Franz A. Birgel, Ph.D.
Muhlenberg College

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The Only Good Indian is a DEFA Indian:
East German Variations on the Most American of all Genres

“The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”
General Philip Sheridan

Introduction

In the May 1971 Playboy interview, America’s super-patriot John Wayne expressed his personal view regarding the settling of the American West: “there were a great number of people who needed new land, and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it to themselves.”1 His fellow conservative Ronald Reagan, the cowboy president, told a Russian audience in Moscow on June 30, 1988: “Maybe we made a mistake in trying to maintain Indian cultures. Maybe we should not have humored them in that, wanting to stay in that primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said: No, come join us. Be citizens along with the rest of us.”2 Implicit in Wayne’s statement is that the Native Americans did not have the good sense to give their land to the civilizing white settlers who were following the path of their manifest destiny; Reagan’s criticism of past policies repeats the conservative arguments of the Eisenhower era for terminating both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the reservations in order to force Native Americans to integrate into white society. Reagan also implies that the United States gave the reservations as a gift to the Indians, who should have been smart enough to give up their ethnic and cultural identities to join the melting pot. Hearing these two statements, one can surmise that both men acquired their knowledge of United States history, their sense of WASP superiority, paternalism and racial arrogance from Hollywood’s fantasies about the American West. Wayne and Reagan’s assertions reveal how Hollywood’s myths about the past not only distorted and misrepresented historical reality but also affected national policy in the twentieth century. Commenting on John Ford’s cinematic representation of Native Americans, Tag Gallagher admitted: “I know of no white film that has tried to assume an Indian’s point of view.”3 Gallagher along with Wayne and Reagan had obviously not seen the East German variations on the Western genre.
I. The Problematic Karl May

Immediately after World War II, both West and East Germany were wary of America’s cultural imperialism. Both countries initially linked Westerns with juvenile delinquency, and the press of the German Democratic Republic even accused “Americanized male adolescents of being responsible for instigating the revolt” of June 16 and 17, 1953 in East Germany. Neues Deutschland and other papers published a photo of a young man wearing a T-shirt with an image of a cowboy printed on it and linked the uprising to images of the American West and fascism. In spite of official disapproval, Westerns fulfilled many a boy’s and young man’s longing for adventure, and until the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, millions of East Germans could see American and other European films in West Berlin. Even after the Wall was erected, many East Germans could still see cowboy films on West German television broadcasts. In 1963, East Germany allowed the release of John Sturges’ The Magnificent Seven, only to withdraw it from circulation on October 4, 1963, after playing in theaters for three months, because the film allegedly provoked aggressive behavior and sparked riots. But the population’s thirst for Westerns could not be stilled. Shortly after the West German release of Der Schatz im Silbersee (The Treasure of Silver Lake, 1962) and the three Winnetou films (1963 to 1965), East Germans flocked to movie theaters in Prague, where these films were shown in German with Czech subtitles.

These four films were based on novels by Karl May, the prolific author, whom many have called the German Zane Grey. Beginning with short stories in 1875 and culminating with novels such as Der Schatz im Silbersee (The Treasure of Silver Lake, 1890) and the three volumes of Winnetou (1892), May helped to create Germany’s image of the American West and contributed to what Hartmut Lutz calls “deutsche Indianertümelei—German Indianthusiasm.” May’s Western novels, which narrate the adventures of the German pioneer Old Shatterhand and his Indian blood brother, the noble Apache chief Winnetou, have entertained generations of mainly boys and young men. A product of his times, May’s adventure novels offered his contemporary readers an escape from urbanization, industrialization, and the insecurities of the depression, which lasted from 1873 until 1896. According to Andreas Graf, by the end of the nineteenth century, the pro-Indian sentiments of May’s readers had already been awakened by James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, but the contemporary historical situation presented a problem: on the one hand, the Native Americans were waging their last wars to keep their lands, and on the other, millions of Germans had already emigrated to the United States and settled on former Indian lands. May solved the problem (as other European authors did during the age of imperialist nationalism) by depicting his countrymen in the West as “noble, helpful and good” heroes. May thus places the blame on villainous Yankees and absolves the German settlers of any guilt in the extermination of the Indians, which is exemplified by Winnetou’s friendship with the whites, i.e., the Germans.

Karl May’s themes of German patriotism, Christian humanism, anti-materialism, anti-capitalism, and respect for nature, as well as the mysticism and pacifism of his old age have elicited both positive and negative responses from both extremes of the political
spectrum. After initial debates regarding the appropriateness of his novels, they were instrumentalized for propagandistic purposes during the Third Reich. May had not only been Hitler’s favorite author, but also Goebbels and Göring had been enthusiastic readers of his novels. Nazi leaders, teachers, and the party’s writers association advocated the use of May’s Indian novels to teach young readers such Nazi ideals as the cult of the Führer, racial theory, and military fitness. Children’s Indian games were considered preparation for later military battles—what was learned in the novels could be applicable in warfare. Hitler advised his officers to study the battle strategies of Old Shatterhand, whom he saw as a Herrenmensch with special leadership qualities, and May’s works were distributed to soldiers engaged in the war against partisans. Christian references in May’s novels were ordered to be deleted, and some passages were rewritten to stress the superiority of the Aryan race. Because the National Socialists picked and chose the works that could be ideologically appropriated, only about one-third of May’s novels were reprinted during the Third Reich; and the later pacifist works were officially “out of print.”

