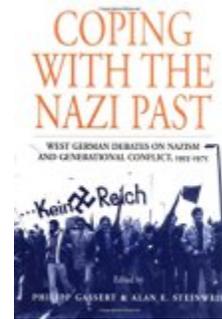


# H-Net Reviews

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Philipp Gassert, Alan E. Steinweis. *Coping with the Nazi Past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict, 1955-1975*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. 339 S. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-086-1.

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## Contemplating Confrontation: The Nazi Past in West Germany's Long 1960s

Can one understand West Germany's "long 1960s" as simply part of the youthful rebellion against cultural strictures that washed over many parts of the globe at that time? Or did an element of that discontent have a peculiarly post-Nazi dimension? If so, to what effect? In recent years, such questions have prompted scholars to ponder how confrontational—and how evasive—the evolving West German historical consciousness of the 1950s and 1960s was. In this particular collection, Philipp Gassert and Alan Steinweis have adeptly organized diverse and suggestive articles that address how the legacy of the Third Reich came to shape West German political, social, and cultural life in the 1960s. It is an admirable effort to locate handholds within a complex and still-growing area of study still sorely in need of synthesis.

The volume is a collection of short essays drafted by an international group of historians whose work (some of which is familiar) is brought together in English to provide a successful introduction to a complex topic. The volume works because contributors write with remarkable clarity, defining topics effectively and connecting them to the pertinent literature. Essays are also thoughtfully arranged. Most important, however, is the place of Norbert Frei's previous path-breaking exploration of *Vergangenheitspolitik*—roughly rendered as "policies toward the past." [1] All essays here take his research as axiomatic. For those looking to introduce new audiences to the ramifications of Frei's work, there is hardly a more suitable book.

The volume organizes seventeen essays into five thematic areas. An eighteenth essay by Konrad H. Jarausch frames the collection itself. It examines why research into 1960s discourses on the Nazi past remains such a popular and productive enterprise. Linking lingering polemical discontent about the period to the "slowness of contemporary history ... to engage the problems of the 1960s in systematic fashion" (p. 13), Jarausch posits that such a delay nurtured mythologized understandings of the postwar decades that evaded and inhibited serious consideration of 1968's impact on West German historical consciousness. Only recently have historians begun to make headway against this mood, by creating contextual space capable of accommodating apparently irreconcilable political, cultural, and social positions. Jarausch believes that the most effective sort of scholarship places the turmoil of the 1960s directly on top of the larger historical discourses—namely, about Nazism—that seem to sustain it. Historians must account for strains of Germany's divided memory that appeared in the last years of the Third Reich, were debated by advocates and opponents of the "1968" movements, and were gradually confronted in the 1970s. From this elongated perspective, "the revolts and debates of the 1960s seem a more manageable phenomenon, for they did not alone initiate confrontation with the Nazi past, but rather dramatized and popularized an ongoing process" (p. 21). The 1960s are thus best viewed as an important, if limited, reorganization of West German policies towards the Third Reich that began to "reverse the direction of memories from exculpation to criticism" (p. 25) in the Federal Republic

rather than definitively resolving them.

Thus introduced, the first cluster of essays addresses legal confrontations with National Socialist crimes that emerged during the late Adenauer years. Courtroom material often became the stuff of public sensation in this period, as Habbo Knoch illustrates by analyzing publication of photos taken from trials of former Nazi criminals. When previously lionized groups were photographically implicated in the Third Reich's worst crimes after 1955, earlier notions of German victimhood were destabilized. Indeed, long before '68ers suggested that Germany had a history of violent aggression, West Germans had begun to adjust to such formulations when they appeared in newspapers. By the time new images of atrocities emerged in the late 1960s, they were often interpreted "not as a mirror but as a movie of something that took place far away and remote from everyday life" (p. 46). Attempts at renewed confrontation with the past made headway within the legal system during the 1960s, despite the periodic incapacity of prosecutors and the judiciary to fathom the scale of Nazi devastation. All the contributors in this section address the way that efforts to seek justice for Nazi crimes were impeded by a latent propensity to brand criminal actions by Germans as atypical. Marc von Miquel, for example, examines prosecutions of former perpetrators that began in 1957-58, the volatile discourses surrounding the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials in the early 1960s, and debates over the Nazi prosecutions and the statue of limitations of 1965. He argues that while many West Germans began to advocate a normative break with the National Socialist past, they also moved to limit how self-incriminating that break might be. A few high-profile individuals during the late 1950s initiated reengagement with the carnage of the Nazi years, but the new round of prosecutions constituted appeasement rather than confrontation, a legal policy whose "most important objective was to avoid public debate" (p. 53). A new mode of addressing the Nazi past emerged, one in which legal rather than historical complicity was paramount and thus stressed details over larger context. Here, "Auschwitz could be discussed, but alongside new forms of silence" (p. 59).

