

# Commemorative Albums of the Higher Communist Schools of the GDR in the 1950s (Based on Materials from the Personal Fund of Corresponding Member of the USSR Academy of Sciences A. I. Lepeshkin)<sup>1</sup>

Oksana F. Ezhova

Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences

**Abstract.** Historic artifacts speak to the fact that various cultural forms existed in different historical periods. The recently discovered works presented in this article are unique artifacts of the cultural history of post-war Europe. Alexey Lepeshkin, who was a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union and a specialist in the field of Soviet public law, was presented with two commemorative albums of the higher communist schools of the GDR (1952). As of today, these albums are part of Lepeshkin's personal fund, and are stored in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (f. No.2004). This article gives the first scientific account of these items. The complex study of commemorative albums is relevant due to the lack of research in the area of handwritten commemorative albums of that period. A comprehensive analysis of the historical and cultural context of the interaction among the socialist countries after the end of the Second World War as exemplified by the relations between Russia and Germany in the example of two commemorative albums of German communist institutions of higher education gives researchers an opportunity to bring these manuscripts into a wider cultural and political context. The genre of hand-made folklore albums has a number of distinctive features in both form and content. This article is devoted to a formal and meaningful description and analysis of these memorial artifacts, both in terms of the texts contained in them, and in terms of visual anthropological analysis of photographs, drawings, and calligraphic features. On the basis of this material, we can draw conclusions about the preservation of folklore pragmatics and forms of existence by such albums, regardless of the change in the social structure in Russian and German culture.

**Keywords:** commemorative albums, written folklore, A. I. Lepeshkin, GDR, Higher Party School, pragmatics of folklore

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The private collection of Soviet legal expert and corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union Alexey Lepeshkin that is now stored in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences contains two commemorative albums compiled in 1952 by students of the party academies of the German Democratic Republic and later donated by Lepeshkin himself to the Archive<sup>2</sup>. Alexey Lepeshkin was a Soviet lawyer, a specialist in Soviet state-building, a Doctor of Law (1954), professor (1954), Colonel of Justice (1954), and Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union (1969). For the purposes of the present study, we will only mention the parts of Lepeshkin's eventful life that are important for the topic at hand. Specifically, we are interested in his official trip to East Germany in February–June 1952, sanctioned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where he delivered a series of lectures on Soviet state law for students of the Higher Party School under the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, as well as for students of other party educational institutions in the country (the Institute of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, the Walter Ulbricht Academy for State and Legal Science, and the School for Democratic Youth); as well as his tenure as a Professor of Law in the Department of State Law at the Moscow State University of International Relations under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union from 1972 until his death in 1977. Lepeshkin was buried in Moscow.

Let us note right away that discussions regarding the relationship between traditional and modern culture and the importance of preserving traditional elements and phenomena are constantly in the public consciousness. In this context, it would be wise to look at evidence of the spread of various traditional cultural forms and genres in different historical periods. The cultural phenomenon of handwritten albums that first appeared around the sixteenth century and continues to this day has a semantic diversity and a broad scope of application. This is why it is studied by researchers in various disciplines and from diverse perspectives – literary critics, folklorists, ethnographers, anthropologists and psychologists. In the present work, we will adhere to methods that allow us to consider commemorative albums in the totality of the materials contained in them as a cultural phenomenon and, at the same time, a special genre of written folklore that represents a traditional written communicative practice. In doing so, we will rely on the work of modern researchers: M. Alekseev (Alekseev 1960), V. Vaczuro (Vaczuro 1977), S. Borisov (Borisov 1996; 2000), N. Lebedeva (Lebedeva 2001; 2004), V. Lurie<sup>3</sup>, and others; as well on that of collectors and publishers of objects of material and non-material folk culture.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Private Collection of Alexei Lepeshkin, Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. Case No. 50–51 (F. No. 2004, No. 1, Case No. 50–51).

<sup>3</sup> Lurie V. F. 2021. A Modern Songbook for Girls. Dvoetochie. URL: <https://dvoetochie.org/2021/02/28/lurie/> (accessed 15.11.2023); Mikhail Karasik et al. (compiled by). *The Dembel Album. Russian Art Brut between Subculture and Artist's Book: Collection of Materials and Exhibition Catalogue*. 2001. St. Petersburg: M.K & Kharmsizdat; Lurie M. L. (ed. and compiled by). *Poetry in the Barracks: Russian Soldier Folklore from the Boyan Collections by Andrey Broido, Dzhana Kutkina and Yakov Broido*. 2008. Moscow: OGI; *The Poetic Speech of Russians. Folk Songs and Modern Folklore Collected by Andrey Broido, Yana Kutkina and Yakov Broido*. URL: <https://daabooks.net/indexkoi.html> (accessed 17.11.2023).

