Introduction

Discussions of the postwar reconstruction of German national identity have largely concentrated on the role of Germany’s totalitarian recent history in the collective memory of both German postwar nation states (Maier 1988; Olick and Levy 1997). It is widely assumed that attitudes toward the recent, overwhelmingly catastrophic and evil past are determinant of the self-identification of Germans today. But the postwar reconstruction of national identity was not limited to particular historical episodes. Early constitutional debates in the Federal Republic appropriated the Weimar experience as a model and lesson (positive and negative) for national-building. In the 1980s, conservative efforts spearheaded by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to reclaim supposedly more positive aspects of German history found their expression in exhibitions and museums. East German historiography similarly focused on the earlier history of the German working class and class struggles.

In order to examine broader changes in identity construction, I compare changes in the portrayal of the German nation in East and West German high school history textbooks from 1945-90. Given that these two nations shared their prewar past, divergent postwar portrayals of a common past provide an opportunity to examine the appropriation of history for the construction of nation identity. In this paper I concentrate on two particular historical episodes and their portrayal in textbooks: the Peasant War of 1525 and the founding of the German empire in 1871. These episodes play a particularly important role in the portrayal of the German nation in that they mark corner stones of national history. The Peasant War was
one of the first expressions of popular national sentiments. It followed the Lutheran
Reformation that emphasized the vernacular and was identified closely with Germany. For
Germany, the Reformation was one of the first elements of a national print culture that lead to
the eventual establishment of the modern nation state (Anderson 1983).

The second episode, the founding of the German empire in 1871, represents the
culmination of a development of which the Peasant War was one of the early manifestations,
namely the creation of a modern German nation-state. Despite its general significance for
modern German history, representations of unification in 1871 are particularly interesting for
students of national identity construction, as the Franco-German War of 1870/71 is the only
episode in modern German history that might present examples of heroism and of a positive
national development (Hedetoft 1993).

The Sociology of Educational Policies
A number of theoretical arguments speak to the sociology of educational policy. Sociology
of education as a subfield has been preoccupied with issues of stratification and
intergenerational mobility. Indicative of this preoccupation, Bourdieu has been perhaps the
most (theoretically) influential sociologist of education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). With
a more narrow focus, theories inspired by Marxist conceptions of societies divided along
class lines have been prominent in examining curriculum policies within sociology (Bowles
and Gintis 1976; Bernstein 1977; Apple 1979). Such approaches have focused on the
distribution of power within nation-states in order to explain emphases in curricular choices.
The emergence of social movements demanding inclusion of underrepresented groups in
historical portrayals in the 1980s and 90s has underscored this view of educational policy as
one dominated by state power and power more generally.
Theoretical arguments postulating the importance of the state and of power more generally are also bolstered by some of the conclusions that have emerged from the growing field of “social memory studies” (Olick and Robbins 1998). Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hobsbawm 1990) has argued that modern states in the late 19th century were actively engaged in the “invention of tradition” and the dissemination thereof. Arguably, this is especially true for Germany where Otto von Bismarck as chancellor of the German empire explicitly embraced the instrumentalization of education for the creation of imperial subjects. Based on such portrayals of the power of the state over educational content and the prominence of power relations in the formation of educational policy, one would expect the state to play a dominant role in portrayals of the nation in postwar German textbooks. Issues of the legitimacy of state power and the lineage of the nation-state would be more concrete manifestations of such state domination. As most of the theoretical arguments about the role of the state in identity construction pertain to the early modern nation-state, such arguments can be tested best cross-nationally in the postwar context.

East and West Germany provide a useful contrast in this regard, as these cases allow for a test of the influence of different political regimes, a socialist one-party state on the one hand, a multi-party democracy on the other, on the instrumentalization of history education. Both states arguably were in need of legitimization vis-à-vis their citizens in the early period after their founding in 1949. History education could be seen as one area where state control would have made such legitimization possible. As the division of Germany became more and more institutionalized throughout the 1950s and 60s, needs for legitimacy may have shifted to other areas of the state’s influence. However, it might be hypothesized that states turn to instrumentalized national histories when they perceive their legitimacy to be in danger from the inside or the outside. This would suggest higher instrumentalization of history throughout East German history and particular peaks of the use of history around the construction of the
Berlin Wall and later periods of destabilization. Similarly, crises in the West German polity might be hypothesized to have lead to the instrumentalization of history.

However, discussions of increasing globalization in the 1990s and some theoretical arguments in the sociology of education point to forces undermining the power of the state as well. Most prominent in this regard is perhaps the “world society” approach associated with research on transnational organizations and the institutionalization of global conceptions of nation-state characteristics (Meyer, Kamens, and Benavot 1992; Meyer et al. 1997). This approach postulates that nation-states have been subject to increasing pressure from a world polity and explains isomorphism across an international context in this fashion. Empirically, researchers associated with this approach have examined a number of elements of educational systems and have found increasing international (Benavot et al. 1991; Frank et al. 1996; Kamens, Benavot, and Meyer 1996) as well as national convergence (Frank, Schofer, and Torres 1994). This convergence has often been characterized by attempts of teachers’ organizations to codify pedagogical knowledge and to professionalize along the lines of such codifications. In contrast to theories on the state’s involvement in identity construction, these theories of educational policies specifically address recent developments and are framed explicitly in an over time framework. They can thus be tested best by over time comparisons of educational policies.

