

Marc-Dietrich Ohse. *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau: Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn (DDR 1961-1974)*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2003. 407 S. EUR 24.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-86153-295-8.



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From Repression to “Repressive Tolerance”? Youth Policy and Youth Culture in the German Democratic Republic from 1961 to 1974

Marc-Dietrich Ohse’s *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau* provides a nuanced account of youth policy and youth culture in the city of Leipzig and in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) more generally from 1961 to 1974, although it could do more to probe the boundaries of the epistemological categories underpinning its analysis. But Ohse’s insightful examination of governmental and church archival records, periodicals, surveys of the GDR’s Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung (Central Institute for Youth Research, or ZIJ), autobiographies, and oral history interviews creates a solid foundation for his fruitful interventions in the historiography of East Germany that go far beyond the subject of youth. At the same time, his study raises “big-picture” questions of interest to scholars working on the phenomenon of youth culture of the mid- to late-twentieth century: To what extent is adolescent intransigence necessarily political? And was the youthful rebellion of the “1968 generation” a truly universal phenomenon in the industrialized world?

The first of Ohse’s five chapters seeks to explain why the youth policy of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei

Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party, or SED) neither found much resonance nor provoked overt resistance on the part of its target population. Involvement in the state youth organization Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth, or FDJ) was, for many of its members, not so much a matter of political conviction as one of routine or opportunism. Membership in the FDJ could and often did confer concrete benefits in the form of privileged access to higher educational opportunities and vocational advancement. Similarly, many young people participated in the youth initiation ritual of *Jugendweihe* not because of their ardent desire to demonstrate their commitment to building socialism, but because it offered an opportunity to celebrate a key stage in life. In this way, the ritual was stripped of its political import and recast as a familial event.

The *Jugendkommunikation* (Youth Communication) of 1963, generated by the Jugendkommission (Youth Commission), triggered a phase of relative flexibility in SED youth policy that lasted until the *Kahlschlag* (“demolition”) phase, which began in 1965. The *Jugendkommu-*

Jugendweihen exhorted members of the older generations to engage with rather than avoid the “uncomfortable questions” of the young and to address the youthful desire for engaging in leisure-time pursuits (p. 65). The Youth Commission thus realized that broad participation in the FDJ and *Jugendweihen* could not necessarily be interpreted as a sign that the SED’s prerogative in shaping youthful self-understanding had found widespread acceptance. Yet even those officials whom one might expect to have supported the *Jugendkommunikation* did not necessarily do so. Although FDJ leader Horst Schumann had in the 1950s critiqued measures that had induced youth to mouth political platitudes, he nonetheless opposed the *Jugendkommunikation* (p. 68). This was one of many instances in which the flexibility of SED policy, and indeed of its promulgators, met its limits, and which prevented the *Jugendkommunikation* from stimulating any “tendency toward democratization” in youth policy (p. 80).

In Chapter 2, Ohse argues that university students exhibited a less pronounced tendency to contradict the dictates of the SED than did school-age pupils or vocational trainees. This situation reflected a conundrum of the SED’s own making. On the one hand, SED educational functionaries complained that students were opportunistic and withheld their political opinions in order to advance their careers. On the other hand, the party was unwilling to countenance unorthodox points of view, a tendency reinforced by the conformist pressures exerted by the 1967 reform of higher education. A system that was supposed to be educating committed socialists was instead teaching youth a lesson in political hypocrisy.

Chapter 3 focuses on another relative thaw in youth policy that manifested itself in 1967, but which came to an abrupt end with the GDR’s participation in the repressive response to the Prague Spring of 1968. Despite, or perhaps because of the propaganda campaigns against it, at least some East Germans were open to the Czechoslovak notion of “socialism with a human face.” Isolated critical voices compared the SED’s response to the Prague Spring to the repression of the 1956 uprising in Hungary and the tactics used by the Nazi regime to eliminate political opposition (p. 198). Nonetheless, grumbling about the GDR’s rejection of the ideals of the Prague Spring did not mobilize East German students into articulating a concrete platform for reforming the socialist system at home.

