



Red Love: The Story of an East German Family

Maxim Leo , Shaun Whiteside (Translation)

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Now, married with two children and the Wall a distant memory, Maxim decides to find the answers to the questions he couldn't ask. Why did his parents, once passionately in love, grow apart? Why did his father become so angry, and his mother quit her career in journalism? And why did his grandfather Gerhard, the Socialist war hero, turn into a stranger? The story he unearths is, like his country's past, one of hopes, lies, cruelties, betrayals but also love. In Red Love he captures, with warmth and unflinching honesty, why so many dreamed the GDR would be a new world and why, in the end, it fell apart.

Growing up in East Berlin, Maxim Leo knew not to ask questions. All he knew was that his rebellious parents, Wolf and Anne, with their dyed hair, leather jackets and insistence he call them by their first names, were a bit embarrassing. That there were some places you couldn't play; certain things you didn't say.

Red Love: The Story of an East German Family Details

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From Reader Review Red Love: The Story of an East German Family for online ebook

Dolf Patijn says

Een familiegeschiedenis over een familie die vanaf het begin actief betrokken is bij de DDR. Een mooie aanvulling op "De Toren" van Uwe Tellkamp.

Dem says

3.5 stars

An engaging and well written personal account that gives outsiders a glimpse of everyday life In East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989

image:

Having recently returned from a trip to Berlin I was eager to read a personal account of life in East Berlin before the wall came down and I chose to read Red Love: The Story of an East German family by Maxim Leo and was not disappointed by my choice as it was a rewarding read and touched upon so many names of places and stories I had seen and heard during my trip.

While I had seen images of the Berlin Wall in books and on television I was completely taken aback when I actually saw what remains of it as it was so unlike the image I had in my head.

The book was a terrific insight into life behind the wall and the hopes and dreams of one German family. The story traces this family's history from the WWI through the Second World War and up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and what an interesting history it is. The book is insightful and held my attention throughout. I did find myself getting confused at times with the different family members but not so much so that it would interfere with the understanding of the book.

image:

Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says

The story of the modern Germany through one family.

Using material obtained from his parents and grandparents as well as his own story, Maxim Leo paints a tale of hope through to ossification that ultimately lead to the implosion of the first 'workers and peasants' state on German soil'.

It's a really good read which has been translated very well. The book contains many pictures which really bring the characters to life. Readers should bear in mind however, that if they are unfamiliar with modern German history you might find some parts difficult to follow.

Nick Blackbourn says

Why the GDR mattered and why it didn't, through the story of one family. The best book I've read in quite sometime.

Denis says

Red Love is quite simply a masterpiece, a lovingly written book that shines as a mesmerizing piece of literature but also as a gripping History lesson. Leo's memories of his youth in East Germany unfold in a melancholy and moving way, narrating the intimate story of his fascinating family, and bringing his childhood back to life. They also do much more than that: they brilliantly capture the complex realities of a country built over the ashes of Nazi Germany and the war, and therefore of the people who contributed to its erection - as well as of the people who later, understandingly, pushed for its demise. Leo's personal journey through his past is lyrically written, and opens the door on daily life in a Germany that was then forbidden to the rest of the western world. By doing so, Leo reflects in a meticulous, almost tender way, on the state's destiny and politics, which get bleaker and chillier as years pass by. We discover a very different East Germany than the one associated to so many clichés we have. Leo has no nostalgia for the communist dictatorship, but through his eyes, and through the often stunning destinies of the members of his family, we do understand what happened in his homeland with clarity and – that is maybe the most surprising – with powerful emotions. Red Love, as the title implies, is indeed, in many ways, all about love, including the love of literature.

Steven Godin says

A certain Wall may have crumbled back in 1989, but life in East Germany is impossible to forget for Maxim Leo. Born in 1970, Leo studied Political Science in both Berlin and Paris before becoming an Editor for the Berliner Zeitung newspaper, and has been praised for his journalism.

