

Maria Höhn. *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 337 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2706-2.



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Frauleins and Soldiers

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) focuses on the post-World War II journey of Maria, a German woman who uses her skill and sex appeal to get the help first of an American Black GI, and then later of a French businessman, to become rich. This allegory of West Germany evolving from her reconstruction to membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) would be prosaic if it were not for Maria's tragic suicide at the end of the film. She had after all made too many compromises, lost her soul in essence, along the way to wealth and status in the new post-VW "Beetle" West Germany. The film also contains one of the most telling images of the new relationship between Americans and Germans, the victors and the occupied. Maria and a girlfriend are in a cafe, being ogled by a group of very loud and obnoxious American soldiers. The camera closes in on their faces, uniforms, and U.S. insignias, and their cigarettes and Coca-Colas. One GI, feeling uncomfortable with the whole scene, goes over to Maria

and apologizes to her. It is not made clear for what reason. The viewer can connect the dots.

Maria Hohn, Assistant Professor of History at Vassar College, has written one of the first detailed looks at the everyday interaction of Germans and the American military in post-World War II Germany. She focuses on the 1950s, a period of intense interactions between Americans and Germans, who were just beginning their fascination with things American. Hohn purports to "provide a worm's-eye view of the German-American encounter in Rhineland-Palatinate and the excitement, ambivalence, and panic that marked that encounter" (p. 14). The author, in fact, grew up in this area during the 1960s and 1970s and thought it natural to be around so many Americans. Historians of postwar Germany have only recently begun to examine how racial hierarchies continued to inform notions of German identity. New scholarship on German reactions to American popular culture as well as German policies toward children born of German mothers and African-American fathers have now emerged. That scholarship, along with Hohn's study, demonstrates that there

is no simple continuity from Nazi racism to racial attitudes in the 1950s. Hohn shows that the Americans brought an unprecedented prosperity to the Rhineland-Palatinate, wooing reluctant Germans into the western alliance. Germans, especially the younger generation embraced the consumerism, more relaxed morality, and materialism of the Americans. General Colin Powell once said of his service in Germany in 1958 that, for blacks, "especially those out of the South, Germany was a breath of freedom" (p. 12). Hohn addresses Germany's later transition to a country that adopted from America not only democracy, rock and roll and Elvis Presley, but also Jim Crow. Religious conservatives indicted the local German population for its materialism, hedonism and loose morals associated with the American military and way of life. Such behavior had led to striptease parlors, prostitution, common-law marriages, and increasing numbers of illegitimate births. There developed a common narrative myth that indicted black GIs; sexually out of control women, or so-called "Veronikas"; and Jewish bar owners for having brought degeneration to the countryside. If this has a familiar ring, it should, for some Germans simply dusted off the old Nazi racial ideology that now seemed respectable in the light of the American objection to inter-racial mixing. The good burghers invoked the racism of their mentors, thus soothing any sensibilities about being Nazis. All of this led to efforts to criminalize prostitution and to broaden the definition of what acts constituted prostitution, i.e., any women in the presence of an American serviceman was liable to arrest as a prostitute. Various church-affiliated welfare organizations attempted, without much success, to stem the rising tide of American influence. In practice it became impossible to arrest every woman in the presence of a GI, so prostitution became equated with racial transgression, black GIs with white women. Hohn concludes this *tour de force* study with an examination of events in the area of Kaiserslautern during the 1957 federal elections, when the controversial deployment

of Nike atomic missiles led to an outcry by both the SPD and the Christian Democrats over the sexual and racial transgressions of black soldiers and German women.

Germany, as attested to by Colin Powell, was the top choice for a tour of duty by African-Americans in the 1950s, but by the late 1960s that tolerance and acceptance had disappeared, making Germany one of the least desired assignments for them. Under the impact of "Americanism" gender and racial issues were renegotiated and reformulated in post-war Germany. Hohn speculates that these debates over black soldiers during the 1950s "functioned as a sort of bridge to the racist discourse on the guest workers who came to the federal Republic in the 1960s" (p. 235). She ominously concludes from the comments of welfare workers that they had little difficulty "shifting their emphasis from worrying about the presence of American GIs, especially black GIs, to worrying about the newly arrived guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*)" (p. 235). Her remarks on German notions of race take on special urgency given the violent xenophobia found currently in the old states of the former German Democratic Republic. This study of German and American racism tests the grand narratives found in the models of Westernization, modernization, globalization, and Americanization. At the same time it asserts that while the Germans may not be just like us, nonetheless the changes they attributed to Americanization were based upon a complex nexus of mutual love and hate that was never a one-way street.

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