In many societies, even today, the voices of women who have endured domestic violence remain muted. Jane Freeland's fantastic new monograph provides survivors and the feminists who fought on their behalf a voice. While her study covers the remarkable story of how feminist activism in divided and reunified Germany led to significant legislation (the Protection from Violence Act) in 2002, many of its themes are universal. At the heart of Freeland's monograph is the problem of assessing how successful feminism has been at mitigating domestic violence. If women are still witnessing abuse in 2022 (the date of the book's publication), then how far has feminism really come? Freeland asserts that we must ascertain how much society changed due to feminism to gauge the movement's success. While feminists' campaign against domestic violence may not have eradicated fear and pain, it brought attention to the issue in ways that previous feminist movements had not. At the same time, feminists often had to compromise on their ideals in order to gain sympathy for abused women. Freeland's monograph delicately and expertly balances these alternating impulses of feminists' fight against domestic violence.

Chapter 1 examines how domestic violence activism emerged out of the creation of the New Women's Movement in 1968. Freeland begins by explaining the misogynistic nature of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), whose male leaders regularly silenced female members, treated them as sexual objects, and enforced a gendered division of labor within the organization. As the student movement at large drew attention to oppressive and authoritarian politics, women within the SDS began organizing to combat their own repression. The New Women's Movement, as it became known, witnessed a brief period of unity before splintering into different factions. Still, it began an important era of feminist activism in the 1970s, especially around reproductive rights and abortion. Terminating pregnancies had long been criminalized under Paragraph 218; feminists sought to change this in order to allow women to participate fully in society as equal citizens. Unlike activists of previous generations, the 1970s feminists engaged in provocative protests, most famously Stern magazine's “We Had Abortions!” exposé. While their activism ultimately did not result in the wide-ranging decriminalization they had hoped for—women could only obtain an abortion under certain circumstances and within a limited time frame—it united the women's movement. It furthermore showed women that they could enact change without men, whose limited engagement...
aided, but did not take over, the movement. And
of course, with increased exposure came in‐
creased opposition and scrutiny from Christian
Democrats and religious leaders. While the fight
for reproductive rights took the spotlight, femin‐
ists also began a quiet campaign to combat do‐
mestic violence. The first domestic violence shel‐
ter, Projekt Frauenhaus, opened in 1976.

The next chapter picks up with the controver‐
sial opening of Projekt Frauenhaus on the edge of
the wealthy West Berlin borough of Grunewald. In
a very short two-year period, the shelter went
from a small feminist project to a state-sponsored
initiative. After a brief explanation of the legal
limits of prosecuting domestic violence, Freeland
powerfully narrates the stories of survivors who
experienced abuse and then sought refuge at the
shelter, including the heartbreaking tale of a Turk‐
ish woman who was deported after leaving her
abusive spouse. Feminists responded by produ‐
cing pamphlets showcasing these testimonies, or‐
ganizing international tribunals, and holding
marches. Furthermore, the mass media began
publishing on these issues, bringing public aware‐
ess and credibility to the shelter project instigat‐
ors. Heavily involved in the international women's
movement, the shelter project leaders took im‐
portant lessons from their British counterparts,
namely that state funding and support were key.
The feminist movement also raised awareness
about other previously unreported problems, such
as marital rape. In the end, however, the media
and politicians co-opted and diluted radical femin‐
ist politics. What began as a campaign to grant wo‐
men autonomy ended, at least temporarily, with
reinforcing paternalistic ideas of women as vic‐
tims who needed protection.

Chapter 3 dives into the shelter experience
and how activists responded to “battered women.”
If feminists imagined that abused women were
seeking an emancipatory space, or that they
shared a sense of solidarity with abused women,
they were soon disabused of these illusions. Most
women who arrived wanted safety and perhaps
support for getting a job and an apartment, not to
become feminists. Furthermore, feminist shelter
leaders soon found themselves confronted with
overcrowded spaces, drug dependencies, and
child abuse. On top of their obvious class differ‐
ences, German feminist activists also had to con‐
tend with the appearance of migrant women, of‐
ten of Turkish background, in their shelters. In
their attempts to help and establish solidarity with
migrant women, German feminists often replic‐
ated racialized discourses about the dangers of
patriarchal, “non-German” culture. Feminists of
migrant backgrounds, in turn, criticized this ap‐
proach and took matters into their own hands,
forming their own shelter projects.

