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LITERARY PROTOCOLS. GENESIS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL VALUE OF A LITERARY GENRE IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC¹

ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the genesis, characteristics and models of the so-called protocol literature, a narrative genre that was very popular in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s. On the basis of an excursus of the most representative works of the genre, the analysis investigates the peculiar overlapping of the private dimension and the public function of the protocols, highlighting the connection with the historical situation in which they were born. In particular, the article focuses on their socio-political value and their position in the literary history of the time, in relation to German and international contemporary literary instances, in order to reconstruct the trends that influenced them and to investigate the reasons for their wide success.

KEYWORDS: protocol literature, GDR, documentary literature, subjective authenticity, factography

If fictional worlds are so comfortable, why not try to read the actual world as if it were a work of fiction? Or, if fictional worlds are so small and deceptively comfortable, why not try to devise fictional worlds that are as complex, contradictory, and provocative as the actual one?
(Eco 1994: 145)

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INTRODUCTION

The term *Protokoll-Literatur* [protocol literature] refers to a literary form that was very popular in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the 1970s, based on interviews that were almost always tape-recorded, then transcribed and published in the form of first-person narratives which, lacking the voice of the interviewer, or the author, took the form of monologues.

The widespread use of tape recorders in the GDR from the 1970s was of central importance to the birth of this genre of documentary literature. Allowing the recording of interviewees' voices, with their emotional nuances, pauses, alterations in tone of voice and different exposure times, they revolutionised the work of journalists and sociologists. Tape recorders also became a widely used tool in literature, producing mixes comparable to those created by the interaction between literature and radio (Kaufmann 1986: 688).

These miscellaneous volumes collect the subjective experiences of different types of characters in polyphony, telling their stories on a variety of topics, ranging from intimate and private matters to work-related issues. This gives these texts a high level of topicality and an evident social outreach.

The realistic dimension of the protocols manifests itself not only in their content, but also in terms of form. Presenting themselves as singular human inventories, the protocols aim to preserve the distinctiveness of each individual's way of speaking, without conforming to a particular register or literary standard, and evoking a sense of spontaneity and extreme closeness to reality (Tomasi-Kapral 2022: 107).

Generally classified as documentary literature, the protocols actually elude univocal definition, being situated in an environment with rather fluid borders, between narrative, sociological essay and journalistic reportage. What distinguishes them from almost all similar forms is their distinct communicative vocation typical of the *Verständigungstexte* [communicative texts] that were so widely popular in the 1980s. Invoking the principle of authenticity, this type of writing uses specific formal features such as the deletion of the all-knowing narrator to communicate the experiences of a specific group of people and to encourage readers to identify with them (Keitel 1983: 448).

A last feature worth mentioning is their evident female matrix. German protocol literature includes almost exclusively volumes written by female authors, based on interviews conducted almost exclusively with women. This fact is so distinctive that the very few instances of male protocols (in which the protagonists are men, but the authors are still women), need to be clearly labelled as such in the paratext, indicating the word *Männerprotokolle* [male protocols] in the title (Müller 1985; Lambrecht 1986).

Protokoll-Literatur has undergone in-depth study by only a small number of scholars. The reasons for this lack of attention can be traced partly to certain formal aspects that characterise these works and all documentary literature in general.

Claiming to be a true chronicle of events, *Protokoll-Literatur* is not inherently meant to express aesthetic sensibility but to bear witness to and defend an unadorned and undistorted truth. Protocols, which tend (or aspire) to be neutral, are therefore devoid of many of the qualities commonly acknowledged as being inherent in fictional literature (Schröder 2001: 16–17): their primary claim is to generate communicability and immediacy using a style that is formal, sober and unaesthetic, resulting in its perception as anti-literary.

While these general reasons potentially affect all sub-genres of documentary literature, protocols are characterised by a further aspect that circumscribes their significance in the literary world, specifically their “limited” presence in geographical terms (within the borders of the GDR and only part of West Germany) and temporal terms (the 1970s and 1980s, with some cases in the 1990s). This restricted spectrum often leads to the consideration of protocol literature as a contingent and transitory phenomenon, reducing its appeal in the eyes of critics.