'Red Love' is an honest and poignant work, told in an utterly convincing manner, that depicts what life was really like during the post-war years and later the collapse of that huge chunk of concrete that split a city in two. But strictly speaking this is not an out and out book about the GDR, it's more a deeply personal look at his family starting right back in the days of pre-WW2. Both his Grandfathers, Werner and Gerhard's stories feature heavily, as well as his parents, Wolf and Anne, who both ended up seeing things differently in the Socialist State.

It is difficult for me to image the GDR even existed, all these years on, I only vaguely remember it being all over the news back in 1989. Prior to that, hardly a word came out from behind the wall. And yet when journalist Maxim Leo was living in East Berlin through the Seventies and Eighties the GDR was not only real, it was omnipresent. As a totalitarian Country it governed how Leo was schooled, what he thought, what job he was allowed to go for, and what he was allowed to think and say. Like a seriously overbearing parent it must have been stifling and terrifying, but also reassuring in a strange way. As long as you just play along with the GDR rulebook, regardless of your own true feelings, then there shouldn't have been anything to worry about. Ideally, you would be taken care of. But what sort of life was that?

Leo tells the story of how his family coped, or failed to cope, with this bizarre historical anomaly. Each member of his family had a different stance towards the East German state. There were those who loved it with every kiss, those who resisted it, and those, like Leo's mother Anne, who didn't really know what to think. The only impossible thing was to ignore it altogether. It's in your living room, and there whilst you slept, like in the words of Wolf Leo "The GDR was always there in bed with us."

The story starts with Leo's grandparents who, in their own ways, were both ardent fans of the East German regime. The two sides of Leo's family could not have been more different. Gerhard, his maternal grandfather, a Jew, was forced to flee Germany before the war to escape the hell of the Nazis. Leo's paternal grandfather, Werner, by contrast, had originally supported the Nazis so enthusiastically that he not only hung his own windows with swastikas, but pestered others to do likewise. While Gerhard joined the French Resistance during WW2 and had all kinds of astonishing adventures fighting against his former Germans, Werner joined the Wehrmacht and fought for the Fatherland in the doomed Ardennes battle. Gerhard returned to Germany a war hero, and became a strong embodiment for the Resistance whilst Werner returned a beaten man, having spent two years toiling in a prisoner-of-war camp in France. But both men had one thing in common, a passion for East German Communism. For one it was a matter of patriotism, For the other it was a chance to rejuvenate himself, and start again. Despite his Nazi past, all he ever wanted was to belong to something bigger than himself, I guess the GDR seemed that bigger something.

Leo's parents, had more of a fractured relationship with the GDR. His mother, Anne, found it almost impossible to reject the ideology of the hero father she dearly loved. But growing up began to see that the Communist ideal and the Communist reality were different ideologies. As a journalist she wanted to criticise the regime, but because of her devotion to her father every bad thing said felt like a betrayal of sorts, she came across as someone almost constantly stuck.

Leo's father, Wolf, on the other hand, rebelled against his Nazi background almost from the very beginning. A colourful, defiant and strong willed artist, Wolf pushed the boundaries of what he was and was not allowed to do. He produced subversive art, and made incendiary talks at the Artists Association. This caused all kinds of family arguments which Maxim bore witness to.

As for Maxim, he was growing up, trying to be his own person, and had no idea which side he would side with. Just wanting to live a normal life with the family he loved, without this 'barricade' that his grandfather often spoke of. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 he felt no happiness or relief, just a kind of empty anxiety, totally overcome by what he was witnessing, and that he still has trouble identifying in the 21st century. He had no real love for his old homeland, and yet it was all he had ever known, before practically overnight it dissolved before his eyes.

This was a moving account of people who love one another in some kind of way, but are doomed never to truly co-exist, and it is also an unbearably affecting description of a world that is now confined to the history books. His family represents a microcosm of East Germany, struggling with the same opposing sets of ideals that eventually broke the Camel's back. As Maxim Leo tells with painful clarity, those who lived in this dysfunctional family are still living with the repercussions today and beyond.

Conny says

This is probably one of the best books/memoirs that I have read so far about life in the GDR (East Germany). I really liked that the author did not pretend for a second that he had the answers for all the problems he was facing during his youth, but rather he describes why he and his family lived their lives the way they did.

