-section focuses on directorial and cinematographic technique in films. It aims to guide teachers who may not be familiar with teaching film. This sub-section is particularly useful for AS and A2 exam questions that deal with colour, sound, directorial technique, etc.

   The form and genre sub-section focuses on the structure, form and genre of literary texts in order to guide the teaching of certain kinds of texts (novels and plays).

5. Further reading
This section provides links to websites, useful sources, articles and online books in English and each target language that can be used as pedagogic resources and/or preparatory material.

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Further support
To find out how the University of Leeds can support your teaching, including teachers’ conferences, CPD, learning festivals and further resources, contact our Arts Engagement Team:

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ICH FÜHL MICH SO FIFTY-FIFTY
KARIN KÖNIG, 1991
It is 1989, and change is in the air in East Germany. When Sabine Dehnert’s brother Mario chooses not to return home to Leipzig from a visit to Hamburg, she must decide whether to follow his example: should she leave her friends and family for a new life in the West?

Why teach this text?
This short text, first published shortly after German reunification, provides an accessible introduction to some of the key questions and tensions that defined the experience of East Germans immediately before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Told through the perspective of 17-year-old Sabine, the book combines conventional literary narrative with epistolary exchanges between the characters to give the reader an insight into the uncertainties, worries, excitement and hopes that preoccupied young people at this pivotal moment in German and European history. Published as an educational text, the book also includes a timeline of key events and footnotes on East German culture-specific references.

Ways to read this text
The text explores the events preceding and immediately following German reunification through the eyes of a group of young East Germans. This perspective is significant, since it gives the characters the opportunity to tell their own story (though there is some tension with the fact that the author herself is West German). Access to Sabine's feelings in the narrative gives an insight into the complex decision to leave or stay, raising questions about the importance of loyalty to family and friends versus the search for individual happiness. The book engages with the social tensions that characterised German society after 9th November 1989, not only between East and West Germans but also between those who had left the GDR and those who had chosen to stay. Once the wall has fallen, Sabine and her brother Mario struggle especially with the question of belonging: are they now more at home in Leipzig or Hamburg? And what does it mean to be, simply, 'German'?

Useful passages
1. Characters
As the book's central character, Sabine stands at the intersection of the different tensions that dominate the story. While frustrated by the limitations of life in East Germany, she is not immediately convinced that leaving the country is the right thing to do; once in Hamburg, she continues to have conflicting feelings about her decision, having left her father and her friends in East Germany and discovered that life in the West is not as easy as she expected. Her doubts come to a head when, having slept through the opening of the German-German border, she regrets not having experienced the November demonstrations first-hand ('Jetzt habe ich den entscheidenden Blick in meinem Leben nur im Fernseher erlebt'). Sabine struggles with her identity in a post-wall Germany, feeling neither completely East German nor completely West German.

Thomas: 'Ich tauchte wie in einen Strom ein und fühlte mich plötzlich ganz stark.'
Sabine’s boyfriend Thomas acts as a counterfoil to her, representing those who chose to stay in East Germany. Like Sabine, he has joined the Umweltgruppe of young people who meet regularly at church to discuss their concerns with East German society, and like hers, his family is split between East and West Germany. However, Thomas decides not to leave the GDR. Once Sabine has arrived in Hamburg, his letters act as a window on the seismic changes of November 1989 and the subsequent transformation of East German society. His account of the demonstrations and the aftermath of 9th November helps Sabine and the reader to understand some of the positive and negative impacts of this change on East Germany.

Students
The book’s central characters are of a similar age to A-level students, so students may find it interesting to compare the characters’ life experiences and priorities with their own. As well as living through a watershed in European history, Sabine and her friends have more recognisable concerns associated with growing up, such as future ambitions and romantic relationships. There are links to topics on the A-level syllabus such as relationships with family and friends, society and equality, and the environment. With its clear focus on the events of 1989-90, the book may appeal especially to students of history and politics.
2. Themes

Politics and personal relationships: 'Ich lass mir doch unsere Familie nicht durch die Grenze zerstören!'