Since the 1990s, however, a number of cases of documentary literature in Germany’s literary landscape have received increasing attention which, triggered by an interest of a historical and social nature, has contributed to a kind of literary canonisation. Examples of this are the success of Victor Klemperer’s diaries, Gabriele Goettle’s reportages and *Echolot* by Walter Kempowski. Similarly, albeit to a lesser extent, reporting on life in the GDR, the protocols began to arouse specific sociological and documentary interest after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This attention created favourable conditions for a reassessment and legitimisation of their literary value.

Hans Joachim Schröder (1991), Albrecht Holschuh (1992) and Reinhard Andress (1994, 2000) were among the first scholars to address the topic. These pioneering contributions, aimed at studying the genre and identifying its characteristics, were followed by the publication of a comprehensive study, again by Schröder (2001), entitled *Interviewliteratur zum Leben in der DDR*, which is the most extensive and in-depth analysis of the subject to date. The state of the art was integrated then by some studies that specifically address post-1989 protocols (Reimann 2008) and the female dimension of this production (Totten 1992; Schmidt 1999).

BRIEF EXCURSUS OF GERMAN PROTOCOL LITERATURE

According to Schröder (2001), a distinction can be made in the production of German protocol literature between a first phase (1960–1973), in which protocols relating also – but not exclusively – to life into the GDR were published in West Germany, and a second phase (1973–1989) in which the genre flourished in East Germany, then reaching the West German public via special editions. Then there was a further wave of production beginning in 1989, which – intending to limit the analysis here to the GDR years – will only be mentioned with a view to reflecting

on the reasons why a literary genre so intrinsically linked to the political and social dimension in which it was born, survived even after the dissolution of the GDR.

The first case in German is *Die deutsche Not – Flüchtlinge berichten* (1960) [*German hardship – The refugees talk*] by Erika von Hornstein, author and documentary film director. The book, published in West Germany by Kiepenheuer and Witsch, is based on interviews with 43 people of different ages and professions who all escaped the GDR. The topics addressed revolve around the interviewees' conflicts with government agencies and with the invasive and insidious methods adopted by the repressive socialist system.

A few years later, the poet and film-maker Erika Runge published *Bottroper Protokolle* (1968) [*The Bottrop protocols*], a compilation of eight interviews with miners working at a coal mine in the Ruhr basin. Runge's book was a huge success, selling 115 thousand copies within the space of 10 years (Andress 2000: 16). The literary impact of *Bottroper Protokolle* was also well received by critics, much more so than *Die deutsche Not*, partly thanks to its editorial placement (Suhrkamp) and the preface by Martin Walser. A year later, Runge confirmed her talent for documentary literature with *Frauen. Versuche zur Emanzipation* (1969) [*Women. Attempts at Emancipation*], which not only contributed to the strengthening of the protocol genre in West Germany, but also launched a whole string of books on female issues. It was with her third protocol work, *Reise nach Rostock. DDR* (1971) [*Journey to Rostock. GDR*], that the writer turned her attention to East Germany. Having obtained permission to spend three weeks in Rostock, Runge conducted and recorded 35 hours of interviews. They were published in the form of monologues and resulted in a report on socialism, the documentary value of which – at a time when there were no correspondents or newspapers to report on current events in the GDR – had an important informative function for the people of West Germany.

The second phase of the protocols opens with the book by poet Sarah Kirsch *Die Pantherfrau. Fünf unfrisierte Erzählungen aus dem Kassetten-Recorder* (1973) [*The Panther Woman. Five Dishevelled Tales from the Cassette Recorder*], the first book of interviews on life in East Germany to be published in the GDR. It is a collection of writings based on conversations with five very different women, from a wild animal tamer to an economist who talk about their work. Editorial placement in Rowohlt's "neue frau" series strengthens the work's connection to the female issue, already established by Runge in the West, to whose books Kirsch's work is explicitly linked. The book also appeared in West Germany in 1978 (Kirsch 1978) published by Rowohlt, selling all the available copies within a few days (Tomasi-Kapral 2022: 109).