I had this notion that people who lived in GDR must have detested it, but that notion of mine was proved wrong here. After reading this book, I realized that not all who lived there were unhappy with the country or the party.

The central players in this book are Leo's parents, Anne and Wolf, and both his grandfathers, Gerhard and Werner. Each one of them with their different experiences in GDR. This book contained more of the family history and less of Leo's own childhood, which can be disappointing but not completely, I enjoyed the book anyway. Grandmothers, other women, and some other people were not given much space in the story, they came into the story to make an appearance and to prove their existence but they were removed from the story just as they showed up. I don't know what happened to them.

Leo's maternal grandfather, Gerhard, was a Jew's descendant or say part Jew, with Jew's father and Aryan mother. They left Germany when he was of age 10 and moved to France. After his father's death, he tried to find his place in the world and later joined The Partisans and fought against the Nazis in the World War II. After the war was over, he permanently became part of the communist party mostly because the people who helped him during the war were mostly communists and his communist friends influenced him a lot. Later during the formation of GDR, he went along with the communist party and moved to East Germany even though earlier he belonged to the West. During the end of the book, we get to know even though he lived in East Germany and was an influential person in GDR, he lived his best years in France.

"New faith for old suffering: that was the ideal behind the foundation of the GDR."

Leo's paternal grandfather, Werner, on the other hand, fought for the Nazis in World War II, he adopted Nazism and served in the war. He belonged to a working-class family and wanted to be successful and influential and show people that children from working class can also reach great heights. Later he moved to East Germany and advocated a communist political party system. For the most part, he went along with the flow and mostly followed things as they came. I guess he did what was best for his survival, he just wanted to live and along the way also find his position in the society.

"I'm surprised that Werner allowed his professional future to be determined by a tram. The stage workshops were in Kreuzberg at the time. If other tram had come first, Werner would have remained a West Berliner, my parents would have never met, and I would have never have been born."

The first generation that lived in GDR and also had invested in the foundation of GDR. For them, GDR was the symbol of protection, peace, and a fresh start.

"Heroes, survivors from the big wide world who have found their new home in the little GDR. Because they aren't prosecuted here, because they are safe here."

GDR gave them the hope that now they could be anything they want and that they could live without any

threat to their lives.

"I think that for both my grandfathers the GDR was a kind of dreamland, in which they could forget all the depressing things that had gone before. It was a new start, a chance to begin all over again."

For Leo's mother, Anne, things were different, she didn't play any part in the foundation of GDR, for her GDR was just something that happened, even though she was born in West Germany, she had to move to the East because of her father's ideologies. She grew up in a communist family and GDR became her identity, she couldn't see herself without GDR. Later in life we see her deflect from those ideologies, but even then she won't completely give up on them, she learned to balance and live in GDR without contradicting the Party even though she had different thoughts and they didn't align with the Party's ideologies.

"The feeling that she must not harm the GDR because it is the safe haven that offers peace and protection to her persecuted parents."

For her, things became a little easy in East Germany also because she belonged to an influential family. She tried to speak her thoughts but stopped before things turned nasty for her. It was really necessary to create a facade if you had to live in the country without getting punishments for breaking the laws or going against GDR.

A few decades later Anne finds that letter in her Stasi File. She learns that an operational procedure had been launched against her. But later case is dropped a short time later. "Father of the woman in question is a member of the Central Committee of the SED*," it says in the file. And this is an end to the matter because investigations aren't usually carried out into important party workers and their families.

*SED - Socialist Unity Party.

Leo's father, Wolf, an artist who didn't really liked ideologies of the Party though he was not really sure if the system was wrong or not, but one thing he discovered earlier in life that you don't really have to believe in the system to live in GDR only that you have to show them that you do. Like every other artist who dealt with multiple censorships and governmental control publication, he also suffered from that though he resisted it every chance he got, he tested the water to see how far he can go without getting into trouble or breaking a law.

"I don't think Wolf was an especially political person at the time. He wasn't yet convinced that the system was wrong. He was more concerned with himself, with his needs, with his dignity. He didn't like being told what to do. He was allergic to other people's rules, he wanted to determine his own life. When he felt pressure from outside he grew stubborn."