Regarding history education in particular, scholars have developed and tested a number of hypotheses from the world society perspective. These have focused on a decrease in attention given to national history, an increase in an integrated social-scientific view of history as a social system, and increasing attention to collectivities below the level of the nation-state (Frank, Schofer, and Torres 1994; Frank et al. 1996). However, support for these hypotheses has come from quantitative data sets including large number of widely disparate countries. Information about the actual meaning of such trends has been limited due to the astonishing
breadth of these analyses. In the context of this paper, it will be possible to examine these hypotheses on an intermediate level between country case studies and large-scale international comparisons.

German Textbooks

East and West Germany provide contrasting institutional arrangements of textbook authoring and approval. Whereas the central influence of the state permeates educational policy in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) is an example of a federally organized, pluralist form of state-control over education. Textbook writing in East Germany was integrated with curriculum design with a great overlap in structure and personnel of these two elements of educational policy. Textbooks are written by independent authors and often commissioned by publishing houses. They are then subject to an approval process by the state ministries of culture. Consequently, East German educational policy resulted in a single textbook closely integrated with a detailed curriculum while the West German educational system is characterized by textbook pluralism.

Methods

In this paper I present analyses of all East German textbooks that treated the Peasant War and the founding of the German empire in 1871 in grades 5-9, i.e. in the various incarnations of the Oberschule. However, I only included one book from each round of textbook reform. For example, only slight revisions of textbooks occurred annually in the early phase of GDR education (esp. 1951-53), so I have only included the earliest of these from 1951. The four textbooks for the Peasant War and the five textbooks included for the founding of the German empire are listed in the appendix.

Since a number of alternative textbooks were approved for use in West German states at a given time, I selected three states and sampled two textbooks from the complete textbook
catalogue of these states for every five-year period. In order to assure the highest degree of comparability to the East German books, I selected textbooks that were approved for use in grades 5-9 in the Realschule, the middle tier of the three-tiered system of secondary schooling. I selected Bavaria because it tends to be a (conservative) outlier in terms of educational policy. In terms of textbook approval, this conservatism has meant that Bavaria has been the most restrictive state in approving textbooks over the course of postwar history. Northrhine-Westphalia was included because it was one of the newly created postwar states and also because it developed from a conservative, catholic state to a social-democratic stronghold. Finally, I included Hessia, because it was perhaps the most liberal state regarding its educational policies, especially in the early 1970s when radically revised teaching guidelines were implemented. This sample resulted in some overlap between the states which reduced the total number of sampled texts. The 32 textbooks included for the analysis of the Peasant War and the 34 textbooks for the analysis of the founding of the German empire are listed in the appendix.

The Peasant War of 1525

The years 1524 and 1525 saw a number of organized peasants’ uprisings in several regions of Germany. These uprisings followed earlier revolts by peasants in the late 15th century (“Der arme Konrad”, “Der Bundschuh”). The uprisings also dovetailed on the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in that they took some of his writings (esp. “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen”) to point to the injustice of the feudal system as it was being transformed by the rise of the monetary economy. Around the same time, there were a number of uprisings organized by knights (Franz von Sickingen, Ulrich von Hutten) who lost out in their struggle for power to feudal lords. The peasants assembled loosely grouped armies (“Bauernhaufen”) who were variously led by religious and social radicals such as Thomas Mün(t)zer and by knights who joined their cause such as Florian Geyer and Götz von
Berlichingen. These armies made use of the relative military weakness of the feudal lords in the wake of military campaigns for Karl V. Meeting with initial success, the Schwabian peasants penned a list of 12 demands (“12 Artikel”) which served as an articulation of their grievances and is generally viewed as a moderate version of these demands, especially since it includes as the twelfth article the proviso that any of the previous demands should be regarded as void, if they are shown to be in conflict with religious teaching. Revolts were centered on Southwest Germany and especially Schwabia, Frankonia and Thuringia, but spread to other regions throughout Southern Germany and the Alps. In 1525 the peasants were defeated in a number of battles and the insurgents were punished severely. The failure of the peasants’ uprisings led to a long period of subjugation of peasants in the German territories.

“Great Peasants” in the GDR

The “Great German Peasant war” is discussed as an event of great significance on two levels in East German textbooks. The uprising is portrayed as a significant element in the history of class struggles and particularly the establishment of feudalism, as well as an element of the German national struggle. In terms of both of these contexts, the peasants’ uprising is described in highly positive terms both rhetorically and substantively. Not only are the peasants portrayed as presenting justified demands, but their opponents (feudal lords and Luther) are often depicted as villains in their character and their actions.