The commemorative album appeared at around the same time as book culture and was originally an attribute exclusively of educated people. The first albums were a kind of diary, made by itinerant students. The Department of Manuscripts of the Literary Museum of the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Pushkin House) boasts a collection of albums that date back to the second half of the eighteenth century. These are so-called *Stammbuchs*. Similar albums were widespread in Germany in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Looking at these albums, we can safely place them in the genre of “manuscripts”, as the samples from that time contain clear genre features that pop up time and again. These included an obligatory title page with a coloured coat of arms that sports a short motto, the owner’s name, and occasionally their class titles. The pages would also be presented in a specific way, containing a quote or saying, possibly in Latin, followed by poems composed by the owner in such a way that they take up the entire page. If one of the poems was written by a friend or acquaintance of the owner, then they too would add a brief motto and write the time and place the poem was written in the bottom left-hand corner of the paper, along with a dedication and an ornate signature, which may also indicate that person’s profession and social status. These *Stammbuchs* would accompany their owners whenever they travelled. In some cases, you can plot a map of the owner’s movements, and the signatures of influential people could, on occasion, serve as a kind of letter of recommendation (Vaczero 1977). The first such albums (sung by friends and/or acquaintances) in Russian high society belonged to men who brought the tradition home from Europe after completing their studies there. But before long, the album would become an element of female, as well as girlish salon culture too. Girls from noble families would later introduce the tradition of the commemorative album to grammar schools in big cities. From there, it would transcend class boundaries and become far more commonplace. The lofty style inevitably suffered – the texts and musical fragments that appeared in the albums of grammar school pupils in the nineteenth century featured poems by revered writers and excerpts of stories by true authors, as well as lines lifted from trashy romance novels and overly sentimental poems full of hackneyed epithets and literary clichés (Borisov 1996). We can thus conclude that the commemorative album as we know it today (compiled by children, teenagers and young people for consumption exclusively within their own familiar environment) started to take shape as a separate written folklore genre of children’s and youth culture in the late nineteenth century. There is almost no evidence to suggest that adults made these kinds of albums after this period<sup>4</sup>.

After the October Revolution, creating commemorative albums continued to exist as a fairly stable folklore genre, primarily among young girls<sup>5</sup>. Formal genre features, such as a specially designed title page, dedications, questionnaires, song lyrics, hand-

<sup>4</sup> Straten V. V. Art of the City Streets. 1927. *Artistic Folklore*. 1-3. P. 144–164.

<sup>5</sup> Zhanyutin A. 1989. Handwritten Album Songbooks among Schoolchildren: Newfound Success for an Old Genre. *Success on a Massive Scale* [Collected Essays]. Moscow: State Institute of Arts. P. 195–197.

drawn illustrations, and pictures glued to the pages, were kept. Certain messages of goodwill written in verse became standard, remaining unchanged from the pre-war period (1930s–1940s) right up until the early 1990s (Arkhipova 2005: 184–189; Arkhipova 2006: 26–32; Bazanov 1998: 72).

Now let us look at the commemorative albums compiled and decorated by German students and teachers and presented to Professor Alexey Lepeshkin during his visit to East Germany in 1952. The first was produced by students of the Party Academy Karl Marx, while the second was made by students of another higher party school named after Wilhelm Pieck.

The Party Academy Karl Marx album contains 18 sheets of thick ivory paper. It has a red binding made out of artificial leather. On the front cover are the images of four figures – Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin – embossed with gold. Only one side of the paper is used, with the reverse side of each page being left blank. The album is in A4 size. The first three pages are printed in blue ink using a stylized jerky font with characteristic thickening that is meant to give the impression that it has been written by hand. The first page contains a dedication to “Our esteemed Comrade Professor Lepeshkin”<sup>6</sup>. Further, in the centre of the page, we see the oval emblem of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, the image of a handshake. Below this are the words “Party Academy Karl Marx under the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany”. The second page contains a lengthy dedication to Lepeshkin that reads: “Dear<sup>7</sup> Comrade, Professor Lepeshkin! We could not let you leave for home, the Soviet Union, without telling you how grateful we are for the invaluable assistance you have provided us in understanding Marxism–Leninism. This is the first time that we have had the honour and privilege of studying under a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the party of Lenin and Stalin. We are extremely happy and overcome with pride. Never before has our school been able to offer a full lecture course on the structure of the state in the Soviet Union and on Soviet state law. Your lectures helped us delve deeper into the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and to start approaching our studies with a greater sense of responsibility. The lectures on the State and law contributed significantly to a better understanding of the role and importance of our state in the struggle for peace and the reunification of Germany. It has become quite clear to us that a great power still lies ahead for our party if we are to defeat the enemies of the working class. And we will achieve this victory, guided by the spirit of love for the motherland and for proletarian internationalism. Comrade Lepeshkin, you have instilled in us the burning passion of this spirit. Working together helps build friendly relations, so that we can unite even further in the fight against our common enemy. We believe that we must do everything possible so that your cordial attitude towards students and our love for one another are felt throughout our Party