The protocol literature genre and its almost genetic connection to the female issue was permanently consecrated in the GDR by *Guten Morgen, du Schöne. Protokolle nach Tonband* (1977) [*Good Morning My Lovely. Protocols recorded on tape*] by Maxie Wander. Unlike Kirsch's stories, which revolve exclusively around work and politics, here 19 women of different ages, professions and backgrounds tell the stories of their private, family and love lives. The author's attempt to give voice to

a wide range of women can be interpreted as a desire to expose the absence of freedom of expression in the GDR (Tomasi-Kapral 2022: 109). As a Viennese woman who moved to East Germany in 1958, the author enjoyed an external vantage point, “as a guest”, and privileged tools – not least the opportunity to travel – to be able to look at Socialism from another perspective. *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* became an East German cult book, inspiring adaptations for theatre and television and radio plays, as well as being adopted as reading in numerous schools (Totten 1992: 45). A year after its publication, a slightly revised edition came out in the West (Buchholz 2015: 349–420), with a preface by Christa Wolf, which, as in the case of *Bottroper Protokolle*, contributed significantly to its reception as a literary work (Wander 1978). Besides being dubbed the most widely read book in the 1980s in the GDR (Lindner 1989: 100), it was also hugely successful in the West, selling over 200 thousand copies in five years (Haux 1978: 2).

The last well-known case of protocols that appeared in East Germany is Gabriele Eckart’s *So sehe ich die Sache* (1984) [*That’s the way I see it*], a reportage on the conditions of workers in the fruit-growing region of Havelland, near Potsdam. Unlike the works presented before, Eckart’s could not be released in the GDR due to censorship. The author had been granted permission to publish the volume, which originally consisted of 21 texts, on condition that two chapters be removed. However, when a preview was published in the magazine “Sinn und Form”, permission to print was withdrawn. The book came out shortly afterwards in West Germany, complete with the two protocols that had been excluded by the eastern censorship and, as a result of the difficulties encountered with the publication of her book, the author left the GDR and emigrated to the United States, where she still lives today (Andress 2000: 133–135).

SUBJECTIVE AUTHENTICITY

The main feature of protocol literature is its authenticity, in terms of the writer’s claims and the reader’s expectations. This has contributed enormously to the success of protocols in the field of sociology: for a country like the GDR, from which no public document revealing its inner workings was released until 1989, protocols made it possible to give readers – including today’s readers – much more information than fictional literature, becoming a valuable source of information for reconstructing the history of the country’s culture.

However, the dimension of authenticity remains relative: evidently, what is really authentic in protocols is that early stage of tape recording, which is in fact undocumented and consequently unknown and inaccessible to readers. Every transcription, whether faithful or revised, involves more or less conscious operations of selection, cuts, manipulations and stylistic choices that jeopardise its objectivity. While claiming to be an authentic rendition of content, *Protokoll-Literatur* is also

fiction (Buchholz 2015: 13), because it draws on a reality, the personal life of the person interviewed, and reworks it to tell a story. In short, it is the same mixture of reality and fiction, of testimony and imagination, that makes all documentary literature (including much more accredited genres with a longer literary tradition, such as autobiography, travel logs, diaries, memoirs, letters, reportage, etc.) a *Zwischenggenre* [hybrid genre] (Miller 1982: 40).

Protocols are not exclusively documentary however (Schmidt 1999: 63), or perhaps it would be better to say that they are only apparently documentary. This sort of “Schein-Dokumentarismus” [apparent documentarism] (Schröder 2001: 57) is consistent with the concept of ‘subjective authenticity’, understood by Christa Wolf as an inner attitude of the writer, a form of credibility that does not separate the author from the object, setting them against each other, but keeps them bound, like a kind of lasso with which the author tries to bind the object to themselves (Wolf 1986: 323).

