

## African Students in East Germany, 1949–1975

**By Sara Pugach. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2022. Pp. xvii + 256. Paperback \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0472055562.**

Robbie Aitken

Sheffield Hallam University

Sara Pugach's ambitious new study, which has been over ten years in the making, takes as its focus the lives and experiences of numerous African students who came to be educated in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Their overlapping life stories are skilfully set against the larger historical context of key moments in both Cold War history and the process of decolonisation in Africa. Combining this microhistorical and macrohistorical approach, Pugach has produced a fascinating study which illuminates the complex ways in which the GDR interacted with postcolonial African states as well as liberation movements. In doing so, she builds on several notable recent publications by the likes of Marcia Schenk (*Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World* [2023]), Eric Burton *et al.* (*Navigating Socialist Encounters Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War* [2021]), Quinn Slobodian (ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War* [2015]), as well as on her own earlier work, all of which have served to deprovincialize GDR history and demonstrate the GDR's transnational entanglements. But the richness of Pugach's study is such that it also has much to say about, among other things, the history of race in Germany, postcolonial African histories, and, in connection with the latter, the multipolar nature of Cold War politics.

Beginning in 1949, the book focuses on the first two-and-a-half decades of student exchanges. Over five chronologically arranged chapters, it follows the motivations for travel, routes to the GDR, and experiences in the GDR of male and female students primarily from Nigeria, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, and Cameroon. Somewhat tantalisingly, it ends around 1975, when not only a shift in East Germany's international position but also political changes on the African continent led to change in the make-up of the student population. Pugach has done a remarkable job in fleshing out the lives and experiences of a highly mobile, heterogenous, and largely overlooked group of people. In particular, she is to be applauded for bringing to life the often laborious and circuitous routes students took in order to reach the GDR in the first place. Traces of students' life stories are scattered across multiple archives, and Pugach has engaged in painstaking research, collecting diverse materials in Germany, the UK, Kenya, Zambia, and Ghana. These are complemented by several oral interviews she carried out with former students and their children. As she notes, the existing materials are not unproblematic. Much of the archival source base is made up of state documents, produced by various GDR government departments which had a vested interest in the students. For the GDR, enticing students from socialist-leaning or non-aligned states to study in East Germany enabled it to establish diplomatic relations with newly established African states. These materials frame the students in a particular manner, with a focus on their ideological commitment to socialism and/or their political usefulness.

Crucial sources written by students themselves, such as *Lebensläufe* (CVs), were also frequently constructed to meet the expectations of state agencies. Through close reading, Pugach handles the materials skilfully to draw out evidence of students' lived experiences and agency. She provides ample evidence of the latter in the form of students expressing dissatisfaction with their experiences in the GDR, protesting discrimination, and, in some cases, choosing to continue their education elsewhere. Additionally, the GDR became a space where they could bring attention to repressive measures being taken by their home regimes. Such protest action tested the GDR's commitment to solidarity with populations of the Global South. Typically, in the interests of foreign relations, the East German state sided with its

international partners rather than with the students. As Pugach shows, the students' experiences were constantly being shaped by external factors, foremost among them a mixture of social and political upheaval at home, including regime change, as well as shifts in global Cold War politics. This could impact their ability to enter, remain in, or leave the GDR. It could also create tensions within student groups, as Pugach illustrates through examining, among several examples, the fallout which the Biafran crisis had on Nigerian students.

Throughout the book, Pugach links the students' experiences to a longer history of racism and anti-Blackness in Germany. The GDR sought to present itself as an anti-racist, anti-imperialist state, while at the same time depicting the Federal Republic (FRG) as the inheritor of the Nazi past. Although commonplace, sex and mixed relationships in particular challenged the myth of the GDR's racial tolerance. Here, Pugach makes perceptive links to the experiences of African-American GIs in postwar West Germany. In both states, racialised images of oversexed Black men lingered on into the postwar period. Equally, in both states relationships were blamed on the supposed loose morals of the White German partners. Yet, in the GDR, in contrast to the FRG, children born out of such relationships were readily accepted as valuable citizens. This is one of many examples of the ambiguity, inconsistency, and complexity of East German ideas of race, as well as of GDR policy and practice towards people from the Global South, which Pugach weaves through the study.

It feels somewhat unfair to be critical of a study which already covers so much ground. Yet, missing to a degree, likely on account of the nature of the existing sources, is a sense of the friendship networks and social interactions students had with one another and with East Germans, beyond those picked up on in state documents. What of links to the church, sports clubs, and shared social spaces? These are hinted at rather than explored in detail. This is similarly the case with regards to students' post-exchange experiences, regardless of whether they remained in East Germany or returned home. In addition, interspersed throughout the book are eighteen striking images from both a private collection and the Bundesarchiv. These serve largely as decoration, and it feels like a missed opportunity that they are not discussed in any detail. These, however, are very minor criticisms.

Despite the multiplicity and complexity of the interwoven themes, Pugach uses her chapter introductions and conclusions very effectively to outline not just each chapter's key themes but also how these relate to the overall themes of the study. The book's epilogue expertly links the legacy of the student exchanges to issues facing contemporary Germany, with nuanced discussions of the rise of the right-wing movement Pegida and the political party the Alternative for Germany. Overall, this is an impressive, wonderfully constructed piece of transnational history, written in an engaging manner.

doi:10.1017/S0008938924000098

## **Free Berlin: Art, Urban Politics, and Everyday Life**

**By Briana J. Smith. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2022. Pp. 328. Cloth \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0262047197.**

Jennifer L. Allen

Yale University

It is perhaps unsurprising that this age of neoliberal market logic, digitally facilitated social alienation, and political polarization has produced a burst of scholarship invested in