

Representation of Self Within Soviet Ideology: Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and Sís's *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*

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This article focuses on the representation of Soviet ideology with regard to a shift in self-identities in Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and Sís's *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*.

IDEOLOGY IS EMBEDDED in children's books; it is an unavoidable and widespread occurrence (Apol, 1998; Hollindale, 1988/1992). Neutrally described as a vital system of beliefs of any culture, ideology is often examined with regard to its incorporation into plots, character portrayals, and images in literary texts for children. More importantly, ideology often plays a crucial role in the construction of self-identity within an ideological system.

Soviet ideology, very commonly connected with totalitarian practices and propaganda, is represented in two award-winning children's books recently published in the United States that mirror a number of complex concerns related to the construction of self-identity. Both Eugene Yelchin's (2011) novel *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and Peter Sís's (2007) autobiographical picturebook *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* depict the lives of ordinary children growing up in "extraordinary everydayness" (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 2). These titles represent, to put it in Nodelman and Reimer's (2002) words, the most indicative

result of ideology that "provides people with who and what they are" (p. 177).

It is essential to recognize and implicate the theme of the representation of self within Soviet ideology. Although the history of the Soviet regime is complex and includes a number of issues, it shaped the history of many countries in Eastern Europe and had a tremendous influence on the United States during the Cold War (1947–1991). The devastating politics of the Soviet Union became a life basis for millions of people and shaped their self-definition and self-identification within the Soviet Union and beyond. Because the Soviet era is a part of history, why shouldn't educators bring Yelchin's and Sís's titles into their classrooms? When it comes to history, Meltzer (1992) affirms that history helps young students see "a sense of shared humanity" (p. 1). The complex historical issues

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lead children to a better understanding of their similarities and differences to grasp the forces that formed and shaped the history and actions of people (Meltzer, 1992).

From the perspective noted above, the novel *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and the autobiographical picturebook *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* suggest strong examples of self-construction within a totalitarian regime as well as a strong desire to break out from the process of the collective being. For young readers who are developing attributes of their selfhood, these two novels offer alternative perspectives of two different literary protagonists and, thus, represent a continuum in understanding the historical past and a person living in it.

Acknowledging the increasing interest in the Soviet culture, ideology, the construction of self, and children's literature from the Soviet period, I believe that books like Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and Sís's *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* serve as remarkable canvases to investigate how Soviet ideology and a Soviet self are presented for U.S. readers and how educators in both academic and school settings can benefit from using these books for promoting global literacy.

My professional interest in this topic is interwoven with my personal cultural background. As I was born in Ukraine, which was still part of the Soviet Union at the time, and grew up there during the Soviet era and after the collapse of the USSR, I personally experienced how Soviet ideology left some traces in my personal/cultural self and how education and literature, in particular, played a crucial role in the development of my self/cultural identity. Taking my personal and literary background into account, I endorse Hollindale's (1988/1992) statement that "children are influenced by what they read" (p. 20). Soviet children's literature laid a solid foundation for my worldview and has lately evoked my professional interest to rethink and revisit a number of literary texts, sparking an impetus to research Soviet children's literature and culture as presented in contemporary narratives.

In this article, I focus on the representation of Soviet ideology with regard to a shift in the beliefs and the transformations in the self-identities of the main characters in *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*. The purpose of this study is to expose the major themes of the texts and create conditions in the classroom that help children understand these themes on their own in order to explore some examples of literary protagonists in a nexus of the Soviet system of propaganda and ideology.

Literature Review

First used by de Tracy and Claude (1801), the term *ideology* referred to a new science of ideas that involved "rational investigations of the sources" (p. 558). Later, in the 19th century, Marx and Engels revised the term to define an unconscious system of beliefs in the social relations of groups with one class dominating the other (Solecki, 1993). Taking from Marx, Althusser (1971) defines *ideology* as a material system of social practices that influences individuals and provides them with their social identities. Thus, ideology as a social practice creates predefined consciousness and hides economic and political social reality by creating illusions, imaginary representations of a fabricated reality (Althusser, 1971). The ideological state apparatus, then, defines the role of an individual while providing a range of determined beliefs, possibilities, roles, and activities. Althusser suggests that identities are mirrored in ideologies, and individuals cannot recognize themselves outside of ideology.

