

Karoline von Oppen. *The Role of the Writer and the Press in the Unification of Germany, 1989-1990.* New York: Peter Lang, 2000. xiv + 277 pp. \$62.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8204-4488-8.



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The push to German reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall had a dizzying, unstoppable momentum. Only thirteen months elapsed between the fall of the East German regime in November 1989 and the first "all-German" elections of December 1990. That is not to say that no objections were raised. Plans for unification met with some suspicion within the international community and at home. In particular, some German intellectuals warned that unification might bring with it unforeseen consequences that society might not welcome. But no one cared much. The slogans chanted at public demonstrations had gone so quickly from *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) to *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are one people) that the doubts of the chattering classes seemed insignificant. In fact, the discursive possibilities and strategies for German intellectuals or anyone else responding to unification became quite limited very early on. As Karoline von Oppen demonstrates in her study of a small group of literary authors between 1989 and 1991, not all intellectuals criticized unification. (For von Oppen, writers who comment publicly on topics outside their professional knowledge transform

themselves into intellectuals, who are almost always on the political left. This definition, while limited, mostly works for her study.) Nor were the writers she studies uniformly hostile to the unification process by which West Germany effectively swallowed the East. However, as von Oppen explains, journalists, and, to a lesser extent, academics tended to characterize writers and other public intellectuals as critics of unification. The writers were then criticized for their supposed criticism, and for viewing such a critique as their appropriate social role. The tacit conclusion was that authors ought to withdraw from the public sphere and cultivate their literary gardens. Much of this critique of intellectuals, von Oppen concludes, was fundamentally specious. Von Oppen's study is thus framed by some important questions. Why, she asks, were intellectuals scapegoated during this era for supposedly opposing unification? What effect did this criticism have on the role of intellectuals in the public sphere? Von Oppen sets out to study the shifting terms of the public discourse on unification as a means of understanding how intellectuals wound up carrying so much of its weight. The book is organized primar-

ily by writer, and to a lesser extent chronological-ly. It begins in August 1989 with a consideration of the early commentary on unification made by prominent East German writers Stefan Heym and Helga Koenigsdorf, and follows them through February 1990, when unification began to seem inevitable. Von Oppen continues with chapters analyzing the work of Rolf Schneider, Monika Maron, Peter Schneider, writer and academic Walter Jens, Thomas Rosenloecher, Joseph von Westphalen, and finally Michael Schneider.

Von Oppen categorizes these writers into three groups. Heym, Koenigsdorf, Walter Jens, and Michael Schneider are "conforming non-conformists"; they consented to unification, although they never forthrightly voiced their support for it (hence their conformity), but criticized the West German political and cultural system. Peter Schneider, Rolf Schneider, and Monika Maron are von Oppen's "non-conforming conformists." They accepted unification as a solution to the country's problems, and also praised the Bundesrepublik. At the same time, they presented themselves as non-conformists, writing against a supposedly monolithic group of leftist writers opposed to unification, whose actual stances they did not generally bother to investigate. Finally, there are the "non-conforming non-conformists," Von Westphalen and Rosenloecher, who published anti-unification books even after unification had occurred. These categories, unfortunately, are not fully explained until the book's final pages.

Von Oppen's intriguing conclusions are made tentatively and piecemeal; they can be summarized as follows. First, the journalistic and academic consensus that German intellectuals somehow failed or fell silent, or that they generally opposed unification, is simply wrong. In fact, the "failure" was by the journalists and academics who didn't study a sufficiently wide range of writers and publications before passing summary judgment on all German intellectuals. Second, the parameters of the debate on unification were set

with great speed. Relatively early on, any criticism of the unification process was declaimed as opposition to unification itself, thereby implicitly making illegitimate any criticism of government policy. In the end, von Oppen comments, the entire affair seemed intended to undermine the idea of the writer as social critic (p. 224).

