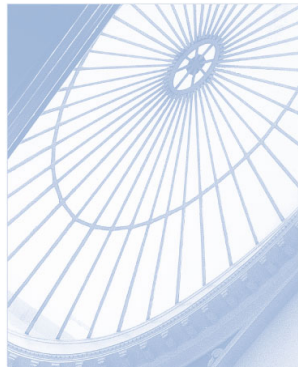


Zitierhinweis

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CATHERINE PLUM, *Antifascism After Hitler: East German Youth and Socialist Memory, 1949–1989*, Routledge Studies in Modern European History, 27 (New York: Routledge, 2015), xvi + 284 pp. ISBN 978 1 138 81535 3. £85.00

Twenty-five years of research on the history of the GDR have shown that communist rule in East Germany was not based on coercion and obedience alone. A number of recent studies have focused on the GDR's ideological dimensions, both exploring its meanings and paying specific attention to the ways in which socialism and antifascism were conveyed and adopted. These studies understand communist rule not as a one-dimensional top-down phenomenon, but as a multi-faceted process involving various actors with differing intentions and options.

This holds true for Catherine Plum's recent book *Antifascism After Hitler: East German Youth and Socialist Memory*, 'the first comprehensive study of youth antifascism in the GDR' (p. 1). Antifascism was not only the 'foundation myth of the GDR', in Herfried Münkler's words, but was also one of the most effective rallying points for the regime. However, only a few GDR citizens had any personal experience with the antifascist struggles throughout Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. Thus the ruling elites constructed a selective, highly stylized narrative of the antifascist struggle, directed to younger generations, that supported communist claims to political leadership. Drawing on a variety of sources such as oral histories, student letters, essays, yearbooks, youth magazines, and literature Plum traces the pedagogical and political challenges of this narrative-building effort, and the changes in youth antifascism over time. Instead of considering antifascist education as a mere tool of totalitarian oppression, she assumes 'a degree of compromise and negotiation between state representatives and average citizens' (p. 3) and highlights an approach that is 'sensitive to issues of age and generational cohort and includes the story of everyday life' (p. 7). Consequently, her research covers both the content of the official narrative as well as commemorative practices and does not focus on GDR children alone. She also takes into account parents, teachers, and so-called 'memory intermediaries', often but not always antifascist veterans themselves, who were 'youth group leaders, museum staff members and volunteers responsible for conveying stories and com-

memorative practices to generations who grew up after the defeat of fascism' (p. 3).

Plum regards antifascist education in the GDR essentially as a communicative process that involved various actors with different experiences and intentions. The dictatorial character of both the regime and the antifascist narrative it generated compelled every GDR citizen to individually master language nuances depending on context. In analysing these contexts—schools, youth groups, memorial grounds, and homes—and the actors involved, Plum takes a measured, systematic, and in-depth approach. She incisively observes that the demand to master different languages led to a form of 'Socialist double speak', although this raises the question of whether this demand affected only children and was only the result of this selective antifascist narrative. Studies by Alf Lüdtke and others have stressed that the demand for a 'Socialist double speak' not only resulted from a public sphere that was thoroughly dominated by SED politics, thus pointing to the dictatorial character of the regime, but also proved highly influential to the regime's eventual implosion in a historical perspective,¹ an assessment that is somewhat at odds with Plum's statement that 'toward the end of the dictatorship, the amount of double speak necessary may have lessened to some extent' (p. 207).

In line with her comprehensive account, Plum's first chapter looks at the various components that constituted the GDR's antifascist 'Youth Memory Landscape'. It introduces antifascist museums, monuments, and memorial grounds, antifascist literature and extracurricular activities (most notably the *Jugendweihe*), and examines youth antifascism in ritual and practice. The antifascist narrative promoted by the SED consisted of two components: it emphasized the efforts of German resistance fighters, which was important to represent the GDR as the 'better Germany', but it simultaneously depicted Soviet efforts as decisive to the defeat of fascist forces in Germany and all of Europe, thereby promoting 'a historical context and rationale for contemporary German-Soviet friendship' (p. 149). Consequently, chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to 'Stories of [German] Resistance Fighters'

¹ See Alf Lüdtke, 'Sprache und Herrschaft in der DDR: Einleitende Überlegungen', in id. and Peter Becker (eds.), *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster: Die DDR und ihre Texte* (Berlin, 1997), 11–26.

and 'Tales of Soviet Heroes and Liberators' respectively. Plum, aware that the antifascist narrative promoted by the East German regime was highly intentional and selective, pays special attention to the 'Portrait of Non-Communist Resistance and Opposition' (in ch. 2) and 'German Nationalism' (in ch. 3). In chapter 4, 'Memory Intermediaries', she makes use of personal contacts and communication with antifascist veterans to explore the conflicts and difficulties these veterans faced when presenting their personal experiences in line with the official narrative. And although this narrative presented nationalism and socialist patriotism as mutually complementary ideologies, Plum demonstrates that portraits of and contacts with German antifascists received more attention than their Soviet counterparts. This preference did have pragmatic reasons, but it also points to private memories made in the wake of the 1945 'soviet liberation', which were strongly at odds with the official narrative and could not be voiced publicly. The impact of dissonant voices again plays a part in the fifth chapter, 'Parents and Pupils'. Here, Plum pays specific attention to stories told at home that did not fit into the official narrative, for example, when grandfathers retained a certain pride in their military service in the *Wehrmacht*. This seems to have happened quite frequently, as Plum stresses 'that children were essentially required to master two different languages: one language for use at home and one for school or work purposes' (p. 205).