Throughout the descriptions of the Peasant War, peasants are portrayed as allying themselves with poor inhabitants of towns and other suppressed parts of the population. Thomas Müntzer (a former protégé of Luther’s) plays an important role in providing the guiding ideology for the uprisings (often independent of the religious underpinnings of his teachings) and in providing military leadership for the uprisings themselves. The ideology that Müntzer contributes to the uprisings might be called proto-socialist in that he demanded
common ownership of property and the equal treatment of all classes. This demand is reinforced in the textbook narratives by descriptions of the miserable conditions endured by peasants in the early 16th century.

Despite descriptions of the abject poverty of peasants and urban paupers, the peasants’ articulation of their grievances and demands in the “12 Articles” are quite moderate and often portrayed as perhaps too moderate by the narratives. The articles are reproduced in all textbooks at least in part. In these articles, the peasants demanded the restitution of common property and an end to their subservience to feudal lords and other more specific items.

Luther is consistently portrayed as a traitor to the cause of the peasants even though his pivotal role as an initial inspiration to the uprisings is acknowledged. The overall assessment of Luther’s role is clearly negative and he is portrayed as acting out of unsavory power motives in his turn against the peasants. Whereas early textbooks describe Luther as gradually turning to the support of feudal lords from the early 1520s on (“In Luther’s teaching it became ever clearer from 1521 on that he wanted to see his Reformation through with the help of the feudal lords.” (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht – 6. Schuljahr Teil II, 1951:106; all translations are mine and all following citations from textbooks are exemplary and not a full count of which textbooks made similar arguments)), later textbooks attribute this change of heart to the development of the peasants’ uprising itself and the peasants’ increasingly radical intentions (Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 7, 1989: 44). However, Luther’s portrayal in the history textbooks changes noticeably with the 1989 edition. Luther loses his status as a villain in this book, although as a historical figure he is still overshadowed by Müntzer.

Feudal lords are described repeatedly as villains not only because of their social position and their exploitation of this position, but also for their personal dishonesty. Negotiations
between peasants and lords are usually described as having failed because the lords were dishonest in these dealings and would attack agrarian armies during negotiations or during periods of negotiated cease fires. The peasants are portrayed as noble and true to their cause throughout the texts. Not only were they willing to negotiate with feudal lords about their demands, but they also “did not harm anyone who did not approach them with antagonistic intentions” (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht – 6. Schuljahr Teil II, 1951: 111). Apart from this abstract portrayal of the peasants, a number of heroes emerge from the East German discourse. Thomas Müntzer is the most prominent of these heroes, but others (such as his student Balthasar Hubmayer, the Frankonian leader Wendelin Hippler, the Schwabian leader Jakob “Jäcklein” Rohrbach, and even the artist Tilman Riemenschneider) emerge as well. Müntzer’s writings are characterized as the basis of the Schwabian peasants’ “12 Articles” (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht - 6. Schuljahr Teil II, 1951: 115). His actions in Mühlhausen are described as visionary not only for the peasants but in world-historical terms as well, when the October Revolution is claimed to be the ultimate fulfillment of Müntzer’s demands (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht - 6. Schuljahr Teil II, 1951: 118). Müntzer even gets a literary hero’s burial in the 1957 textbook which writes that the “great German peasants’ leader died courageously as he had lived” (178).

All textbooks emphasize Müntzer’s activities in cities that are part of the GDR. His early activities in Zwickau, Allstedt, and later Mühlhausen are highlighted and explicitly associated with these cities, while the interim period in Southwest Germany (which would be in the FRG) is downplayed (subheadings “Thomas Müntzer comes to Zwickau” and “The Peasant War Grips Thuringia” as opposed to “The Peasant War Is Spreading” in reference to Schwabia, Lehrbuch für Geschichte der 7. Klasse der Oberschule, 1962: 25, 36, 33).

Some of the textbooks make explicit connections between the Peasant War and the fate of the German nation. The 1962 text thus adds “German” as an adjective to passages that had
been neutral in their national implications before. In the summary of the discussion of the war the book states:

    The peasants’ hate for their lords after the defeat was greater than before. The peasants were unable to free themselves from subjugation, but in their hearts they kept the memory of the Great German Peasant War (1524 to 1525). The Great German Peasant War was the largest insurrection against feudalism of German peasants and town paupers. … [The peasants and paupers] passed on the stories of the heated battle to their children and grandchildren, and these in turn relayed their reports to descendants. Thus the conviction remained among German peasants that the injustice that had been done to them by their tormenters would ultimately be avenged. (Lehrbuch für Geschichte der 7. Klasse der Oberschule, 1962: 41, emphasis in the original)

    Questions which follow this summary make the connections between the Peasant War and the contemporary situation in the GDR clear by asking students, “In which part of Germany were the century-old demands of peasants to plow their own land fulfilled?” and “Why are so many LPGs [Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften – agrarian cooperatives] named after Thomas Müntzer?” (Lehrbuch für Geschichte der 7. Klasse der Oberschule, 1962: 41). In contrast to the 1962 textbook, the 1951 summary does not mention the qualifier “German” in connection with the war or the peasants even once. The textbook of 1957 summarizes the chapter on the Peasant War in reference to abstracted class struggles by writing that feudal lords “felt the great power of the people for the first time” (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht – 6. Schuljahr, 1957: 181). The latest textbook goes even further in abstracting from the local and national features of the war by discussing it in terms of an “early bourgeois revolution” (Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 7, 1989: 44-46). Friedrich Engels is quoted with a statement about the cruelty of feudal lords and the summary even includes a statement about the meaning of the reformation that clearly provides a version of the connection between Protestantism and the development of capitalism as proposed by Max Weber (Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 7, 1989: 47).