<sup>6</sup> All translations from the German here are by L. V. Kondrashkova (Ph.D), a Senior Research Fellow at the Andrey Rublev Museum of Ancient Russian Culture and Art.

<sup>7</sup> It actually contains the German equivalent of “Dearest” – the superlative form of “dear”.

and, moreover, by the working people of Germany. We hope, Comrade Lepeshkin, that you will enjoy the same success in your teaching that you have enjoyed with us wherever you go! We wish you the best of health! Your profound knowledge will always serve as a reference point for all of us. Your modesty is an inspiration, and your unity with the working people will forever guide us on the difficult road to victory”.

The dedication is signed: “From the teacher and students of Party Academy Karl Marx under the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. June 1952”.

On the one hand, what we have before us is a typical panegyric, written entirely in the spirit of praise for a Roman general or lifted directly from an encomium dedicated to a Christian saint. On the other hand, it reads like a tribute to an old friend, a comrade with whom warm relations were built as a result of working together – something that the authors of the note want to be “felt throughout the Party and by the working people”. It is at this point that the praise turns into a passionate confession, worded in much the same way as a love letter. Love poems are an important element for describing one’s feelings, hopes and expectations... and they are also a mark of the genre of commemorative albums produced by the younger generation. In the case of this text from the album, love for the young German builders of socialism and communism is a noble and heartfelt feeling for comrades in the party in the class struggle.

The second piece of text in the album on page three recounts the history of the establishment of Party Academy Karl Marx. It is not nearly as emotionally coloured as the dedication and is of a more formal nature. According to the text, the academy could not have been created without the help of the Soviet Union, and that the album talks about the life of the school.

Subsequent pages contain photographs pasted into the album. The pages with photographs have printed blue edges. At the top of the page, in the centre, the blue edging gives way to a printed circle that bears an emblem – two flags (East Germany and the Soviet Union) and the words “German–Soviet friendship”. The captions underneath the photographs are handwritten in block letters, using a thin pen. The photographs on the pages are of prominent East German political figures of the time – Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht, and Otto Grotewohl. One of the photos of Wilhelm Pieck contains the words written underneath: “Ernst Thälmann’s comrade-in-arms and our idol Wilhelm Pieck”. Note the vivid emotional (or imitation of such) words of respect and admiration for the leader. The word “idol” is informal. Another interesting detail is worthy of note here: in the photograph, Comrade Walter Ulbricht is giving a speech on stage in front of the students of the Party Academy Karl Marx. Above him is a large portrait of the German thinker, hanging from the back of the stage, with one of his quotes written in large letters.

The album also contains photographs of the leaders of the world communist movement: Elena Dmitrova speaking at a meeting in honour of the seventieth birthday of Georgy Dmitrov. Other photos depict students in the classroom, the school dormitory, students taking part in the May Day celebrations, and dancing to the music of an ac-



cordion in anticipation of the start of the procession. The last photo in the album is from a function held in the school's assembly hall in honour of Comrade Stalin's 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. A huge banner with a half-length portrait of the leader is stretched on the back of the stage, officials are at the presidium, while military officers are sitting near the stage. The last page does not have any photographs and instead contains a statement by Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany at the time: "The starting point for improving the quality of our ideological work and the training offered at the party academy is to deepen the study of the history of the Communist Party of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union". Seeing as though Lepeshkin taught Soviet law and the history of the Communist Party to German students, this quote can be seen as being addressed to him personally as a justification for the respect and gratitude of the audience.