After the war, the political leaders of the German Democratic Republic aimed to separate their country from its National Socialist past and attempted to expunge all remnants of fascistic thought, among which they included the works of May. As a result, Karl May’s writings were “neither forbidden nor permitted.” When socialist realism became the literary norm in the GDR, many party leaders and pedagogical theorists such as Edwin Hoernle argued that May’s books “bear imperialist thinking; they especially celebrate the dominance of the white race and the victory of ‘civilized man’ over the ‘savage.’ They do not know the struggle of the exploited against their exploiters. Karl May is the type of young people’s writer of the beginning imperialistic period.” In spite of official disapproval, schoolboys in East Germany surreptitiously passed around older editions of May’s novels, and West German editions were smuggled into the country. Although a West German publisher held the rights to a few edited works, according to copyright laws, most of May’s writings could have been reprinted in the GDR as early as 1962. The official East German policy dictated that valuable paper should be used to print the writings of newer, contemporary authors. May was not rehabilitated and reprinted in the GDR until 1983, when Winnetou I appeared and its 250,000 copies quickly sold out. Shortly thereafter, the East German literary scholar Regina Hartmann wrote in 1987 that May’s relevance lies in his “humanist credo, … the equality of all races, the right of all people to self-realization, to the free development of their culture … his plea for peaceful coexistence.” She further argues that East German readers will not approach May’s novels as an escape from reality or compensatory therapy, but rather, they will understand the relevance of his pacifism.

II. East Germany’s Indians, or If you want something visual, that’s not too abysmal, we can take in an old Gojko Mitić movie

Because of the popularity Karl May’s novels as well as that of Hollywood, West German, and Italian Western films, the DEFA studio of the German Democratic Republic decided to produce its unique variation on the genre for domestic distribution and exportation to other Eastern bloc countries. Between 1965 and 1982, DEFA made twelve feature films about
Native Americans starring the Yugoslavian physical education student Gojko Mitic, who was to become one of East Germany’s biggest stars. With the use of DEFA’s Totalvision widescreen format and Orwocolor (a type of Agfacolor), the films aimed to offer audiences visual pleasure by recreating the grandeur of Western landscapes on the screen. Although the first and some later productions were filmed in Yugoslavia, outside location shooting there was stopped in the late 1960s because some party functionaries apparently feared that the cast and crew would be negatively influenced by Tito’s unorthodox and more liberal form of socialism—the official explanation for filming elsewhere was that Yugoslavia had proved to be too expensive. The Eastern European countries of Rumania and Bulgaria as well as more exotic regions, such as the Crimea, (Soviet) Georgia, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Cuba, later served as substitute locations for not only the traditional American West, but also other regions inhabited by Indians, namely, the Old Northwest, the Northeast, Florida, and Argentina.

*Osceola.* The eponymous Seminole hero (Gojko Mitic) prevents the runaway slaves from lynching their former brutal overseer.

Although Karl May’s sympathies lay with the Indians who were defending their lands and way of life, there was a conscious effort on the part of the DEFA studio to differentiate its films from his novels and their cinematic adaptations. According to one critic, the novels lack a “sense of historical reality,” whereby “historical reality” does not merely refer to a knowledge of the historical facts, but also an historical awareness of class conflict and exploitation under capitalism. Günter Karl, chief script editor of the DEFA group Roter Kreis, stated, “the most important thing for us: to assume a clear historic-materialistic position in looking at history, to make the orientation on historical truth into the theoretical principle.” This criticism of Karl May also applies to the Hollywood
Westerns, whose “fundamental attitude” according to Gottfried Kolditz, director of three Indian films, “is totally trapped in imperialist ideology.” Konrad Petzold, who made four of these DEFA films, states that one of the studio’s aims was to counteract the influence of West German television programs (able to be seen on most East German televisions by merely turning the antenna) “where revolver heroes are constantly presented, where killing becomes a sport, where the Indian is a person of an inferior race, second class, where the robbing of Indian lands is incessantly dressed up with some phrases about American lifestyle and about alleged rights of the new settlers. Thus we didn’t make these films because of the pure adventure or solely because of audience tastes.”

Already the title given to this film genre indicates the shift of emphasis: Not Western, not cowboy, but Indianerfilme, Indian films, which depict the fate of Native Americans from their own perspective, showing how Western expansion and settlement affected the country’s original inhabitants. Instead of glorifying the Western hero or the courage and tenacity of the settlers, these productions show how the pre-capitalist Native American tribes suffered from and rebelled against the economic forces behind the myth of Manifest Destiny. The strong, laconic, infallible hero is no longer the cowboy but the Native American. The basic antagonisms can be summarized briefly: the Indians are the good guys, and the white men are the bad guys, reversing the Hollywood equations of savages = id, white civilization = superego. But such stereotyping is an obvious oversimplification. Good white men, including cavalry officers, do appear in these films, yet they are usually, like the Indians, also victimized by corrupt politicians and corporations. The criticism is directed less at settlers than at the greed of corporations and the U.S. government for not keeping its treaties. Manuela Seifert has drawn attention to the obvious: some of the stock elements of the Hollywood Westerns are conspicuously missing. In the first ten Indian films there are no cowboys, cowherds, farmers, and very few pioneers traveling West, the latter group being a characteristic the Hollywood’s nation-building films. When farmers and cowboys do appear, they are in Argentina (Severino, 1978). As the series progressed, the films usually got better, or at least more varied, and the unacknowledged borrowings from the Karl May novels and their cinematic adaptations became more obvious, including the occasional use of comic relief.