The impact of social and political change on individuals is at the centre of this text, and throughout the book the act of leaving the GDR or even having family members in the West is one that creates tension between the characters. For Sabine, her coming-of-age as a young adult is contextualised by her decision to take her fate into her own hands and leave the GDR, but she knows that by doing this she is jeopardising her relationships with friends and family. While Mario's letter from Hamburg gives strong justification for his decision to leave, Sabine's conversation with Thomas and his grandparents reminds her of the impact on those left behind.

Expectations vs. reality: 'So habe ich mir das Leben im Westen nicht vorgestellt.'

Like many East Germans who left the GDR, Sabine and Mario find that life in West Germany is not quite the ideal they had imagined. Mario has an exhausting job that leaves him with no energy to spend the money he has earned, and on her arrival in Hamburg Sabine directly encounters some of the prejudices held on the 'other' side of the German-German divide. Her first letter to Thomas describes her West German colleagues' fears that they will be overrun by Übersiedler from the East, and she resents the perception that she is a foreigner despite her German nationality. Meanwhile, Sabine is critical of the Bundis who complain about refugees from the East while everything is in plentiful supply in the West.

3. Language

'Gegenüber Bundis hielt man ja zur DDR.'

The language of the text is simple and accessible, making it an approachable first experience of literature as a lens for social and historical questions. Notwithstanding this simplicity, the book showcases the close link between language and identity by adopting the idiom of the teenagers through whose eyes the experience is narrated. This is most obvious in the letters between Sabine and the other characters, but there are hints of it elsewhere in the narrative too, showing how the telling of the story is marked by Sabine's perspective even though it is written in the third person. Throughout the book, culture-specific terms are used that demonstrate the particularity of East German experience by introducing the specific vocabulary used to describe it. Another dimension of this specific language use is the inclusion of expressions used by East and West Germans to refer to one another, which reflect the tensions between them: for Sabine and her friends, West Germans are ‘Bundis’ or ‘Besserwessis’; meanwhile, the act of ‘abhauen’ from the GDR is seen as a betrayal and those who quickly changed their political colours after reunification are referred to as ‘Wendehälse’. By using or avoiding such terms, characters in the book align themselves with particular points of view or worlds of experience, and these dimensions of the language in the text show how the words we use to describe our experience help to define who we are.

4. Form and genre

This is a short novel, giving students the opportunity to encounter some of the key features of literary narration in an approachable form. Alongside the third-person narration of Sabine's experience, inflected by language that reveals the character’s perspective within the voice of the narrator, the book makes use of epistolary form through the letters between Sabine and others, and at the end also turns to the diary format to reflect on Sabine’s experience. Both these forms of story-telling act as literary devices to offer more direct access to the characters’ thoughts and feelings. The letters are especially important as they act as a means of reflecting a perspective on events on the ‘other’ side of the wall: while Sabine is still in the GDR she receives post from Mario, and once she has arrived in Hamburg she writes letters to Thomas. Told in the present tense, with a first chapter that gives a flash-forward to Sabine’s moment of escape and gaps of varying length of time between the short chapters, the book creates a feeling of immediacy and involvement with the events narrated.

Author biography

Born in 1946 in Düren (Nordrhein-Westfalen), König trained in education before collaboratively writing her first work of youth literature (Merhaba… Guten Tag) in 1982. Her second collaborative book, published in 1989, explores the question of cultural identity through the experience of a young Turkish-German girl whose family plan to move back to their home in Turkey (Oya. Fremde Heimat Türkei). As with these earlier texts, the author’s background in education is apparent from the style of the writing in Ich fühl mich so fifty-fifty: while her writing has been criticised for being too didactic to be considered truly literary, her texts continue to be popular in schools and have been translated into French and Danish.
Further reading


Useful websites

• https://www.dtv.de/buch/ich-fuehl-mich-so-fifty-fifty-78020/
MUTTER COURAGE UND IHRE KINDER:
EINE CHRONIK AUS DEM DREISSIGJÄHRIGEN KRIEG
BERTOLT BRECHT, 1939
Why teach this text?
In this chronicle of the Thirty Years War, Anna Fierling, nicknamed ‘Mother Courage’, follows the armies back and forth across Europe, selling provisions and alcohol from her canteen wagon. As the action progresses between the years 1624 and 1646, we see the wily woman determined to make her living, but over the course of the play she loses all three of her children (Swiss Cheese, Eilif, and Kattrin) to the very war from which she tries to profit. She remains indomitable, refusing to part with her livelihood – the wagon. Mother Courage is considered by some to be the greatest play of the 20th century, and perhaps also the greatest anti-war play of all time. Like a Shakespearean history, it is set in the past but teaches us about the present. Unlike a Shakespearean history, it shows us the effects of policies and decisions made by kings and generals on the common people.

