

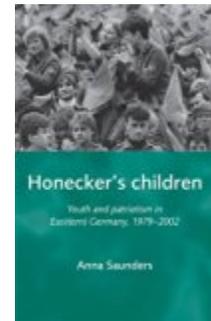


Anna Saunders. *Honecker's Children: Youth and Patriotism in East(ern) Germany, 1979-2002*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. xii + 252 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7411-0.

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The Making and Unmaking of Young Patriots

While historians know a great deal about how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) came into existence and how it disintegrated in November 1989 after demonstrators took to its streets, far less is known about the growing generations in between the rise and fall of the GDR and after the demise of Communism. *Honecker's Children* makes an important and original contribution to the historical literature on Communist youth policy by examining institutional efforts to instill patriotism in the generation that came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on extensive archival research and interviews, and focusing on the former GDR districts of Halle and Magdeburg, *Honecker's Children* is not only a history of growing up under Communism but also a comparison of patriotic education and civic loyalties before and after the *Wende*, the “turnaround” of 1989-90. Anna Saunders shows that efforts to promote allegiance to the state, under Communism and in the democratic and reunited Germany, have failed to sway the hearts and minds of young people. The larger significance of her work lies in defining the limits of influencing youth from above and demonstrating how the history of a generation can illuminate continuity and change in ways that defy conventional periodization.

Saunders's story begins in 1979, the thirtieth anniversary year of the founding of the GDR, with the introduction of compulsory military education in schools and intensifying political propaganda amid renewed Cold War tensions. The first chapter identifies the five ma-

ior themes of the GDR's patriotic youth program in the 1980s: historical consciousness, militarism, proletarian internationalism, the notion of the West as a hostile enemy, and pride in the present. The SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) enlisted schools and youth organizations and used national holidays to advance the goal of uniformity, “casting all young people into the mold of the ‘socialist personality’” (p. 44). The regime boosted membership in the Free German Youth (FDJ), the GDR's youth organization, and the popularity of *Jugendweihe*, the rite of passage that saw fourteen-year-olds swearing allegiance to the Communist state. But Saunders views the ramping up of state strategies to promote youth patriotism as an indication of the regime's vulnerability to a changing Cold War context; competition with the Federal Republic and East German churches; and declining birthrates at home, perceived as a threat to the country's military capabilities.

The second chapter shifts from the regime to the perceptions of young people who belonged not only to public institutions and organizations but also to private networks of families and friends. Investigating the limits of Communist youth policy, Saunders defines the overwhelming majority of young people as “apathetic conformists” who supported the “fundamental principle of socialism” but not the practices of SED rule (pp. 101, 103). Dull teaching methods and antiquated language that appeared in textbooks undermined the state's patriotic program. Beyond the classroom, the SED agenda owed its

counterproductive nature to the rigid structures of the youth movement; the scrutiny of censors; and last but not least, the cultural pull of the West. In a fascinating discussion that presages developments after 1989, Saunders also argues that young people resisted the self-image of belonging to a second-class German state by adopting a sense of superiority to the GDR's socialist neighbors that fomented xenophobic attitudes toward minorities at home. While observers have interpreted outbursts of racist extremism in the 1990s as a response to social and economic dispossession in the former East, Saunders's story establishes a new historical context for understanding some of the problems of the present.

Saunders's third chapter looks at the relationship between young people and the state during the revolution that brought about the collapse of Communism and German reunification. Identifying the peak of youth patriotism in the fall of 1989, when hopes for a reformed and democratic socialism took teenagers into the streets, she traces the collapse of youth activism as reunification became inevitable, bringing into focus the social and economic challenges of life in a reunited Germany. Retreating into the private sphere, young people "entered unified Germany in much the same way that they had lived in the GDR, demonstrating an apolitical distance from the state" (p. 142). In the final chapter and conclusion, Saunders argues that neither the SED nor the democratically elected leaders of the reunited Germany succeeded at winning over eastern youth. Both governments have failed to deliver on promises of meeting the material and emotional needs of young people, resulting in "a lack of confidence in the state and a consequent unwillingness to contribute actively to its development" (pp. 221-222). Saunders presents apathy as a form of political engagement; teenagers responded to official programs not by

voicing disapproval but by withdrawing from public life. Economic insecurity and social discrimination have resulted in unhappiness in the private sphere that weakens the state's capacity to cultivate loyalty to it. Official messages on the National Socialist and GDR pasts and the democratic tasks of the Federal Republic have fallen short of promoting political engagement among these former GDR citizens. Patriotism, Saunders concludes, cannot be imposed from above without organic growth from below, which begins with satisfaction in private life.

Despite the strengths of *Honecker's Children*, the book falls into an interdisciplinary gray area that becomes problematic early on in the author's discussion of the meanings of patriotism, nation, and state. Assembling a cast that includes Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities* [1991]), Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism* [1983]), and Jürgen Habermas (*Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, second edition edited by Peter Dews [1992]), Saunders's literature review fails to produce a framework that would sharpen her approach, whether historical or sociological, and define the audience she addresses. Is *Honecker's Children* about the particular experiences of young Germans who were once citizens of the GDR, traces of which appear to be vanishing from history? Or, does Saunders's interest lie more broadly or comparatively, in relations between youth and the state? While the author's intended audience is unclear, her arguments about the attitudes of German teenagers in two political systems are not. Viewing life across a temporal and social boundary, Saunders demonstrates how surprising continuity, and not only change, can be. Scholars of education and youth will benefit from this story about state strategies for producing collective loyalties and the particular ways in which young people respond.

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