Some of Van Oppen's arguments are left incomplete. For example, she states, but does not really prove, that "it is precisely the moment when critical writers *accept* the inevitability of unification that the process of the de-legitimization of their role begins" (p. 24). Yet her chapter on Monika Maron notes throughout that Maron's acceptance of unification, based on the contention that German cultural unity superseded the relatively unimportant political separation of the two states, helped legitimate her voice as social critic. Von Oppen's chapters make for lively and thoughtful reading. She is a sensitive analyst of authorial strategy with regard to the mass media, and notes each author's unique concerns and comments. Her consideration of gender, and its contribution to Maron's relative marginalization as opposed to other writers, is particularly interesting. However, von Oppen's presentation of the German media is problematic, despite the book's title and introduction, the latter of which explicitly states that the book will view the media as more than a passive filter for opinion (p. 14). First, her methodology seems contradictory. The basis of her research, as described in her introduction, is an examination of the *Fachdienst Germanistik*, a monthly press summary that she describes as presenting the most important public debates in "the main German-language press"--meaning, in effect, the West--and including only the most important East German periodicals (pp. 18-19). Thus, even as she castigates German journalists and academics for focusing on the mainstream press, she seems to replicate their error in her study. She occasionally mentions less important periodicals, such as the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, but for the most part we are treated to a discussion of the usual outlets:

the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, and *Der Neue Rundschau*. These papers tend to set the tone for German public discourse, and any contemplation of the German press must begin with them. But given her argument, I was surprised she decided to end with them as well. Second, her discussion of the media lacks both context and agency. Readers without prior knowledge of the contemporary German press will not find any explanatory material in this book, though it would have required only a few paragraphs to identify the most important press outlets, their location on the political spectrum, and their ownership and its potential effect on editorial policy or reportage. Rather, Von Oppen's treatment of the press is limited to naming the journals in which her authors published. She similarly fails to differentiate among journalists or editors. The critics attacking or praising her authors are frequently nameless and faceless, often depicted in passive voice, as in this example: "[Stefan Heym] is described as '*der arme Literat* [the poor literatus]' ... his political views described as '*sein[en] Traum* [his dream]' and '*seine Lieblingsidee* [his beloved idea]'" (p. 46). The reader is given no help other than the bibliography in identifying the author of these views, R. Hank. But it turns out that Hank wrote for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, or *FAZ*, in December 1989; the *FAZ*, one of Germany's most important papers, is also often quite conservative. I find it unsurprising that a conservative paper would mock the views of a leading socialist author who had the temerity to criticize the Bundesrepublik. Did this tone mark the rest of the *FAZ*'s commentary on unification? Did the paper set the tone for the rest of the mainstream media during this period? Answering these kinds of questions, even briefly, would have helped shed more light on von Oppen's topic.[1] This absence of contextualization marks the book overall, even the introduction and conclusion. Even just a bit of it would have made her study more accessible to non-specialists and would have helped her argue for the relevance of

her work. For example, her introduction's presentation of her topic and its wider significance could have included a capsule history of German public intellectuals, whose significance to German politics and letters dates back, by most accounts, at least to Goethe and Herder. Another possibility would have been briefly to compare 1989-1990, as a signal moment of change, with other, similar moments, such as German unification in 1871.[2] A third option would have been to devote a paragraph to a comparison with other countries in Central and Eastern Europe during 1989-1991, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, where writers and the press often played equally or even more important roles.[3] Also, her interpretative paradigm is at odds with her actual conclusions. Her introduction and conclusion rely on Michel Foucault's 1972 "*Les intellectuels et le pouvoir*" and on Edward Said's thoughts on public intellectuals. Said himself, of course, was intellectually indebted to Foucault. Von Oppen discusses at length discursive constraints on writers in the public sphere, such as oppositional commentary and opinion, interventionist editors, and constraints of generation. By this last term, she seems to mean other people's opinions of members of the most famous German political/intellectual generations, such as the Group of '47 (a Cold War literary grouping that included Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Martin Walser, Ilse Aichinger, and Ingeborg Bachmann); the '68ers (the West German "protest generation," the seedbed both for the terrorist Baader-Meinhof Group and for the Green Party); and others. She does not explain this idea fully, nor does she identify these groupings for the non-expert. She also notes that writers can be bound by constraints of medium: that is, if writers' contributions are not published in the most important journals and newspapers, they are considered to have "fallen silent." Yet her individual chapters belie this pessimistic frame. They tend to emphasize authorial agency, strategy, and innovation, even if her authors sometimes meet with failure. Von Oppen also attempts to analyze fame