Throughout their production, the DEFA filmmakers appear to be shadowboxing with May and the images he had created, borrowing from him and reworking his themes to suit their ideological purposes. Influenced by reports of the Sioux wars over the Black Hills, May characterizes the Sioux as cruel and evil, while the Apaches are friendly and good. (Cochise, who died in 1874, served as a his model for Winnetou.) Since the Native Americans are the noble protagonists in all of the DEFA films, historical conflicts between the tribes proved problematic and needed to be explained. The only negative Indians are those who have been corrupted by the whites, especially by firewater. Hostilities between tribes are usually the result of white manipulations. For example, in Chingachgook, die große Schlange (Chingachgook, The Great Snake, 1967), based on Cooper’s The Deerslayer, the Delaware and Huron tribes are presented as gunfodder, fighting a war for foreigners on their own soil. The British Captain Warley states in the film: “The crown needs land, power, and riches. … We pay the Delawares, and Hurons are mercenaries of the French. There’s nothing left for us but for both sides to fight to the last Indian.”
Chingachgook, like many other DEFA Indian heroes, realizes that if the Native Americans are to survive, they must stop fighting each other and resist the whites.

Whereas Winnetou in May’s novels and their film adaptations struggles to maintain peace between his fellow Indians and the white settlers, fighting against bandits and profiteers alongside his white friends Old Shatterhand and Old Shurehand, DEFA’s Indian heroes come to realize that peaceful coexistence is impossible: they must either fight for their lands or migrate to Canada. Due to the shift of emphasis, the theme of blood brotherhood (which in the case of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand has an implied homosexual subtext) appears only in one DEFA film. Similarly, the theme of intermarriage as a resolution to the racial tensions is avoided. Winnetou has his beloved Ribanna marry a young cavalry officer to symbolize the peace between Indians and Whites (Winnetou II), whereas in the DEFA production of Kolditz’ Ulzana (1974), the protagonist’s wife is Mexican, but this represents a union between two non-WASP groups opposed to American expansionism. In addition, Winnetou’s conversion to Christianity at the end of volume three and May’s German nationalism were problematic from an East German perspective. With an eye on capturing an international market, the West German film versions of May’s novels make no mention of Old Shatterhand coming from Germany, and leading roles were played by foreigners: the American actor Lex Barker as Old Shatterhand, the British Stewart Granger as Old Shurehand, and the French Pierre Brice as the noble Apache chief Winnetou.29 (An irony in the casting is that Shatterhand as played by Lex Barker looks German with his blond hair and blue eyes, yet audiences recognized him as a former Hollywood Tarzan.) Consciously avoiding the “white sentimentality” of May’s novels,30 the DEFA films resulted in the reverse, a sentimental depiction of the red race. It should be noted, however, that in the transformation of the novels into films, May’s sentimentalism was largely replaced with action in the West German productions.

In contrast to occasional errors in May as well as the distortions of Hollywood’s Westerns, the DEFA films took pains to be historically and ethnographically accurate.31 The Indians are presented as individuals, not as an anonymous, predatory, threatening mass, and instead of presenting the homogenized Hollywood Indian, the DEFA productions differentiate between the fate and customs of the individual tribes. Writing about the Hollywood productions, Edward Buscombe states, “We don’t look to the Western for ethnography;” that is not something viewers expect from the genre, in spite of some films which attempt to present some aspects or insights of Indian culture,32 yet this is precisely what the DEFA studio aimed to present. For the first film, Die Söhne der großen Bärin (The Sons of Great Bear, 1966), the studio employed the author and anthropologist Liselotte Welskop-Henrich, on whose six-volume novel the film is based, as a consultant. A fanatic about accuracy, she left the project and refused to let her other works be adapted for the screen, complaining that the studio was taking too many liberties with regard to the historical and cultural details. (A more mundane reason for her departure, given later by some reliable sources at DEFA, was that she demanded higher royalties for her story.) In order to be as accurate as possible, the costume designers poured over countless volumes (in West Berlin libraries, since there were few such holdings in the GDR) and drew sketches of the various tribes’ costumes, which they recreated for the films. Whereas the scenes focusing on depicting local color and customs emphasize the sense of community
among the Native Americans, they also result in static, idealized representations of tribal life, in spite of the moving camera. Often these idyllic interludes interrupt the dramatic tension before crucial confrontations. Later films dispensed with the recreation of reportedly authentic Indian dances in *Chingachgook, die große Schlange* (*Chingachgook, The Great Snake*, 1967) and *Spur des Falken* (*The Trail of the Falcon*, 1968).

