

Peter Reichel. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2001. 253 S. EUR 13.90, broschiert, ISBN 978-3-406-45956-6.



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Critical discussion and debates about the Nazi past have become defining features of public discussion and historical consciousness in post-reunification German society. The cumulative impact of debates over the reparation of slave-laborers, the Goldhagen and Walser-Bubis discussions, the "Crimes of the *Wehrmacht*" exhibition, and the prolonged deliberations over the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" for Berlin, to name the most prominent, has been to center the Holocaust and war in public consciousness. While this may reflect a more critical and inclusive reckoning with the legacy of the Nazi past than took place in the divided Germany, it has also witnessed an increasing emphasis on the perceived necessity of "remembering" the events that Nazism engendered.[1] As survivors and witnesses fade from view, there are increasing efforts to preserve their memory vicariously for future generations. Peter Reichel shows in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute* that attempts to "come to terms" with the Nazi past were not focused initially around this goal, but rather the practical, political ways in which the

German successor states tried to deal with their genocidal and violent pasts. Reichel succeeds in displaying the degree to which questions concerning this inheritance were prominent in public and political discourse in the early post-war decades.

As his book's title implies, Reichel has set himself an ambitious task: to review the arguments and debates surrounding the Nazi legacy between the end of the war and the present. In examining this "second history" of National Socialism, Reichel focuses on the political and judicial aspects of confronting and integrating Germany's highly problematic past. Ranging across events such as denazification, the Nuremberg trials, reparations, the Auschwitz Trials, and the Bundestag debates on statutes of limitation for war crimes trial prosecutions, the book aims to provide a broad overview describing these processes and show how they represented the dominant manifestations of German attempts to "come to terms" with its recent past. The complex and often contradictory course of this second history does not lend itself easily to broad categorizations or to simple overarching arguments, and it would be unreasonable

to expect them in a work of this type. However, Reichel does provide some interpretation and analysis of the events and processes that are described in the text.

In the first chapter, Reichel provides some introductory comments on the differences between how the past was dealt with in East and West Germany, and acknowledges the pressures imposed by the Cold War. As is well known, the German Democratic Republic sought to emphasise its "anti-fascist" resistance and claimed that through re-ordering its society along socialist lines it had removed the conditions that allowed fascism to emerge. Indeed, the 1968 constitution declared proudly that "militarism and Nazism had been exterminated on its territory" (p. 15). Although providing a context for potential subsequent comparative discussion, the limitation of examination of how the past was dealt in East Germany largely to the first chapter means that the subsequent chapters focus very strongly on West Germany.

In discussing the problematic and abortive attempts at denazification (chapter 2), Reichel ably highlights the practical difficulties and political limitations in executing such a policy. Chapter 3 examines the Nuremberg trials and shows that the leading Nazis attempted to exculpate themselves through questioning the validity and impartiality of the Court, as well as arguing that they had merely been following orders (pp. 51-54). Where the Allies had difficulties in dispensing justice, the German legal system was subsequently caught between the ideals of justice and depth of social entrenchment of Nazi sympathy (chapters 5 and 8). Chapter 4 considers the payment of money as restitution and compensation (*Wiedergutmachung*), both directly to victims and to Israel, which implicitly acknowledged German responsibility but also attempted to rehabilitate West Germany. In Chapters 6 and 7, Reichel looks at the political problems of dealing with the continued presence of perpetrators and an embarrassingly persistent anti-Semitism. Chapter 8 focuses firmly

on German trials against perpetrators, which placed a reckoning with the Holocaust firmly on the public and media agendas.

Chapters 9 and 10 of the book bring the discussion into recent decades. Reichel argues that increasing media attention to the Holocaust and its filmic portrayal emotionalised the political discussions on extending the statute of limitations for war crimes and was a factor in their extension (pp. 194-198). Chapter 10 returns to the ways in which both successor states, East and West Germany, used Nazism as a negative point of orientation to the new post-war regimes. Coverage of the 1970s and 1980s, and the presence (or not) of the past in Germany in these decades receives rather less attention than the period from the war's end to the 1960s. For example, there is no discussion of Bitburg, the *Historikerstreit*, or Helmut Kohl's approach to the past. While this selection probably reflects the considerable scholarly attention that has been given to more recent debates about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, their exclusion attenuates the book's claim to examine the entire post-war period.

In reviewing the recent debates over memory, Reichel openly and probably correctly views the Holocaust as an event that has been "globalized" and made into an internationally recognizable symbol of the evils of modernity, against which recent crimes might be judged (p. 209).[2] Although the elevation of Auschwitz to a kind of moral arbiter may be welcomed, for this strategy to be effective, political discourse needs to move beyond vacuous moral condemnation and invocations of the past towards building effective social and political mechanisms and cooperation that might have a more likely chance of preventing genocides and crimes against humanity.

Although Reichel limits the frame of his discussion and investigation to the political and judicial spheres in his foreword, the strong concentration on these aspects does not quite match the promise of the book's title. To be sure, he does ac-

knowledge that there are three other main areas involved in dealing with the "second history" of Nazism, namely, public memory and memorial culture, aesthetic and artistic mediations of Nazism, and the objective representations of Nazism through historical and social sciences. Indeed, it is perhaps fruitful to consider the merit of the present work as an addition to his previous *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedaechtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit*, which deals with the aspects of memorial culture and representation in considerable detail. [3] The concentration on political, legal and memorial aspects of how (West) Germany has confronted its past is a broad trend in the ever-expanding but already oceanic literature on the subject, and Reichel should by no means be singled out for this. These approaches may help explain how Germany has "come to terms" at a national, official level, but they do tend to subsume or suffocate voices from outside the realms of official discourse. What did local communities and individuals do about their complicity or not in Nazism, and how did this change over time? How were the "lessons of the past" taught in education and disseminated in public media? And how did the social experience of the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust differ across Germany and over its eastern border? The posing of such questions should not be seen to take away from the importance of the public recognition of German responsibility and its use as a kind of negative cornerstone of identity. The point is that the official view can and should be enriched with deeper social-historical understanding.

Peter Reichel has produced a useful, concise survey of the most prominent debates about how Germany tried to come to terms with its genocidal and violent past, and shown that because of the very prominence of these debates, the early post-war era should not be categorised simply as one of forgetting. Nazism and its crimes, despite the sometimes inadequate sanctions against the perpetrators, clearly remained issues of considerable

public-political salience in the new Germany. "Coming to terms with the past" remains one of the most controversial and pregnant concepts in the historiography of modern Germany. Reichel's broadly targeted contribution to the history of *Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung* is therefore welcome, giving concrete examples of how the past was confronted or avoided politically and legally, and suggests further the need for renewed attention to the changing meanings of this program over time.

Notes

[1]. Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Nazi Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). Niven argues that the Nazi past has been confronted more openly and inclusively since reunification.

[2]. See also D. Levy and N. Sznajder, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, no. 1 (2002), pp. 87-106.

[3]. Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedaechtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999).

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