Ways to read this text
Bertolt Brecht himself suggested the following about the point of Mother Courage:


The play can be read in a number of ways: as a morality tale on the brutalising impact of war; as a warning for neutral states not to make a deal with Nazi Germany (Brecht was living in exile in Sweden at the time of writing); as a critique of the corrosive power of capitalism; as a depiction of the hard choices a mother has to make in difficult times; as a dialectic experiment designed to confront audiences with the causes and consequences of war.

Students
Students will find this play challenging but highly rewarding. The recommended edition offers opportunities for self-study through explanations of unusual words and terms, annotations on context, plus notes on reception and interpretations. With a plethora of productions available online, students can experience Brecht’s concept of ‘epic theatre’ in practice while learning about the moral, social and political consequences of Germany’s belligerent past. Brecht’s use of colloquial German can initially be confusing, but students quickly come to terms with dropped endings. Hesse’s sardonic humour, his brutal honesty in portraying the characters’ manoeuvrings, is particularly appreciated by A-level students.

1. Characters
Mother Courage: she is, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the play’s ‘untragic heroine.’ A parasite of the war (the chaplain calls her ‘eine Hyäne des Schlachtfelds’), she follows the armies of the Thirty Years War, supporting herself and her children with her canteen wagon. She remains opportunistically fixed on her survival, having won her nickname when she hauled a cartful of bread through a city under bombardment. Courage works tirelessly, relentlessly haggling, dealing, and celebrating the war in times of prosperity.

Eilif: The first child Mother Courage loses to the army. Eilif is the warlike son, eager to join the war and carry out its brutal business. Some say that his fatal virtue is his ‘bravery,’ but the accolades he receives are certainly questionable. His rise to power – reflected in his costume – involves nothing more than a series of cunning, vicious raids on the local peasants, raids motivated by the need to keep his men fed.

Swiss Cheese: The first of Mother Courage’s children to die. Swiss Cheese suffers from an excessive sense of duty and honesty and eventually dies because of it – in other words, during the war, his virtues cost him his life. Courage instills these qualities in him because he is not particularly bright.

Kattrin: Courage’s dumb daughter, Kattrin distinguishes herself as the character who most obviously suffers from the traumas of war. She wears these traumas on her body, since sexual abuse robs her of her voice as a child and the war later leaves her disfigured. Throughout most of the play, she figures as the war’s helpless witness, unable to save her brother Eilif from recruitment or Swiss Cheese from the Catholic spies. Later, she will stand by Courage when she refuses to identify Swiss Cheese’s body. As Courage notes, Kattrin suffers the virtues of kindness and pity.

The Chaplain: One of two characters mooching off Mother Courage. The Chaplain initially appears as a cynical, wooden character. He remains loyal to the Swedish monarchy and the campaign as a war of religion, though is aware of the horrors around him. The Chaplain also reveals more sympathetic qualities, particularly when he defies Courage and attempts to save local peasants.
The Cook: The Chaplain's rival for Courage's affections and bread, the Cook is an aging Don Juan, a bachelor long past his days as the dashing Peter Piper who seduced girls like Yvette. Darkly ironic, he is aware of the war as a continuation of business as usual, continually unmasking the divinely inspired military campaign as another massive profit scheme. In understanding his social position, he bears no loyalty to the rulers who would exploit him.

Yvette Pottier: Initially appearing as a camp prostitute, Yvette is the only character who will make her fortune through the war, marrying and inheriting the estate of a lecherous old Colonel. A woman ruined by the war (the Cook gave her an STD when she was 17), she mourns her lost love yet remains bent on securing her interests.

2. Key Scenes
The ‘Song of Great Capitulation’ (Scene 4)
Kattrin on the Roof (Scene 11)

3. Language
There is no doubt that the language will initially challenge students –the sentences are short, but the characters speak a somewhat archaic German and use dialect and colloquialisms. On the other hand, the drama and ‘epic’ structure of the play allow students to follow the action, while the songs that interrupt the play add texture and pathos.