### III. History Lessons or Propaganda?

Intended for younger audiences (six years of age and older), the Indian films had to be approved not only by the DEFA production committees, but also by the Ministry of Education. Usually releasing a new one film every year during summer vacation and often showing them in outdoor theaters with personal appearances by Gojko Mitic, the government-controlled studio fulfilled a dual function with these productions: they met audience demands for entertainment by providing adventure films and served as a pedagogical tool to educate the country’s children about class conflict.\(^{33}\) In order to introduce the history lesson, the long expositions, often overloaded with explanatory dialogues or voiceovers, slow down the development of dramatic plot and tension.\(^{34}\) In *Chingachgook*, for example, a voiceover informs the viewers that the economic dependency of Indians on whites had the intensified hostilities between tribes. At the beginning of *Weiße Wölfe* (*White Wolves*, 1969), a voiceover states that U.S. history in the years after 1879 was characterized by an economic upswing and unconditional striving for power; it is the era of Morgan, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and Rockefeller, capitalists who built their fortunes at this time. The attempt to engineer spectatorial responses, however, proved to have very limited success among younger viewers. While the government and DEFA heads believed that repetition of the same basic themes would be pedagogically effective,\(^{35}\) the young audiences ignored the political message—they got enough of that in school and in youth groups—and enjoyed the films as exciting adventure stories, overlooking the often pathetic dialogue, the often fake stunts and improbable scenes.\(^{36}\)

Obviously, these films present a Marxist interpretation of United States history, and their anti-Americanism is evident, yet they are closer to historical facts than most Hollywood films. While still in the tradition of the 1950’s idealized Indians such as in *Broken Arrow* and *The Last Hunt*, one can argue that the East German Indian films anticipate the counterculture Vietnam-era American Westerns, which focus on the extermination of Native Americans, films such as the 1970’s *Soldier Blue* and *Little Big Man*, but without the graphic violence. With the possible exception of *Chingachgook*, based on Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*, the central conflict in every DEFA Indian film follows the same formulaic structure, revealing how some combination of unscrupulous white miners, settlers, speculators, corporations, bandits, the army, and the government connive either to exterminate or force the Native Americans off their tribal lands onto reservations. Because audiences know the fate that befell Native Americans, the DEFA Indians are allowed some victories, but most of the films have an open ending, implying that the struggle of those who survived continues.
When the historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” that free land and the constantly westward moving frontier are the key factors in America’s development, he omitted to mention the original inhabitants’ rights to the land. Turner concluded that acquisition of these lands as public domain had been the result of Indian wars on the frontier, which had served “as a military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression,” i.e., acts of aggression by the land’s original inhabitants. Both consciously and unconsciously, Hollywood accepted Turner’s thesis and turned it into the dominant myth. The representation of westward expansion, be it in the nation-building films (e.g., Union Pacific) or the turning-the-wilderness-into-a-garden variety (Shane and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence), ignored the Indian’s original rights to the land. In many ways, Hollywood continued to perpetrate the nineteenth-century belief that in the confrontation between civilization and savagery, the latter must vanish since those who actively cultivate the land are morally superior and have a right to it. While such films show that the Lebensraum practice of the white settlers called for the transplanting of Native Americans to barren reservations, until 1970 most of these films justify the killing of Indians because they threaten the white settlers or constitute an obstacle to progress.

In Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, Dee Brown quotes an article from the Cheyenne (Wyoming) Daily Leader of March 3, 1870, an article which summarizes the aims of the Big Horn Association, a mining group which believed in Manifest Destiny:
The rich and beautiful valleys of Wyoming are destined for the occupancy and sustenance of the Anglo-Saxon race. The wealth that for untold ages has lain hidden beneath the snow-capped summits of our mountains has been placed there by Providence to reward the brave spirits whose lot it is to compose the avant-guard of civilization. The Indians must stand aside or be overwhelmed by the ever advancing and ever increasing tide of emigration. The destiny of the aborigines is written in characters not to be mistaken. The same inscrutable Arbiter that decreed the downfall of Rome has pronounced the doom of extinction upon the red men of America.39

All of the DEFA Indian films constitute an indictment of this racist Social Darwinism, represented in the three thematic unities of “progress, genocide, and profit,”40 the three forces which caused the myth of the Vanishing American to become historical reality.

The Sons of Great Bear, The Trail of the Falcon, and its sequel White Wolves deal with the expulsion of the Dakotas after the discovery of gold in the Black Hills. In Apachen (Apaches, 1973) greedy Americans slaughter the Mimbreno Apaches who lived peacefully with Mexicans whom they had permitted to travel through their lands, and in its sequel, Ulzana (1974), the same Apaches are attacked by businessmen who lost profits after the Indians have become self-sufficient farmers and no longer purchase their spoiled food supplies. Tecumseh (1972) depicts the efforts of the eponymous Shawnee hero to unite all Indian tribes into a confederation. In Osceola (1971), the oppression of Black slaves is linked with the fate of the Seminole, and the title figure fights against a plantation owner who wants the Indian lands to expand his sugar cane fields, which are gradually becoming depleted from overplanting. In Tödlicher Irrtum (Fatal Error, 1970), set in 1897, the Shoshone have been forced onto reservations, and in order to survive, they entered into a contract with a capitalist corporation, the Wyoming Oil Company, whose manager cheats them and kills five chiefs in order to take over their shares in the company.

