

Katharina Karcher. *Sisters in Arms: Militant Feminisms in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1968.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. 178 S. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78533-534-1.

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Interestingly enough, militancy is rarely used as an analytical category in research on feminism in the Federal Republic of Germany. According to Katharina Karcher, research fellow at Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge, this term is strongly associated with violent protest tactics in the radical Left and the Autonomist movement in the FRG. Against this background, her aim is not to challenge this widely shared view, but to underline different marginalized and silenced perspectives. Convinced that little attention is brought to the use of confrontational or violent methods for the cause of women, the author puts forward the thesis: "Consciously or unconsciously, historians of German feminism have created a narrative about 'good' feminism and 'bad' militancy, which is based on a limited understanding of both terms." (p. 10) Accordingly, there was a complex interplay between old and new, conventional and innovative, constitutional and unlawful, as well as peaceful and violent protest tactics leading to different results in different feminist campaigns. With this intention, the text pursues several questions, for example: How confrontational was the approach taken by the actors involved? What effects, if any, did their actions have? It goes without saying that these questions are important for historical science and must be discussed. Karcher approaches them using archival sources – autobiographical accounts and

interview data – as well as previous studies of feminist protest in the FRG.

The book comprises five chapters (plus the introduction and the conclusion) demonstrating the complexity of the topic, e.g. the new women's movement in West Germany, terrorism, feminism and the politics of representation as well as an examination of militant feminist protest against the abortion ban. In addition, Karcher intends to describe feminist responses to violence against women, militant feminist protest and transnational solidarity. She uses a broad definition of feminist militancy: "Feminist militancy, as understood in this context, refers to historically and politically specific sets of ideas and practices that aim to overcome sexist oppression and are based on the assumption that this objective can only be reached with a confrontational attitude." (p. 11) This definition is of fundamental importance for analysing the complex interplay of different protest tactics in feminist campaigns without reinforcing ahistorical notions of feminism and nonviolence.

The introduction begins with a discussion of different kinds of feminism and a definition of gender. Although feminist activists in West Germany did not use the latter term, the author considers gender as a useful category of historical analysis. She believes – based on Myra Marx Ferree – gender intersects important social factors, including ethnicity, nationality, age, sexuality and

class. Further points are the important events in the New Left in West Germany and the relevance of militancy in the new women's movement. Karcher details the dynamic of the *Rote Zora* (Red Zora) and other militant feminist groups. Justifiably she writes – and this is a very important aspect – these groups emerged in the late 1960s in the context of the anti-authoritarian student movement and were radicalized by the attacks on Benno Ohnesorg and Rudi Dutschke and last but not least by repeated clashes with the police and polemical attacks in the media. The student Ohnesorg, as is well known, was killed by a police officer during a demonstration on June 2nd, 1967. The assassination of Rudi Dutschke was attempted only a few months later on 22 April 1968. These events were central turning points and led to further radicalizations.

Chapter three particularly draws attention to the aspects of terrorism and feminism and shows that Red Zora and another part of the militant leftist network, the *Revolutionären Zellen* ('Revolutionary Cells', RC), had – in contrast to the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) women – an active interest in themes and debates in the new women's movement. It is true that the RAF women had distance from the aims and principles of feminism. "Domestic violence, sexual abuse, abortion and other central themes in the new women's movement were of no relevance to the RAF, since the group focused almost exclusively on state repression and violence." (p. 55) The Red Zora's foundation was a response to the lack of support in the RC for radical feminist positions. The author gives a differentiated description and explains that the Red Zora continued to operate as a part of the wider RC network from 1977 until 1984. The organization tried to balance campaigns on women's issues with other general campaigns of the RC, but it was difficult and led to a gendered division of labour in the militant leftist network. Through this experience, the Red Zora realized the split

from the RC and developed an independent women's guerrilla group in 1984.

Especially chapters three and four describe many additional protest activities and attacks by members of Red Zora. The author quotes many examples: the movement against paragraph 218 of the German criminal code, a bomb at the Federal Court of Justice (1975), bombs and poems against the abortion ban, tackling domestic violence and rape, the Walpurgis night marches or feminist attacks against pornography and sexism in the media. However, in this context the reactions and confrontations between the new women's movement and militant feminist groups in West Germany need to be further addressed. Finally, the relevance of mass media representation in this conflict should not be underestimated. In the concluding chapter, Karcher makes it clear – as one result of her study – that the feminist protest was a complex interplay of peaceful and violent tactics in campaigns.

Karcher perceived it as difficult to draw a clear-cut line between peaceful feminist protest on the one side and detestable violence on the other side. The author readily agrees that some feminists have supported armed leftist groups in West Germany. Even more, she believes their "activities deserve attention, not least because of the critical debates they sparked about the scope and limits of feminist protest". Against this background, Karcher demands, "new conceptual tools to document, analyse and contextualize these debates." (p. 137) One interesting example is the militant protest in the British movement for female suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century. It is really one of the best-researched episodes of militancy in the history of European women's movements. It shows us that one does not have to agree with the political aims or tactics of militant feminist groups to see their activities as a part of the long and varied history of feminist movements. Altogether, the study of Katharina Karcher sophisticatedly describes the topic of militant feminisms

in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1968
and shows us the complexity of this issue.

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