4. Form and genre
Mother Courage is an example of Brecht's concepts of Epic Theatre and Verfremdungseffekt, (alienation / estrangement / distanciation effect). Verfremdungseffekt is achieved through the use of placards which reveal the events of each scene, juxtaposition, actors changing characters and costume on stage, the use of narration, simple props and scenery. For example, a single tree might be used to convey a whole forest, and the stage is usually flooded with bright white light, whether it’s a winter’s night or a summer’s day. Several songs, interspersed throughout the play, are used to underscore the themes of the play. They also require the audience to think about what the playwright is saying.

Author biography
A major dramatist of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was the founder of one of the most influential theatre companies, the Berliner Ensemble, and the creator of some of the landmark plays of the twentieth century: The Threepenny Opera, Life of Galileo, Mother Courage and The Caucasian Chalk Circle. His plays and dramatic theory are central to the study of modern theatre. His politics determined his life: as an avant-garde poet in Munich; as an up-and-coming playwright in Berlin during the Weimar Republic; in Danish, Swedish and American exile during the Third Reich (he had to appear in front of the House Committee for Un-American Activities in 1947); and as a cultural figurehead of the German Democratic Republic. He summed up his experience in a speech in Moscow a year before his death in 1956:

In den Kriegen um den Brotpreis sind die Pflüge die Kanonen. In den immerwährenden unerbittlichen Kämpfen der Klassen um die Produktionsmittel sind die Zeiten verhältnismäßigen Friedens nur die Zeiten der Erschöpfung.
Further reading


• Christine Mersiowsky, EinFach Deutsch Unterrichtsmodelle: Bertolt Brecht: Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder – Neubearbeitung: Gymnasiale Oberstufe, Schöningh Verlag, 2014

Useful websites

• Epic theatre and Brecht, GCSE Bitesize, http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision

• Bertolt Brecht speaks in the House Committee on Un-American Activities, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkiqGxD4C78

• Brecht in Theory - Helene Weigel on Epic Theatre, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXyNIQoh6ig

• Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (classic production with Helene Weigel), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXyNIQoh6ig

• The actress Meryl Streep discusses Mother Courage, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mz5j1LmLLw

• Facebook page of the International Brecht Society, https://www.facebook.com/brechtsociety
SOPHIE SCHOLL – DIE LETZTEN TAGE
DIRECTED BY
MARC ROTHEMUND, 2005
SOPHIE SCHOLL – DIE LETZTEN TAGE DIR. MARC ROTHEMUND, 2005

Rothemund’s film focuses on Sophie Scholl, one of the six principle members of the Munich resistance group die Weiße Rose (White Rose), and the final five days of her life in February 1943. Sophie together with Hans, her brother and the group’s co-founder, are arrested whilst distributing the group’s sixth and final anti-Nazi pamphlet at Munich’s Ludwig Maximilian Universität. We witness Sophie’s interrogation by Gestapo investigator Robert Mohr, which develops into an intellectual and psychological dual. Sophie, Hans, and fellow group member Christoph Probst are charged with treason and tried by the infamous President of the People’s Court, Roland Freisler. They are found guilty and sentenced to death, executed the very same day. The closing scene depicts hundreds of copies of their final pamphlet being air-dropped over Munich by the RAF.

Why teach this film?

Sophie Scholl – Die Letzten Tage is one of many post-millenial German films about the Nazi past. Rothemund’s film, however, draws on authentic interrogation and trial documents, which only came to light after German unification. As such it offers a new perspective on the events and the people involved but also crucially on the people involved. We see the events from Sophie’s viewpoint and focus on her as an individual; the film allows us to reflect on questions of ideology, courage, opposition as well as individual responsibility. Oscar-nominated and multi-award winning, Rothemund’s Sophie Scholl has become one of Germany’s most critically acclaimed films on the international stage.

Ways to read this film

Based on actual historical events Sophie Scholl is first and foremost a feature film centred on a personal story of opposition under an authoritarian regime. The film can be read as a historical drama, however it can also be considered from a memory perspective, asking us to reflect on the way in which these historical events have been remembered and why. We can read the film in order to try and understand Germany in the early 2000s and its relationship to the Nazi past, asking questions such as why this film and why the focus on Sophie Scholl? What can we deduce from these decisions? What does the way in which Sophie is portrayed tell us about the ideas and values that are important now?