The recognition of subjective authenticity in protocols may perhaps diminish their historical and documentary value to a certain extent, but it undoubtedly enhances their creative value and raises the question of authorship, which is of central importance to legitimise the literary scope of writing that tends to codify itself within the journalistic or sociological sphere. The logic of the protocol can only meet the requirements of a literary aesthetic to the extent that the authorial function emerges, is made explicit and takes on a specific dimension (Schröder 2001: 35). This explains Kirsch’s and Wander’s willingness to claim the literary status of their writings, which is also corroborated by their editorial placement in literature series, reviews in literary journals and paratexts that emphasise their poetic value. All this contributes to emphasising the literary significance in the GDR of a type of writing considered elsewhere to be of sociological interest.²

THE TRIUMPH OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Along with authenticity, one of the most commonly recognised features of *Protokoll-Literatur* is the frequent recurrence of private themes: the characters almost always introduce themselves to their readers with complex and problematic approaches to reality and deal with life experiences, hardships and uncertainties in an intimate way.

It should be pointed out that this shift towards the private sphere applies more generally to all GDR literature during the period of *détente*. In the 1970s, after the replacement of Erich Honecker by Walter Ulbricht as the first secretary of the party’s central committee and the signing of the treaty on relations with West Germany,

² In Italy, for example, in 1980, Wander’s *Ciao bella* was published by Feltrinelli in the current affairs series “I nuovi testi” with an introduction by sociologist Renate Siebert.

a process to liberalise the government's cultural policy began in the GDR, enabling intellectuals to gradually break free from Socialist Realism.³ A sort of "New Subjectivity" emerged in literature at that time, spearheaded by works that created space for topics that had been considered taboo until then, such as the critical confrontation of the individual with East German society.

Protokoll-Literatur was part of this confrontation, responding to the needs of the people and allowing the private code to triumph over the official language. In that vacuum of communicative possibilities generated within the dictatorial system, there was a renegotiation of the private sphere (of the individual, of everyday life and of domestic life, sometimes investigated from a feminist perspective), which was removed from the official and optimistic vision of socialist propaganda and re-interpreted in a shared public dimension, in which there was room for the unhappiness, suffering, discomfort and contradictions of the life of the individual.

THE SUBSTITUTE PUBLIC FUNCTION

The frequent reliance on the private dimension did not stem from a desire to retreat into the intimacy of the self in order to escape the world. On the contrary, it is widely believed by critics that the popularity and large print runs of these books can be traced back to their significant "Öffentlichkeitsfunktion" [public function] (Emmerich 2000: 292).

Given the limited room for manoeuvre provided by the media, protocol literature emerged as a form of public discourse to meet the population's need for expression and communication. In circumstances in which the media reported news and messages for the purposes of propaganda, reiterating slogans that conveyed a positive and successful vision of the world, protocol literature took on tasks which would have been performed by journalism and public debate in democratic conditions. In other words, it fulfilled a substitute public function and hosted topics of public interest that were kept quiet by the media or subjected to ideological deformation by the organs of official self-representation (Andress 2000: 12–13).

The topics addressed by *Protokoll-Literatur* – a latent criticism of the party or of Realsocialism, identity crises, depression, alcoholism, homosexuality, suicide – could not be dealt with openly through other channels. Nor could they appear in literary works in the strict sense, as they were perceived as potential threats to the stability of political order (Tomasi-Kapral 2022: 106n). By addressing specific social issues, protocol becomes a political fact, a story of unofficial truth (Andress 2005: 244) or of "Gegenwirklichkeit" [counter-reality] (Emmerich 2000: 294), free from

³ It was a transitory moment: this so-called "short decade of liberalisation" (1971–1976) was interrupted by the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, which was followed by years of repressive cultural policy.

ideological distortions, which shun the embellishments and happy endings typical of the official narrative.

