The 1949 foundation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from Soviet-occupied territory in East Germany ushered in a new era. Under the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), the East German state began a concerted effort to instil its brand of German socialism into the hearts and minds of citizens previously under National Socialist domination. The most targeted demographic of the East German population was its youth, as the older German generations were considered lost to the taint of Nazism. In contrast, the youth of the country presented an ideal opportunity to create the model socialist citizen. In its ambition to inculcate younger generations with pro-Soviet, German socialist values, the state became an omnipresent force in the education and socialization of the nation’s children. The state accomplished this through incorporating strict control and Party ideology into both the country’s public education system and the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), the foremost youth movement in the GDR.

Against a backdrop of mounting Cold War tensions, the ideological mobilization of youth in the German Democratic Republic created conditions to raise the ideal socialist citizen, in order to secure the health and survival of the state. The policies and actions of the Freie Deutsche Jugend youth movement and the East German education system were designed to engender the individual youth with class-consciousness, present socialism as a youthful ideology with no alternative, and mobilize the state’s youth in the preservation and defence of East German socialism against the capitalist West. In assessing this effort, attention will be focused on the presentation of socialism to the youth in the GDR, the use of the education system as a method of propaganda, and the mobilization of youth under the FDJ banner.

After the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, military officials in the Soviet Union drew inspiration from the fallen Nazi bureaucracy’s education policies. Though ideologically polarized, the occupying Soviet government found that Nazi education reforms were useful as a means of social control, stressing a strict rigidity and subservience to the state. Indeed, while the Soviet military government sought to sweep away the vestiges of Nazism in their occupation zone, they used the previous education system as a basis for the implementation of their own. This similarity can be attributed to a strong favour for propaganda via education that emanated from both Nazi and Soviet leadership. Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin, despite their differences,
viewed the state education system as a supreme means to impart a ruling ideology into German youth. However, the Soviet Union’s approach to education reform and youth indoctrination in occupied Germany differed from earlier protocols through its ostensible neutrality. Both the re-established education system and youth organization were careful to conceal their true objectives, as there were worries that German parents would “[baulk] at seeing their children once more in line and marching.”

Throughout the existence of the GDR, the SED made an explicit call for the participation of youth in the socialist Weltanschauung, or world-view, associating the health of the nation with the level of youth involvement in the state. The state was quick to portray the nation’s younger generations as a key component to the success of socialism in the GDR. In a 1989 speech to members of the FDJ, General Secretary Erich Honecker referred to the nation as a “republic of youth,” pronouncing that the state had “changed for the better, thanks to the strength of our people, the strength of our youth.” While such proclamations were attempts at evoking feelings of pride and responsibility in the state’s young demographic, the socialist enculturation was also aimed at providing motivation for pro-government youth activism.

While the youth were tasked with socialist nation building, they were also called to become the GDR’s citizen defence against foreign militarism, “always in the front ranks of the struggle against imperialist war policies and for the happiness of nations.” The potential destruction of German socialism by “foreign imperialists” weighed heavily in youth-targeted state propaganda. The method in which propaganda messages were phrased explicitly linked the fortunes of the young generation with the nation’s socialist ideology. This implication made a coercive argument for the defence of socialism; SED propaganda asserted that the downfall of German socialism would negatively impact the lives of the youth cohort. A GDR propaganda manual, Jugend Weltanschauung Aktivität, reinforced this attitude, stating that children born under socialism were “firmly bound to it, seeing socialism’s goals and ideals as [their] own.”

Past socialist and communist figures were a significant part of the propaganda effort towards youth. Their personas were commonly used to glorify socialism while portraying the GDR’s foundation as a heroic culmination of years of struggle against Nazi totalitarianism. The glorification of socialist figures was also an integral part of the imagery found in the organization of the youth movement. The Thälmann Pioneers, a subset of the FDJ for schoolchildren aged 6 to 14, took their name from Ernst Thälmann, a leader of the Communist Party of Germany executed by the Nazis in 1944. While honouring Thälmann, the organization also used the slain communist figure as a role model for its junior charges; one of the rules for the Pioneers

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3 Rodden, *Little Red Schoolhouse*, 34.
promised that they were to “work and fight as Ernst Thälmann teaches…ready to support peace and socialism.”