In chapter 4, Ohse argues against Gerhard Besier’s

notion of GDR Protestantism as having constituted a “church of a new type” that was entirely subservient to the SED.[1] While the Catholic Church of the GDR remained publicly mute as far as political affairs were concerned, the Protestant Church made use of its “limited autonomy” to provide a venue for dissident voices.[2] A generational shift in the church leadership prompted a progressive modernization of religious youth outreach starting in 1966. Some younger pastors engaged in “open work,” which entailed actively engaging youth not involved in church activities. Ohse compares these pastors to western social workers, who were not so much interested in missionary outreach as they were in providing a safe haven for re-socializing nonconformist youth (p. 273). The churches became increasingly open to youth who found themselves at the margins of society, and these youth in turn influenced church life itself.

Ohse’s fifth chapter disputes Stefan Wolle’s contention that the relative liberalization of SED youth policy coincided with the rise of Erich Honecker to power in 1971.[3] Ohse maintains that the phase of “repressive tolerance” (p. 304) had already begun towards the end of Walter Ulbricht’s rule, and it entailed a move away from open repression to a more active exertion of control “behind the scenes” (p. 287), in particular by the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry of State Security). Nonconformist youth culture was to be instrumentalized for socialist ends rather than stigmatized. The FDJ was to become more responsive to youthful desires and initiatives, the most salient example of which was the preparation for the 1973 World Youth Festival in East Berlin. But the 1974 Youth Law, which expanded the institutional basis of the FDJ without changing its character and codified the preferential treatment of committed young socialists in the granting of access to higher educational opportunities, represented the renewed triumph of repression over “repressive tolerance.”

One of the key questions underpinning Ohse’s analysis in *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau* is the extent to which the SED succeeded in shaping the self-understanding of youth. In his introduction, he implies that this influence might have been more extensive than previously assumed by other scholars (p. 8). To test this hypothesis, Ohse relies heavily upon the testimony of his informants, but also upon evidence of the widespread participation by GDR youth in the FDJ and *Jugendweihen* ceremony. Yet he echoes the recognition of the 1960s Youth Commission that such participation could not necessarily be taken as a barometer of youthful political commitment. This conclusion raises the question, which Ohse could state more

explicitly, of how then one is to measure the “success” of GDR youth policy in achieving its goal of producing a new generation of committed socialists if participation in socialist institutions was not necessarily indicative of such commitment.

The response offered by Ohse is more multifaceted than the nature of the “success” question might at first imply. Many GDR youth in the 1960s and 1970s exhibited a form of “reluctant loyalty” (p. 379), in which a certain level of identification with the GDR co-existed with ambivalence or hostility toward its institutions. Ohse qualifies the generalizing connotations of the term “reluctant loyalty” as soon as he deploys it, as he realizes that the political options that GDR citizens had at their disposal lacked a common pattern that would be conducive to a monolithic characterization (p. 379). His account nonetheless posits this “reluctant loyalty” as co-existing with a fundamental estrangement from state-socialism. The outcome of these seemingly contradictory tendencies was the perpetuation of a pattern of mutual deception: SED functionaries could delude themselves regarding the extent of support they enjoyed amongst youth, while young people could continually cultivate hopes that a more pragmatic and liberal political era was just around the corner.

In this sense, Ohse’s argument resonates with that of an American scholar, Alan Nothnagle, a GDR historian whom he does not cite. In his study of East German youth propaganda, Nothnagle maintains that the GDR’s longevity was in large part due to a “collective mythology” based upon the recognition by both state officials and citizens by the 1970s that public professions of political loyalty were typically mere formalities, but also upon an equally shared expectation that these professions of fealty would continue to be made.[4] In Ohse’s case, it was not so much that SED officials were content with perpetuating a myth of complicity on the part of the populace; it was that they were unwilling or unable to avoid provoking an undesired outcome with their repeated calls for political and ideological commitment. Yet the willingness on the part of some state officials to acknowledge this provided an impetus for the periodic flexibility exhibited by SED youth policy. This policy was thus not merely shaped by blind adherence to ideology. Successive waves of “repressive tolerance” were not mere whims on the part of SED officials, but demonstrative of the mutually constitutive relationship between SED youth policy and youth culture.