Students

This film will appeal to students interested in a variety of fields, from history, particularly of the Nazi past and of resistance to it, as well as students interested in film, in politics and in memory and remembering as well as philosophy and ethics. Given the issues raised in the film and in particular its focus on the intellectual challenge to fascist ideas and authoritarianism, as well as reactions to such opposition, and broader themes of racism and intolerance, as well as individual responsibility, it is a particularly pertinent film to study in the current climate in which we are faced with the rise of far-right populism across Europe and in the United States of America as well as Brexit. Although not entirely comparable, many of the ideas Sophie Scholl and her compatriots opposed, have begun to re-emerge in recent years, rendering the Weiße Rose relevant to a new generation.

1. Themes

The central theme is that of the individual in relation to the state, whether that is in facilitating it, as Robert Mohr does, or in opposing it, as the members of the White Rose do. When Sophie is given the chance to abdicate responsibility for the pamphlets, she declines, opting to stand by her actions and her beliefs, even though it will cost her life. Ideology is thus an integral theme – both in support of and in opposition to Nazism. Authenticity is a further key theme. The film opens with the statement that it draws upon historical facts, previously unpublished interrogation transcripts and new interviews with eyewitnesses. It is not only the dialogue which lays claim to authenticity, but the location setting and clothing were also meticulously researched to be as accurate as possible. The twin themes of resistance and heroism are also central, reminding the viewer that such simple acts of voicing dissent and sharing political views, which we take for granted today, were deemed treason; thus the film, it raises the question of what constitutes heroism.

2. Language

Language and rhetoric are intrinsic to the film, both in the perceived danger oppositional rhetoric is deemed to pose and in the interrogations carried out by Mohr. The interrogation dialogue is taken directly from the actual transcripts, allowing Sophie’s voice to be heard in the present. The film presents language as a powerful tool, one which Sophie uses to challenge Mohr. Voice tones are also juxtaposed, highlighting the irrationality of the regime versus its opponents. In the court room scenes Roland Freisler becomes increasingly irate, especially when Sophie remarks that he will soon be standing in their shoes, yet the three defendants’ voices remain calm, measured and articulate. Sophie’s last words to Hans and Christoph, remarking that the sun continues to shine, is a metaphorical allusion to their actions and the hope they would have an impact beyond their deaths. This is visually reinforced as Sophie turns her face to the bright sunshine as she is led to her execution. A voiceover brings the film to its conclusion, reminding that the final pamphlet was smuggled to England, where it was copied and dropped over Germany by the RAF, thus aligning the language of these opponents with the Allies.
3. Characters

**Sophie Scholl:** Sophie was one of six siblings, born 9th May 1921 in Forchtenberg and raised in Ulm. Sophie gradually became politicised – originally joining the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM), she developed into an ardent opponent, not least because of the treatment her father Robert Scholl, received for speaking against the regime, as well as the loss of her Jewish friends. After compulsory national labour service, Sophie began studying biology and philosophy at the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, where her brother, Hans, was a medical student. Initially unaware of Hans' resistance group, Sophie joined the group in 1942.

**Hans Scholl:** Hans was the second eldest of the Scholl siblings, born on 2nd September 1918. After first being involved in its youth wing, Hans became increasingly opposed to the regime, leading him to become one of the founding members of the White Rose, co-writing and distributing anti-Nazi pamphlets in between his studies and his compulsory military service as a medical orderly on the Eastern Front, a duty which further reinforced his opposition to the state.

**Robert Mohr:** At the beginning of the interrogations, Mohr a specialist interrogator in the Gestapo, is ardent in his adherence to National Socialist thinking, yet the viewer senses that Sophie begins to change his mind, both through her arguments and her determination to take responsibility. Robert Mohr was interned after the Second World War, but never faced trial for any of his duties in the Gestapo. He died in 1977. In the film, the viewer is led to believe he harbours a sense of regret that he sent Sophie to her death.