The second set of essays addresses bifurcated confrontations with the Nazi past among West German professional organizations in the 1960s. Here, too, willingness to engage the National Socialist past was checked by a propensity to not look at it too closely. In Klaus Weinbauer's study of West German police organizations, high-ranking officers parried allegations of Nazi-era misconduct through recourse to tales of Weimar-era heroics.

A powerful culture of traditional police camaraderie enhanced a carefully nurtured sense of victimhood, and allowed policemen to evade uncomfortable questions. Selective understanding of the Nazi past also guided reform of the Federal Republic's healthcare system during the 1960s, as Sigrid Stöckel points out. She contends that motivation for decentralization of state-organized medical care was critically influenced by rhetorical criticisms of the later 1940s and 1950s, which blamed criminal medical practice during the Third Reich on a narrow caste of public health officials in the *Öffentlicher Gesundheitsdienst* (ÖGD). Discontent about the Nazi past that finally inspired change in the 1960s manifested itself in the removal of the ÖGD doctors from general practice. Yet these demonized health officials found themselves in charge of populations defined by so-called "social ills," where an "old paradigm of social hygiene" that encouraged cleaner housing, reeducation, and limited reproduction "for the sake of suffering families as well as for that of society as a whole" (p. 138) still seemed oddly appropriate.

Even populations generally disinterested in the Nazi past selectively confronted it during the 1960s, as Karen Schönwalder's look at West German employer associations suggests. She notes that these groups maintained silences about Nazi exploitation of foreign labor even while claiming to address it in recruitment during the 1960s.[2] Many sensed the need to correct perceptions that Germans exploited other national groups, but this awareness became a political and economic expedient more than any reckoning with historical wrongdoings. When policies that favored certain ethnic populations became the norm, it was clear that a frank discussion of "the differences between authoritarian and liberal policies towards foreigners, about the past and its consequences" (p. 121) had not yet taken place.

Having established that changing approaches to the Nazi past preceded the turmoil of the late 1960s, the collection next addresses generationally-driven historical transition. '68er radicalism was both generational and historical, and essays here assess how understanding of the Nazi past influenced notions of what it meant to be radical. Detlef Siegfried identifies youth media outlets as essential to the construction of a peculiar ethos among the younger generation. These outlets encouraged dissociation from the parental historical outlook, Siegfried argues, but without rigorous clarification of the rationale for such a break. Utopian visions premised on a flimsy historical self-awareness resulted, inhibiting that generation's ability to escape their elders' biases. Younger

Germans might have thought differently, then, but they shared more of their parents' historical indifference than many would have admitted. The ramifications of this ignorance are powerfully advanced in Dagmar Herzog's rereading of sexual discourse. While the New Left considered itself antifascist, Herzog suggests that it is better thought of as "antipostfascist" (p. 161). By this, she means that '68ers blithely conflated the repressive sexual culture of the 1950s with that of the Third Reich. While this move conveniently linked scattered political and sexual discourses found in the Frankfurt School, it overlooked the fact that National Socialist sexual discourse was "anything but repressive" (p. 168) for heterosexual "Aryan" populations. She argues, in fact, that the Third Reich often bartered permissive sexuality for loyalty to the regime. Herzog thus interprets New Leftist calls for sexual promiscuity as a "displacement of the discourse of morality from murder to sex" (p. 172), a rhetorical gambit intended to flank the Nazi legacy rather than to assault it head-on.

The most evocative symbol of "1968" in West Germany was and is the student movement, and essays on this topic look at the phenomenon with an eye towards the relationship of public protest to the Nazi past. Assessing discourses about encounters between leftist students and the conservative political establishment, Michael Schmidtke and Belinda Davis detail how instrumentalization of the Nazi past was used to press particular agendas only peripherally connected to that history. Schmidtke notes that many New Leftists invoked the past not to initiate its comprehensive evaluation, but as a backdrop against which to nurture and perform acts of public civic courage. Although anti-authoritarian actions lacked elegance, Schmidtke reminds us that they worked to ensure that even limited confrontation with the Nazi past was "no longer restricted to a discursive level but was increasingly anchored socioculturally" (p. 189). Proof of the benefits of such action can be found in Davis's essay on state persecution of leftist agitation. Davis implies that defenders of West German official action should be thankful that citizens were more committed to the notion of a democratic state than the state itself. Were it not for such commitments, she feels, the Federal Republic might well have unleashed a civil war. While the student movement did not live up to its goals of radically confronting the Nazi past, Schmidtke and Davis suggest that it provided the means by which such a confrontation might ultimately take place.