Despite the regimentation of organizational life and

extensive surveillance by the Ministry of State Security, the SED was unable to keep GDR youth culture fully under control (p. 366). Some degree of youthful nonconformity was possible in the GDR, whether manifested openly by wearing jeans or hidden from public view in the form of an alternative youth music scene sequestered in gastronomic establishments of the countryside. Ohse follows the arguments of Konrad Jarausch and Detlef Pollack that the degree to which East Germans were able to maintain “non-organized spaces of ideological neutrality” is indicative of the limits of the SED’s totalitarian reach.[5] Youthful nonconformity, however, did not prove conducive to the articulation of a coherent platform of overt political opposition, because even nonconformist spaces were subject to state surveillance. Ohse thus disputes what he sees as Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk’s tendency to characterize all nonconformist behavior as forms of resistance or opposition against the totalitarian prerogative of the GDR state.[6] Ohse would not deny that repressive GDR policies served to politicize styles of clothing, music, or behavior that might otherwise have remained apolitical. But he rejects the notion that the politicization of aspects of youth culture from above would necessarily connote their politicization from below.

Does Ohse assume that the depoliticization of youth resulted from their incessant immersion in meaningless political ritual that prevented them from either wanting or knowing how to make their cultural dissidence take on a political valence? He seems to do so when he maintains on page 18 that GDR youth culture was not characterized by what Christiane Lemke has called “a critical distance from domination.”[7] But Ohse’s conception of the “political” is more deeply rooted in the concept of *Eigensinn* as developed by practitioners of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) like Alf L  dtke.[8] From this perspective, engagement with dictatorial political systems need not necessarily be “political” in intention or outcome, but instead can encompass a range of behaviors and motivations that cannot be reduced to a dichotomy of conformity and resistance. As such, the model of *Eigensinn* proves quite suitable for the ambiguity that Ohse finds in GDR youth culture, as when he argues that Christian youth who integrated elements of a socialist worldview into their own were not demonstrating subservience to SED dictates but rather an *Eigensinn*-like engagement with the ideological foundations of the GDR (p. 279). For Ohse, resistance against SED dictates might very well have been “political in the broadest sense,” but in the absence of clearly articulated goals for changing

the system, it did not constitute a form of genuinely political opposition (p. 375). Given the limited scope of political expression beyond cultural nonconformity that was available to GDR youth, Ohse might have seen fit to expand his notion of political acts beyond those of an overtly oppositional cast.[9]

What Ohse does question, albeit briefly, is whether the dominant heuristics of *Eigensinn* and totalitarianism theory are sufficient to capture the “constitutive contradictoriness” of life in the GDR.[10] Ohse seems to want to draw upon elements of both approaches and to some extent move beyond them, as exemplified by his focus on both the totalitarian pretensions underlying official SED youth policy and the way in which youth culture (both of an official and unofficial nature) was experienced in everyday life. While Ohse’s approach is a laudable one that resonates with much of *Eigensinn*-oriented scholarship, he does not break the kind of new epistemological ground that this brief portion of his introduction seems to augur.

For all of its focus on the history of everyday life, however, the book pays remarkably little attention to forms of *Eigensinn* that have often commanded scholarly attention, such as work stoppages by laborers. This stems from the book’s emphasis on the church and student milieus, and from its attempt to determine whether the GDR produced a “1968 generation” akin to that of its western German counterpart. It was the missing crystallization of political opposition among students in particular that leads Ohse to conclude that, except for an extremely limited contingent of young people active in the Protestant churches, there was no “1968 generation” in the GDR. The SED had been responsible both for creating the conditions that prompted protest and for the depoliticization of youth that muted the extent and the efficaciousness of that protest. And yet, some of the themes discussed in those small church circles, such as the military draft and alternative models of socialist society, set the tone for the peace and human rights movements that were housed in the GDR Protestant churches of the 1980s.