The presentation of communist heroism was a strong undercurrent in GDR propaganda. The state relied on the virtues of both German and Soviet figures to promote socialist ideology while also preserving the “revolutionary heritage of the people” in opposition to Western capitalism. Communist heroism against Nazism was recast in a Cold War context, encouraging youth to employ the same steadfast courage against the “Western imperialists” who had succeeded the Nazis in GDR propaganda. The SED portrayed the Party as an extension of German socialist ambitions. This is particularly demonstrated by Erich Honecker’s statement that the SED was “the Party of Karl [Liebknecht], Rosa [Luxemburg], Ernst Thälmann, Wilhelm Pieck, Otto Grotewohl, [and] Walter Ulbricht” - a Party “guided in its every action by the immortal teaching of the great German scientists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.” The use of socialist heroes in GDR propaganda was as pragmatic as it was idealistic, implying that the SED was the direct result of the actions of the communist figures, attributing their heroism to the Party by association.

Propaganda aimed at youth was as much anti-capitalist as it was pro-socialist. It portrayed the West, especially the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany, as militaristic imperialists. At the same time, it characterized the German Democratic Republic and its Eastern Bloc allies as defenders of peace. This perspective was linked to propaganda aimed at mobilizing youth as “guards on the front line” while simultaneously portraying the youth movement and the government itself as peaceable. In a public call for the removal of nuclear weapons stationed in Western Europe, Erich Honecker stated: “we reiterate our proposal, supported by the appeal of our youth that the Pershing II and Cruise missiles stationed in Western Europe…be removed.” According to Honecker, the regime’s ultimate goal was to “create peace in the face of NATO’s weapons,” referencing the increase in NATO’s European nuclear arms strength, with the addition of American cruise missiles in the early 1980s.

The state’s primary method of ideological mobilization was the East German school system, which provided the state with the ability to teach the socialist Weltanschauung as fact. The state’s highest goal was the creation of the “model socialist” through education and the preparation of a new generation to continue socialist progress in East Germany. While the GDR curriculum sought to educate children in traditional subjects, a substantial focus was placed on the development of personal qualities considered essential to the advancement of socialism. These qualities included “team spirit, sobriety, industriousness, a high sense of public duty…and respect for manual labour;” qualities which would form the basis of the FDJ youth movement, to be examined later.

Part of this education was aimed at explaining the result of such qualities put into practice, to illustrate the benefits of engaging in the socialist worldview. In the GDR civics textbook Staatsbürgerkunde, the dedicated, sober socialist workers were at the forefront of human progress. They maintained peace in a chaotic world, while enjoying a high standard of

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14 Vojtech Mastny, “Did NATO Win the Cold War?” Foreign Affairs 78.3 (1999): 185.
15 Rodden, Textbook Reds, 14.
living as a result of their industriousness and sense of collective welfare. This socialist work ethic, *Staatsbürgerkunde* writes, was essential to “restrain those circles of imperialism that are ready to use the great accomplishments of the human spirit against humanity.”

According to the GDR education programme, collective happiness took precedence over all else, encouraging the socialist youth to transcend individual goals in favour of providing for the collective good.

Propaganda in GDR school textbooks was even more explicit in its attack against the capitalist West, providing a pedagogical opportunity to instil a dislike of the West in receptive minds. While Marxist-Leninism was a prevalent force in all school subjects, civics class presented the best opportunity to employ Party ideology. The material in *Staatsbürgerkunde* adhered to Party policy of smearing capitalism and glorifying socialism. However, where Party speeches to youth stressed the importance of defending socialism against a powerful capitalist order, textbooks depicted the West as “on the defensive, doomed to inevitable collapse, while socialism…will ultimately triumph throughout the whole world.” Through a more extreme view of the conflict between the two ideologies, *Staatsbürgerkunde* removed any possibility of a capitalist victory over the forces of socialism. The state-sanctioned textbook presented the former as an ideology in utter decay, and consequently not worth supporting.

