

Frank Bajohr, Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Claudia Kemper, Detlef Siegfried. *Mehr als Erzählung: Zeitgeschichtliche Perspektiven auf die Bundesrepublik. Festschrift für Axel Schildt.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016. 406 S. gebunden, ISBN 978-3-8353-1882-3.

Reviewed by Paul Steege

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In their introduction to this *Festschrift* celebrating the influential career of Hamburg historian Axel Schildt, the four editors begin by questioning the value of the genre. Reflecting on the almost inevitable “mixed bag” that results from a collection of honorific essays produced by friends and colleagues, they note ruefully that these volumes are rarely really read, even by the honoree. Any skepticism about the relative merits of the *Festschrift* has not stopped its steady flow onto university library bookshelves around the world. A keyword search for “Festschrift” in the main catalog of the Princeton University Library, for example, returned 1,049 items published since 2011: <http://catalog.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First> (03.03.2017). They declare their intention to produce a book that advances scholarship by means of a “shared approach to the subject matter” (p. 9) and select Schildt’s 1999 essay “Fünf Möglichkeiten, die Geschichte der Bundesrepublik zu erzählen” first published in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 44 (1999), pp. 1234–1244, https://www.blaetter.de/sites/default/files/downloads/zurueck/zurueckgeblaettert_200910.pdf (03.03.2017). to provide that conceptual focus. This approach is largely successful, and although the essays do not entirely avoid the mixed-bag phenomenon of which the editors warn, the volume as a whole delivers a series of thoughtful reflections on the

multiple narrative possibilities with which historians might engage West Germany before 1989. Contrary to the anxiety Schildt expressed in 1999, that Federal Republic (FRG) has, its “relative normalcy” (p. 12) notwithstanding, continued to provoke critical and engaged scholarly interest. In fact, as this volume suggests, it is precisely in interrogating the implications of this presumed normalcy that diverse narratives of its history can prove especially productive.

Following the editors’ brief introduction, Schildt’s 1999 essay is reproduced in full, a choice that provides the reader a firm sense of the book’s conceptual grounding. Writing fifty years after the founding of the Federal Republic, Schildt delineated five ideal-typical approaches with which its history had been narrated, and the subsequent essays emerge out of these personal accents: a history of success (“Erfolgsgeschichte”); a history of failure (“Misserfolgsgeschichte”); a history of modernization (complicated somewhat by the FRG’s status, already at its founding, as a modern society); a burdened history (“Belastungsgeschichte”) that examines the FRG’s history as weighed down by the unresolved legacy of National Socialism; and a broader history of westernization that embeds the FRG within Western European and trans-Atlantic worlds.

The twenty-six essays are arranged in five groups – not in terms of Schildt’s categories but

reflecting particular focal points of contemporary history research. These designations are “Collective Socializations” (“Kollektive Sozialisationen”, 4 essays); “Symptoms of Subterranean Developments” (“Symptome unterschwelliger Entwicklungen”, 5 essays); “Micro- and Macro-Spaces” (“Mikro- und Makroräume”, 4 essays); “Reorderings from the Perspective of the Present” (“Neuordnungen durch den Blick der Gegenwart”, 7 essays); and “Competing Interpretations” (“Deutungskonkurrenzen”, 6 essays). What emerges out of the book’s mixture of personal engagement with historical experience and historiographical reflection on narrative process is an analytical thread that might best be understood as an attempt to historicize West Germany’s “relative normalcy” and thus implicitly to posit that concept as the fruitful target for future historical investigation, even beyond this particular German case.

“Micro- and Macro-Spaces” (Section 3) is the weakest part of the book, doing little more than to declare the existence of various sub-disciplinary categorizations (urban history, regional history, and the history of globalization) and speculating about possible means by which these approaches might prove relevant for histories of the FRG. But even if the section title hints that these four essays were grouped by default rather than clear conceptual intent, the tension it posits – of a spatial designation between macro and micro – provides a helpful means to consider what approaches allow this sort of edited volume to cohere into something more than just the sum of its parts; the most successful essays tip the scale very much in favor of the micro. Even recognizing the editors’ desire to speak beyond the pages of this volume, the authors of these essays embrace the narrowness of a task constrained by fewer than fifteen pages and refuse to apologize for what they cannot include.