    The clearest consequence of the failure of the Peasant War is the subjugation of peasants for centuries to follow. At the same time, the defeat of knights by feudal lords also signaled
the establishment of seigniorial feudalism and the predominance of feudal lords in society for
the following centuries. Finally, the ascendance of feudal lords and their subjugation of the
new Protestant church organizations also spelled the end to radical elements of the
Reformation.

The “Peasant War” in the FRG

In West German textbooks, the peasants’ uprising of 1525 only becomes “great” towards the
second half of the postwar period (the first, still isolated use of “Der große Bauernkrieg” can
be found in Die Reise in die Vergangenheit, 1962: 96). Initially, the Peasant War is
frequently subsumed under a more general heading of “Social Unrest”. It is not discussed
prominently and rarely given any wider significance other than as a particularistic conflict.
The Peasant War is most frequently discussed as a direct outgrowth of peasants’ uprisings in
the late 15th century and the uprisings against feudal lords led by knights. These struggles are
portrayed as struggles against the monetary economy and seigniorial feudalism that emerged
around the beginning of the 16th century.

Most textbooks attribute the uprisings to the dire economic circumstances of agrarian life.
Some are more specific in mentioning excessive subdivisions of land through inheritance
(Lebendige Vergangenheit, 1953: 107) or consequences of the emergence of a monetary
economy (Geschichte der Neuzeit, 1960: 11) as reasons for the misery of peasants. Given the
presentation of the Peasant War in the context of social unrest, motivations for the war are
often described in terms of a succession of failed uprisings.

The “12 Articles” are consistently presented as a moderate set of demands (Lehrbuch der
Geschichte für die Mittelstufe höherer Schulen, 1952: 197), though the connotation of
moderate is positive in most of the books. Given the frequent association of the peasants’
uprising with various Protestant movements, the article demanding free elections of pastors is
Invariably mentioned along with articles demanding more economic independence and especially freedom from duties owed to feudal lords and knights (Geschichte für Mittel- und Realschulen, 1953: 31). In many books, especially later ones, the “12 Articles” are used as a literal source and quoted in their entirety to expose students to historical source material (Spiegel der Zeiten, 1960: 88-89).

In the course of the battles between insurgent peasants and feudal lords, many atrocities are attributed to victorious peasants. The uprising is thus branded as illegitimate and as an insurgency. Descriptions of the peasants often echo this negative assessment: “The peasants ganged up, destroyed fortresses, monasteries, and towns and took terrible revenge on their tormentors.” (Unsere Vergangenheit, 1962: 53) Given that the portrayals of the Peasant War were often part of the textbook chapter on the Reformation, such sacrilegious acts are clearly presented as heinous (Grundzüge der Geschichte, 1975: 197). Martin Luther plays a largely positive role in the West German accounts of the Peasant War. Not only are his writings portrayed as the main inspiration of the peasants, but he is described as initially approving of the peasants’ demands as “just” (Menschen in ihrer Zeit, 1966: 23). His change of heart is usually attributed to looting of churches and monasteries in the course of peasants’ uprising (Geschichte für Realschulen, 1968: 27), but in later textbooks the reasoning turns towards Luther’s support by feudal lords to offer an explanation of why he turned against the uprising. Through his turn against the increasingly violent character of the uprising, many textbooks describe the Reformation as loosing its popular support and its status as a particularly German endeavor. One textbook writes that from the suppression of the peasants’ uprising onward, “the reformation was not a cause for the entire German people.” (Geschichtliches Unterrichtswerk, 1962: 149) and Luther is generally associated with the feudal lords rather than the common people in most portrayals.
Thomas Müntzer, on the other hand, is not even mentioned by a quarter of West German textbooks (eight of the 32 included). When he is mentioned he is variously associated with religious movements like the “Schwärmer” (Lehrbuch der Geschichte für die Mittelstufe höherer Schulen, 1952: 197), “Schwarmgeister” and “Bilderstürmer” who strove to eliminate icons, paintings and other material manifestations of wealth from churches, or sometimes even incorrectly with the “Wiedertäufer” (Geschichte, 1968: 19). Often, his preaching is branded as too radical or even communist (Wege der Völker, 1950: 54; Geschichte für Realschulen, 1971: 4). The branding of Müntzer as a communist is especially prevalent in early postwar textbooks, but sporadically appears throughout the time period (Geschichtliche Weltkunde, 1977: 36). Müntzer’s activities in Mühlhausen are usually evaluated even more negatively, once even as a “reign of terror” (Lebendige Vergangenheit, 1953: 108). When Müntzer is mentioned in connection with the military campaigns of the uprising, it is usually in connection with his defeat.