Studying Soviet ideology and the construction of a self within it, it is necessary to note that *Soviet Communist ideology* primarily refers to the relationship between agencies and policies of power and individuals in order to create a new kind of person who will integrate into the Soviet collective construct to dedicate one's deeds to the common good (Engelstein & Sandler, 2000). The purpose of Soviet ideology is to create the New Man and the New Woman, whose typical characteristics lie in self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-discipline, as well as a readiness to be heroic in their acts. Interestingly, S.A. Hunt and Benford (2004) retain their belief that "collective identity is the social construction of a facticity—that is, the objectivated reality of an identity assigned to a group, organization, or movement" (p. 436). Their account stresses collective behavior that emerges "to communicate dramas replete with heroes, heroines, villains, and fools" (p. 437). Collective and social awareness constituted not only a Party collective but also, as Kharkhoridin (1999) elucidates, a *kollektiv* that required political and ideological qualities.

However, the Soviet era created a dichotomy between collective and personal identities. Although the emphasis was on collective not individual identity, the Soviet collective, as Blum (2003) asserts, was a cluster of individuals governed by the power of a socialist society that inserted a complex praxis of individual self. Therefore, individual deeds contributed to Soviet collective thinking, with a society regarded as a collective body developing from the actions of individual personalities. Engelstein and Sandler (2000) articulate that "the cultivation of subjectivity was

implicated in...the collectivist regime” on all levels of everyday practices (p. 7).

Investigating the 1937 diary of Alexander Afinogenov (1904–1941), a Russian Proletarian writer, Hellbeck (2000) stresses the call for a radical transformation of the New Man that through individual deeds and self-inscription will bring prosperity to the Bolshevik system. Individuals were expected to engage in the Soviet frame of self-constructing (Hellbeck, 2000). The Stalinist state and the years of the Great Terror of 1935–1938, with its purging campaign, were concentrated on the “individual approach” (Kharkhordin, 1999, p. 164). The individual was put into circumstances that cultivated a cult of personality, *kul't lichnosti*, which became a part of a mass phenomenon of the cultivation of each individual to promote the regime (Kharkhordin, 1999). In other words, human beings' acts were held to certain standards of Communist ideology.

A number of scholarly works (Apol, 1998; Birketveit, 2006; Hollindale, 1988/1992; Moynihan, 1973; Sutherland, 1985; Taxel, 1988) emphasizes the importance of recognizing and revealing ideological themes for young readers. A review of the literature shows that the representation of the Soviet era and its children's literature as well as the construction of self in the Soviet era have been the objects of a number of theoretical analyses (Arzamastseva, 2003; Balina & Rudova, 2008; Engelstein & Sandler, 2000; Kelly, 2005; Kharkhordin, 1999; Olich, 2009; Stephens, 1992; Sunny & Martin, 2001).

The volume *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, edited by Balina and Rudova (2008), is a collection of essays that offers an overview of the state of Russian children's literature during the Soviet period and afterward. It explores the relationship between children's books and the formation of a self, as part of a Soviet and later Russian society. As Balina (2008) notes, “literature for children in the new Soviet state was supposed to provide a blueprint on how to become a productive citizen of this newly formed society” (p. 4). Thus, it is crucial to establish a connection between children's literature and the ideology of a society in which such literature is produced. Similarly, in her book “*Vek Rebenka*” v *Russkoj Literature 1900–1930 Godov* (“The Age of a Child” in Russian Literature of 1900–1930s), Arzamastseva (2003) discusses the development of literature for children in the pre- and early Soviet period and its importance in the establishment of a new Soviet ideology.

However, the scholarly works mentioned above are mainly focused on the children's literature published in Russia. In contrast, little research has been done on the Soviet-themed

children's books published in the United States. Therefore, this opens up a basis for content analysis of the main characters in Yelchin's and Sís's stories to investigate various topics related to specific historical time frames of Soviet Russia's Communist ideology, particularly the Stalinist era and Soviet Czechoslovakia occupied by the Russians during the Cold War (1945–1989), and examine the ways used to create and transform the self-identities of the two main literary protagonists.

Methodology

Through content analysis of the two award-winning titles, I focus on the following questions:

- What is the nature of the self-identity of each protagonist?
- What elements of Communist ideology are presented in these two books?
- How do the self-identities of the main literary protagonists change in relation to Communist ideology?
- What are the major similarities and differences in their association with Soviet ideology?

