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This fascinating book is an important contribution to a growing body of research on West German-American relations during the Cold War era. Like some (though far from all) of those studies, it also stresses the crucial role that gender and racial issues played in West Germans’ adaptation to democracy on the Western model. Despite its fetching title and its stunning cover illustration (depicting a beautiful blond German woman fondly embracing a Black GI), the book is not just about “GIs and Fräuleins,” but raises far broader questions. Through her detailed examination of the impact of the U.S. military presence on two counties of the Rhineland-Pfalz in the 1950s, Maria Höhn can show how a specific group of ordinary West Germans negotiated their encounter with the “American way of life,” which included both consumer wonders and African-Americans. Her book demonstrates a distinct evolution in West German attitudes towards gender, race, and the postwar transformation of everyday life facilitated by the American presence, but also complexly inflected by the growing prosperity of Germans’ own consumer democracy.

American troops occupied the Rhineland-Palatinate briefly in 1945, and then returned en masse to stay in 1950 as part of the U.S. military build-up in Europe occasioned by the Korean War. In the course of 1950-51 more than 100,000 GIs and their dependents arrived at military bases in Kaiserslautern, Baumholder, and other smaller towns in the Rhineland-Palatinate. (Since then, Höhn tells us, millions of American soldiers have passed through those bases, with more than 70,000 remaining there today). Despite the Americans’ huge and rapid construction projects, housing shortages in the 1950s forced many military couples to live “on the economy.” Additionally, GIs sought leisure-time entertainment and female companionship off base. Höhn’s first chapters explore how disruptions brought about by the American presence transformed many aspects of daily life in the poor rural province but also offered locals numerous money-making opportunities. She also documents concerted American efforts (sometimes initiated at the highest U.S. policy levels) to win German hearts and minds for the American mission, showing that, to foster good will, Americans involved themselves in many aspects of German daily life, including festivals and celebrations, charities, churches, hospitals, schools, sporting events, and in the living rooms and kitchens of shared living quarters.

Höhn maintains, however, that cordiality foundered on gender and racial issues to such a degree that in October 1952 the German Bundestag declared that American occupation troops had turned large stretches of the Rhineland-Palatinate into a “moral disaster area.” As Höhn details in subsequent chapters, conservatives were dismayed by the dissolute forms of entertainment provided to GIs, but they were most outraged by the young women they termed “Amizonen,” “soldiers’ brides,” or “Veronikas” (for “Veronika Dankeschön,” a play on the U.S. campaign against VD) who flocked to the bases to enter into shorter or longer-term relationships with GIs. That conservative response, Höhn argues, is evidence for “a profound anxiety over single and independent women at a time of conservative efforts at gender stabilization” (p. 179). Clergy, social workers, and conservative politicians—incensed by the young women’s adoption of colorful American clothing and makeup, their preference for American over German men, their access to and delight in luxuries not available to other Germans, their enjoyment of their own sexuality, and their insistence on their right to live as
they pleased—decried young women’s descent from bourgeois respectability into something akin to prostitution. Some of the “Veronikas” were indeed professional or “amateur” prostitutes (a profession regulated but not illegal in Germany), but others were GIs’ German girlfriends or fiancées, who cohabited with their American boyfriends since American authorities prohibited marriage until four months before a GI was to return home. Locals in the Rhineland-Palatinate were far more tolerant of the “Veronikas,” arguing that not all women could be judged by the same standard and that the ready availability of sexual partners for GIs protected their own women from unwanted sexual advances. Over the course of the decade, locals increasingly relaxed their attitudes towards women’s sexuality outside of marriage, in part because they had seen their own daughters marry GIs and in part because they appreciated local women’s access to GI paychecks. But, as H=hn also notes, their changed sentiments also document a changed attitude towards authority: citizens of the new German democracy were no longer prepared to accept the church and state prerogative to regulate private sexuality.

On the other hand, H=hn also argues that by the mid-fifties gender anxieties in the Rhineland-Palatinate were supplanted by racial anxieties. In her view, Germans negotiated the general relaxation of sexual mores by vilifying interracial sexual relations. Though black GIs frequently reported that they encountered less racism in Germany than in the still-segregated United States, German hostility towards black-white liaisons, perhaps influenced by American racial attitudes, grew during the decade. U.S. MPs and German police alike considered any white German woman consorting with an African-American GI to be a prostitute, and German authorities imposed mostly harsh sentences on the women they prosecuted. H=hn shows that attention to the so-called “Negernwesen” (Negro nuisance) in the Rhineland-Palatinate received nationwide media overage, allowing both CDU and SPD to mobilize race as a political tool in the 1957 Bundestag elections. H=hn’s exploration of race relations in 1950s West Germany raises the intriguing possibility that German racial attitudes towards people of the African diaspora (another focus of recent scholarship) was to a significant extent informed by West Germans’ encounter with the racism of the American military. At the same time, complaints that Eastern Europe Jews ran the disreputable bars catering to black GIs, where prostitutes congregated, proved that anti-Semitism was still alive and well in the postwar Federal Republic.

H=hn’s study seems to show that after 1945, despite conservatives’ forceful condemnation of American materialism and its attendant social ills, ordinary Germans opted pragmatically for consumption and the American way of life. In the debate over how to understand the post-1945 transformation of German society, H=hn weighs in strongly on the side of “Americanization,” rather than a more generic “Westernization” or “modernization,” as making the greatest impact. By focusing on conservatives’ attempts to contain female sexuality, H=hn emphasizes that gender issues were of central importance to the creation of modern West German society after 1945, and her book provides evidence substantiating Dagmar Herzog’s argument that conservatives considered sexual propriety an antidote to the moral disorder of National Socialism. She also suggests that the readjustment of racial attitudes accompanying the emergence of modern West Germany may have involved the production of new notions of German “whiteness” that later contributed to racist discourses on guest workers. One of the first studies to focus on post-1945 German-American relations at the local level, H=hn’s book insists that an examination of influences from without as well as from within Germany is necessary to comprehend German history fully. Now future scholars will need to pursue the provocative questions this book raises, investigating other areas of West Germany where Americans were not so evident to discover whether “Americanization” was so compelling there, further exploring the effect of U.S. and German policy initiatives on ordinary Germans’ daily lives, and continuing to argue that gender and race are categories essential for understanding the history of Germany and everywhere else.

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