Paradoxically, therefore, the hallmark of this literature focused on the private sphere is actually its public function. Authentic accounts of life contrast with the official picture of society, making this literary genre particularly popular with readers in a country where what was officially proclaimed contrasted sharply with the reality of their own lives. Unlike fictional literature, *Protokoll-Literatur* emerged as a form of public discourse that met the population's need for expression and identification. In her preface to *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* Christa Wolf highlights the important possibility to identify with the protocols, also mentioning the fact that these writings are particularly well-suited to documenting new facts as they are subject to neither the laws of literature nor to the "Versuchung zur Selbstzensur" [temptation to self-censorship] (Wolf 1978: 12). In this mention of self-censorship, understood here as undefined individual reluctance to talk about oneself, it is hard not to sense an allusion to the omnipresent ideological pressure and the presence of censorship imposed from above.

WHY WERE PROTOCOLS WRITTEN AFTER 1989?

If protocols are a product intrinsically linked to the unreliability of the media at the time of the GDR, the question remains as to why they continued to be produced and published even after the reunification of Germany. Their continuity, at least until the mid-1990s, can be attributed to several sociological, psychological and political reasons.

First of all, after 1989, the protocols offered the citizens of the former GDR the possibility to keep the memory of a lost condition and a State that no longer existed alive: by sharing experiences, literature fortifies the sense of belonging of a community of subjects (Keitel 1983: 447). The uninterrupted production of protocols can be connected to what cultural sociologist Bernd Lindner calls the *Hochkonjunktur* [boom] of biographically oriented literature after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Lindner 1992: 6). Alongside diaries and autobiographies, protocols produce identity and acceptance through confrontation with one's own biography and self-reflection.

Secondly, protocols enabled writers to make their story comprehensible, both to themselves and to others, and to do so "quickly", responding in the immediate post-reunification period to the emotional and political need to speak out, without having to resort to lengthy revision processes (Mosler 1990).

These reasons were joined by other, more practical ones, closely linked to the political dimension and to censorship: some of the protocols published after 1989 date back to several years earlier and the government had not granted permission to publish them. In addition to this, many of these books covered matters that could only be written about after the fall of the GDR, because they expressed harsh criti-

cism of socialism or dealt with conflicts, such as female issues, that had not yet been settled. Moreover, from the 29th of December 1991 onwards, when the population was given access to the GDR archives, many writers decided to address their own traumatic experiences, resulting in numerous protocol works inspired by the files of the STASI.

FACTOGRAPHY, OPERATIVE LITERATURE AND PORTRAITS

To complete the analysis of the protocol genre and place it within the literary framework of the time, it is useful to trace its origins, reconstructing the various stimuli that may have contributed to its flourishing.

During the Weimar Republic, numerous intellectuals and writers close to the Communist Party looked up to the Soviet Union, where a debate on factual or factographic literature had flourished since the late 1920s. Between 1927 and 1928, its highest representative, Sergei Tret'iakov, launched a theoretical discussion in the magazine "Novyi LEF" about the need for an objective literature that could replace pre-revolutionary bourgeois fiction. The instrument to be used to forge the new Soviet literature was the newspaper, whose body of articles, according to Tret'iakov, could be considered a sort of "collective Tolstoy" (Helms 1976: 78). In 1929, Tret'iakov proclaimed himself a "factographer", coining a term which, evoking photography, echoed the only technique that seemed to be able to guarantee absolute adhesion to reality.

It is hard to determine exactly how well Tret'iakov was known and received in Germany by his contemporaries. Most certainly in 1931 he gave a lecture for the "Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Rußland" [Society of Friends of the New Russia] in Berlin, inviting those present to study the facts, translate them into news reports, articles and biographies, and proposing an "operative" artistic practice that would directly influence everyday life and set social change in motion. The so-called *operative Literatur* played an important role in the avant-gardes of the early 20th century and influenced Russian and European literature with significant developments in the Soviet Union – despite the accusation of formalism – and in Germany (especially regarding Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin).

After falling victim to the purges and being shot in 1937, Tret'iakov fell into oblivion, only to be revived in the 1970s (Gröschner 2007: 22). In 1972, Rowohlt published his factual volume *Literatura fakta* [*Literature of Fact*] and, in the same years, East-German Slavist Fritz Mierau edited several of his theoretical and literary writings.