4. Cinematography and style

The film largely makes use of shot-reverse-shot (Schuss-Gegenschuss) as a technique through which to reinforce the centrality of the two principle characters – Sophie and Mohr – seen in the use of close up images of the characters' faces, so as to facilitate the viewer's identification with them. The shots are also angled so that they look at each other evenly, undermining any notion of either hierarchy or heroism, so that the viewer knows this is an intellectual dual between the two of them, rather than a film about heroic martyrdom. The only instances where the film deviates from this are in the scenes where Sophie appears to look heavenward first in her cell before the trial, and later, on her way to her execution. Aerial shots are also used in a mirroring technique, first when the viewer sees the pamphlets falling from the upper floor at the university and then in the closing scene where they are air-dropped over Munich; conversely, these scenes undermine the film's attempts to otherwise avoid allusions to martyrdom. Lastly, the film makes use of authentic photographs of Sophie, along with other members of the group, reinforcing both their youth, but also that they were ordinary individuals, rather than mythical figures to be heroized.

Further reading


Useful websites

- [http://germanfilm.co.uk](http://germanfilm.co.uk)
When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Jana Hensel was 13: she spent the next 13 years of her life finding her feet in a country that had changed irreversibly overnight.

Why teach this text?
Jana Hensel’s memoir of her childhood in the GDR and her reflection on the changes that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall attempts to win recognition for the experiences shared by her generation of East Germans. It is a personal, heartfelt and, in places, entertaining account of the changes introduced by German reunification and will help students to look beyond a general historical understanding to see how the far-reaching social and cultural redevelopment of East Germany after 1989 affected individual lives. As well as offering a window on a critical historical moment, it links into A-level topics such as fashion and pop culture, holidays, sport, family relationships and social integration.

Ways to read this text?
Following its publication, the text was both welcomed and criticised for its exploration of the identity crisis experienced by Hensel’s generation of East Germans. Hensel contrasts the sudden changes of reunification with the inevitably gradual process of coming to terms with these, drawing attention to the ways in which we identify with our past and present, for example through material culture, celebrity figures and language. Her text shows how the sudden removal of these orientation points in 1989 resulted in a sense of lost Heimat for a generation of East Germans. The sadness of this loss is mitigated by a sense of humour in the text: keen to avoid accusations of uncritical Ostalgie, or nostalgia for the GDR, Hensel mixes the often naïve child’s perspective of her own memory with a more informed adult’s retrospective, to show how our fondness for the familiarity of the past can tempt us to remember it through rose-tinted spectacles. The text thus raises important questions about the nature of memory by showing that the GDR has not completely disappeared but remains an active memorial space for those who lived there.

Students
Students will enjoy reading Hensel’s engaging and personal account, and should find the text valuable for its demonstration of how the model of state socialism was experienced from a young person’s perspective. The text offers students the chance to learn about the sporting and cultural heroes, youth culture and material culture of the GDR, which they may find interesting to consider in comparison with their own teenage experiences. With its focus on historical events and their impact on personal lives, Zonenkinder may appeal particularly to students of history, politics and psychology or social studies.

Useful passages
1. Characters
The ‘narrator’ (Jana Hensel): ‘Man lernt die Dinge eben erst dann zu schätzen, wenn sie verschwunden sind.’

The voice of the text is that of Hensel herself: writing in 2002, she is reflecting from the ‘half-and-half’ position of someone who spent 13 years growing up in East Germany and then the next 13 coming to terms with the new environment of a reunified Germany. She claims to speak on behalf of her generation, often using the plural ‘we’ to describe her past memories and her present feeling of being in limbo between cultural identities. With a blend of sadness, humour and critical insight, she describes her GDR childhood, her attempts to blend into German society in the 1990s, and her more recent realisation that this has contributed to her sense of loss of Heimat and increasing need to reclaim her past.

The older generation: ‘Wir waren die Söhne und Töchter der Verlierer.’

A constant presence in the text is the conflict that emerged between Hensel’s generation and their parents after reunification, as they responded in different ways to life in reunified Germany. Drawing on Helmut Kohl’s idea of the ‘Gnade der späten Geburt’, Hensel notes that her generation is not entitled to judge her parents’ generation for being obedient citizens in the GDR, since their own youth means they themselves have not had to make the same decisions. Meanwhile, she notes the increasing commercialisation of Christmas and her parents’ over-enthusiastic attempts to embrace West German material culture in the 1990s while their children simply wanted their ‘difference’ as East Germans to go unnoticed.