The ostensible absence of a “1968 generation” in the GDR does not lead Ohse to abandon the generational rubric for his analysis. For the SED, young people held both the promise of continuing the building of socialist society even as they seemed to be particularly privy to the allure of Western cultural influences—both reasons for making youth a prime focus of educational initiatives on the part of the state. Yet the SED did not consistently recognize youth as a generational constituency whose inter-

ests might be distinct from those of the working class as a whole, and was hence inclined to ignore the psychological dimension of youthful rebellion. Thus, the aim of youth policy was not to produce generational, but instead socialist, consciousness. Ohse believes that whatever effect that SED policy might have had upon generational self-understanding, and indeed upon the creation of a specifically East German identity for GDR youth, was not so much the product of specific experiences like the cultural crackdown in 1965 or the Prague Spring of 1968 as it was the result of the stabilization of the GDR as a political system under Ulbricht and during the initial years of the Honecker era (p. 378).

What Ohse might have done, however, is to ask how and whether the ostensible homogeneity of official political culture, the relative absence of generational conflict in public discourse, and the isolation of alternative youth cultural milieus would have been conducive to the formation of generational consciousness of any sort. And yet perhaps the rubric of generation reinforces Ohse’s periodization, for he views the passing of the Youth Law in 1974 as marking the end of an era in which the progressive stabilization of the GDR allowed for “free spaces” for youth to remain “free” as long as they were also subject to some degree of control (p. 367).

The limitation of the index to names of historical figures and scholars detracts from this book’s value as a reference work for aspects of GDR youth policy and culture. And while Ohse provides a thoughtful exploration of the limitations of his archival and published sources, he could have said more about the selection of his oral history interviewees and evaluation of their testimonies than simply the fact that they alone provide a perspective “from below” (p. 22). These caveats notwithstanding, Ohse’s monograph combines a rich evidentiary base with astute analysis, eminent readability, and a thought-provoking engagement with the work of other scholars. These attributes should guarantee it an important place in the historiography of East Germany.

Notes

[1]. Gerhard Besier, *Der SED-Staat und die Kirche: Der Weg in die Anpassung* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1993).

[2]. Ohse borrows the term “limited autonomy” from Detlef Pollack, “Religion und gesellschaftlicher Wandel: Zur Rolle der evangelischen Kirche im Prozess des gesellschaftlichen Umbruchs in der DDR,” in *Der Zusammenbruch der DDR: Soziologische Analysen*, eds. Hans Joas and Martin Kohli (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

1993), pp. 246-266.

[3]. Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971-1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998).

[4]. Alan L. Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

[5]. Konrad Jarausch, "Die gescheiterte Gegengesellschaft: Überlegungen zu einer Sozialgeschichte der DDR," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 39 (1999): pp. 1-17, and Detlef Pollack, *Kirche in der Organisationsgesellschaft: Zum Wandel der gesellschaftlichen Lage der evangelischen Kirche in der DDR* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994).

[6]. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, "Wer sich nicht in Gefahr bringt...? Protestaktionen gegen die Intervention in Prag und die Folgen von 1968 für die DDR-Opposition," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 50 (1999): pp. 424-437.

[7]. Christiane Lemke, *Die Ursachen des Umbruchs 1989: Politische Sozialisation in der ehemaligen DDR* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991).

[8]. Alf Lüdtke, "Geschichte und Eigensinn," in *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte: Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*, ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1994), pp. 139-153.

[9]. For an exploration of how historians might modify their conception of the "political" to incorporate manifestations of popular culture and everyday life, see Eve Rosenhaft, "Women, Gender, and the Limits of Political History in the Age of 'Mass' Politics," in *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives*, eds. Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallick (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 149-173.

[10]. Ohse derives the term "constitutive contradictoriness" from Detlef Pollack, "Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR. Oder: War die DDR-Gesellschaft homogen?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 24 (1997): pp. 110-131.

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