



**Bettina Joergens.** *Männlichkeiten: Deutsche Jungenschaft, CVJM und Naturfreundejugend in Minden, 1945-1955.* Postdam: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2005. 603 pp. ISBN 978-3-935035-57-6; EUR 30 (paper), ISBN 978-3-935035-57-6.

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## Male Youth Groups in West Germany after World War II

Bettina Joergens's published dissertation examines three youth groups in Minden—a small German city on the northeastern edge of North Rhine-Westphalia, roughly forty-five miles west of Hannover—with the goal of illuminating how notions of masculinity were challenged and transformed in the decade after World War II. Her work builds on the research of Robert Moeller, Heide Fehrenbach, Uta Poiger, Hanna Schissler, and others who have observed the challenges posed by the collapse of Nazism, the loss the Second World War, and the social chaos of the postwar years for the militarized masculinity dominant in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century.[1] As social order was gradually restored, West Germany was “remasculinized,” these scholars argue, but on different terms than earlier. Above all, stable families were identified as the foundation for political, social, and sexual order, and men were expected to emphasize their roles as “loving fathers and sons.”[2] Joergens adds some depth and complexity to this thesis by analyzing the “everyday history” (*Alltagsgeschichte*) of adolescent boys who participated in the organized youth groups of Minden.

Joergens chooses associations that represent the three main social milieus of the city: the educated bourgeoisie, “Christian-conservative” middle and lower middle class, and socialist workers. The Jungenschaftler came almost exclusively from students at the local *Gymnasium*. Their fathers were educated and well-off, and had generally served as party functionaries and army officers under the Third Reich. The end of the war, consequently, was experienced by these young men as a major rupture in their lives. With fathers either dead or locked away in prison camps, their families were exposed to the

full impact of the social and economic hardships left for Germany in 1946 and 1947. Nevertheless, these young men retained a sense of belonging to a social elite. Their youth group continued the traditions established by the Wandervogel and the Bündische Youth in the first half of the century. The group met weekly, at first at a member's house and later in a room in the city's youth center (*Jugendheim*). Surrounded by a “mystical atmosphere” created by candlelight, they sang, discussed literature and politics, and learned about art and cultures of the Far East. The youth reserved much of their energy, though, for the hiking trips that they regularly made, during which they camped, played games, and communed with nature.

Adolescent men from the middle and lower middle class generally joined one of the two or three youth groups (*Jungenschaften*) organized within the Christian Association of Young Men (CVJM). Generally, they were sons of small business owners, clerks, employees, and craftsmen; the majority attended school at the local *Gymnasium*, but some had left school already and were involved with on-the-job training. In comparison to other classes, the social situation for their families was relatively stable. Although threatened by hardships just like anyone else in the late 1940s, the possession of property and jobs that were in high demand during the years of economic reconstruction gave them a comparative advantage. They also could count on the stability of the ethos and institutions of the Protestant Church, which emerged nearly unscathed from Nazism and war to become the most socially influential establishment in the region around Minden. The CVJM youth groups met one evening per week, first in a common room available to them and later in the CVJM Youth Center. After

a choral hymn and prayer, the group generally turned to a reading and discussion of specific Bible passages, which then framed a conversation about themes important to the young men—family, alcohol, technology, cars, girls, and sex, to name just a few. The CVJM youth groups also made regular outings, though they were more likely than the Jungenschaftler to stay in established camp sites or youth hostels. Whereas hiking, exercise, and the experience of nature was the focus for the Jungenschaftler, the CVJM youth emphasized a daily routine of choral singing and Bible reading.

The last group was composed of working-class youth. Here, Joergens passes over the expected choice—the Social-Democratic Falcons—in favor of another one, the Friends of Nature (*Touristenvereins - Naturfreunde*), a group not as explicitly political as the Falcons though still loosely associated with Social Democracy. This organization was different from both the Jungenschaftler and the CVJM in that it included male and female members. Furthermore, members generally had few educational opportunities available to them. Their families suffered greatly after the war: savings were destroyed by the currency revaluation of 1948, incomes were limited by the economic problems of the postwar period, and the high unemployment levels experienced by the country well into the 1950s meant that jobs were hard to come by for both men and women of the working class. Like all youth groups, the Friends of Nature organized regular hiking trips around the region. They elected delegations to attend regular conferences and participate in the association’s governing bodies. They also routinely organized festivals at which members gave presentations, musical and dance performances, and other creative exhibitions. However, the real center of attention for this Minden association, Joergens suggests, was the practice of folk dancing that took place at the weekly meetings. Youth leaders used the dances to introduce youth to different countries and their customs. They sometimes read histories and brought costumes along for the participants to try on. For the young girls and boys who belonged to the Friends of Nature, though, the main enjoyment came from the dancing itself.