The second album contains 19 pages. Just like in the first album, all text and images are on one side of the paper, with the reverse side remaining empty. The binding is made out of artificial leather. There is no embossing or inscription on the cover, which is fastened through two round holes with a red silk cord. The album is in A4 size. It was compiled by students at the Wilhelm Pieck School. Unlike the first album, this work is bright and colourful in its design. The first and sixth pages contain drawings coloured with paint or ink. They are of an extremely high quality, with many fine lines and ornamental features, in a style that is reminiscent of church manuscript miniatures. The first page is embellished with a floral design and two emblems – one of the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, FDJ) and the other of a similar organization in the Soviet Union, the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (Komsomol). Meanwhile, page six boasts a medallion in the centre of the page, framed by images of red banners, doves, flowers and leaves, the rising sun beaming orange rays, ears of corn, and portraits of Joseph Stalin and Wilhelm Pieck.

The first page contains a dedication to Alexey Lepeshkin (which reads: "To Comrade Professor Lepeshkin, as a thank you and a reminder of the Wilhelm Pieck School. June 20, 1952, while the final page leaves us with a quote from Kim Il Sung ("The people liberated by the Soviet Army will not be enslaved by the imperialists again"), written in large Gothic font. The ornateness of the first letter of Kim Il Sung's statement is also reminiscent of the handwritten style, decorated as it is with a pattern consisting of guns, red banners and a laurel branch.

Unlike the first album we looked at, this one does not include a long dedication or encomium to Lepeshkin. Here, the gratitude of the students is primarily expressed through the visual structure of the images. In the previous album, for example, the majority of the photographs depict official events or ordinary school life with people captured in static poses. Here, the opposite is true, as most of the pictures depict heartfelt and touching moments from the lives of the students captured 'live' as they go about their day. All the captions are in large letters, written with a thick blue felt-tip pen. The photographs have been outlined using the same pen, one to two millimetres from the edge. The first photo, which depicts students looking at a stand with a picture of a

young Joseph Stalin, has the caption underneath: “Learning from Stalin means learning to win”. This is followed by photographs of the school building and a picture of Wilhelm Pieck with students. It is captioned: “Wilhelm Pieck is a great friend, helper, and mentor of the youth”. After a hand-drawn insert there is a group photograph featuring another guest from the Soviet Union, Vyacheslav Kochemasov, Chairman of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Youth, who, as the person who wrote the captions notes, “sends his greetings from the glorious Komsomol”.

The next picture is of four smiling young men and a young lady on a sunny day, walking towards the photographer, suitcases in hand, against the backdrop of leafy trees. One of the young fellows is wearing a dark shirt, light shorts, and dark shoes and socks. The caption to the photo reads: “Most of the students at Wilhelm Pieck School are from families of workers and peasants”. Although, looking at them, there is no way of telling what class they come from – they are simply dressed neatly and modestly, in the fashion of the time. Then there are pictures of students listening to a lecture, students at stands learning about the history of the party, students at bookshelves, students with their backs to us listening intently to the lecturer with his pointer at the blackboard, who, as the caption tells us, “is immersed in the study of the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with the students” (it is not Professor Lepeshkin in the photograph, although it evidently places a strong emphasis on the importance of his missions). As we can see, these are typical images for the party school’s commemorative album, showing off the main party tasks of the educational institution. Next is a photo of the school’s teaching staff. A poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky dedicated to the party and translated into German adorns the wall behind the presidium. The following picture metaphorically expresses aspiration, willpower and strength of mind: the photo is of a student athlete performing a long jump, snapped while he is in mid-air; more students are stood in the background, waiting for their turn and exchanging glances. The caption reads: “Training for the sports achievement badge “Ready to Work and Defend Peace”. Another photo depicting girls and boys performing a circle dance has the playful caption: “In cultural circles”.

The composition of the next photograph is particularly interesting. It depicts three lads wearing only shorts, digging a hole. The centre of the picture is shifted to the right relative to the axis of symmetry of the image, and the young man in the middle, in a half-turned pose, is looking at his comrade to the left. The lad on the far right is standing lower down than the others, in the hole. It is a fine sunny day, and everyone is smiling. The caption reads: “Helping build our new school as volunteers”. The theme of constructing a new building continues on the next page. Three smaller photographs depict a corner building under construction from different angles.

There is one more page following the one with the quote from Kim Il Sung, and it contains a photograph of two buglers wearing identical long-sleeved shirts with breast pockets tucked into their shorts. They are both wearing belts, black patent leather boots and white socks. The boys are standing on a small pedestal in front of some birch trees. Both have their left hand on their belt and are holding the bugle with their right,

pressing the horn to their lips, heads thrown back. Small items have been stuck onto the bugles – reddish-looking flags or pennants. The caption for this final photo reads: “The FDJ (Free German Youth) fights for the establishment of a united, democratic, independent and peace-loving Germany, and calls on the youth of both Germanies to engage in this struggle”. This is a direct reference to the political events of the time – the division of Germany and the delineation of zones of influence of the Soviet Union and the United States on the territories of the newly created states.