Rarely is the history of the Peasant War presented as the history of particular individuals. Though there are examples of such an approach (Die Reise in die Vergangenheit, 1975 presents Karl V. in a succession of dialogues to depict his role in the Peasant War and the uprising in general), these are rare and limited mostly to the first half of the postwar period. Such instances of “great-person”-centered history are replaced by social scientific views of history emphasizing the systemic aspects of contingent developments. One of the clearest examples of such social scientific discourse makes its appearance in the 1977 edition of Geschichtliche Weltkunde (34) which is the first portrayal that uses a diagram to illustrate the systemic preconditions to the outbreak of the Peasant War. However, this portrayal is only pioneering in its use of a diagram adding to the general impression of a social-scientific view of history which is in evidence in many books of the postwar period, though this approach clearly becomes dominant by the mid-1970s.
Three quarters of included West German textbooks only mention Western German locales of the uprisings and specific battles (Zeiten und Menschen, 1969: 177-178). Since most of the military action did indeed occur in Southwestern Germany, this emphasis is at first not surprising. However, the textbooks seem to distinguish in their geographic attribution between Western German locales of general events or positively evaluated events and those in Eastern German which usually were evaluated negatively, often associated with Thomas Müntzer (Unser Weg durch die Geschichte, 1969: 79).

Given the portrayal of the Peasant War as a particularistic struggle, few implications of this struggle for the German nation are discussed explicitly in the textbooks. Only a small number of books place the Peasant War within a particularly German historical development and point to the peasants as “German peasants” (Geschichtswerk für Realschulen, 1966: 20). Most frequently this attribution comes in the context of an evaluation of the uprisings as the first large-scale social upheaval, esp. in later textbooks. A 1985 textbook writes that, “as never had happened in Germany before, this upheaval of the common man [sic!], encompassed broad sections of the population.” (Unsere Geschichte, 1985: 40 emphasis in the original). The German nation also appears in the context of an assessment that subsequent historical developments led to great hardship for German peasants: “The greatest social uprising of our [!] history was thus a failure. The economic situation of peasants even worsened. They were excluded from political participation for the next 300 years.” (Geschichte für Realschulen, 1971: 17)

Some of the textbooks do mention the national goals that had also been part of the peasants’ uprising in that they demanded a reform of national governance structures along the lines of a unified legal system, standardized measurements and money, and the dissolution of classes under the emperor (Geschichte für Mittel- und Realschulen, 1953: 31). However, even
in the context of the rare mention of such national aspirations of peasants, no connections are drawn with the modern German nation-state.

**Unification and Foundation of the German Empire in 1871**

Modern Germany was unified as the German empire following the Franco-German War of 1870/71. Unification came largely at the initiative of Prussia and its chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, and represented the so-called “Kleindeutsche Lösung” in that it excluded Austria. After the collapse of the 1848 revolution in Germany, Prussia emerged as the most powerful of the German states. Through wars against Denmark (1864) and Austria (1866), Prussia solidified its leadership position and bolstered it further by joining with Northern German states in the “Norddeutscher Bund” in 1867. As the culmination of the ascent of Prussia to power and of the emergence of a German nation-state, Bismarck provoked war with Napoleon III. of France through publication of the “Emser Depesche”, following a Franco-German dispute over the Spanish crown. King Wilhelm of Prussia was offered the German imperial crown after defeating the French armies. He ascended the throne as Wilhelm I. of Germany in Versailles in 1871.

**Prussification in the GDR**

The portrayal of the German nation in the late 19th century is characterized by two elements in East German textbooks: 1. As a necessary and progressive development of bourgeois society and 2. as the culmination of Prussian attempts to gain power over Germany in a united nation-state. The portrayals underwent a development regarding both of these aspects over the course of GDR history. Whereas unification is described mostly in terms of class struggle in the 1950s and as a process of Prussification, later accounts downplay class relations and portray Prussia and especially Bismarck in a neutral or even positive light.
The historical narrative of German unification is dominated generally by an account of Bismarck’s role in this process and the GDR textbooks are no exception to this rule. However, beyond Bismarck’s role as the main protagonist of this development, he also serves as a villain and as a representative of a despised social class in the textbooks, the Prussian Junker. Much is thus made of Bismarck’s family background and his associations with various social peers in the early textbooks which paint a picture of Bismarck largely drawn from his famous “Blut und Eisen” speech to the Prussian parliament. However, later textbooks and especially the 1989 edition (Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 8) portray Bismarck in an increasingly positive light. Not only is his character evaluated positively in these later narratives (“scharfsinnig und geschickt”), but the process of unification itself is painted in increasingly positive terms, independent of its economic necessity.

The causes of the developments leading up to the Franco-German War of 1870/71 are sought in economic circumstances throughout the portrayal of unification. The narratives consistently point to contradictions between economic development and a reactionary form of government, but also between economic development and its impediments caused by the fragmentation of the German nation into many small states. Unification in 1871 is thus portrayed as an economic necessity.