The fourth chapter jumps over the border to
East Germany. In the German Democratic Republic
(GDR), violence against women was not publicly
discussed, but the Socialist Unity Party (SED)-run
regime tracked cases and recognized it as a lead‐
ing cause of divorce. As early as the 1950s, work‐
place committees and the legal system attempted
to flag abusers. At the same time, this flagging sys‐
tem was not necessarily aimed at saving women,
but rather at improving men's workplace pro‐
ductivity and addressing rates of alcoholism.
Moreover, the socialist regime sought every op‐
portunity to save marriages, often overlooking
patterns of abusive behavior. At times, the conser‐
vative morals of the SED regime interfered with
protecting women's equality. For instance, one wo‐
man who had had an affair lost custody of her
child because her promiscuity was seen as endan‐
gering the family more than her husband's abus‐
ive behavior. Not all judges, however, ruled
against women. In addition, there were other lib‐
eralizing spaces in the GDR. Film became one ven‐
uue through which women's experiences with sexu‐
al assault and domestic violence were featured.
Legal failings and cultural critiques combined to
create a maelstrom. By the 1980s, women across
the GDR had become largely cynical about the claims of socialist women’s emancipation.

Chapter 5 situates East German activism against domestic violence as part of a longer history of feminism in German history. Borrowing from their Western counterparts, East Germans worked to protest their regime’s treatment of domestic violence. At the same time, they adapted their methods to their own unique situation. By the late 1970s, the official women’s organization, the Democratic Women’s League of Germany, had lost traction with women in the GDR. Instead, women increasingly found themselves gravitating towards nonstate groups, such as the Weimar Frauenenteestube. This group took it upon itself to survey women about their experiences with sexual violence. One significant distinction between East and West German feminism was the target of their activism. Rather than homing in on men as the problem, East German feminists identified the state’s inadequate punishment of sexual violence as the issue. Other groups also participated in feminist activity, even though that was not their intent. A Catholic charity organization set up a crisis shelter that ended up being overwhelmingly used by women escaping domestic violence. In doing so, shelter workers fulfilled the same goals of the nascent women’s movement in the GDR: to help women outside the boundaries of the state. 1989 then became a turning point for the women’s movement.

The effects of the fall of the GDR on its burgeoning feminist movement come to the fore in chapter 6. Unsurprisingly, women’s rights in the two Germanys had diverged over the preceding decades of separation. Abortion became a dividing line, as East German women had free rein, in contrast to West German women, who could only terminate pregnancies within twelve weeks with a doctor’s permission. After German reunification in 1990, East German women were forced to conform to the West German standard. According to other scholars, abortion symbolized the entire fate of women’s rights in a reunified Germany. Freeland makes the case that domestic violence activism was a counterweight to the more popular and better-researched topic of abortion. Unlike abortion, domestic violence in the 1990s united feminists, who worked together in the 1990s to tear down legal barriers and expand social services to the East. Their work culminated in the 2002 Gewaltschutzgesetz (Protection from Violence Act).

Freeland’s monograph is an important addition to the canon of German gender history in many ways. For one thing, she tracks down archival evidence of a socially taboo topic that has not received the same scholarly attention as other issues affecting women. Moreover, she draws together the parallel histories of East and West German feminist activism, a comparison that illuminates the significant upswings and downfalls of each movement. Extending this comparison into the postreunification years allows Freeland to carry out Gerda Lerner’s call to challenge “the periodization of traditional history.”[1] Germany’s reunification posed certain obstacles to feminist activism, but it did not represent the beginning or end of the movement. If there is a complaint about this marvelous book, it is that Freeland perhaps undersells the global or pan-European nature of the German women’s movements. She alludes to recent protests in places like Poland in the conclusion as a way of highlighting the continuing legacies of communism and nationalism. One wonders, then, how representative the two Germanys were in their stances on domestic violence. Did the unique circumstances of reunification propel violence against women to the forefront of the movement in ways that were not possible across the rest of the Eastern bloc? One book cannot accomplish everything. What Freeland has achieved, however, is huge: a much-needed fundamental rewriting of the history of feminism in postwar Germany that opens new areas of inquiry for new generations of historians to pursue.

Note

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