

Peter Bender. *Deutschlands Wiederkehr: Eine ungeteilte Nachkriegsgeschichte, 1945-1990.* Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2007. vii + 325 pp. EUR 23.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-608-94466-2.



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Published on H-German (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

This last book by the late Peter Bender starts from the premise that Germans "forgot" Germany in the 1960s. He wonders where Germany went between the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic in 1949 and the unification of Germany in October 1990. This synthetic work seeks to reframe our approach to postwar German history. Rather than merely treating the two German states in parallel, Bender demonstrates the ways in which they and their populations remained bound to one another and shared common problems and interests. He recognizes the greater advantages and power of the FRG but gives the GDR its due. As a result, Bender succeeds in refocusing our attention on the intertwined histories of the postwar German states and in explaining how Germans still could hold a conception of a German nation after forty years of separation.

Bender's account makes clear that Germans bore significant responsibility for the division of Germany. Defeat, occupation, and even the Cold War were outcomes of the German war of aggres-

sion. In addition, German politicians helped create the Federal Republic and GDR. The Cold War was most intense in the Germanys because of the long history of suspicion between communist and non-communist parties along with the legacy of Nazi anti-communist propaganda. The need to impress their alliance partners with their trustworthiness also led German leaders on both sides of the newly emerging border to become the perfect Cold Warriors.

Bender characterizes the 1950s and 1960s in this context as a period of intense conflict and alienation between the two German states. With the building of the Berlin Wall and East German restrictions on travel between the two Germanys, East and West Germans (and thus the German nation) also became estranged from each other. In his attempt to emphasize the joint experience of the two Germanys, Bender unconvincingly lays partial blame at the feet of the Federal Republic's leaders for frightening West Germans and keeping them from visiting the East. More persuasive is his argument that the East German public

(more so than that of the West) kept alive hopes for a unified Germany because of its desire to be liberated from communist oppression.

Both German states faced the need to confront the National Socialist past and to reassure neighbors and allies that Germans would not become Nazis again. Bender argues that both Germanys failed to implement a thorough denazification. In the Federal Republic, public opinion would not support such a program, the result of an unwillingness to reject the twelve years of Nazi rule as bankrupt. Dependent on votes, political leaders could not afford to move too far ahead of public opinion. The dictatorship in the GDR did not need to concern itself with public opinion or rule of law; it compromised denazification by whitewashing the pasts of people willing to proclaim their support for the regime. While many of those guilty of Nazi crimes went unpunished, Bender credits both states with creating societies that effectively rooted out Nazism. Younger generations of Germans in East and West had the benefit of distance and economic security from which to examine the Nazi past and force more complex understandings of it. Bender also presents 1945 as a watershed year (although he avoids the term *Stunde Null*) that left Germans tired of war and power politics. Out of resignation they embraced pacifism and economic well-being as their priorities. Over time, Bender asserts, these values embedded themselves in German political culture on both sides of the German-German border.

The success of the two German states in gaining sovereignty Bender attributes to the leadership of Konrad Adenauer and Walter Ulbricht. Bender emphasizes that both were willing to put the needs of their separate states above German unity. The preoccupation of Germans with their own personal plight meant that unification received little priority. Divisive policies won the trust of the superpowers, which rewarded both leaders with sovereignty. Once relations with the superpowers stabilized, German politicians could

turn their attention to their neighbors. The FRG formed a close relationship with France and pursued European integration. West Germans traveled freely within the West and became Europeans. The GDR also entered into economic and military alliance with its neighbors in the East but with fewer results. Polish and East German leaders remained suspicious of one another. The Soviet Union, which dominated the alliance, actively discouraged close ties between its client states. East Germans remained isolated in the GDR. As a result, "they remained German" (p. 120). This assertion that East German citizens were more German than their West German counterparts is provocative, particularly in light of the author's later complaint that in unified Germany, little remained of German traditions outside of economic prowess. The author blames the Nazis and military defeat for their demise, but perhaps he is also hinting at the failure of Helmut Kohl and the architects of German unification to appropriate some traditions that had survived in East Germany.

By the late 1960s, changes in the international situation allowed German leaders to pursue, within limits, their own interests. The Federal Republic wanted to decrease German-German tensions to prepare the way for unification and the demise of the GDR. The GDR wanted to maintain distance in order to preserve itself, but needed western capital and consumer goods. In the end, the Federal Republic's money helped ease tensions. Improved relations and increasing contact across the border allowed Germans on both sides to think along European lines and to regain a historical and cultural sense of their place in central Europe.

Ultimately, what allowed Germany to unify was the collapse of communism, which no longer motivated and inspired even the leaders. The inability of communist economies to meet the demands of the populace prompted leaders to give up the idea of offering an alternative to the West,

and to try instead to imitate western standards of living. The events of the 1980s, Bender asserts, proved the success of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. The GDR had been undermined by economic crisis, but also through the example of the Federal Republic.

With the unwillingness of the Soviet Union to prop up a weakening East German government, the East German public carried out a bloodless revolution in 1989. Bender's description of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the spirit of the revolution is particularly vivid. While opposition leaders still imagined a separate GDR, people in the streets wanted West German prosperity for themselves. Politicians were forced to follow the lead of the masses. Bender gives credit to Kohl for seizing the opportunity, but he also recognizes that Kohl's success depended on Soviet weakness and Mikhail Gorbachev's turn from communism.

Kohl deliberately minimized the economic and human costs of unification and the disruption it would cause in order to secure electoral victory. As a result, unification took place in a fashion meant to cause the least disruption to West Germans as possible. No new verse was added to the national anthem, no new constitution was written. Bender argues that Kohl won the election through this tactic, but forfeited the ability to shape national unity. In his all too brief discussion of Germany after 1990, Bender shows that West German arrogance hindered internal unification of the nation; however, Bender remains confident that in another generation or two, the divisions of *Ossi* and *Wessi* will be forgotten. The move of the federal capital to Berlin marked the return of a central European consciousness. Once again, Germany is a land in the middle, but this time "surrounded by friends" (p. 278).

Aware that nations are constructs rather than eternal beings, Bender points out convincingly that if communism had not fallen when it did, it is more likely that two separate nations would have emerged. He is less successful in his attempt to

bring together social and cultural forces with political considerations to explain how Germany survived to reemerge as a unified nation in 1990. Descriptions of individual actors are insightful and the balance of domestic and international politics is nicely maintained, but social history gets short shrift and is sketched with little depth and specificity. The processes of Europeanization and social changes that freed Germans from the return of Nazism are only superficially addressed. The overwhelming emphasis falls on politics, often on *Deutschlandpolitik* to the exclusion of all else. While this strategy may be necessary to maintain the elegance of the argument, it also skews the historical picture a bit. The reliance on 1945 as a "zero hour" (even without the label) ignores recent research that points to continuities between the Nazi and postwar periods. The sparse use of sources also diminishes somewhat the scholarly value of the work. At the same time, however, Bender is able to draw on his impressive journalistic experience to great effect, particularly in the discussions of *Ostpolitik*. Overall, this book is an interesting and beautifully written addition to postwar German studies.

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Citation: Margarete Myers Feinstein. Review of Bender, Peter. *Deutschlands Wiederkehr: Eine ungeteilte Nachkriegsgeschichte, 1945-1990*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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