As Taylor (2003) suggests, content analysis explores various social and cultural communications and identifies the relationships among them. In other words, content analysis is an exploratory process that studies the information and messages, conveyed by both written and visual narratives. It also assists in determining how this information is used in the meaning-making process. Content analysis is a tool to investigate norms and meanings embedded in texts.

While conducting a search on children's books that depict Soviet ideology and a self within it, I specifically selected these particular titles because they both won a Caldecott or Newbery honor and, therefore, are much more likely to be exposed to a variety of readers.

Because Yelchin's book pairs a verbal narrative with pictures and Sís's autobiographical picturebook represents a combination of the visual and verbal in narrative, I also examine how the visual and verbal components establish certain perspectives for conveying portrayals of Soviet ideology. With these texts, I will take readers through a process of content analysis that “may develop more nuanced perspectives on real life” (Sipe, 2008, p. 7).

Findings and Discussion

In the sections that follow, I discuss Yelchin's and Sís's representations of the self-formation and self-transformation processes of the literary protagonists' selves. To provide a logical chronology, I start with Yelchin's book because it represents Soviet ideology of the Stalinist era, which precedes the Communist occupation of Czechoslovakia.

BREAKING STALIN'S NOSE

Yelchin's debut novel, *Breaking Stalin's Nose*, presents a realistic slice of Soviet history. Born in Leningrad in 1956, right after Stalin's death, Yelchin incorporates his personal experience in telling a story from the point of view of 10-year-old Sasha Zaichik. Yelchin provides an interesting nexus between the image of the broken nose on Stalin's statue and an image from the classic short story "The Nose" by Nicholas Gogol (1916), which represents the absurdist theme of something that takes place only in someone's imagination or dreams. This brief allusion is mentioned by Yelchin in Chapter 24 of his book and, in fact, sets the plot of the whole story.

Breaking Stalin's Nose represents a linear timeline of Sasha's evolution and self-transformation to the Soviet Stalinist regime. At the beginning of the novel, Sasha strives to become a real Communist. He constructs his self-image not only through his own reflections about the grandeur of Comrade Stalin but also in the letter he writes to Stalin. Sasha reveals that it is his dream to join the Young Soviet Pioneers, the collective spirit of the Soviet people, and to become one of the "cogs of the Soviet machine" (Kaminskaya & Stolyarova, 2001, para. 1). More than anything, Sasha desires to be a hero and a Communist like his father, who is "the eagle eyes of [the people's] beloved State Security" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 54). Referring to his father, Sasha does not stress his personality, character, or some particular traits; the dominating value of his father's character is a strong devotion to service for the good of Communist ideology. The father himself teaches Sasha that "it's more important to join the Pioneers than to have a father" (pp. 26–27). Consequently, it is political propaganda, the instance of which is presented in the opening paragraph, that shapes Sasha's ideas and beliefs, as well as a steadfast education at home and, as it is shown later in the novel, at school, which for Fitzpatrick (1999) becomes the main route to advancement in Soviet Russia. Fitzpatrick argues that party membership served as a prequalification for ambitious young people, yet their ambitions were supposed to follow the same political line as the Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League). Those who exhibited behaviors that were different became the objects of suspicious treatment and were often removed from the party and society as enemies of the people.

In the beginning, Sasha's ambitions fit the norms dictated by the party. He wants to serve the prosperous future of Communism and cherishes Stalin. In his letter to Stalin, the boy expresses his admiration of Comrade Stalin and regards him as his leader and teacher. Sasha manifests his beliefs in the future of Communism, which were inculcated

into the people, and, by this point, represents a model of the creation of Stalin's cult among children.

Kelly (2005) explains that Stalin's cult was established over the course of the 1930s and that the leader was depicted as a bearer of full responsibility "for the lives and fates of children" (p. 199). She suggests that Stalin's cult was experienced by children and "drew on vital tropes of 'Sovietness'" (p. 204). In representing the cult, Yelchin illustrates how children practiced Stalin's cult on a daily basis. As Yelchin's illustrations often suggest, the cult of Stalin appears in a number of portraits and monuments. By making Stalin's portraits larger than the characters and positioning them in the background, Yelchin invites readers to a wide range of interpretations.