as a factor in an author's public stance and legitimacy. But she explicitly omits the most famous writers involved with unification-- Christa Wolf, Günter Grass, and Martin Walser--from her study. They have been the subject of copious commentary, so they might have better served von Oppen as foils, quickly dispatched in her introduction or conclusion. That said, she does need to contend with them and the controversies they engendered, since the fallout from those *causes celebres* clearly affected the journalistic and public perception of any author who dared to speak on political issues. Given the absence of these celebrity authors, the reader is left wondering how fame and image really worked in relation to authorial legitimacy in the media in this context.[4] Finally, Von Oppen's text would have been strengthened by bolder argumentation, less repetition, and more direct, less academic prose. She sometimes generalizes about all German intellectuals, East and West, based on her very limited sample set. She does not translate quotations for the non-specialist reader. Like many works published by Peter Lang, no professional editor seems to have been involved. Some citations are inaccurate. The narrative voice changes from past to present tense at odd moments.

In the end, the strength of Von Oppen's study lies in her careful analysis of authorial strategy against the larger context of the headlong rush toward unification. Her larger questions about German society and the position of public intellectuals go unanswered. But perhaps that is simply because, as other scholars also have concluded, writers and the press did not much affect the speedy march toward unification. The press echoed the growing public consensus on the issue, and writers who failed to mirror that enthusiasm were made scapegoats. Although she fails to grapple with the wider issues of the German public intellectual's relationship to the German media, specialists in the field will nonetheless find that Von Oppen's discussions of these lesser-known authors navigating issues of nationalism and the

German past, and carving out a place for themselves within the discourse on unification, are worth reading.

Notes

[1]. Readers interested in analyses and overviews of the German media and press in the twentieth century might turn to the following resources. Hermann Meyn's *Massenmedien in Deutschland* (Köln: UVK Medien Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004) and Rudolf Stöber's *Deutsche Pressegeschichte: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Köln: UVK bei UTB, 2005) are textbooks but nonetheless useful starting points. For the BRD, see Jürgen Wilke, *Mediengeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1999); the DDR is presented in Gunter Holzweißig, *Die schärfste Waffe der Partei: Eine Mediengeschichte der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2002). Two important recent English-language monographs on the West German media during the Cold War are Peter J. Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany: The Press and Broadcasting since 1945* (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1994), and Jessica Gienow-Hecht, *Transmission Impossible: American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Postwar Germany, 1945-1955* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999). Harry Pross, in *Zeitungsreport: Deutsche Presse im 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Verlag, 2000) offers a fascinating set of anecdotes, although the volume does not in fact provide the historical analysis the title promises.

[2]. See von Oppen's later essay on this topic, "From A 'Multinational Republic' to 'The Promised Land': Journals and Unification," in *Germany's Two Unifications: Anticipations, Experiences, Responses*, ed. Ronald Speirs and John Breuilly (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[3]. On 1989 in Eastern Europe, see Timothy Garton Ash's classic *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (New York: Vintage, 1993);

Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2000). For a sampling of the ideas of two of the heroes of 1989, see Michael Bernhard and Henryk Szlajfer, eds., *From the Polish Underground: Selections from Krytyka, 1978-1993* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Adam Michnik, *Letters From Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985); Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Prose* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991); *idem*, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvíř?ala* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

[4]. For an introduction to the literature on German unification and intellectuals, see Stephen Brockmann, *Literature and German Reunification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Harold James, *When the Wall Came Down: Reactions to German Unification* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jan-Werner Mueller, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Robert von Hallberg, ed., *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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