After the first films, individual villains were replaced by the system, i.e., the combined ruthlessness of government, army, and corporations. In the final showdown of White Wolves, Far-Sighted Falcon avenges the murder of his wife by killing the villainous Bashan (Rolf Hoppe). After having hurled a knife at Bashan’s heart before he could fire his pistol—a variation on the fast draw showdown on the main street—the now defenseless Far-Sighted Falcon is shot pointblank by Bashan’s accomplices. Immediately thereafter, countless men in frockcoats and high silk hats appear seemingly out of nowhere on the streets, representing the capitalists who will now rule and exploit the town along with the surrounding area’s natural resources and minerals. Defeated by the combination of greedy capitalists and corrupt politicians, the sheriff and his deputy, in a scene reminiscent of High Noon, take off their badges and place them on a horse rail. After Gojko Mitic’s character Far-Sighted Falcon died at the end of White Wolves, the fourth film in the series, there was a wave of protests (similar to those in West Germany because the Apache chief dies in Winnetou III). The scriptwriters and directors realized not only that they must consider audience expectations and not let the film’s hero perish, but also that the endings should be
more uplifting. Only at the end of *Tecumseh*, the seventh film, does the hero also die, this time in conformity to the historical facts.

*Tecumseh*. The film ends with a freeze frame: “Tecumseh fell in battle on October 5, 1813. William Henry Harrison became president of the United States of America in 1840.” For dramatic and ideological purposes, the complicated figure of Governor Harrison was transformed into a thorough villain because of his aggressive expansionist policies.

Although the recurring themes of Indian oppression and exploitation along with the resulting fight for survival were believed to serve a pedagogical purpose, the DEFA studio realized by the early 1970s that the Indian films were stuck in a formulaic quagmire. Both plots and settings needed to be expanded. *Severino* (1978) underscores the lesson that the exploitation of Indians was not limited to the United States. Set in Argentina at the turn of the century, the film presents a variation on the war between cattle and sheep ranchers, with the sheep raising company instigating a war between Indians and small cattle ranchers so that the company can take over their lands. *Severino* shows that not only whites, but also Indians, when led by a demagogue, can be racists. In *Der Scout* (*The Scout*, 1983), the cavalry takes the horses of the Nez Percé in order to prevent them from fleeing to Canada before they can put into reservations. Gojko Mitic, as White Feather, becomes an army scout to lead the horses back to the tribe. This film is the last in the series based on original scripts. Filmed in Mongolia, the supporting Mongolians cast as Indians look as inauthentic as the German actors with body paint do. Released in 1983, when Karl May adaptations were already being shown on East German television and in the movie theaters, *The Scout* was not as successful as the others. The last DEFA Indian film with Gojko Mitic, *Prairiejäger in Mexiko* (*Prairie Hunters in Mexico*, 1988) was a two-part television film based on a novel by Karl May, Germany’s main creator of the country’s image of the West.

The story of *Blutsbrüder* (*Blood Brothers*, 1975) begins where Ralph Nelson’s *Soldier Blue* ends, with the massacre of the Cheyenne by Colonel Chivington (named
Iverson in Nelson’s film) at Sand Creek on November 29, 1864. Black Kettle had been
given an U.S. flag by President Lincoln a few months earlier and told by Colonel
Greenwood that as long as that flag flew above his tepee, no soldier would shoot at him.43
The flag does not deter the cavalry from shooting the inhabitants of the village, including
the children huddling around Black Kettle. During the final part of the assault, the stars
and stripes goes up in flames, evoking images of flag-burning protests during the Vietnam
War. Witnessing the slaughter, the cavalry’s flag bearer Harmonica breaks his flagpole
and is therefore imprisoned for treason. He escapes with two other soldiers, but during
their flight, these two shoot two Cheyenne Indians. Harmonica cares for the wounded
Indian maiden Fawn, yet on the following morning is captured by the Indians and
sentenced to death. Fawn intervenes on his behalf, and instead of death, Harmonica is
forced into a race reminiscent of the one in Run of the Arrow (1956). As her brother Hard
Rock pursues Harmonica, he slips climbing a mountain, and the white man brings him back
to the village. Hard Rock is humiliated and cannot understand why Harmonica did not kill
him. Gradually he learns to respect Harmonica, who goes native like Kevin Costner in
Dances with Wolves (1990), falls in love with Fawn, and marries her. The preparations for
the wedding ceremony are an example of DEFA’s attempt to present authentic Indian
customs. Shortly thereafter, she and their unborn child are killed during another attack by
the cavalry.

As Gerd Gemünden has pointed out, there is a “racist blindspot” in these films.44
Like films made under Hollywood’s production code against miscegenation, Fawn, the
Indian wife of a white man, is doomed like Sonseeahray, Jeffords’s wife, in Broken Arrow,
and Chihuahua, the apparently Mexican-Indian girlfriend of Doc Holliday in My Darling
Clementine (1946). The same is true for the mixed-blood hero played by Armin Mueller
Stahl in Fatal Error. Depressed after Fawn’s death, Harmonica leaves the tribe and
becomes the town drunk. But when he sees Hard Rock captured and in chains, he plucks
out his beard like an Indian, helps his friend escape, becomes his blood brother, and fights
on his side. The film ends with a freeze frame of Harmonica and Hard Rock jumping off a
rock while attacking the cavalry, implying that the struggle against U.S. oppression
continues.
Blood Brothers. A pre-credit sequence opens the film with an introduction and song by the Colorado-born “Red Elvis” Dean Reed. In 1973, Reed moved to East Germany. Apparently because of personal problems, a declining career, and disillusionment with the regime, he committed suicide in 1986.