Presented in a style that satirically resembles Socialist realism, Yelchin's illustrations provide additional elements for the process of self-formation. For example, a double-page spread on pages 20 and 21 depicts Sasha standing by a window, looking at a huge statue of Stalin. Sasha is almost invisible. His hair merges with the background, while Stalin's monument rises up before him. Additionally, although it is snowing, Stalin's statue is untouched by the snow. How does Sasha see himself in comparison with the monument of Stalin? Kelly (2005) explains that children had to consider themselves students and apprentices of their master, who could help and give advice on the whole sphere of living, including both political and social matters.

Interestingly, Sasha defines the main features of the Stalinist character. It is important for him to be "strong from physical exercise...and always to be vigilant, because our capitalist enemies are never asleep" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 4). In this way, Sasha does not articulate his individuality or self-awareness but his willingness to serve Stalin, to sustain the traits of the Stalinist spirit, and to reinforce the false consciousness created by the state apparatus. Because "individuals seek relief from a collective hardship and distress" (Hinshelwood, 2009, p. 144), Sasha, in contrast, provides remarkable insight about how to follow the common ideals and values of the Soviet people, which represent a social whole per se.

Sasha is pure and naive in his beliefs. When his father gets arrested by the State Security guards because his neighbor Stukachov denounced him for only mentioning Sasha's mother on the eve of the Pioneers rally, the boy still continues to believe in Stalin's justice. Moreover, he is confident that the secret police "arrested [his] dad by mistake" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 34), so Sasha seeks a meeting with Stalin. Sasha decides that as soon as Stalin learns

about the mistaken arrest, he will let his father out. With this assurance, Sasha becomes a victim of Soviet ideology that pervasively forces him to position himself within the desired political ideological construct.

The first doubt that Sasha reveals about the reasons for his father's arrest situates him as an individual and projects the future evolution of his self. The claim of Sasha's Aunt Larisa's husband that Sasha's father is "an enemy of the people" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 41) and the unwillingness and fear of his aunt to let Sasha into the house evoke Sasha's memories about his mother's death. Although the boy still believes that Stalin will rescue his father before Sasha becomes a Pioneer, he poses a revealing question right after recalling his father's announcement about the death of Sasha's mother: "Why did Aunt Larisa say my dad looked guilty?" (p. 45). However, this episode represents only the beginning of a shift in Sasha's self-identity. He starts questioning what is happening, or at least, he reacts to events critically; however, his critical thinking often looks more like an unconscious evaluation of events. For instance, when classmate Vovka Sobakin calls Sasha *Amerikanetz* (the American), the boy recalls that his father warned him about Vovka. But, for what reason? Was he called *Amerikanetz* just because of his mother, who came from the United States to serve the purpose of Communism?

In spite of these doubts, Sasha is not yet ready to question his faith to the party. Chapter 13 of the novel, which deals with Sasha's arrival at school, offers another opportunity to see how he continues his efforts to maintain his beliefs in being "a good Communist" (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 18). When the teacher announces that Sasha's father is going to attend the Pioneer rally, Sasha thinks, "By now, Stalin must have sent his order: 'Free Zaichik immediately!'" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 55). Furthermore, the teacher asks Sasha to recite the Laws of the Young Soviet Pioneers. As a result, Sasha establishes his Communist self once again by stating, "the Young Pioneer is devoted to Comrade Stalin, the Communist Party, and Communism" (p. 55), and, "A Young Pioneer is a reliable comrade and always acts according to conscience" (p. 56). By using both the narrative and illustrations, in this chapter, Yelchin provides an example of the construction of a collective self, enforced by the ideological state apparatus. When Borka Finkelstein, the only Jewish student, appears in the class, the teacher not only calls him one of "the children of enemies" (p. 58) but also encourages students to vote for sending Finkelstein to the principal. The illustration shows only raised hands, thus making it impossible to identify individuals.

When Sasha feels that he cannot raise his hand against his classmate, the teacher suspiciously addresses him, stating that Sasha is the son of a hero and consequently needs to act like one. With everyone's eyes upon him, Sasha is compelled to raise his hand. The evaluation of personal identity becomes an issue again. Although Sasha becomes a subject of official ideology, he is puzzled by the pressure put on him by the teacher as well as the pressure of the *kollektiv*.

