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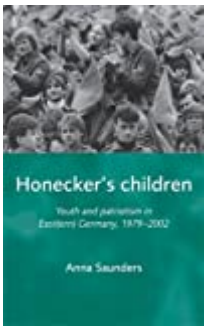


**Anna Saunders.** *Honecker's Children: Youth and Patriotism in East(ern) Germany, 1979-2002.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. xii + 252 pp. $74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7411-0.

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## Honecker's Children

In her first book Anna Saunders provides an analysis of youth patriotism from 1979-2002 that encompasses both the DDR (German Democratic Republic) and the new states (*Laender*) of the Federal Republic. Mobilizing archival sources and oral interviews she asks how the SED (East German Communist Party) socialized young people into their national identity and if changing conceptions of patriotism for youth in the 1980s eventually doomed East Germany. Saunders argues that the key to answering these questions lies in uncovering the relationship between the government and young people. She maintains that categories offered by other historians such as totalitarian (government-dominated) or niche (individuals retreated to sheltered private spaces) do not adequately explain the interactions that took place. Saunders relies on Alf Luedtkeâs venerable concept of *Eigensinn*, originally formulated to try and understand why communist workers supported Hitler in the 1930s. Luedtke reasoned that proletarians only engaged with the state when it coincided with their needs, and otherwise maintained their daily regime and guarded their private space with little interference from the government. Happy to have their support, Hitler and the Nazis did not push workers too hard before 1943. Saunders finds that this model of selective interaction and accommodation accurately represents the ways young people and government interacted in the former DDR, and indeed for years after *die Wende,* the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The author identifies five areas where the SED focused its efforts on turning youngsters into patriots after 1979. The regime worked hard to inculcate a specific historical consciousness in the classroom and it emphasized the duty of all boys to perform military service. East Berlin strove to present the West as an implacable foe but stressed international connections with other proletarian movements around the world. Finally, government officials supported youth organizations designed to teach children pride in their country. This multipronged approach faced problems that its creators had not envisioned. As we all know, students do not like boring history classes which are designed to fit them into

a box. Much like in West Germany, young males approached military service with increasing ambivalence in the 1980s. Young East Germans did not hate the West; they had access to television from the Federal Republic and this seemed to offer an appealing alternative to socialism. As the socioeconomic situation deteriorated, attacks on foreigners increasingly made a mockery of internationalism. Collectively, this meant that fewer people identified with the state in the same way as those who built the country in the 1950s. Saundersâs research showed that while young people liked the idea of socialism, they had numerous complaints about its articulation in the DDR.

Remarkably, East German national identity did not collapse for young people starting in September 1989. Saunders argues that many teenage boys and girls assumed that the increasing number of and tolerance for street protests would not result in the end of the DDR but in fundamental changes that would address their concerns. She deals with this subject in chapter 3, and it is here for the first time that we hear from the oral interviewees. They exhibited, or at least recalled, a sense of pride and hopefulness about the future in East Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 changed everything, however. Now, a new national identity stood ready-made in Berlin and the rest of the Federal Republic. As the economic situation worsened, youngsters abandoned the DDR and did not evince much sadness when it disappeared in 1990. The largest single bloc of them voted for the center-right CDU/CSU bloc in the 1990 national elections.

However, former Eastern German youngsters did not escape the attention of government. After 1990 history teaching shifted to fit the values of the Federal Republic of Germany. Textbooks focused on tolerance and freedom, and preached the unity of humanity rather than class conflict. Eastern youth again exhibited their proclivity for selectively taking what they wanted from this new framework while ditching what they did not like. For example, students remained suspicious about history class because it still seemed overly political, especially in its criticism of socialist East Germany. Like their counterparts in the western *Laender*, young Easterners did not really see the point of the Bundeswehr (the army) and equated nationalism with the Nazis. Unlike their counterparts in places like Hamburg or Munich, they looked on the European Union with great suspicion and remained deeply concerned about foreigners. More than elsewhere in Germany, youngsters from the East tended to vote for groups on the political extremes. Finally, nostalgia linked to an imaginative memory of the DDR developed at the end of the century. Saunder's research demonstrates that the well-documented phenomenon of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for certain aspects of life in East Germany such as full employment, iconic consumer products, and music) had a great deal of resonance for young people who otherwise had no reason to identify with the DDR.

I came away from the book largely convinced that Luedtkeâs concept of *Eigensinn* represents a nuanced means of understanding the way that youngsters related to the government in the last decades of the DDR. While this approach might not work with all institutions in East Germany (the Stasi comes to mind), it enables Saunders to show change over time across political systems, and that is impressive. As someone who also uses oral interviews in research involving students, I was somewhat disappointed that her forty-three subjects did not play a more prominent role in the argument. They appeared occasionally to reinforce conclusions drawn from the archive but were not central to the argument. Even taking this criticism into account, this is a valuable read for specialists on East Germany, scholars working on youth and childhood in Central Europe, and the many, many academics who study the ways that governments teach patriotism.