For Wolf, neither the system was in his favor nor the fall of the wall in 1989. At least the system gave him something to resist against, the fall of the wall came with, no resistance, and nothing to fight against, with the fall of the wall he saw his own downfall.

Anne found herself again and with a new found spirit because after GDR was collapsed. Now she could express her true self without hurting sentiments of her communist family and without going against the party.

There was this section in the book where Leo was not selected for Higher Education and had to go for work while some other students went to college to get further education and be the intellectuals and the influencers in the country. I'm not still sure why he was denied admission in the first place but what I learned is that The Party had a lot of power to make decisions and if they felt a family is hindering or going against their ideologies they made them suffer and comrades didn't have the power to fight them. Another thing I learned from the desperation of Leo's parents to get him into the university is that life in GDR for workers was not very good and they suffered the most. Leo's family was full of intellectuals and his parents' friends were intellectual and had a good place in the society. So, that shows why they made sure he went to college and a good thing that he did.

Now, I wonder what was it like to live in GDR when people concerned were workers and not the influentials.

I liked to read the history of his grandparents mostly because it gave an insight into their lives and why they made those decisions they made and how they played their part in the WWII. Also how their decisions affected their family. It also helped in providing the distinction of how life was different for three different generations living together in the same country. And not only that reader get to see how GDR transitioned from being one of the most strict government to one which was much mellower and one day weak enough to witness its downfall.

This book was a really good memoir and was very engaging. I haven't read many books so as to compare them with each other but this I believe is one of the best out there. Worth reading.

David Lowther says

This is one of the finest biographical histories of recent years. It's not, strictly speaking an autobiography because the author uses material obtained from his parents and grandparents from before he was born.

Red Love is about three generations of one German family; grandparents who grew up under the Third Reich, parents who lived throughout almost the entire period of the German Democratic Republic and the author himself who was nineteen when the Berlin Wall came down.

Between them they paint a picture of an ultimately failing state which differed only from Nazi Germany in so much as the GDR killed fewer people. Both states were ruthlessly authoritarian. The book also makes it clear why so many idealistic communists were suspected of disloyalty by the GDR government. But it doesn't say so. It's so skilfully written that the reader reaches an understanding of life in the GDR without being preached at.

This is a superbly translated book and wonderfully written and one which all those who wish to understand the evolution of modern Germany should read.

Shaza Kachour says

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Hameed Younis says

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Alexandra says

Fascinating topic. It would have been nice if the English translation had had a few extras like acronym guides, timelines, maybe a family tree. I was a bit unclear as to which side was which in certain parts. Leo wrote this book in German and I'm sure his original audience was intimately familiar with the characters and event, but someone more removed (i.e. me, an American in her early 30s) could have used a quick refresher/primer.

Sue says

Maxim Leo certainly has some interesting family stories to tell. Born in 1970, Leo is a journalist who lived for his first nineteen years behind the wall in East Berlin, the son of bohemian parents, Wolf and Anne, and the grandson of at least one True Believing Marxist, Gerhard. He used family conversations, diaries, and memoirs, as well as the East German secret police (Stasi) files which are now open and freely available to anyone wishing to check his own files.

Perhaps the unusual thing about Maxim Leo's story is that he persisted in learning its details and writing it down. Legions of Germans have similarly fascinating stories from family members who lived through some of the 20th century's most cataclysmic history, but they will slide into obscurity.

Leo's maternal grandfather, Gerhard, is a riveting figure. He escaped to France at the age of 10 with his parents. His father, a principled and accomplished attorney, had unwittingly run afoul of Goebbels. Gerhard grew up to fight in France with the Partisans in World War II, and his stories are among the most dramatic in the book. His colleagues in the Resistance were communists, and Gerhard adopted, never wavering, a

political commitment that he learned from them in these formative years. Hence Gerhard's daughter Anne grew up in a fervent Marxist home. Like her father, she enjoyed privilege in the GDR, or East Germany, with little interference from the Stasi. Gerhard's wife, Norah, was barely mentioned.