A climactic scene in *Breaking Stalin's Nose* develops when Sasha goes to the school basement to get a banner because he has been selected by the teacher to be a banner-bearer at the Pioneers rally. While carrying the banner to the class, Sasha approaches a plaster statue of Stalin and imagines himself justifying his father. Accidentally, Sasha damages the statue of Stalin and breaks its plaster nose. This act is compared with "a vicious act of terrorism" (Yelchin, 2011, p. 99) because a person who damages the property of the people is considered guilty of a crime, according to the Criminal Code of the Soviet Union. This particular scene shows that by this accident, Sasha denies his desire to be a Pioneer and regards himself "an enemy of the people, a wrecker" (p. 75). He is truly scared and decides to lie. Although Sasha believes that he will bear responsibility for this one day, he reveals an identity conflict at this moment. With this decision to hide the truth, he thinks primarily about his individual self and not about the Soviet collective. Before Finkelstein confesses that he damaged the statue of Stalin, Sasha hesitates to raise his hand to confess. Yet, when Finkelstein takes Sasha's fault as his own, believing that in this way he can see his parents who are in Lubyanka prison, Sasha does not feel a sense of relief. He is envious and decides that Finkelstein thought over the situation.

The episodes discussed above finally show the complexity of Sasha's character and his ego, which does not coincide with the Communist ideal. Sasha does not fit the model "of the passive individual subsumed under the collective" (Gerovitch, 2007, p. 137) but rather cares about himself as an individual. This psychological struggle separates Sasha from the Soviet spirit. Furthermore, when the principal of Sasha's school reveals the truth about the arrest of his father, the boy loses his sense of the we idea of Communism and starts to feel his otherness. The reference to Gogol's story "The Nose" involves the beginning of Sasha's realization about the stupidity and absurdity of Stalinist ideology. Yet, he does not express a strong conviction in the absurdity and ambiguity of this ideology but instead speculates on the thoughts of Luzhko, their substitute teacher, about "The Nose":

"What 'The Nose' so vividly demonstrates to us today," says Luzhko, "is that when we blindly believe in someone else's idea of what is right or wrong for us as individuals,

sooner or later our refusal to make our own choices could lead to the collapse of the entire political system. An entire country. The world, even.” (Yelchin, 2011, p. 112)

This excerpt refers to Sasha’s unconscious questioning of his own beliefs and provides a final impetus for his meeting with an imaginary nose of Stalin, which one more time tries to persuade him of his father’s guilt. The point of the imaginary Stalin’s nose conflicts with Sasha’s assurance and his lack of obedience to the Soviet machine. He contradicts it by stating, “My dad is innocent. There is nothing to confess!” (Yelchin, 2011, p. 118). At the beginning of the novel, Sasha was informed by a State Security officer that his father is “an iron broom purging the vermin from our midst” (p. 10), and Sasha learns now that his own father gave the order to arrest Sasha’s mother. For the first time, Sasha consciously does not trust a representative from State Security. Moreover, when an officer offers Sasha the opportunity to become a Pioneer by agreeing to denounce his own classmates, Sasha does not comply. The officer depicts Sasha’s father as an example of a Soviet servant, an image that Sasha denies. Now he does not see his father as a hero but, rather, as a man who stands up for his individuality: “My father was never a snitch” (p. 136). In the final scene of the novel, Sasha escapes from the school to visit his father at Lubyanka prison and to ask him about the truth. Sasha stands in a long line of people to see his father, which is highly unlikely to happen. Thus, the text is open-ended and provides a faint note of hope: The final illustration shows a tremendously long line of people who have not even reached the building of Lubyanka.

Throughout the personal happenings within the ideological apparatus, Sasha experiences an awakening of his critical consciousness. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist neither questions his personal existence nor sees himself aside from Soviet ideology. However, closer to the end of the story, Sasha slowly starts to exclude himself from the collective wholeness. He becomes more skeptical about the events and questions the justice of Stalin. Thinking about the message in Gogol’s story, Sasha refers to the possibility of having an individual choice. Although, at that exact moment, he is not conscious about what “our own choices” (Yelchin, 2011, p. 112) means, he is later forced to make his own choice by refusing to become a Pioneer and going to Lubyanka. Consequently, the way Sasha sees his own self, tired of the Soviet ideologically constructed reality prior to his father’s arrest, is changed and reconstructed. Sasha starts to see himself as an individual who strives to interpret the events happening around him and question the Soviet reality. In Sasha’s consciousness, the entire political system collapsed along with all of his beliefs and ideas.

