



Alan McDougall. *Youth Politics in East Germany: The Free German Youth Movement, 1946-1968*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 261 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927627-1.

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Failure to Connect

The collapse of the Communist regime in East Germany in 1989 and German reunification one year later gave research on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) an enormous boost. With government sources declassified, historians were now in a position to investigate the entire history of the GDR in unprecedented detail. Since the beginning of the 1990s, all its major state institutions and organizations have become the object of close scholarly scrutiny. The Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth, or FDJ) is no exception. Founded in 1946 for all 14- to 25-year-olds regardless of their political sympathies, it was kept under tight control by East Germany's ruling Communist party, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party, or SED). While membership was never made compulsory, the FDJ became a mass organization by the end of the 1940s. However, for the next two decades, i.e., during the era of SED leader Walter Ulbricht, it never comprised more than 55 percent of eligible East German youth. Two German studies have discussed its early years and the period up to the building of the Berlin Wall.[1] Alan McDougall's work, the first on the FDJ in English, builds on their findings and also examines the repercussions of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia on the organization.

His study takes a narrower approach than its title suggests, however. Interested primarily in the course of East German youth policy and the reactions it triggered among the young, McDougall pays only scant attention to social and cultural issues such as the career opportunities of and Western cultural influences on East German youth. Refuting the totalitarian model prevalent in earlier scholarship on the GDR, the author argues that the FDJ was a "qualified failure" (p. 237) because it succeeded in gaining the outward loyalty of most young East Germans but failed to turn them into ideologically committed supporters of the Communist regime. While significant minorities of young East Germans either staunchly supported or openly dissented from the policies of the

regime, the majority displayed a "reluctant" or "disaffected" loyalty (p. 18), as recent GDR scholarship has characterized the attitude of the East German population at large. McDougall develops his argument by investigating five "crisis points" of the relationship between the FDJ and East German youth.

The first crisis reached its peak with the uprising in June 1953 against Communist rule in East Germany. While the FDJ had been able to gain many members by focusing on leisure-time activities in its founding years, it ran into massive resistance when it attempted to recruit young people for the emerging East German military in 1952 and lost many experienced functionaries to the new army. Other functionaries and members refused to take part in a campaign against informal groups of young Protestants. When street protests erupted in June 1953, most young people showed no willingness to defend the regime. On the contrary, many young people, in particular young workers, played an active part in the uprising. After the events, the FDJ failed to make any serious attempt to change its policy and lost a large number of members. It was only during the political "thaw" in the mid-1950s that a new FDJ leadership made some reforms, most notably setting up "youth forums" in major cities. Providing an opportunity for relatively open discussions of social and cultural issues, these forums drew a quarter of a million participants in the first half of 1956 but were severely restricted later in the year when the FDJ began to fear losing control of them. In the wake of the Hungarian uprising against Communist rule and Soviet dominance in the fall of 1956—the second "crisis point"—most FDJ functionaries and members kept a low profile. While open dissent was voiced only by students, including many FDJ members, at four universities, many school pupils displayed a consciously limited protest by, for instance, wearing black or clothes in the colors of Hungary's national flag. The construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961—the third "crisis point"—triggered similar

forms of symbolic protest. Later that year, many lower-level functionaries and members again refused to toe the official line in a new recruitment drive for the East German military (the draft was not introduced until 1962) and a campaign against listening to Western radio stations.

In 1963, Ulbricht, who wanted to help secure the success of his economic reform policy, attempted to liberalize youth policy. The party leadership itself published the “youth communiqué,” which called upon the young to be more assertive as future “household heads” and criticized adults for their lack of trust in the younger generation. The communiqué electrified many young people and inspired the Deutschlandtreffen, an event that drew large numbers of young people, including quite a few Westerners, to East Berlin, where they often engaged in unsupervised discussions. The FDJ leadership and many functionaries, however, dragged their feet, thus undermining Ulbricht’s reform effort. Following clashes in Leipzig in October 1965—the fourth “crisis point”—that pitted the police against young demonstrators who were protesting the ban of guitar groups modeled on the Beatles, the SED and FDJ reverted to a youth policy that gave priority to control and ideological education. During the “Prague Spring” of 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia thereafter by troops of the Warsaw Pact—the fifth and final “crisis point”—the FDJ proved able to prevent open protests against the Communist regime among East German youth, despite many contacts between young East Germans and Czechs prior to the invasion. The organization had by then become very successful in training ideologically reliable functionaries and dispatching them quickly to trouble spots. Yet, as McDougall points out, it was never able to foster more than superficial loyalty among young East Germans throughout the history of the GDR.

McDougall’s findings confirm in the field of youth policy the picture of the GDR that has emerged from recent scholarship. The Communist regime, never able to fully control its population and the young, vacillated between cautious steps to liberalize its rule in order to gain legitimacy and hasty repression when this liberalization seemed to threaten its power. McDougall presents a well-documented and jargon-free narrative, drawing upon a

wealth of government files and interviews with leading FDJ functionaries of the 1950s and 1960s. However, by only touching on questions such as the recruitment, training, and careers of the functionaries of the FDJ and its everyday activities, he does not fully explain how the once haphazard organization developed into a bureaucracy that proved efficient in controlling young people but not in winning their hearts and minds. Moreover, by focusing primarily on youth policy, McDougall misses the chance to place his arguments in a broader context. Uta Poiger’s seminal study *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (2000) could have provided McDougall with a wealth of insights into the reasons why young East Germans were so reluctant to heed the demands made upon them by the FDJ. Interviews with former ordinary FDJ members and non-members like those Dorothee Wierling conducted could also have provided substantial evidence.[2] Finally, given the coexistence of an outer liberalization of youth policy and increased surveillance of the young by the secret police following Ulbricht’s replacement by former FDJ leader Erich Honecker in the early 1970s, McDougall could have refined his argument by expanding the time period under investigation. In sum, while it is not the definitive study of the relationship between East German youth and the Communist regime in the Ulbricht era, McDougall’s book will serve as a useful introduction to the subject for English readers and as a reference point for studies of youth organizations and youth policies in other Eastern European countries during the Cold War.

Notes

[1]. Ulrich Mählert, *Die Freie Deutsche Jugend 1945-1949: Von den, Antifaschistischen Jugendausschüssen’ zur SED-Massenorganisation. Die Erfassung der Jugend in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995); Peter Skyba, *Vom Hoffnungsträger zum Sicherheitsrisiko. Jugend in der DDR und Jugendpolitik der SED 1949-1961* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000).

[2]. Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR und seine historischen Erfahrungen* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2002). See also the most recent study by Marc Dietrich, *Ohse, Jugend nach dem Mauerbau. Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn (DDR 1961-1974)* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2003).

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