

Honeck, Mischa: *Our Frontier Is the World. The Boy Scouts in the Age of American Ascendancy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5017-1618-8; XVI, 374 S.

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In his monograph, *Our Frontier Is the World*, historian Mischa Honeck provides an innovative and detailed account of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) and its vision of boy- and manhood from the late 19th century to the 1970s. The book is not the first one to examine the BSA.<sup>1</sup> However, based on a large set of sources ranging from the organization's internal documents to numerous newspapers, it goes beyond not only the time but also the geographical frame of earlier studies and uncovers the BSA's imperial entanglement. In seven chapters and an epilogue, Honeck links the youthful and seemingly innocent endeavors of the Boy Scouts to American empire building and attempts at consolidating white male dominance at home and abroad. Moreover, young people's playful and transnational involvement offered „a template for doing empire in a nation notoriously invested in negating its own imperialism.“ (p. 5)

The first chapter identifies the roots of scouting in the political and social changes at the end of the 19th century. Rapid modernization, immigration of non-whites, urbanization, as well as the women's movement threatened established structures of power. White elites on both sides of the Atlantic agreed that one had to put an end to the „sissification“ (p. 24) and complacency among males by building character and establishing a new form of manhood. Not only should boys be made into men, but by staying in touch with the young, adult men should achieve rejuvenation and regeneration, which was deemed an absolute necessity for a national rebirth and growth.

Chapter 2 focuses on two international expeditions organized by the Scouts in 1928 amidst slowing membership growth and the rise of modern youth culture in the 1920s. Thereby, Honeck argues, „the BSA constructed global frontiers as initiation rites that prescribed culturally sanctioned corridors to imperial manhood.“ All meticulously casted,

one boy left for Antarctica, while the other three went to Africa, both seemingly distant places of wilderness still untouched by Western civilization. They were turned into poster boys of adventurous white youth progressing to (imperial) manhood through their exploration.

In the third chapter, Honeck looks at the five world jamborees, the international meetings of Boy Scouts, in the interwar years. Meant to manifest „world brotherhood“ (p. 127) after years of international conflict, this „campfire diplomacy“ (p. 90) should enhance understanding, peace, and reform. However, as Honeck shows, the events divided as much as they unified. „Anglocentric“ (p. 113) in nature, they were informed by and shaped imperial ideas as well as national and racial hierarchies. Moreover, to many boys, especially from war-torn countries, American scouts appeared spoiled and aloof, as they flaunted their consumer power. Jamborees made peaceful exchange possible, but at the same time, internationalism reaffirmed nationalism.

Especially interesting is chapter 4 which examines in more detail the BSA leadership's debate on the inclusion and treatment of other races considered inferior at home and abroad especially in the interwar period. Racial diversity had always been a contentious issue in the BSA. Letting white children spend their formative years playing with boys of color represented a nightmare to most. Still, the BSA began to allow African and Native Americans to join. However, racial stereotypes and segregation held on strong. Abroad, the BSA invited Filipinos and Puerto Ricans into their ranks, but their inclusion and treatment reeked of paternalism and disempowerment. Regardless, numerous minority members, whether at home or abroad, used their participation to organize and fight white dominance within and beyond the BSA.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the BSA gained a steady stream of young members called on to help save the nation from the Great Depression and undemocratic radicalization. The BSA claimed to act as a diverse (mas-

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Benjamin René Jordan, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America. Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910-1930*, Chapel Hill 2016.

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culine) bulwark against communism and fascism. Its leadership repositioned the organization's mission to turn the scouts into „a home-front army“ after the attack on Pearl Harbor (p. 168).

After World War II, the BSA quickly became invested in the Cold War, as chapter six shows. In its „convergence of patriotism and Christianity,“ „boy-men“ became „crusaders“ (p. 209). With growing membership, the BSA pursued three main campaigns in which the boys across generations should further American manhood and help defend „America's free-world empire“ (p. 209). In civil defense programs, they built, among other things, bomb shelters and distributed preparedness pamphlets. Another field of interest linked scientific discoveries to „boyish fantasies of exploring and conquering unknown spaces“ (p. 210). Lastly, scouts should participate in foreign relations by helping to build a global anticommunist community of scouts in face of the Soviet threat.

In his last chapter, Honeck takes a closer look at scout activism on military bases especially in Germany, Japan, and South Korea. While the military represented hard power and dominance, the youthful innocence of boy-men and their bonding with real soldiers „cast an idealized image of the U.S. military empire, hiding its violent aspects and the contradictions involved in maintaining it“ (p. 246). In occupied countries, scouts participated in the reeducation process with much paternalism that infantilized and disempowered the locals, with racist undertones in Asia. The book concludes with an epilogue on the pressures on and changes of the BSA since the 1960s that would have deserved at least a chapter. It raises exciting questions and topics especially with respect to race and gender. The development of an „urbanized version of scouting“ (p. 277) especially with respect to African Americans, for instance, needs more research.

Throughout the book, scouts remain agents in their own right who did not always act according to the BSA's visions of appropriate behavior. However, an unfortunate limit of the monograph that Honeck admits to is the scarcity of sources that reflect the voices of the boys who were exposed to the organi-

zation's missions. The question of the overall impact and how the young scouts reacted to their leaders' visions remains all too often unanswered, especially with respect to minority groups. Moreover, as wide-ranging as the sources used are, a more diverse set could have been consulted. For instance, a look at more African American newspapers, also from the South, might have added more layers to the monograph.

Furthermore, Honeck's chapter on the BSA's role in occupied countries lacks a closer look at the African Americans who were part of the occupation forces. Did their children join the boy scouts overseas? How did discrimination and segregation at home factor into the BSA's democratizing efforts abroad? Overall, the monograph has its lengths and repetitions, also due to its structuring that is thematical as well as chronological. It would have benefitted from stronger editing and streamlining.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the book is an important addition to the history of the BSA, but more importantly to the history of childhood and empire. With *Our Frontier Is the World*, Honeck unmasks the (ab)use of youth and youth organizing to further and at the same time play down U.S. empire building.

HistLit 2019-2-161 / Christine Knauer über Honeck, Mischa: *Our Frontier Is the World. The Boy Scouts in the Age of American Ascendancy*. Ithaca 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 06.06.2019.