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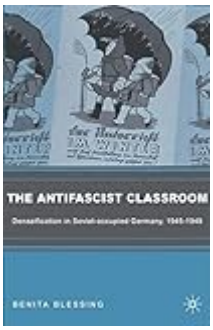

Benita Blessing. *The Antifascist Classroom: Denazification in Soviet-occupied Germany, 1945-1949.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xvi + 288 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-7612-3.

Reviewed by Peter Barker (Department of German Studies, University of Reading)

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The Antifascist Beginnings of the GDR

Since the demise of the GDR, most writing on its history has concentrated on the period after its creation in 1949. This book throws new light on the period between the end of the war and the founding of the GDR by focusing on the role of the school system in the Soviet zone and the attempt by the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) to create a new antifascist identity in the eastern part of Germany. What is particularly appealing about this book is the author's choice not to concentrate solely on policymakers, whether from the German authorities or the Soviet administration, but rather use a wide range of sources that reveal the feelings of the people in the system, whether children or adults. As a result, emphasis falls on the view from below using above all essays written by children during this period as the major source. Benita Blessing also makes use of a wide range of other sources: school textbooks, political posters, autobiographies, memoirs, films, and novels. As a result, the reader gains a varied picture of the school experience in the immediate postwar period. The book also relates the classroom to the social structures outside, highlighting a general trend toward reestablishment of traditional family and gender structures after the social dislocations caused by war and defeat.

Blessing focuses mainly on the concept of the "new school" and its relationship with the ideological drive in these early years towards the creation of a democratic, antifascist society. She stresses, however, that although the "new school" meant that the school system in the *Sowjetische Besatzungszone* (SBZ) developed quickly in a different direction from that in the western occupation zones, both in content and structure, it was not entirely new. It reflected earlier attempts in the nineteenth century, and in particular the Weimar Republic, to reform the German educational system. While the system in the western zones reverted quickly to the traditional three-tiered system, that in the SBZ differed from the outset in two very important ways. First, it became a secular system with religious education eliminated from the curriculum; the churches were only allowed to operate at its margins outside school time, although in these early years often still on school premises. Second, it also introduced the major structural change of a comprehensive system from the ages of six to fourteen/sixteen, drawing on earlier experiments with the a single school for

all students (*Einheitsschule*), which, from 1959 on, became the polytechnic high school (*Polytechnische Oberschule*). The aim was to institute a uniform system that canceled out differences of class, gender, and religion. It was not totally successful in achieving this aim, as can be seen from the persistence of certain inequalities right up to the end of the GDR–for example, in gender relations and in the development of "special" schools for gifted pupils. But Blessing uses the evidence of essays written by schoolchildren in the 1980s to demonstrate that some of the ideals of the early SBZ educational system with its belief in a secular, antifascist society persisted into later generations. What had disappeared in the minds of many GDR citizens was the belief in the ability of the SED and the government it dominated to deliver these ideals in practice. Blessing uses the example of writer Brigitte Reimann, whose diaries reveal the growing split between her ideals as a convinced socialist and her perception of government practice.

With this book, Blessing has produced an interesting example of the diversity of reactions, emotions, and experiences in a society often portrayed as uniform and overregimented. In many ways, the book contributes to the debate conducted on H-German in October 2007 about the nature of the GDR dictatorship and the effects of its use of repression, which was stimulated by a review of Andrew Port's book, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (2006). Several contributors to this debate made the point that the question of which sources are used was often crucial to the conclusions reached. Blessing has gone primarily for the use of sources from below to illustrate the diversity of reactions to the political and social realities of the SBZ without diminishing her criticism of the repressive nature of the regime as a whole. The book provides a very useful contribution to this debate for all researchers and students interested in the nature of eastern Germany's development after 1945.

The Antifascist Classroom provides a wealth of material on an under-researched area of SBZ/GDR history. Hopefully any second edition will correct some glaring typos in the text. For example, the Social Democratic Party is given on page 2 in German as the "Sozialistische Partei Deutschland." Errors stand out in particular in the list of abbreviations, mostly in the German form of party names.

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