Plum argues that despite a somewhat twisted adoption of the antifascist narrative, the 'campaigns . . . never degenerated into a completely "participation-less" movement' (p. 238). An epilogue on *Namensverleihung* practices, a public ritual in which schools received the name of an antifascist hero, after the *Wende* emphasizes 'a continued interest in historical antifascist resistance efforts' after 1990 and shows that 'many GDR commemorative traditions have been transformed and continued in altered form' (p. 271). Plum argues that in propagating an antifascist narrative that sought legitimacy for the government and their newly formed state in competition with West Germany, the East German regime primarily 'recognized the power of authenticity' (p. 256). Instilling socialist heritage and loyalty seems to have been most effective when connected with specific individuals, whether dead or alive. Meetings with those who had actively fought against National Socialism (or their relatives) were an integral part of antifascist education in the GDR. Antifascist veterans

spoke in rather 'intimate settings' (p. 180), reconstructed their stories 'in a realistic, authentic manner' (p. 181), and 'sought to give their listeners a sense of the challenges involved in opposition and resistance work' (p. 180), while presenting themselves as 'representatives of the working class' and showing a 'strong sense of collective identity' (p. 178). Drawing on the historical eyewitnesses' authenticity, based on experience and personal impressions, the regime thus promoted a strategy that provided youth with vivid recollections of the antifascist struggle and simultaneously promoted present socialist values.

While the regime's emphasis on 'authenticity' seems to have been successful in addressing the younger generations, however, it could never completely dictate how the 'memory intermediaries', often antifascist veterans, would recount their own stories. Furthermore, factors such as 'geographical location, the type of school, and, very importantly, the political climate at individual schools' (p. 255) influenced what narratives would be passed down to young people. Understanding antifascist education as a communicative process, Plum not only demonstrates the limitations of regime control but also reconstructs five categories of students' reactions to the antifascist narrative promoted in the GDR: 'antifascist enthusiasts, reserved antifascists, apathetic students, nonconformists and the . . . fascist enthusiast or devotee' (p. 219). Unsurprisingly, given the significance of a 'Socialist double-speak', Plum finds that the numbers of both antifascist and fascist enthusiasts were relatively small, but she is rather vague about the size and significance of the remaining three categories. Emphasizing the 'role of compromise and conformity among memory intermediaries and state administrators' (p. 256), she states that 'the history of communist resistance and the legacy of GDR antifascism live on' (p. 259) and concludes that the official education proved somewhat successful. While this conclusion seems justified with regard to the five categories made up by Plum it tells us little about the interplay between stability and crisis in the history of the GDR. If antifascist education had a share in legitimizing communist rule for almost forty years, how are we to explain the regimes' sudden implosion in 1989?

Drawing on generational analysis, as Plum does, seems promising in attempting to answer this question. She refers to the fact that the worldviews of those born before the foundation of the GDR in 1949 and those born afterwards were 'distinct and quite distant' (p. 197),

and stresses that the efforts of memory intermediaries were not sufficient to bridge this inherent divide. While these observations certainly hold true, it would have been interesting to see how what Lutz Niethammer and others have called a 'generational blocking',² affected the status of memory intermediaries. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, antifascist conviction enabled members of the younger generations to reach the highest echelons of GDR society, thereby associating antifascism with social advancement and success. But because these generations stubbornly insisted on their influence and power well into the 1980s, this was impossible for those belonging to the younger generations. Consequently, antifascism was no longer associated with success and social advancement, but with stagnation and the denial of power.

Nevertheless, Plum's comprehensive approach is a valuable study of youth antifascism in the GDR, extending scholarship beyond the level of the state by assessing the everyday contributions of different actors in conveying stories and commemorative practices to those born after the defeat of fascism. Her study not only gets to the bottom of its social and political relevance, but addresses crucial questions regarding the legitimization and institutionalization of communist rule after 1945 that depended on the mobilization of those generations that were too young to have participated in the antifascist struggle themselves. While Plum touches on some of the most important and still highly debated questions regarding the assessment of the GDR, for example, the role of history, and the nature of social relationships within state socialism, she is nonetheless less concerned with uncovering why the regime's emphasis on 'authenticity' proved so successful in conveying its antifascist narrative. One is tempted to ask how much this points to what scholars like Wolfgang Engler and others have called the intimate character of social relations in the GDR, that is, the strong desire for and special significance of personal and heartfelt relations among GDR citizens.³

² See Lutz Niethammer, 'Erfahrungen und Strukturen: Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der Gesellschaft der DDR', in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994), 95–115; Hartmut Zwahr, 'Umbruch durch Ausbruch und Aufbruch: Die DDR auf dem Höhepunkt der Staatskrise 1989', *ibid.* 426–61.

³ Wolfgang Engler, 'Die ungewollte Moderne', in *id.*, *Die ungewollte Moderne: Ost-West-Passagen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 31–84.

How successful the SED was with its project of a 'different' Germany, and to what extent it created a society that was not apathetic but vivid and committed (to a certain degree) are the 'big' questions still highly debated among contemporary historians. Without explicitly positioning itself within these debates, Plum's study is nevertheless a valuable contribution that addresses crucial issues of legitimacy and participation, thus offering further insight on these big questions.

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