

Sabine Moller. *Vielfache Vergangenheit: Öffentliche Erinnerungskulturen und Familienerinnerungen an die NS-Zeit in Ostdeutschland*. Tübingen: edition diskord, 2003. 239 S. EUR 15.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89295-735-5.

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East German Discourses on the National Socialist Past

Sabine Moller's study of East German memories of the National Socialist past originated as part of the research project "Tradierung von Geschichtsbewusstsein" conducted at the Psychologisches Institut of the Universität Hannover under the supervision of Harald Welzer from 1997 to 2000.[1] For this study, thirty families from the old German states and ten families from the new German states were interviewed about their understanding of National Socialism, the Holocaust and the war. Each family consisted of the "contemporary witness" generation, their children and their grandchildren (p. 106). The study maintains that an individual's historical consciousness is shaped by two distinct memory cultures: the official "lexicon" that emphasizes the criminal character of the National Socialist system and the "family album" that stresses the suffering of an individual's own family members under the regime as well as their courage and virtue. The study argues that both East and West German family members shared the challenge of reconciling the conflicting content of these two memory cultures (pp. 15-16).

However, significant structural differences existed in the relationship between "lexicon" and "family album" in the two German states. In comparison to West Germany, where dissenting views could be articulated both publicly and legally, in East Germany official state antifascism dominated the public discourse about the National Socialist past and despite some notable exceptions in the field of literature, dissenting views were largely confined to the private sphere. Thus, in the "family album," stories of plundering and rape by the Red Army existed for

which there was no corresponding entry in the official "lexicon." Furthermore, the study found that ten years after the collapse of the GDR, the historical consciousness of East and West Germans continues to be shaped by different events. East Germans associate the "uniqueness" of German history with the division of Germany, the fall of the Wall and reunification, whereas West Germans cite National Socialism, the Holocaust or World War II (pp. 16-18). This discrepancy between the roles assigned to the National Socialist past by East and West Germans is the focal point of Moller's study.

In her study, Moller provides a sophisticated analysis of why East Germans continue to place less emphasis on the National Socialist past than their West German counterparts. She asserts that East Germans' lesser engagement with National Socialism, the Holocaust and the war cannot be understood simply as the product of years of indoctrination in official state antifascism or dismissed as a failed attempt to come to terms with the past (p. 204). Through a detailed examination of the interviews of three generations of East Germans, Moller demonstrates that East Germans' understanding of the National Socialist past, like that of their West German counterparts, has evolved over time. As the legitimacy of the communist government increasingly came into question, East Germans grew more skeptical of the official representation of the past. Consequently, East Germans began relying more on other sources, such as family, church and Western media, for information about National Socialism. For example, the generation of East Germans born

in the 1960s often referenced church youth groups as providing them with a safe forum to discuss the similarities between state socialism and National Socialism. East Germans born in the 1970s cited the alternative interpretive model for National Socialism offered by Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993) and Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) as playing a crucial role in filling in the "weiße Flecken" of mandated antifascism (pp. 183-185). Moller argues that increased skepticism about the official representation of National Socialism opened the way for an intense debate about different interpretations of National Socialism, rather than an increased interest in actual events that took place during the National Socialist regime. Thus, for East Germans, National Socialism became the starting point for understanding life in the GDR (p. 204).

With the collapse of the GDR, the official state representation of history became subject to a critical public reevaluation. Events that previously could only be discussed privately now could be debated publicly. Moller argues convincingly that this "return" to history prompted a renewed interest in private family memories. While official state antifascism had been discredited, the stories of the "contemporary witness generation" had remained constant (p. 176). Moreover, as more information became available about the Soviet special camps, mass graves and Stasi activities, the "contemporary witness generation" found itself in the unique position of being able to use GDR experiences to counter their children's and grandchildren's reproaches about their involvement with National Socialism. In fact, many East Germans of the postwar generations began to utilize their parents' and grandparents' claims to have known nothing about National Socialist crimes to explain their own ignorance of crimes committed by the DDR dictatorship (pp. 197-199). Thus, Moller concludes that in the former GDR since 1989, not only has the future been rethought, but also the past has been reinterpreted in multifaceted ways (p. 205).

The strength of Moller's study lays in its evalua-

tion of the similarities and differences between East and West German memories of the past and its historical contextualization of the interview material. In contrast to the original research project, Moller examines how family stories about National Socialism interact with other sources of information, such as school, church and media, to shape an individual's historical consciousness. As a result, Moller offers a more complex picture of the role played by National Socialism in the memories of East Germans that moves beyond the notion of a single East German memory culture and takes into account the impact of the political upheaval since 1989 on East German discourses about the National Socialist past.

The one issue that Moller does not explore is the discrepancy between the number of East (10) and West German (30) families that volunteered to participate in the original research project. What does this skewed ratio of participation say about the role assigned to National Socialism by East and West Germans? How might it be symptomatic of the unequal partnership that has existed between East and West Germany since unification in matters of education and scholarly representations of the recent past? How might the disproportionate representation of East and West German families impact the reliability of the main study's results? These questions are never addressed by the author. In addition, Moller offers no explanation of the criteria she used to select the three East German families whose interviews she discusses in detail in chapter 4 and on which her conclusions are largely based. Although these omissions represent potentially serious flaws in her study, Moller does provide valuable new insights into the complex relationship between the "lexicon" and "family album" that warrant further exploration.

Note

[1]. See Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and K. Tschuggnall, *"Opa war kein Nazi": Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002).

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