Leo's paternal grandfather, Werner, is less known, having disappeared, leaving his wife, Sigrid, to raise Wolf on her own. He rather cheerfully adopted Nazism when he became a soldier in World War II. Then, by random chance finding himself in East Berlin after the war, he became a teacher, cheerfully turning young minds into loyal defenders of its communist political system. When the wall came down, Werner was happy to spend time in his little country cottage. In other words, Werner was blowing in the wind, not too thoughtful. He, too, is an interesting type. Even though she raised Wolf, Sigrid gets little description.

Living in the workers' paradise, Leo fails to qualify for the top educational track leading to the Abitur diploma. His mother, the loyal communist but in the intellectual elite, is utterly dejected because her son is fated to be a worker. What delicious irony!

Leo describes the events leading up to the fall of the wall in 1989 – the best part of the book, perhaps because Leo lived them himself. This information is not second hand. The Marxists in the family have a struggle ahead, to come to terms with the fact that the perfect society they envisioned is not ever to be realized.

While the stories are good ones – and particular to the Marxist families who established and embraced the ethos of East Germany – there are several glaring flaws in this book. It may fail to endure as a memoir on several counts. The reader must already be familiar with the events of Germany beginning in the 30s, up through unification of the two Germanys. There is scarcely any effort to establish that context, which must surely limit the value of the book to anyone not well grounded in the history. (That includes the current younger generations, for whom this is all ancient history.) As years pass, that unfamiliarity will become ever more common. Written originally for a German audience, the book even uses numerous political party abbreviations without explanation.

The memoir could have benefitted from more linear sequencing, for a story unfolding through a dramatic historical period. I found myself annoyed with abrupt time shifts among the various personages. And I really wondered about the missing women. Leo worked diligently to interview his grandfathers, but not his grandmothers. Hiss. Boo.

Bob says

Not everybody in the GDR thought the place was totally horrible; many of the residents just wanted to get along with their lives. Despite the obvious problems they just went with the system.

Maxim Leo's parents are about the same age as me, so they also grew up in the 1950's, hearing about WW-II from their own parents who were about the same vintage as mine. What I remember most from that era was the tendency for vets to talk little about their wartime experiences, as if they did not want to bring them back up.

Maxim's mother was of Jewish descent, and her father escaped to France where he sided with the resistance and survived -- after being captured by the Germans -- only by extreme good luck. Maxim's father was not

Jewish, and his dad was a German soldier who ended up as a POW, returning home about two years after the end of the war. Both of Maxim's grandfathers became Communists, each because of deep seated hatreds for the fascists. Having the nazis be dead was not nearly enough for the grandfathers: They wanted the entire nazi concept to be obliterated. The GDR did do a good job of this, successfully blaming the Third Reich on the West Germans to an extent that East Germans were able to disassociate themselves from the whole thing.

But all was not well in Maxim's family. His parents had both been born in the West, and even though they largely accepted the East as "being the way things are" they could not agree with everything. They found they could go along to some degree, but not to the point where they knew fully well that the Party was blatantly distorting the truth, especially when the distortions were absurd. Both parents had occasional brushes with the Stasi, but managed to stay just enough within the limits to avoid being arrested. They were quite good at this balancing act.

As the Wall came down and the GDR ceased to exist, Maxim's family had some very mixed emotions. Life in the GDR was fairly quiet, people had low cost housing, and they knew how to work with that system, limitations and all. The West was opulent, aggressive, loud and expensive. It took some getting used to, despite the relief at losing the Stasi. Probably much the same experience as someone would have when they are released after a long stay in prison: Better? Yes. Overwhelming? That, too.

A very interesting and well written story.

The Stasi experiences were interesting for Maxim's mother. She was a journalist who gradually developed an understanding how the Party had manipulated the truth. Her choices were either (a) put up with it and be quiet, or (b) speak up and suffer. She did some of both and finally had to quit her job. This reminded me greatly of the job I recently retired from, at a large and well known company. They did not have a Stasi, instead they used the annual performance review to serve the same purpose. Your options were to go along with management (the corporate Party) or get a bad review, with consequences.