In Martin Sabrow’s “Der Apfel von Wiebelskirchen,” the personal functions not just as the

impetus for but also the means to analyze spatial and chronological boundary-drawing. He dives into Erich Honecker’s 1987 visit to West Germany, using the East German leader’s return to his Saarland birthplace to investigate his personal as well as political map of Germany’s past and present. In digging into Honecker’s political fantasies (“Träumereien”, p. 80) provoked by his return home, Sabrow pleads for an approach to divided Germany that explodes simple understandings of how borders divide, moving between multilayered experiences of Heimat and political anxieties about claims to that sort of belonging.

Adelheid von Saldern examines the “contemporary historical entanglement” (“zeitgeschichtliche Vernetzung”) of an October 1965 book burning organized in Düsseldorf on the banks of the Rhine by members of the *Jugendbund für Entschiedenenes Christentum*, using Schildt’s categories to move back and forth between narratives about the events of 1965 and the Nazi book burning of May 1933. She shows how a small event can facilitate a probing analysis and provide “multilayered insights” (“vielschichtige Einblicke”, p. 112) that put West German society into historical context. In the same section, Linde Apel’s essay on the “Erfolgsgeschichte der ‘Stolpersteine’” tackles the limitations (and possibilities) of narrative forms inherent in the commemorative art installation project that marks with inscribed brass cobblestones sites once inhabited by victims of Nazi persecution. It follows Andreas Wirsching’s contextualization of Richard von Weizsäcker’s May 1985 speech that assessed May 1945 as a moment of liberation. Together these essays offer parallel criticisms about the iconic narratives that seem to craft a “caesura in memory politics” (“erinnerungspolitisch[e] Zäsur”, p. 113) in the FRG’s history-making. Whether confronting the contradictions between historical sources and the “authentic” witness (like von Weizsäcker) or recognizing how the proximity of perpetrator and victim on a single street undermines any singular narrative claim on their expe-

riences in and of that place, it is right to assert, with Wirsching, that the category “tragic” should have no place in assessing the legacy of the Nazi past (p. 125).

Like von Saldern, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum takes Schildt’s five categories as a productive means to engage the narrative possibilities inherent to one very narrow slice of postwar German history, the World Cup experiences of the West German and then unified German national soccer team. The point here is not to validate one narrative methodology over the other or even to claim soccer history’s importance for understanding the FRG. Rather, the essay smartly turns Schildt’s historiographic questions around, deploying them as a means to take soccer history seriously. Operating on a similar meta-narrative level, Frank Bösch concludes this fourth section of the book with an appeal for an *Alltagsgeschichte* that approaches the seemingly “normal” (p. 302) as something distant, even when found in the FRG. He appeals not for a particular methodology per se but rather interrogates the implications of the very “Alltagspraktiken” that comprise his analysis – work, free time, sleep – recognizing in them not “unproblematic, boring” or “insufficiently political” concepts (p. 312) but rather dynamic moments that highlight the historical potential inherent in an un-nostalgic engagement with the FRG and its history.

In a well-chosen final essay (“Die Bundesrepublik als das andere Deutschland”), Dorothee Wierling pushes back against West Germany’s presumed normalcy. Far from discounting a focus on the history of the FRG, she rather calls for historians to approach familiar preconceptions, the truths that go without saying, in order to transform them into moments of “astonishment, curiosity and new questions” (p. 392). What happens, she wonders, when we imagine that East German developments and the lingering legacy of a lost war might have been “more real” (p. 401) than the miraculous good fortune that sustained

West Germany? But, of course, as she notes, in the GDR, West Germany was always present, even if the SED sought to “un-realize the country to the west” (“das Land im Westen zu de-realisieren”, p. 401). This battle over presence and erasure has shifted since reunification, an outcome generally normalized as a foregone conclusion. For historians at least, that end product should remain anything but given.

This challenge to presumptive outcomes gets to the intersecting questions that Schildt posed in 1999, ten years into Germany’s return to “normalcy.” By breaking down the chronological and geographical boundaries constraining the narratives of FRG history, these essays challenge readers to move beyond any tendency to pathologize the normal or normalize the pathological. In locating the FRG in a history of twentieth-century Germany, it is thus not a question of having to push back against the “fascinating” nature of fascism (pace Susan Sontag) or the scholarly allure of the SED dictatorship, but rather to think through the residual power of what might even seem trifling. Gyanendra Pandey, *Unarchived Histories: the “Mad” and the “Trifling,”* in: Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Unarchived Histories: The “Mad” and the “Trifling” in the Colonial and Postcolonial World*, London 2014, pp. 3–19. ; and that is an appropriate mission for a *Festschrift*.

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