Joergens’s analysis clearly reveals that West Germans distanced themselves from the soldier ideal so prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century. The Jungenschaftler were faced with the biggest challenge in the postwar era. Many were left with a

profound “feeling of being deceived” by the promises and propaganda of the Nazi regime (p. 140). With their previous moral bearings stripped away, the boys carefully felt their way forward into an uncertain future. The culture formed within the Jungenschaftler reflected this sense of searching. The model of the soldier did not entirely vanish from their activities. They sang soldier songs; played war games involving teams of boys “fighting” other boys for the control of land; and emphasized the values of strong bodies, group discipline, and loyalty to their group and group leader (*Führer*) in ways that would have been familiar to members of the Bündische Youth during the Weimar era. At the same time, though, the postwar Jungenschaftler consciously rejected the paramilitary atmosphere of the earlier era in favor of a sophisticated aestheticism, with a heavy emphasis placed on the romantic enjoyment of nature and poetry and on the appreciation of Asian literature and mystical traditions. Through a carefully cultivated knowledge of literature, politics, and the world within an all-male atmosphere, the young bourgeois men were able to fashion a masculinity that distanced itself simultaneously from women, their fathers, and the “mass society” taking shape around them.

The CVJM youth, in contrast, perceived very little challenge to the image of masculinity established in their family. The relative economic stability of their family meant that their fathers successfully maintained their role as male breadwinner and head of household. These young men generally looked up to their fathers, seeing them as occupationally proficient, technologically knowledgeable, emotionally disciplined, and spiritually focused. Above all, though, masculinity meant orienting oneself toward marriage and eventually establishing a family.

The masculinity revealed through the activities of the Friends of Nature is the most obscure, quite possibly because the working-class men involved had the hardest time sorting through the mixed signals of the postwar era. Many seem to have held on to a notion of masculinity based around physical strength, self-discipline, and working with one’s hands; however, this version of masculinity was noticeably weakened by the high unemployment and by the numbers of working-class fathers who were incapable of holding a job because of war injuries. It was also visibly challenged by the more “casual” (*lässig*) example of masculinity offered by many American soldiers and by celebrities of American popular culture. Certain in-

cidences reveal working-class boys resorting to sexual relations with women as a way of establishing their masculinity; yet, at the same time, others seemed to look toward family-based relationships with women (especially those modeled by the cooperation of men and women at the festivals) as a much-desired stable presence in their lives.

Unfortunately, Joergens's book is severely weighted down with a stiffly formal organization that makes the book painful to read. Every chapter, section, subsection, and even sub-subsection has an introduction and conclusion, leading to a great deal of repetition. However, this should not hide the fact that her analysis of masculinity at the level of the everyday is a very valuable contribution to the history of masculinity in this period. By getting "underneath" the level of public discourse, it reveals how complex any history of gender becomes once local relationships and social interactions are brought into sight. Interestingly, it suggests how the mere presence of women in a group can alter the way that masculinity is understood and performed by men in the group. There are some questions that I think are left unanswered by the book: What happened in circumstances when the boys in these social milieus were forced to interact with one another? In what ways were the various notions of masculinity either challenged or confirmed by such interactions? Furthermore, how did these boys respond to the model of "fatherhood" increasingly held up in the 1950s as the hegemonic version of masculinity? Such questions

might be answered someday by future research. For now, Joergens's work has suggested how much we can learn from having more microhistories of gender for Germany, in this period and in others.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Moeller, "The 'Remasculinization' of Germany in the 1950s: Introduction," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 101-106; Robert Moeller, "The Last Soldiers of the Great War' and Tales of Family Reunions in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 129-146; Heide Fehrenbach, "Rehabilitating Fatherland: Race and German Remasculinization," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 107-128; Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Hanna Schissler, "Normalization' as Project: Some Thoughts on Gender Relations in West Germany during the 1950s," in *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*, ed. Hanna Schissler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 359-375; Frank Biess, "Survivors of Totalitarianism: Returning POWs and the Reconstruction of Masculine Citizenship in West Germany, 1945-1955," in *Miracle Years*, 57-82; and Clayton Whisnant, "Styles of Masculinity in the West German Gay Scene, 1950-1965," *Central European History* 39 (2006): 359-393.

[2]. Moeller, "'Remasculinization' of Germany in the 1950s," 106.

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