Radical questioning of the Nazi past was not just a leftist hobby. That history was reconsidered from mod-

erate and rightwing standpoints as well, as the fourth section of the volume well reminds us. Elizabeth Peifer, for example, demonstrates that West Germans as a whole—not simply those on the fringes—developed a deeper faith in the stability of German democracy in the 1960s. Proof of such commitment was on display in the early 1970s, when record numbers of West Germans involved themselves in politics. She suggests that this action helped bypass the violent history of extra-parliamentary protest by fostering a political culture where positive change could emerge from both grassroots and mainstream sources. Elsewhere, Joachim Scholtyseck tracks a similar willingness to conceive of politics in a new way by looking at the collapse of conservative historical tropes during the early 1960s. Traditionally, conservative elites leaned on totalitarian interpretations of Germany's past, in which rampant secularism and monopoly capital had combined to make National Socialism possible. In fusing political and economic liberalism with Christian values, these conservatives understood themselves to be the strongest defenders of a Federal Republic defined by staunch anti-Nazism. When former Nazis were discovered in the government starting in the 1950s, Scholtyseck claims, orthodox conservatives were left "disoriented and helpless" (p. 250), forcibly induced to confront National Socialism again. With time and some soul-searching, conservatives modified their historical perspectives and political outlooks. By the time the serious accusations of 1968 surfaced, many conservatives felt that the most critical elements of the Nazi past had already been addressed.

The final section of the volume briefly assesses some international dimensions of West German confrontation with the Nazi past during the 1960s. Such historical reckoning was never the domain of West Germans alone, and it often figured in foreign relations. The place of this past in West German foreign relations is given particularly evocative form in Carole Fink's reconsideration of the Adenauer administration's relations with Israel. Fink argues that the rapprochement between Bonn and Jerusalem in 1952 cannot be simply understood as the start of a vibrant period of conciliation and cooperation. Rather, she suggests that the bonds between Konrad Adenauer and David Ben-Gurion were "grayer than gold" (p. 277), indirect and easily distracted by outside concerns. Sometimes these relations were driven by outside obligation, particularly to the United States. At other times, however, historical dimensions influenced the construction of policy between the two nations, an argument that Fink nicely supports by considering how the diplomatic fallout out of the Six-Day War and the onset of *Ostpolitik*

might have been enhanced by West Germany's efforts to support a particular historical self-narrative. Many in the Federal Republic used Israel's 1967 military victory to advocate a normalization of relations with East Germany, even at the expense of those with Israel. Fink argues that this matter of foreign relations cannot be understood without acknowledging that overtures towards the GDR preserved a tangible sense of German victimhood—a nation divided, with both sides positioned on the front lines of any East-West showdown—and created a way to view “the Nazi past through a more distant lens” (p. 285).

This big book offers an impressive range of archival exploration, theoretical consideration, and adept argumentation. Students and scholars alike will appreciate the questions it allows them to ask. But even though this text aims at synthesis, many will find that questions raised begin to outweigh answers given. This is a hazard of the field, for distilling the rhetorical posturing of and about the West German 1960s in ten- to twenty-page installments is nearly impossible. In this text, only limited inquires and provisional answers can be tendered, even if some are quite suggestive. Gassert and Steinweis note that serious questions about collective memory of the Third Reich and impulses for change in the 1960s require

greater consideration, including the impact of gender on the social and religious fabric of West Germany, shifting class identities amidst postwar modernization, and the place of the German Democratic Republic. In opening rich new veins of potential research, this volume's best contribution might lie in having proven just how much more work remains to be done.

#### Notes

[1]. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996), and *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, tr. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[2]. For an older example of this literature, see Knuth Dohse, *Ausländische Arbeiter und bürgerlicher Staat. Genese und Funktion von staatlicher Ausländerpolitik und Ausländerrecht: Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Königstein: Hain, 1981).

[3]. A succinct argument along these lines can be found in Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2002).

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