History was not spared from the East German state’s ideological revisionism, as the distortion of the subject became a cornerstone of the GDR curriculum. History in the GDR aligned closely with the socialist Weltanschauung, and the lessons of history were couched in Marxist ideology. The subject curriculum was designed to instil in the pupil a sense of socialist patriotism and the belief that history was a series of interconnected events demonstrating the evils of the exploitive pre-capitalist and capitalist systems. History in the GDR was restructured by state historians to cast socialism as the natural progression of the nation’s development. However, history previous to Karl Marx and the formation of socialism was portrayed exclusively as a history of exploitation. By contrast, the state viewed the spread of socialism as a victory for the forces of progress and the culmination of a long proletarian struggle.

The manipulation of history in the GDR also served a more immediate goal; demonstrating to the youth the duplicity and moral corruption of the capitalist Western world. Though proletariat attacks against ruling classes spanned the entirety of recorded human history in GDR historiography, special attention was reserved for the post-1939 period. With the role of Germany in the Second World War, GDR historians were tasked with portraying the horrors of the capitalist-assisted Nazis while exonerating the East German citizens from complicity in the Nazi regime. The rise of Hitler during the 1930s was attributed to the “decay of a rotting capitalism,” while the leading western Allies, the United States and Great Britain, were portrayed as “reactionary, aggressive, and imperialistic.” Historical examples of the untrustworthy nature of the western Allies were provided in conjunction with this assessment. GDR historians criticized alleged Allied inaction in opening a second European front to relieve pressure on the Soviets, unnecessary Allied strategic bombing intended to hinder Soviet post-war

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17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
reconstruction, and indeed, the Western war effort as a whole, writing that “the Western Allies played no decisive role in the war.”

GDR historians also addressed contemporary history, incorporating their analysis into the larger complexion of the Cold War. The beginning of the Cold War, writes the GDR history text Geschicthe 9, began with the American strategic nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an action that was immaterial to Allied victory in the Second World War but was instead designed to warn the Soviet Union. Continuing the theme of anti-West propaganda, GDR textbook historians revised the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, writing that it was “completely unnecessary since the USSR had offered to take over the care of the Western sectors of Berlin.” GDR history curriculum also addressed the state of affairs in divided Germany, citing the construction of the Berlin Wall as a necessary response to West German aggressiveness, instigated by the militaristic West German Bundeswehr, successor to the Nazi Wehrmacht.

Historical revisionism was a powerful Cold War tool, portraying historical arguments as one-sided glorifications of the supremacy of the socialist Weltanschauung against the corruption and militarism of the capitalist West. This educational perspective served to eliminate any dissent in the policies and living standard of the GDR, providing East German youth with a slanted perspective that demonstrated the inferiority of the Western lifestyle when set against its socialist rival. The state’s revision of history was also complicit in the rearing of the model socialist citizen, providing tangible, codified “facts” that demonstrated the benefits of living one’s life according to the precepts espoused by the state. Finally, historical revisionism in the GDR provided youth with constant examples of the victories of socialism and the subsequent decay of capitalism, presenting a future dominated by the inevitable socialist victory.

State control over German youth organizations also provided an excellent opportunity to introduce children and adolescents alike to socialist values, instilling in them a love for solidarity and community and a desire to become the Party’s ideal of a model German citizen. The FDJ was a practical opportunity for East German students to put into action what they had been taught so thoroughly during the course of their education. Jana Hensel, in her memoir of life in the GDR, writes: “I was a young citizen in a young nation, and it was my duty to advance the cause of socialism so that it would…achieve the great ideal of a Marxist-Leninist worker’s paradise.” In this way, efforts at mobilizing the younger generations through membership in the FDJ were part of a larger design to educate children and give them practical experience with the socialist Weltanschauung.