Blood Brothers was co-written by and stars the American expatriate actor, singer, and political activist Dean Reed, who became a bigger star in Eastern bloc countries after he settled in East Germany than he had been in the United States. Made when the popularity of the genre was declining, Blood Brothers borrows very freely from Karl May’s Winnetou and Hollywood films: the white man and the Indian must fight against each other before they can become friends; the marriage between the white man and the Indian woman is doomed, but unlike Old Shatterhand’s relationship with Winnetou’s sister Nscho Tschi, Harmonica doesn’t want his fiancée to be sent to a white school and become civilized; the death of the Indian wife/fiancée eventually leads to a stronger male bond between the Native American hero and the white man, a motif also presented in Broken Arrow, the murderer’s necklace in the hands of Fawn is reminiscent of Old Shatterhand stealing Winnetou’s necklace, and finally, there is the ritual of blood brotherhood.

IV. The Indian Films in the Service of the Cold War

By the mid 1960s, the films of the DEFA studio had such a bad reputation among the population in East Germany that Hannes Bolla in Spur der Steine (Trace of Stones, 1966) says to the female protagonist Kati: “For a date with you, I’d even be willing to watch a DEFA film.” In order to counter the effect of West German television and to increase attendance at the cinema, the studio aimed to “establish itself as a maker of genre films,” a goal, which became realizable especially after the success of the first Indian film, The Sons
(Earlier attempts at science fiction, operettas, and children’s films had been quite successful.) When DEFA studio decided to make *The Sons of Great Bear*, however, none of the directors on its staff stepped forward. All were preoccupied with their more serious projects dealing with topical, contemporary issues and did not want to lower themselves by making an adventure film. The Czech director Josef Mach, who had made more traditional films at a time that the Czech new wave was garnering laurels, was chosen to direct. After its success, other directors, especially younger ones competed for the jobs. The Indian films were not only the most successful series of genre films produced in East Germany, but they surpassed all others in audience attendance. They are a rare example of DEFA also being able to produce commercially successful films. The first seven films cost 20 million East German marks to produce and yielded 27 million. The attendance figures outnumbered those of other entertainment films and even those of political mainstream films, which were attended by organized groups.

After the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED, held in December 1965, banned almost the entire year’s feature films, one of the noteworthy survivors was the first Indian film, *The Sons of Great Bear*. With the exception of the year 1972, the genre became the most successful of all films distributed by Progress Filmverleih from 1966 until 1976. Numerous factors contributed to the production and release of these Indian films in the GDR: the continuing German fascination with Native Americans, East German support of and identification with Native Americans—during the 1960s and 1970s, members of the American Indian Movement marched in East Berlin’s May Day parade—and the films conform to tenets of socialist realism with their easily understood political message and positive, exemplary heroes. When the Soviet Military Administration granted DEFA the license to produce films on May 13, 1946, the Soviet film officer Colonel Tulpanov stated during the ceremony, that in addition to the democratic rebuilding of the country, DEFA has the obligation of “educating the population, especially the young, to a true understanding of democracy and humanity, in order to awaken respect for other peoples and countries. As a mass art, film must become a sharp and powerful weapon … for peace and friendship of all people of the world.”

In the first history of the American Western published in East Germany, Michael Hanisch, who is no fan of the “European imitations [that] have more or less nothing to do with the original,” concludes his extensive and pioneering study:

> America, the Western part of the U.S.A. not only has present-day problems, but also an “unresolved past.” It is said that the American Western also entered the throes of death because of the lack of new themes. Certainly many themes could be found in this “unresolved past.” However, these Westerns would probably look somewhat differently than the old ones.

In German, the words “unresolved past” (*unbewältigte Vergangenheit*) are used exclusively when discussing the holocaust and other atrocities committed during the Third Reich. While focusing only on American Westerns and ignoring the European ones, including the DEFA Indian films, in his study, Hanisch unintentionally mentions the major motivation of
the East German films, which found new themes by focusing on America’s unresolved past and corrected its historiography of the period.

Characterizing the Indian films, Barton Byg writes that they “seem to mediate between the progressive messages of a socialist realism and a mythical representation of ‘man’ and ‘nature’. The working class as subject of history in Marxist terms is here invited to identify with the Indians in their struggle against imperialist invaders.”53 According to Marx’ theory of social development, the Indians live in a form of primitive communism, and the inhabitants of the GDR, in their struggle against Western bourgeois capitalism, are expected to identify with the primitive communists in their fight against capitalism.54 The films also constitute a form of self-legitimization for the country. At the end of The Sons of Great Bear, Tokei-Ihto takes his tribe to Canada, where its members can live in peace. When he states: “we will go a new path. … Work the soil, raise tame buffalo, forge iron, make plows. That is now our new path,” he appears to express the aims of the German Democratic Republic, “the first peasant and workers state on German soil.”

![The Sons of Great Bear](image)

*The Sons of Great Bear.* Having defeated his father’s murderer, the villainous Red Fox, and his gang, Tokei-Ihto (Gojko Mitic) will lead his Dakota tribe across the Missouri River into Canada.