Other reasons for unification are located in popular support for this development. Though the extent to which the German people are described as patriotic and in support of the three Prussian wars (against Denmark, Austria and France) varies, the populace is consistently portrayed as playing a role in these developments. Popular demands for action against Denmark and France are particularly emphasized in this context and placed in a historical continuity stemming from revolutionary attempts to establish a German nation-state in 1848.
Moderating such accounts of popular support for unification are the narratives of the rise of the working class. The first textbook (Lehrbuch für den Geschichtsunterricht – 7. Schuljahr Teil III, 1952) places the greatest amount of emphasis on the development of the working class by separating the account of this development from the narrative of the Prussian rise to dominance over Germany. The placement of unification within a historical development towards capitalism (and thus ultimately towards socialism) is highlighted by the lengthy account of the fate of the Paris Commune which is integrated into the narrative. From the second textbook (Lehrbuch für Geschichte der 8. Klasse der Oberschule, 1960) on, the account of the modern history of the working class is separated out from German history leading to a drop in volume of the chapter including unification from approximately 7200 words to 2700 words between the first two editions. However, the history of working class organization is reintegrated into the historical narrative in the textbooks of the 1980s (Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 8, 1983; Geschichte – Lehrbuch für Klasse 8, 1989), thought it now appears as an integral part of the historical development as opposed to the separate section it consisted of in earlier versions.

The narrative of diplomatic relations leading up to unification is dominated in the first two textbooks by disapproving accounts of the “Prussification” of Germany. The image presented is very much one of Prussia usurping power over other German states and coming to represent all of Germany. In later textbooks, the term “Prussification” is dropped entirely and the developments are not presented with such an exclusive focus on Prussian power politics anymore.

Instead of the earlier account of the founding of the German empire as dominated by power politics pursued by politicians and rulers, later accounts (i.e., the textbooks from 1960 on to an increasing extent) begin to emphasize popular support for German unification and also for the wars waged in the course of the struggle for unification. Whereas the 1960
textbook (Lehrbuch für Geschichte der 8. Klasse der Oberschule) began the discussion of popular enthusiasm for the “defense” of Schleswig-Holstein, it still included an explicit statement that unification itself was accomplished without popular participation or representation, a qualification which is dropped in subsequent editions. Discussions of the historical status of the Franco-German War undergo a very similar development. Given the increasing focus on popular support for this war, all textbooks from the 1960 edition on state that the war against France was a “just” war of national self-determination, at least up until the defeat of Napoleon III. After the initial German victory, the textbooks portray the continuation of the war against the Third Republic and the Commune as a punitive and imperialistic war, lacking popular support.

Connections to the GDR are almost entirely absent from the account of the founding of the German empire. Obviously, the sections detailing the growth of working class organizations expound on the efforts of individuals who are confirmed members of the East German heroic pantheon, especially August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, but few continuities of the German nation-state between the empire and the GDR are mentioned. On the other hand, the implications of the founding of the empire for the German nation are clearly addressed by the narrative. Despite the objections of the textbooks to the method by which unification was achieved and despite the couching of the positive consequences of unification in Marxist terms (“overcoming territorial fragmentation, unifying measurements, unified economic area, and opportunity for larger scale working-class mobilization”), the textbooks note this unification with satisfaction and allow it to be associated with some form of an expression of the popular will as demonstrated by the changes in the portrayal of popular support discussed above.

“Bismarck Unifies Germany” in the FRG
Accounts of the developments leading up to the founding of the German empire in 1871 invariably begin either with the coronation of Wilhelm I. of Prussia in 1861 or with the king’s decision to turn to Otto von Bismarck as state minister in 1862 in West German accounts as much as in the East German textbooks. The subsequent narrative leading up to unification in 1871 is dominated entirely by the role the Bismarck played in this development.

Even though narratives of the founding of the German empire are focused almost exclusively on Bismarck, these are not hagiographic accounts of his role. Throughout the postwar period, West German textbooks point to the blunt and antidemocratic use of power by Bismarck and diminish his potential status as a national and military hero. Even General von Moltke who served as Bismarck’s most successful military strategist in the Prussian wars against Denmark, Austria and France does not achieve the status of a military hero. This lack of a heroic description of Bismarck reflects some of the ambivalence with which the founding of the modern German nation-state is seen. Attention to the crucial influence of an individual’s political strategy and ambition also does not prevent the textbooks from increasingly emphasizing a social-scientific view of history as predicted by other research on history curricula. This rise of a systemic view of history is most easily observed in the emergence of tasks and questions offered to students in the texts from the 1970s on. Geschichte (1972) is perhaps the first textbook in the sample that exhibits some of this tendency. Questions in this and subsequent textbooks focus on the understanding of power relations that made Bismarck’s policies possible as opposed to earlier textbooks which merely describe developments as they unfold. Such analytic questions largely replace the anecdotes that many of the earlier textbooks use to paint a picture of Bismarck’s character as an explanation of the historical development.