The formation of the FDJ in March 1946 marked the culmination of several years of effort from the political left in Germany to form a socially inclusive leftist youth organization. The German Communist Party advanced plans for such an organization as early as 1930, but they fell afoul of sectarian differences between socialists and Communists. After the fall of the Third Reich and the formation of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) in 1945, a new socialist youth organization was needed to replace the former Young National Socialists (Jungdeutsche Nationalisten) and Young German Christians (Jungdeutsche Christen), as well as other youth groups that had supported the Nazis.

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23 Rodden, Textbook Reds, 131.
25 See for instance: Rodden, Textbook Reds, 134; von Borries, 49.
26 Jana Hensel, After the Wall: Confessions From an East German Childhood and the Life That Came Next (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 83.
1945, conditions were in place for the creation of what was to become the FDJ. The organization, formed on 7 March 1946, was projected as a “non-partisan, united, and democratic” youth organization, ostensibly formed for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged nation, but in truth was an effort at reconciliation between the various elements of the German left.\textsuperscript{28} Though initially small in size, the organization would grow to 950,000 in November 1949, and its survival would be ensured by its integration into the SED at the 3\textsuperscript{rd} FDJ Parliament in June of that year.\textsuperscript{29}

While the SED used the FDJ to educate youth in the virtues of socialism and the qualities possessed by an ideal socialist, the FDJ also guarded its members from influences that countered their socialist indoctrination or caused dissent in the GDR. The two most powerful influences outside of state control were religion and “creeping Westernism.” Initially, the state had an uneasy but tolerant relationship with the Protestant Church in the country. Only after the “Stalinization” of the Soviet Occupation Zone in 1949 did state opposition to the church become overt.\textsuperscript{30} This broader conflict between church and state was reflected in actions taken against church youth movements, seen as competition to the FDJ. The SED criminalized the Protestant church youth group \textit{Junge Gemeinden} (JG) in the summer of 1952, declaring them a “fifth-column” that threatened the “organizational monopoly the FDJ was intended to enjoy.”\textsuperscript{31} By December 1952, the GDR Politburo issued a directive designating the JG as an American-sponsored “terror group,” banning JG meetings in the country and purging members from FDJ academic leadership.\textsuperscript{32} Though the directive was later rescinded by the post-Stalin Soviet leadership in June 1953, by that time it had alienated several thousand pacifist Christian youth from the FDJ and, ultimately, German socialism.

Due to the failure of the FDJ to eliminate church opposition by rendering church youth groups illegal, the socialist movement shifted its attention to competing against the church by transforming religious sacraments into socialist rituals. Beginning in 1954, the FDJ introduced the \textit{Jugendweihe} or “youth consecration,” a secular ritual aimed at competition with church confirmation. The ceremony acted to draw East German youth away from the church and, as Hensel notes, to mark a progression into socialist maturity as the youth “emancipated him- or herself from the false consciousness of capitalist exploitation and embraced his or her working-class identity.”\textsuperscript{33} Though the \textit{Jugendweihe} initially failed to draw significant numbers of youth to its cause, by 1959 youth participation in the temporal ceremony reached 80.4 percent,\textsuperscript{34} thus diminishing the influence of religion in favour of the state.

While the SED’s campaign against religious influence in the GDR was largely successful, Western culture was a greater threat to its control over the country’s youth, especially before the August 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall. The FDJ, in its attempt to reinforce socialist values, faced a growing problem as Western music, films, books, and television found their way into the GDR. Not only did Western artifacts compete directly with GDR socialism, they also illustrated contradictions in the socialist \textit{Weltanschauung}. Western culture proved extremely popular with East German youth, as East German movie houses played Western films,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 80.
\item \textsuperscript{32} McDougall, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Hensel, 94.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ross, 138.
\end{itemize}
West German spy novels were traded secretly, and Radio Luxemburg, RIAS, and “Freies Berlin” played American rock-and-roll to a generation of youth rebelling against state control.\(^{35}\)

The FDJ’s initial response was to completely prevent Western culture from reaching the GDR. This objective is best exemplified by the September 1961 *Operation Strike Against NATO-stations*, wherein 25,000 FDJ members pointed thousands of receptive TV and radio antennae towards the east.\(^{36}\) However, such disruption efforts did not halt the growing fascination with Western culture in the GDR. By 1963, the FDJ met Western culture with accommodation, providing East German *ersatz* versions of rock-and-roll music and other elements of Western culture to varying degrees of success. Combating this culture proved to be more difficult than reducing religious influence in East Germany. This was in part due to the influence of West Berlin in the midst of the socialist GDR, the spirit of rebellion fostered by (primarily American) rock-and-roll music, and the inability of the Party to provide a legitimate alternative.