2. Themes
Loss of identity: ‘Ich möchte wieder wissen, wo wir herkommen.’

Hensel refers to the fall of the wall as ‘der letzte Tag meiner Kindheit’, a major watershed in her life and one that was followed by a loss of orientation markers that she had so far used to create her identity. As well as the absence of material items and social structures, she reflects on the critical disappearance of stories of GDR experience. She resents the cultural appropriation of East Germany by the West, e.g. in changes to street names and the name of her parents’ tram stop, or in the new historical and political frameworks introduced in GDR schools after reunification. The book fights against this erosion of identity by telling Hensel’s personal story.
The ownership of memory: ‘Wir waren einfach zu jung. Und oft schon vermischen sich in unseren Anekdoten über das Land, aus dem wir angeblich stammen, eigene Erlebnisse mit Gelesenem und Gehörtem.’

Hensel admits that her account of the Leipzig demonstrations, recalled in the first chapter, is built partly from her own memory and partly from media reports. By doing this, she both highlights the instability of individual memory as a stand-alone historical witness and equally argues the importance of individual voices in the public and shared remembering of the past. Admitting that the GDR had its flaws, she insists that it is not possible to simply draw a line under this experience when it endures in people’s memories and has contributed to their sense of self. Her telling of her own story is an act of resistance to the appropriation of the GDR’s history by those who did not experience it.

3. Language:
‘Die Dinge hießen einfach nicht mehr danach, was sie waren.’

The text is written in a readable first-person style that combines personal anecdotes with Hensel’s outlining of the historical events that contextualise them. Throughout, she uses the language of the text to reinforce her argument about the role of culture in the construction of identities: the narrative is rich in references to GDR terms and slogans that are not explained for the reader (there is a glossary of some terms at the back). This supports her claim to be writing on behalf of a generation who share her experience; for the reader who is not familiar with East German culture it recreates the ‘otherness’ that Hensel describes having felt during her first years in reunified Germany. Hensel resents the disappearance of GDR brand names and terminology without a trace in 1989 and their replacement by West German equivalents that bore no associations for her. Resistant to the idea of having to ‘translate’ her childhood into another language of experience, she instead celebrates the language of ‘die Zone’. With this ‘translation of experience’ in mind, students might find it interesting to compare some passages of the much-criticised English translation with Hensel’s German text (see Further reading).

4. Form and genre
‘Das ist unsere Generation. Nur die Erfahrungen der letzten zehn Jahren und alle Freunde, die sie teilen, bilden unsere Familie.’

Zonenkinder is a non-fiction text and is firmly grounded in Hensel’s autobiography, though the structure is thematic rather than chronological, helping Hensel to trace her argument about the loss of cultural identity through the erasure of the past. Meanwhile, the impression of a factual account is supported by the inclusion of images and photographs, sometimes accompanied by captions, which give the effect of a scrapbook of authentic personal memories. The combination of personal anecdote and memento with a retrospectively organised and argued view of events demonstrates how Hensel’s memory of her childhood is both highly personal and now somewhat distant. The text can be read as a response to Florian Illies’ Generation Golf (2000), which explored and critiqued the generation of West Germans who, like Hensel, were born in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Illies, Hensel applies a light irony to her picture of her generation; unlike him, she is crucially motivated by the sense that she and her contemporaries are being robbed of their identity while their voices are not heard.

Author biography
Born in 1976 near Leipzig, Jana Hensel is a German author and journalist whose writing draws heavily on her East German childhood and her identity as an Ostdeutsche. She is resistant to the dominance of West German culture in the East after 1989 and argues in her work for recognition of the fact that life in the GDR was both different from the West German way of life and a formative influence on East Germans’ sense of identity that should not be ignored. Her other publications include Neue deutsche Mädchen (2008, with Elisabeth Raether), Achtung Zone – Warum wir Ostdeutschen anders bleiben sollten (2009), and regular articles for broadsheet newspaper die Zeit.
Further reading


- Hensel, Jana, After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life That Came Next, translated by Jefferson Chase (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).


Useful websites