The focus on Bismarck in describing the founding of the German nation-state inevitably brings a focus on Prussian politics with it. The textbooks trace Bismarck’s political strategies
and goals to his constitutional conflict with the Prussian parliament in the 1860s. Despite this focus on Prussian politics and despite the importance of Prussian activism in the Franco-German War, the unification of Germany in 1871 is usually not described as the usurpation of power over all of Germany by Prussia. Since the southern German states joined Prussia in the war against France, the armies in this war are inevitably described as German armies, not as Prussian. This is in stark contrast to the “fraternal war” (*Einst und Jetzt*, 1967) against Austria in 1866, the description of which clearly labeled the protagonists as Prussian.

Most accounts of the three Prussian wars of the 1860s and 70s mention popular support for these wars as a factor in their successful conclusions. However, this support is only ever noted in the abstract and no particular groups or actors are identified as being support of the war or even as opposing it. Liebknecht and Bebel’s refusal to support these wars in parliament, which is a crucial element of the East German narratives, is not mentioned specifically by a single West German textbook. This absence of specific collective or individual actors reinforces the impression that the founding of the empire was merely the result of Prussian power politics, not of a popular struggle for unification.

Even though the founding of the German empire obviously plays a crucial role in the history of the German nation-state, the accounts of this founding in textbooks draw few connections between it and the Federal Republic. Such connections are only ever made in the context of some of the analytic questions and tasks for students mentioned above in the context of an increasingly social-scientific view of history. Such questions (*Die Reise in die Vergangenheit* (1972): 122 and *Spiegel der Zeiten* (1977): 180) occasionally ask the students to compare empire and postwar constitutional institutions or the role of the military, for example. But the accounts of the founding of the empire do not in any obvious way argue for any continuity between this early modern nation-state and the postwar state.
Comparisons and Conclusions

Examination of the portrayal of the Peasant War and the founding of the German empire shows that the construction of national identity in the German Democratic Republic was dominated by macro-political developments and attitudes towards nationhood. From the beginning of the postwar reconstruction on, various factions within the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei – Socialist Unity Party) debated the extent to which the German character of the GDR was to be emphasized. The two most prominent East German politicians, Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, both moved in their attitude towards the German nation from universalistic principles tied to world communism and internationalism to much more particularistic notions of a peculiarly German socialism in the GDR. These developments and control of the party apparatus over education as represented by these two leaders explain some of the changes in the portrayal of the nation in the selected episodes. In the early days of the GDR through the 1950s portrayals emphasized class conflict as underlying history. In contrast, portrayals of the 1960s and 80s privilege the particularly German (and Prussian) aspects of these episodes.

The analysis of East German textbooks above reflect this change in historical emphasis clearly. The career of the term “German” in the portrayals of the Peasant War is an example of changes in the portrayal of the nation. While the Peasant War was represented in terms of class conflict in early and the most recent textbooks, the textbook that was published during the later years of Ulbricht’s leadership emphasized the particularly German character of the uprising. Emphasis of East German locales in the narrative of the Peasant War provides another indicator of changes.

The role of Prussia in the narratives of the founding of the German empire, reflects a similar development. Whereas the early textbooks which emphasized class relation in the account of the Peasant War as well as of the founding of the empire demonized Prussia as an
imperialistic power, later accounts weaken this demonization. Though these accounts stop short of valorizing Prussia, they do introduce the argument that unification on the basis of Prussian might have represented the popular will. In this context, Bismarck as a historical figure is also seen in an increasingly less negative light, especially since his role is counter-balanced by the rise of working-class organization in the textbooks.

The close coupling of macro-political developments in East Germany with the portrayal of the nation in historical episodes suggest that the GDR is an example of the instrumentalization of history for contemporary purposes. Given the direct control that the party apparatus exerted over education (not least through the family tie between Margot Honecker, minister of education for most of the 1970s and 80s, and Erich Honecker), the analysis presented here indicates that the party used this link for identity-building purposes.

Few of the global trends that researchers have observed in large-scale quantitative comparisons such as the turn to a social-scientific history curriculum and the emphasis of sub-national groups are evident in East German materials. If anything, the prevalence of a social-scientific (here, Marxist) view of history wanes, as history textbooks moved away from the rigid consideration of historical developments only in relation to class struggle. Instead, the portrayal of Luther serves as a good example of the overwhelming personalization of history in the GDR by emphasizing the role of villains and heroes in historical developments. Luther serves as one of the villains for the Peasant War, but even more attention is paid to the heroes of the uprisings who are rarely even mentioned by West German textbooks. This personalization is contrary to the global trends revealed by other research on history education (Frank, Schofer, and Torres 1994; Frank et al. 1996). One might speculate that control over education by a dictatorial political apparatus precluded such influences or that a number of world polities might coexist along the lines of the First, Second and Third World.
Luther is also a good example of the interaction between macro-politics and textbook content in terms of the presentist legitimation of the GDR nation-state. Given Honecker’s increasing interest in particularly German aspects of the GDR, celebration of the 500-year anniversary of Luther’s birth was endorsed by the party leadership, even though this anniversary coincided with the 100-year anniversary of Karl Marx’ death. In the celebrations, Luther was clearly portrayed as an important part of the national heritage of the GDR and his activities within the geographical confines of the GDR were emphasized. Similarly, Prussia was increasingly acknowledged as a predecessor to the GDR. Continuity was emphasized surprisingly not only in the geographical overlap between parts of Prussia and the GDR, but also in the role of Prussia in the unification of the German nation-state. This process could be most clearly observed in the “rehabilitation” of Frederic I. of Prussia (who regained his title “the Great”) and of Potsdam as his residence in the 1980s, but is reflected in Bismarck’s “career” within the textbooks as well. Other aspects that indicate the instrumentalization of history are the emphasis of East German locales and attempts by textbook authors to draw direct connections between demands put forth by peasants in the Peasant War and the supposed fulfillment of these demands in the East German state.