Television provided East German youth with the most consistent exposure to Western culture. While border patrols and the Berlin Wall could control the spread of physical information, television broadcasts represented an unchallenged flow of culture. By 1961, after the Berlin Wall had been erected, West German television stations began to air television programs specifically targeted at viewers in East Germany.\(^{37}\) The airing of Western entertainment, news, and sports programs presented a sharp break from GDR-broadcast programs that reaffirmed the glories of socialism and the horrors of capitalism. This divergence between people and their government often resulted in private criticism and discontent directed at the state.\(^{38}\) In offsetting this transmission of Western culture, the infiltration of “enemy” television into the cultural geography of East German youth was checked by the state through its traditional controls. As East German youth viewership of Western television reached eighty percent in 1981, the government responded with a barrage of vehement anti-Western denouncements embedded in the state education system, the FDJ, and state-run leisure activities.\(^{39}\)

One of the strongest messages espoused by the FDJ was socialist solidarity at home and abroad. Solidarity in the GDR took on several different forms. It was expressed by both workers in established socialist countries and by “peoples struggling for their freedom and independence.”\(^{40}\) The expression of solidarity towards these various groups was a means of mobilizing youth towards the socialist *Weltanschauung*. Socialism was presented as a non-exploitive, industrious ideology devoted to the common good of all people of the world, while capitalism was portrayed often as an exploitive force threatening the aspirations of progressive movements. Hensel, in her experiences with GDR youth programs during the mid-1980s, writes: “we sold flowers from our school garden…and donated the proceeds to help napalm victims in Vietnam.”\(^{41}\) This passage demonstrates both the efforts towards engendering solidarity while

\(^{35}\) Ibid, 139.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, 175.


\(^{40}\) “The Rules of the Thälmann Pioneers”

\(^{41}\) Hensel, 81.
providing American involvement in Vietnam as an example of the “horrors” of capitalism. Solidarity with the GDR’s Eastern Bloc allies was also a common theme in East German propaganda, as the GDR’s geographic position adjacent to the NATO powers in Western Europe often prompted the SED to stress that the country was “not alone in the world,” possessing “powerful allies...in the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, [and] in the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic.”

The Party ideal of solidarity was not limited strictly to external concerns, as youth organizations promoted solidarity among their peers and workers in the GDR. Aside from providing youth with socialist role models to emulate, local solidarity stressed the importance of strengthening communal bonds and maintaining social cohesion in GDR society. In his 1989 address to the FDJ, Honecker’s commentary on workers in the GDR underlined the important role they played in the success of the country. He stated: “in the 40th year of the existence of the GDR, we can proudly see that all labour has paid off.” Hensel notes smaller-scale expressions of solidarity encouraged in youth, writing: “to honour working classes on May 1, we...helped weaker pupils with their math homework.”

Though the GDR disappeared into the annals of history with the reunification of the two German nations in 1990, the influence of the East German state’s attempts to construct the ideal socialist generation through mobilization and education remains an important part of German society to present. Significantly, GDR educational reform created generations of citizens oriented to a world-view no longer prominent in the post-Cold War world, while the collapse of the traditional East German professions after reunification has further alienated former GDR citizens from their new country. Despite existing as one entity, the Federal Republic of Germany now contains two very different types of German citizen. At time of writing, significant cleavages in political and cultural outlooks, resultant of forty-five years of ideological separation, remain an undercurrent in German society. With the GDR relegated to a historical curio, the downfall of the socialist Weltanschauung has created tremendous economic, social, and political implications for the reunited nation, as each group looks for its place in the life of the other.

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42 Honecker, 1989.
43 Ibid.
44 Hensel, 81-2.
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