The “successors” of medieval albums of itinerant students are thus not only scrap-books created by pupils at girls’ schools, but also commemorative books of other communities and individuals. It is certainly worth studying the issue of attributing collections of photographs, drawings, texts, in whatever form they may appear, to the folklore genre through a comprehensive analysis of both the content and the formal aspects of the object of material culture that captures the interest of the researcher, as well as the context in which it was created and subsequently survived (Chistov 1995). Thus, a colourful title page, dedications and/or wishes, freehand drawings, handwritten captions for images with detailed comments – all of which appear in one or both of the commemorative albums we have looked at – are indicators of the preservation of the characteristic traditional elements of the written folklore genre. The very fact that young people made and compiled such albums places the object of material culture that corresponds to the conditions of the existence of the folklore genre (Shchepanskaya 1993).

As we have already noted, the two albums we have looked at here were compiled at the end of the 1951/52 academic year and presented to Alexey Lepeshkin by the students of the higher party schools in June 1952. The captions to the photographs tell us that the pupils of these educational establishments were most likely from worker or peasant backgrounds. East Germany had a national education system at the time, which was built on the model of the Soviet education system in accordance with the Law on the Democratisation of the German School that entered into force in 1946 and was only rescinded in 1959 following the adoption of a new Law on the Socialist Development of the School System in the German Democratic Republic. That is, we can assume that young people became familiar with the tradition of making commemorative albums with drawings and inscriptions when they were at school. The Gothic-style inscriptions and ornate illustrations could be a result of the religious upbringing and education of children in German families – while Christian church education was no longer part of the school curriculum, it was nevertheless preserved in East Germany. Many prominent German communists received a church education. Most notable of these was Wilhelm Pieck, who is mentioned above and depicted in the photographs of the albums we have described. The albums compiled for the Soviet professor have almost nothing in the way of a personal touch – there are no messages from individual students or teachers, all the lofty words written for Alexey Lepeshkin are collective, from the “average” pupil and instructor. We do not know the names of the people who put the album together, as such works are typically anonymous and



reflections of collective folk art and culture. The desire to express thoughts and feelings in writing, whether they are real or imaginary, is itself void of any cultural colouring, but the practice of framing them in a specific genre indicates the preservation within the community of traditional mechanisms for the functioning of the structure of the commemorative album, which is obvious when analysing the content of the albums compiled by the German students for Professor Alexey Lepeshkin. We have no way of knowing how often Lepeshkin actually leafed through these albums. Nor do we know if he made any albums or scrapbooks of his own – there is nothing in his private collection. We can assume that the commemorative albums brought to the Soviet Union from abroad as proof that the individual had the opportunity to live and work abroad could again acquire a functional meaning similar to that intended by the founders of the genre (itinerant students) and be seen as a kind of letter of recommendation, or evidence of one's social status.

These facts, in addition to the material we have presented here – the commemorative albums produced by students at the higher party schools in East Germany in 1952<sup>8</sup> – lead us to some general conclusions:

1. The albums we have looked at belong to the corpus of written folklore, more specifically, to a widely used genre within this category of handwritten scrapbooks.
2. The very fact that the practice of compiling such albums existed in the communist universities of East Germany testifies to the preservation of the genre among the youth in the country, which was under Soviet influence, following the war.
3. Such albums, regardless of their content, preserved folklore pragmatics and the features and forms that are typical of the genre.

The change in the social structure of East German society did not affect the preservation of the genre of commemorative albums; the structure of the form was kept. In some cases (the albums we have looked at serve as an example of such a cultural artefact), specifically, when the album was a collective effort intended to be presented to a specific person, the content of the album was an expression of the goal and was thus usually a propaganda piece. That said, the students were more or less free to write what they wanted in terms of dedications and comments in the albums, although they nevertheless turned out to be stylistically neutral statements that were socially acceptable in this particular cultural and historical context.

#### **About the Author:**

**Oksana F. Ezhova** – Ph.D. in Philology, Research Associate at the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 34 Novocheremushkinskaya str., Moscow, Russia, 117218. E-mail: oks-ezhova@yandex.ru

<sup>8</sup> Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, f. No. 2004.

**Conflicts of interest.**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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