In contrast, changes in identity construction in textbooks of the Federal Republic of Germany seem to coincide well with some of the predictions derived from the world polity perspective and do not seem to demonstrate the presentist instrumentalization of history for state purposes. Whereas the lack of a legitimizing role of history in West Germany is clearest in comparison with East Germany, aspects of the professionalization of history education can be observed best in overtime comparisons of West German textbooks.

Overtime comparison reveals that portrayals of the Peasant War are characterized by the tight coupling of high school history texts with academic historiography. Whereas history in the early days of the FRG was seen as the "history of great men", later historiography began
to emphasize "everyday history" or "history from below". Textbook authors were increasingly drawn from the ranks of university-based historians reflecting some of these changes. Similarly, the increasing attention paid to systemic aspects of the peasants’ uprising (i.e., its origin in economic and political conditions of the time) is evidence for the influence of some of the paradigms of history education revealed by international comparisons. In the West German case, professionalization attempts along the lines of world polity influences were accompanied and perhaps intensified by demographic shifts, sweeping a new generation of teachers into schools following the expansion of education in the 1960s and initiation of educational reform. The rise of social-scientific views of history is less clearly observable in the case of portrayals of the founding of the empire, because these portrayals were bound so clearly to Bismarck as a political actor and thus left little room for other actors. However, even in this context of a diplomatic history of unification, some of the analytic questions that are posed to students by the textbooks in the 1970s and 80s, suggest that historical developments were increasingly presented in a systemic fashion.

History is not used overtly for legitimating purposes in the case of the West German textbooks. Of course, a closer reading reveals aspects of legitimation, but as these are not mediated by direct state control over education in the FRG, one might suspect that such elements are due to a more general attempt at the legitimization of the postwar nation state than the particular utilization of historical episodes for such purposes. Emphasis of historical events in Western Germany as well as the disparaging portrayal of some of the ideological underpinnings and actors of the Peasant War could certainly be interpreted as legitimizing the West German state vis-à-vis East Germany. However, even such legitimizing aspects are subject to some of the developments of professionalization in that they change over the course of the 45 postwar years covered. In contrast, the portrayals of Bismarck and the founding of the German empire are not used for a legitimation of the Federal Republic at all.
In part, this might be due to the problematic nature of the course of German history following the 1870s (esp. since early GDR historiography inevitably painted a picture of continuity from Bismarck to Hitler to the FRG).

Depending on the general attitude to the parties in the insurgency, peasants’ deeds are presented in all textbooks in the active or passive voice. In East German books, peasants’ positive deeds (e.g., their valor) are named with specific subjects and the active voice, while some of their negative actions (e.g., the destruction of churches and monasteries) are presented as passive occurrences. Likewise, feudal lords take an active role in rooting out the excesses of the peasants’ destructiveness, but are more passive and unnamed in descriptions of the revenge visited upon insurgents after their defeat. West German textbooks initially exhibit exactly opposite portrayals in that they belittle peasants’ demands and achievements by presenting the peasants as mere subjects of historical developments. Later on, the increasing attention given to systemic and social aspects of history lead to a greater appreciation of the peasants’ contributions and a lessening of the emphasis on the contribution of “great men”.

My analysis of East German textbooks lends some support to hypotheses that identify the state as the main actor in the utilization of history for identity purposes, but the West German case also shows the great influence of global trends towards the professionalization of history education, systemic views of history and an increasing emphasis of sub-national groups in national education. Interestingly, the portrayals of the Peasant War of 1525 and of German unification in 1871 lend very little support to theories of national identity that emphasize the ethnic core of such an identity. The analysis of West and East German textbooks presented here shows that though some aspects of history are exploited for political purposes, few textbook authors draw explicit connections between the overlapping ethnic background of today’s Germans and “great German peasants” of the 16th century or of 19th century Prussians.
References


Appendix

The Peasant War in East German Textbooks

[All without author and published by the Verlag Volk und Wissen, Berlin]


The Founding of the German Empire in East German Textbooks

[All without author and published by the Verlag Volk und Wissen, Berlin]


The Peasant War in West German Textbooks

[Authors omitted, approval states in brackets: Bay = Bavaria, Hes = Hessia, NRW = Northrhine Westphalia]

Geschichte der Neuzeit (1960). Munich, Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag: 11-12. [Bay]
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