The rediscovery of Tret'iakov coincided with the blossoming of protocols in Germany and despite the absence of documented links between the authors mentioned and the factographic writings, it is not hard to trace similarities between the ambition of authenticity of the protocols and the factographic approach.

Notwithstanding this *renaissance*, factography encountered quite a few obstacles in Socialist Realism, the aesthetic principles of which clashed somewhat with the idea of entrusting the Soviet revolutionary epos to newspapers. The canonised models, on the other hand, sought to abandon a slavish recording of reality in favour of its re-proposition in a romantic-dialectical key. Reality, in other words, was not to be reproduced according to a documentary logic that relegates the artist to the background and prioritises the fact, but through a narrative fiction capable of conveying the greatness of Socialism, where the sovereignty of the author prevails over the facts (Schröder 2001: 71).

In this view, one of the most encouraged genres in the field of short prose was that of *Porträts* [portraits]: anthologies of literary portraits in the third person which conveyed the author's personal perspective on the lives of fictitious and mostly positive characters (one example being Rainer Kirsch's portraits, *Kopien nach Originalen* [Copies of originals]). The model of portraits was considered closer to the concept of literariness and was strategically opposed by the government to the model of protocols, which were often strongly criticised as non-literary products of the so-called "Nicht-Autoren" [non-authors] (Baumgart 1970: 738). On this subject, it is worth noting that Sarah Kirsch distinguished her five stories, deliberately *unfrisiert* [dishevelled], from conventional portrait literature, calling them "Lebensprotokolle [...] die ehrlicher sind, als herkömmliche Porträts, in denen die Leute meistens wie Engel erscheinen" [protocols of life, which are more honest than traditional portraits in which people usually appear as angels] (Huffzky 1977), distancing themselves from the genres advocated by the regime.

The attitude towards protocols was similar to the more general position taken towards documentary literature, which, in the meantime, was already flourishing as an independent genre in West Germany in the 1960s. In 1986, the Germanist Eva Kaufmann criticised the belated arrival of documentary literature in the East: she mentions its presence in West Germany (Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth, Günter Wallraff), Sweden (Sara Lidman) and the Soviet Union (Ales Adamovič) and points out that, even in the GDR, it had always been present in the form of reportage, considered the operative genre par excellence, without there being any real awareness of it. As proof of this, during an internal debate in the *Schriftstellerverband* [Writers' Union] in 1968, Kaufmann recalled that reportages were still seen as "Vorformen der 'eigentlichen' Literatur" [primitive forms of "real" literature] (Kaufmann 1986: 686).

Kaufmann goes on to cite numerous works that originated in the 1970s in the GDR in the wake of the aforementioned concept of "subjective authenticity" created by Wolf, including Kirsch and Wander's protocols, which show how, from 1971 onwards, with the 8th SED congress, the opening of socialist policy towards innovation had resulted in documentary literature obtaining its own "moralische und künstlerische Autorität" [moral and artistic authority] (Kaufmann 1986: 688).

In addition to the similarities with factual literature and the differences from portraits, in order to complete the picture of the possible influences on this literary genre, it is worth briefly mentioning "Oral History", with which, according to critics,

protocols share various similarities (Totten 1994: 45; Andress 2000: 21). Schröder believes the function of *Protokoll-Literatur* to be exactly the same as that of “Oral History”: the documentation of mentalities, psychic dispositions, roles and cultural styles by reconstructing history through a “bottom-up” account of everyday life (Thompson 1988: 98; Schröder 2001: 42). Protocols also allow a democratisation of history and, according to Schmidt, present themselves as an “operative Variante von Oral History” [operative variant of Oral History], once again confirming the unique combination of genres that characterises these narrative forms (Schmidt 1999: 182).

The democratisation function of the protocols is to be understood in a dual sense, with reference to history but also to literature: firstly, history was made accessible to many through a bottom-up rendition, allowing experiences to be shared and social issues to be confronted; secondly, the protocols, and documentary literature in general, represented a great value in terms of literary literacy, making literature accessible to readers who, according to Kaufmann, often shunned the complicated prose of certain fictional literature (Kaufmann 1986: 689).