Although party officials wanted to stop producing these films after the third one, popular support prevented their cancellation. With their anti-imperialist messages, the films were politically safe. Made during the Vietnam War, their anti-capitalist, anti-American messages can be read as an indirect expression of solidarity with North Vietnam and as an accusation against the U.S. as an imperialist power engaging in another genocidal war in Vietnam. Whether one agrees with this interpretation or not, it should be noted that the UN General Assembly had unanimously passed the “Genocide Convention” in 1948 to prevent and punish mass killings, and it became international law in 1951. But the U.S. did
not ratify it until 1988. As Leo Kuper noted, “did it fear that it might be held responsible, retrospectively, for the annihilation of Indians in the United States, or its role in the slave trade, or its contemporary support for tyrannical governments engaging in mass murder?”

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1 “Playboy Interview: John Wayne,” *Playboy*, May 1971, p. 82.
5 That such activities were frowned upon is evident in DEFA’s *Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin—Schönhauser Corner*, 1957), in which one juvenile delinquent repeatedly goes to the cinema in West Berlin.
7 The commercial success of the *Der Schatz im Silbersee* and first *Winnetou* film aroused the interest of Spanish and Italian producers, who were encouraged by their popularity to invest in Westerns for the home market. Constantin, one of the companies involved in the Karl May films, together with Ocean and Jolly Films, co-produced Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars*, starring Clint Eastwood. One can argue that without the Sauerkraut Westerns, Clint Eastwood would not be the star he is today. See Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns. Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: Taurus, 1998), pp. 103 and 115.
8 May’s collected works comprise 74 volumes, 99 volumes in the critical edition currently being prepared. His novels have been translated into thirty-nine languages, but never into English. Peter Uwe Hohendahl surmises that James Fenimore Cooper was too well established in the United States to allow a foreigner to compete with him and that American readers would find in May’s novels too many inconsistent details, which did not disturb European readers. “Von der Rothaut zum Edelmenschen. Karl Mays Amerikaromane,” in *Amerika in der deutschen Literatur. Neue Welt—Nordamerika—USA*, ed. Sigrid Bauschinger, Horst Denkler, and Wilfried Malsch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975), p. 230.
9 Hartmut Lutz, “German Indianthusiasm: A Socially Constructed German National(ist) Myth,” in *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 2002), p. 167. Recently the effect of Karl May at the turn of the century has come into question, since in addition to Karl May, numerous other others and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, which toured Germany in 1890-91 and 1906, captured the German imagination. Feest has found over 1,000 titles of Indian stories published in Germany between 1875 and 1900. He surmises that “[t]aken together, they may have had a greater impact on German views of Indians than did the works of Karl May.” Christian F. Feest, “Germany’s Indians in a European Perspective,” in *Germans and Indians*, p. 37-38.
A customer-survey by the Karl May Verlag revealed that his novels were read by 81.6% of young people between 1931 and 1935. Cited by Barbara Haible, *Indianer im Dienste der NS-Ideologie. Untersuchungen zur Funktion von Jugendbüchern über nordamerikanische Indianer im Nationalsozialismus* Hamburg: Kovač, 1998), p. 78.


12 Because of repeated attacks on Karl May by the elementary school teacher and avowed Nazi Wilhelm Fronemann (who accused May of being a Marxist, pacifist, and anti-racist) and party members, who wanted to burn his books in Göttingen, Goebbels’ Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda ordered that “the attacks on Karl May’s books were undesired.” Erich Heinemann, “‘Karl May paßt zum Nationalsozialismus wie die Faust aufs Auge’: Der Kampf des Lehrers Wilhelm Fronemann,” in *Jahrbuch der Karl-May-Gesellschaft*, 1982, p. 239, quoted in Haible, *Indianer im Dienste der NS-Ideologie*, p. 103. After the war, Fronemann became a socialist and advocated banning Karl May’s works because of their fascist elements. See Heermann, *Old Shatterhand ritt nicht im Auftrag der Arbeiterklasse*, pp. 5-10.

13 See, e.g., the criticism of Karl May by Klaus Mann, “Cowboy Mentor of the Führer,” *The Living Age*, Nov. 1940, pp. 217-22. Mann’s article captures the reactions of most German émigré writers, who saw parallels between the battles in May’s novel and Hitler’s war. According to Albert Speer, Hitler was impressed by “the tactical agility and circumspection” of Winnetou, whom the Führer considered the perfect example of a “company commander.” Albert Speer, *Spandauer Tagebücher* (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1975), p. 523.

14 Hartmut Lutz, “German Indianthusiasm: A Socially Constructed German National(ist) Myth,” in *Germans and Indians*, p. 178. For a more detailed discussion of how the Indian novels of Karl May and other authors were used to instill National Socialist ideology in young readers, see Barbara Haible, *Indianer im Dienste der NS-Ideologie*.

15 Haible, *Indianer im Dienste der NS-Ideologie*, p. 82 and 119.


17 Haible, *Indianer im Dienste der NS-Ideologie*, p. 103 and 132.

18 Hartmann, *Old Shatterhand ritt nicht im Auftrag der Arbeiterklasse*, p. 10.


21 According to Gojko Mitic, “the GDR was not ready to accept the stories about Winnetou, Old Shatterhand and his friends simply as good entertainment with a shot of morality.” Gojko Mitic, *Erinnerungen*. Aufgezeichnet von Alex Wolf (Frankfurt/M: Ullstein, 1996), p. 51.


