

Book Review: Coming of Age: Constructing and Controlling Youth in Munich, 1942-1973 by Martin Kalb

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Kalb, Martin. *Coming of Age: Constructing and Controlling Youth in Munich, 1942-1973*. New York: Berghahn, 2016. xii + 273 pages. Hardcover, \$85.00.

Few can deny that Germany's twentieth century ran a turbulent course, from an authoritarian monarchy to a chaotic republic, through Nazism, Communism, two world wars, and concluding with the emergence of a stable democracy. The challenge of explaining these dramatic and rapid transformations has created fertile ground for some interesting historiographical innovations. Among these has been an emphasis on 'generations' as a category of analysis. Such approaches have roughly fallen into two categories, with the first treating the common experiences of generational cohorts to assess their responses to dictatorship and war. The second, more commonly utilized in postwar histories, has explored the dynamics of intergenerational conflict. It is to this latter discussion that historian Martin Kalb's *Coming of Age: Constructing and Controlling Youth in Munich, 1942-1973* makes its mark, offering a study of the perceptions of youth in Munich during the first three decades after the Second World War. For Kalb, the issue is not the reality of the youth experience in postwar Germany, but the ways in which municipal and state authorities, the press, and consumer industries constructed a series of images of youth from the late 1940s through the waning days of the so-called student movement in the early 1970s. Kalb's avowed goals are first to "challenge pervasive constructions or representations of youth as delinquent" (p. 1), and second to "demonstrate how social constructions can be powerful tools of social control" (p. 236). Ultimately, this first promise gets less attention in the study, but the second comes through brilliantly and makes for some solid cultural history.

According to Kalb, fears of wayward or hypersexualized adolescents and young adults formed a thread of continuity in the postwar era, but were particularly acute at three critical periods: the immediate postwar years, the late 1950s when Germany experienced stunning economic growth and material affluence, and the years of protest in the late 1960s. The book is thus divided into three sections examining each of these moments as vignettes in a longer history of struggles to define and control youth. Within each section, Kalb dedicates a chapter to describing the prevailing images of youth, which were typically divided firmly along gender lines.

In the early postwar years it was the "delinquent boy" and "sexually deviant girl" who wandered unsupervised through the ruined streets (p. 18), while in the 1950s it was the well-known image of the "*Halbstarke*" (literally *half-strongs*), the adolescent males hanging out on street corners mimicking James Dean, and the "teenagers," the rebellious females dancing to rock and roll and demonstrating "unrestrained sexuality" (p. 107), who "posed a new threat to social order" and exemplified the dangers of Americanization (p. 87). In subsequent chapters, Kalb discusses how authorities drew on these perceived threats to extend their power into public

spaces. For instance, government officials used the rhetoric of dangerous adolescents to justify large-scale police raids that targeted black market areas in the later 1940s while broadening the powers of the Youth Welfare Office to redirect wayward youth into more controlled spaces.

Kalb's last section treats the youth associated with the widespread protests of the 1960s, and it is here that we see most clearly the strengths and weaknesses of his study. Most admirably, Kalb helps us to understand the hostile climate of the era by drawing a convincing line between the fears of protesters and the concerns about youth evident over the preceding decades. Even though many of those committing acts of protest and rebellion were hardly adolescents and were mobilizing in response to pressing political developments, they were colored in the public eye by the longstanding image of the *Halbstarke*. The result was the notion of the agitating "*Student*" and the "*Gammler*," a pejorative term for long-haired youth seen as shiftless and unkept, who were greeted with policies originally intended to deal with juvenile delinquents. At the same time, Kalb reveals that the young protesters, rather than objecting to such labels, embraced them and made them part of their cause, thus participating in the debate over their status as youth. Above all, their involvement in the discussion played an important role in unmaking the heavy-handed tactics of the state and the police while also sharpening their criticisms of the wartime generation. "Similar to the *Halbstarke* and the *teenager*," Kalb explains, "actual students used styles to resist contemporary norms" (p. 172).

Unfortunately, Kalb is forced to admit that the gendered binary evident in past controversies over youth is less obvious in the late 1960s, since the image of the *Student* and the *Gammler* were predominantly male. This challenges somewhat his notions of continuity, and indeed underscores a central problem with his analysis, which concerns the degree to which his depiction of debates over youth were really as rigid and dichotomous as he portrays. Kalb argues, for example, that postwar laws against youth delinquency "demonstrated a widespread postwar consensus" (p. 69), but it is hard to see corroboration for this ambitious argument in his other sources, which include newspapers and government memoranda (but curiously not court records). Also, there are dozens of examples throughout the book in which the author alludes to attitudes about one of the six images of youth that he describes without providing direct evidentiary support. Terms such as delinquent boy, teenager, or *Gammler* appear in italics quite often in the text, but much more rarely in quotations. Generous readers, of course, will likely defer to Kalb's reading of the sources, but it would strengthen his case if we could see more examples of police, court officials, reporters, and even ordinary citizens utilizing these terms as stereotypes for broader youth so that we are not tempted to wonder whether the images of youth were not in fact more contested. The evidence is there, but it is sometimes difficult to tell, and it seems that Kalb might have leveraged his sources more effectively.

Even if Kalb may or may not overstate the popular image of youth, he redeems himself in his discussion of the tensions involved in controlling youth. In the book, the state is no single

mind, but is beset with dissenting approaches and perspectives. We see, for example, ambivalence from American occupation authorities and later conflicts between authorities in Munich and more conservative leaders of the Bavarian federal state. In addition, he very astutely shows us how commercial interests took advantage of the ambiguities of youth identities and youth spaces to shape young people as valuable customers.

In conclusion, while Kalb's consideration of youth stereotypes could use a more detailed empirical rendering, the connections he makes between image and policy are quite nuanced. In this way, *Coming of Age: Constructing and Controlling Youth in Munich, 1942-1973* makes a substantial contribution to the growing literature on the generational divides that shaped postwar Germany. Also, even if he could say so more directly, Kalb is correct when he implies strongly that both the image of youth and the youth themselves played a decisive role in shaping postwar Germany. I came away convinced that because of these debates, it was German democracy that was "coming of age" during these years.

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