The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain by Sís is an autobiographical picturebook that tells the story of a young boy growing up in Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic and Slovakia, under the Soviet regime and dictatorship. Sís starts his book with an Introduction page, in which he provides brief historical background information about the Soviet Union after World War II, the time when Czechoslovakia became a Communist republic. The Soviet Union created the Eastern Bloc, the Communist State of Eastern Europe, which consisted of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, and Albania and was managed by the Communists. Later, by building the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Union “cut the city of Berlin in half” (Sís, 2007, n.p.) and separated Eastern Europe from the West.

Through the eyes of an unnamed boy who tells his personal story, two narratives are developed. Sís uses his own “language,” which mostly includes skillful illustrations and short, informative sentences. Referring to the language in his book in his Boston Globe–Horn Book Award acceptance speech, Sís (2009) states,

I have no language [to tell about his Czech life]...I have my drawing....

I am proud to say I developed my own new language, a language of “that time.” An unpleasant time, a time without colors, a time of stupidity and suspicion, a gray time (paras. 4–5)

Therefore, with the help of illustrations, Sís portrays activities in which the main protagonist participates. The character is not an observer of life under Soviet ideology but rather an active participant. He integrates into society and represents a part of it.

At the beginning of the book, the main character defines himself as part of ideology. Sís situates the boy within boxes, depicting no boundaries between his self and Communist propaganda. In the upper left box as well as in a lower right box on the second double-page spread, the main character draws a colorful picture. This detail attracts attention and also becomes a symbolic representation of a child’s naïveté. Being under the ideological control, the young boy does not understand the situation. He follows his parents and experiences the cult of the Communist leaders, Lenin and Stalin, and the Communist civil and military symbols. Yet, he is not particularly surprised or astonished by the surrounding happenings.

Moreover, the next double-page spread depicts the boy involved in mandatory Communist activities. Thus, the Russian language, the joining of the Young Pioneers organization, collective working, and numerous public activities that glorify the Soviet power are required. The main character becomes a part of the collective being. He shares his collective awareness with his family and other children. Soviet symbolism starts to preoccupy his drawings. For instance, he draws military tanks with a red star and a Soviet flag or the hammer and sickle that symbolize the unity between industrial and agricultural spheres. In contrast to other children, he adds some color to his pictures, yet he does not feel self-assured or confident of what images he should draw and whose beliefs to portray. He creates these particular illustrations not only because he identifies with the Sovietness in his everydayness, but also, as the textual part narrates, “he drew what he was told to at school” (Sís, 2007, n.p.). In examining Soviet educational policy, Eklof (2005) emphasizes the Stalinist school system that was created after 1931 in the Soviet Union and soon was proclaimed “a new era in the schools” (p. 5). According to Eklof, Stalinist education was mostly based on collective consciousness and discouraged everything individual and personal. He explains that educators and everyone involved in the educational process all knew their places in the Stalinist system: “By 1953, . . . all schools looked alike, all textbooks were the same, and all teachers followed the same lesson plans” (p. 5). Although Sís was born in 1950, three years prior to the end of the Stalinist era, the educational system and restrictive regime’s policies did not change much afterward.

With the illustrations in the following double-page spread, Sís stresses the character’s deep involvement and passive observance of the happenings. He does not articulate his individual preferences but, instead, follows the rules set by the Communists. The text narrates, “He drew tanks. He drew wars” (Sís, 2007, n.p.). Instead of being scared of the enumerated events represented in the text, such as the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, President Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, and the threat of nuclear war, the character still participates in the compulsory school practices as they were presented and demanded. The text follows: “He didn’t question what he was being told” (n.p.).

Speculating on the process of developing one’s self, Engelstein and Sandler (2000) comment that such questions as “who am I, and who are we?” were entwined in the minds of thinking persons” (p. 5). The main character starts to distinguish himself and Czech people from the collective of the Soviet regime by drawing a number of artistic elements, which look extremely vivid in contrast to the dull Socialist art. Sís (2007) uses bright colors in

his illustrations to provide this particular contrast. As the Soviet manifestations are drawn in black and white with some addition of red to emphasize the major symbols, the Western “bits and pieces” (n.p.) incorporate yellow, green, blue, red, pink, orange, and other colors. The culture of the West evokes an even stronger artistic taste in the protagonist. He starts to participate actively in the cultural life that the West opens for him. This is his first milestone on the way to establishing his self-identity. In this colorful palette that Sís uses, the boy strives to express himself and to assert his self.