FOR A RETURN TO THE TERM *PROTOKOLL*

In conclusion, it is worth addressing a hitherto neglected aspect of the term *Protokoll* and its political and social meaning. This need arises especially from the recent tendency of some scholars to prefer *Interviewliteratur* [interview literature] to the term *Protokoll-Literatur*. This term favours an emphasis on the dialogical dimension of the journalistic and sociological interview in the name of a clearer and more appropriate definition of the object of study (Schröder 2001: 29–30).

Protokoll – a term that in German basically means minutes – corresponds to the transcription of what is said during a meeting or a session, with an obvious reference to the bureaucratic and administrative context. In a protocol there are several voices, one next to the other, which are reported by the person taking the minutes, who does not usually ask questions but acts merely as a “secretary”. *Protokoll-Literatur* on the other hand originates from actual interviews, conducted by the author with an interviewee (just one at a time), almost always tape-recorded and later transcribed.

However, there are several reasons to encourage the use of the “original” term *Protokoll* and to defend the crucial nature of this term for the contextualisation of the literary phenomenon. Firstly, the conversational nature of the protocols struggles to emerge. As has already been observed, the voice of the interviewer is not found in any of the texts examined (Töteberg 1989: 82), nor do the interviewees express themselves in response to questions which, while not explicit, can be inferred. Moreover, adopting a name that refers to the interview merely reinforces the pigeon-holing of these texts in the journalistic sphere, unfairly amplifying their anti-literary nature.

Alongside all these aspects, which are perhaps of marginal importance, there is a central question, which has emerged in these pages and has not been highlighted to date, i.e. the intrinsic relationship of the protocols to the historical and social context of the GDR. The hypothesis advanced here is that the term *Protokoll* possesses a strong political connotation, which is impossible to underestimate, and which goes beyond its actual semantic area. It leads us to trace the nature of these literary forms back to a psychological dimension strongly influenced by the atmosphere of repression. It is possible to hypothesise that the decision to use the protocol format could be a hint to the repressive context, i.e. to the interrogations, prosecutions and strict control measures adopted by the government on many of its citizens. In other words, the fact that many citizens of the GDR were interrogated by the STASI may have had a connection to the use of the term *Protokoll* in relation to this literature, as writers may have sought a source of inspiration for their works in these dynamics, as well as an effective means of communicating with their audience. If this is the case, we may suppose that this adhesion (also formal and not only in terms of content) to a specific experience – of which there may have been widespread knowledge among the GDR citizens – may have been one of the reasons for the flourishing and success of the protocol genre.

Moreover, in many cases the works in question include the term *Protokoll* in the title, conveying a not insignificant authorial (or editorial) choice. The writers' decision to call their narrative works "protocols" may be an expression of their desire to explicitly politically characterise the works through the paratext. With regard to this, it is worth remembering that, for a German speaker, the term protocol unmistakably evokes the lost world of East Germany, the many protocols of conferences (not least that of Bitterfeld) and writers' congresses. If, for instance, we look at the collocation map of the term, available in the online version of the Duden German Language Dictionary, next to the various adjectives most frequently used to qualify *Protokoll* (*ausführlich, vertraulich, diplomatisch*) [detailed, reliable, diplomatic] we also find *sowjetisch* [Soviet].⁴

Such occurrence in the usage of the term *Protokoll* seems to suggest a connection to practices in use in the Soviet Union – or even a direct hint to state repression – and, by extension, to the GDR. For this reason, the replacement of the term *Protokoll* with *Interview* to refer to this narrative genre fails to account for the historical and social significance of these works and risks causing a gradual shift of attention away from their actual nature.

Ultimately, the attempt to recoup and reassess this body of writings, which is appreciable and necessary and common to all scholars who have dealt with *Protokoll-Literatur*, can make use of various strategies aimed at enhancing the experimental function and political nature of these works, but it should not involve the abandonment of a highly evocative and characteristic term, which powerfully recalls the specific social and political dimension of protocols.

⁴ See <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Protokoll> [last access: 14.10.2024].

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