27 Quoted by Seifert, p. 4.
28 Seifert, p. 55.
29 Although production money came mostly from Germany, Yugoslavia, where the location shots were filmed, is listed as a co-producer for most films, along with Italy and France for some others.
31 Because May wrote his novels without ever having visited the American West, he used sources which were not always accurate and therefore incorporated numerous errors into his novels. Regina Hartmann, for example, asks whether the Apaches were really superior to other Indian tribes as May describes them and argues that such problems would not arise in the Indian literature of socialist authors such as Liselotte Welkopf-Henrich, on whose novel in six volumes the film *The Sons of Great Bear* is based (p. 481).
33 The promotional literature for *The Sons of Great Bear* argues that children would be able to understand the film. In discussions with the novel’s author, DEFA staff, and ethnologists, children reportedly asked intelligent questions and revealed a knowledge about Native Americans that would put some adults to shame. *Film Werbung* (Progress Film-Verleih), No. 11, 1966, p. 4.
34 Seifert, p. 56. This is the main argument of her *Diplomarbeit*.
35 In their sociological analysis of film reception, the GDR film scholars Lothar Bisky and Dieter Wiedemann argue that the cumulative effect of similar perspectives will affect greater qualitative changes on the part of the viewers than a single film, TV show, book, newspaper article, or political discussion. *Der Spielfilm—Rezeption und Wirkung. Kultursoziologische Analysen* (Berlin (East): Henschel, 1985), p. 102.
36 When Mitic jumps off a train onto his horse, there is a cut while he is in mid-air, and the next shot shows him sitting on his horse (*Trail of the Falcon*); a similar cut occurs when he jumps off his own horse onto a horse pulling a carriage (*Osceola*). Instead of reloading his gun to shoot an alligator pursuing a run-away Black slave, he jumps into the water with his knife to kill the animal (*Osceola*).
38 The villainous Ryker in George Stevens’ *Shane* appears to quote Turner’s thesis when he describes how he fought the Indians to turn the land into an open range for his cattle and therefore opposes the homesteaders, the next chapter in the development of the West.
41 The film’s director, Claus Dobberke, commented in an interview, “The fact is that racial fanaticism and its results was on the white side as well as on the Indian side.” Quoted in Habel, *Gojko Mitic, Mustangs, Marterpfähle*, p. 147.
42 Heermann argues that in the cinematic duel between Gojko Mitic and Pierre Brice, cinema’s Winnetou, Mitic appears to have lost (*Old Shatterhand ritt nicht im Auftrag der Arbeiterklasse*, p. 83). It should be noted, however, that the last of the Karl May Westerns, *Winnetou and Shatterhand im Tal der Toten* (*Winnetou and Shatterhand in the Valley of the Dead*), made in 1968, was a failure at the box office. Elke Schieber of the Filmmuseum in Potsdam tells the story that one can always tell whether visitors to the museum come from the former East or West Germany: upon seeing a
statue of an Indian, the West Germans burst out, “that’s Winnetou!” and the East Germans exclaim, “that’s our Gojko!” In 1992 Mitic replaced Pierre Brice as Winnetou in the annual open-air Karl May Festival at Bad Segeberg.

43 Dee Brown, p. 70.


45 In the film Winnetou II, the army officer Lt. Merrill and the Indian maiden Ribanna marry so that their symbolic union would secure peace between whites and Indians. Winnetou and Ribanna had been in love, but they renounce their love for peace between whites and Indians. Here it is not a matter of violating any codes against miscegenation, but rather, the ideal of renunciation for a greater good.


47 Die Söhne der großen Bärin had 4.870 million viewers in one year; Spur des Falken had 3.201 million; Chingachgook, die große Schlange had 2.877 million, and Weiße Wölfe had 2.804 million. Dieter Wiedemann, “‘Aber das Publikum wollte sich unterhalten’—Zur Rezeption von Arbeiterfilmen in der DDR,” in Der geteilte Himmel. Arbeit, Alltag und Geschichte im ost- und westdeutschen Film, ed. Peter Zimmermann and Gebhard Moldenhauer (Constance: UVK Medien, 2000), 270.


49 Colin C. Calloway, “Historical Encounters across Five Centuries,” in Germans and Indians, p.76.


54 Jon Raundalen points out the contradiction in this intended identification process. According to Marx’ theory of historical evolution, society must develop through the stages of primitive communism, slave society, feudal society, and bourgeois/capitalist society before it can develop into the classless communist society. East German audiences, already in the so-called classless communist society were expected to identify with “primitive communists.” Raundalen writes that at the same time, “every ‘back to nature’-oriented quest was banned and deemed reactionary and contra-revolutionary.” Indianer som Westernhelt: En Studie av den Østtyske Westernfilmen. Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures & Societies, No.5 (Trondheim, 2001), p. 175. In this sense, the activities of East German hobby Indians (the reenactment of Native American dances, dress, and customs) can be interpreted as a form of resistance to socialism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Film Werbung (Progress Film-Verleih), No. 11, 1966.


Two images not used in the published version of this article:

*Apaches.* DEFA beefcake bondage. “Look, the great warrior doesn’t even flinch” as Ulzana (Gojko Mitic) is being whipped.

*Apaches.* Scalping of the dead Apaches at Santa Rita. “$100 for a man’s scalp, $50 for a woman’s scalp, and $25 for a child’s scalp.”