Representing the evolution of the self of the literary protagonist, Sís (2007) further opens the boy’s emotional unbalance. When Soviet troops invade Czechoslovakia in 1968, during the period known as the Prague Spring, the boy’s face depicts tremendous fear. His agonized expression in the illustration signed with the words “Russian tanks were everywhere” (n.p.) resembles Edvard Munch’s (1863–1944) well-known expressionist painting *The Scream of Nature*. The boy, however, as both the verbal and illustrative narratives develop, starts to actively participate in various activities and protests against Communist dictatorship. Although he cannot change a lot by himself, his personality stands out from the crowd. With his paintings, he demonstrates a personal revolt, which goes against the collective regime and involves others in a public demonstration of their desire to be free. When the Berlin Wall finally falls in 1989, the boy flies over it. His self is emancipated and transferred into freedom.

The self of Sís’s protagonist develops quickly. Similar to Yelchin’s main character at the beginning of the novel, the boy blindly and naively accepts the ideologically rigorous demands. His life is governed by, in P. Hunt’s (1992) words, “ideological freight” (p. 18). The protagonist’s self-definition gains its shape, together with his own self-representation and self-fulfillment. His readiness to rebel against the passive living under the Soviet regime and self-searching in art become necessary manifestations of his realization of self-image. In summary, Sís’s graphic and verbal narratives, with the addition of the notes from his journal, interweave a public articulation of the character’s self-definition and proclamation of his individuality.

Discussion of the Books and Conclusions

Every literary work is a product of culture and a social environment that encompasses messages encoded by the author. As the result, the text becomes a reflection of the author’s beliefs and, most importantly, ideology. As such, it is highly important to recognize and question ideology embedded in books.

As discussed in the prior analysis, the two selected children's books represent a realistic slice of life under Soviet ideology and offer unique opportunities to glimpse the realities and hardships encountered by the main protagonists on their way to self-identification. Although the books vary greatly in their delivery and style, they both portray the effects of ideology on the development of young children and their interaction with their selves, society, and the world around them. Through vivid and symbolic illustrations and strong narratives, both authors articulate and highlight the process of the transformation of a self, placing a special emphasis on the complex interrelationships between the characters and ideology that locks and pressures them to become a little screw in the massive Soviet machine. The aim of Soviet ideology is to prevent different thinking and preclude people from developing ideas and opinions that deviate from the official line of thought. However, in both cases, the failure of the system is evident. Contrary to its core idea that prohibition and fear will produce submission, ideology creates opposition and pushes main characters to rethink the place of their self within the society.

Both Yelchin's fictional character, Sasha Zaichik, and Sís's young boy protagonist experience various stages of self-development ranging from being a naive subject of Soviet ideology to being resistant and full of questions that arise with the characters' personal perceptions of the oppressive regime. Even though Sasha's change and evaluation is highly connected to his family drama and the boy's self-display goes hand in hand with the deprivation of his dreams and desires, both characters articulate their individual differences.

In an interview, Sís shares his opinion of what exactly *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* can present to its readers. For him, his literary work becomes a chance to teach others that such political practices as Soviet ideology can happen "anyplace, anytime" (Giorgis & Johnson, 2008, p. 14). Because young children, as he shows in the book, will not be able to evaluate their existence under the rule of destructive and oppressive power, Sís feels that it is crucial for him to teach children to learn to question the

happenings critically. Yelchin (2011) follows by strengthening Sís's point in his own Author's Note:

I set this story in the past, but the main issue in it transcends time and place. To this day, there are places in the world where innocent people face persecution and death for making a choice about what they believe to be right. (p. 154)

The aim of Soviet ideology is to prevent different thinking and preclude people from developing ideas and opinions that deviate from the official line of thought.

By using these titles in the classroom, educators in both university and K–12 settings can engage students in a critical discussion of the representation of the Soviet regime in both the verbal and illustrative parts of Yelchin's and Sís's books. Therefore, students can investigate a number of issues and be involved in comparative activities based on the contemporary culture of the United States and the Soviet Union as presented in the discussed books.

Both titles not only offer a possibility to investigate various topics related to specific historical time frames of Soviet Russia's communist ideology, in particular the Stalinist era and Soviet Czechoslovakia occupied by the Russians during the Cold War (1945–1989), but also involve readers in the process of examining the ways of creation and transformation of the self-identities of the two main literary protagonists to multiply "a quantitative aspect" of intertextual connections that help build a critical reader (Sipe, 2008, p. 232). ■

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