



Kimberly A. Redding. *Growing up in Hitler's Shadow: Remembering Youth in Post-war Berlin.* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004. xvi + 193 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97961-4.



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World History from the Bottom up

World history from the bottom up or *Alltags-geschichte* at the power center of Hitler's total war, in the crater of the collapsing phantasm of world empire, and at the flashpoint of superpower confrontation. There is surely no more central place for experiencing world history in the middle of the twentieth century in Europe or in the world than Berlin. So the question of how everyday people experienced this drama is bound to evoke curiosity. Prior to her dissertation, Redding first began asking such questions when, as an English teaching assistant, she helped shepherd the last young Berlin heirs of "the Age of Extremes," as Eric Hobsbawm named it (eschewing the term "totalitarian"), through their post-1989 years. How did not only average Berliners, but also the most innocent—the children—experience and cope with the most dramatic Berlin years of Nazism, defeat, occupation, and a totally different political, economic, and social order? Redding sought the answers primarily in interviews with thirty-one people born between 1926 and 1933, who experienced the critical years from Nazism to the Cold War largely in Berlin. Earlier interviews archived at the Heimatmuseum Charlottenburg and a few published reminiscences bolster the sample a bit.

The result is a good primary-source book that documents and illuminates the four periods of major political changes that this particular cohort lived through in their school and initial working years: the Nazi era; the 1945 "collapse" (*Zusammenbruch*); the hunger years; and the early Cold War split of the city. These periods are organized effectively in five chapters, with three "interludes" on deprived girls, juvenile delinquents, and East-West border crossers as transitions between the four postwar chapters.

Redding's major findings will not surprise experts, but will be useful to counter the all-too-common popular and textbook stereotypes of the immediate postwar period—in which brutal National Socialist Germany was dominated by the Holocaust, German society collapsed completely at the war's end, and a quick conversion to freedom and democracy came to the west, while dark oppression reigned in the east. The interviewees, like most non-political Germans who were not targets of racist or political persecution, perceived the Hitler years, until the last bitter year or so of defeat and saturation bombing, as happy, relatively prosperous years between the dis-

astrous and violent Great Depression and the unsettled postwar regime of ruins and desperate shortages. This sense of the golden years under Hitler especially dominates this cohort, and Redding rightly makes much of it and the contrast to the essential brutality of the regime.

Interestingly, several of the thirty-one interviewees had a strong memory of their last encounter with “the Nazis,” whom they all regarded as other, different people, but never themselves. Usually these were moments of fear, and “the Nazis” were not leaders, but radicalized Hitler Youth, SS, or lower-ranking officials. Redding also sees this moment as a turning point in the youths’ self-perception from “we” to “I,” although her subjects said very little of that sort. This certainly parallels National Socialist propaganda of *Volksgemeinschaft* and the positive memory of many who had enjoyed the comradeship of their Hitler-Youth activities. Yet one wonders whether Redding has over-interpreted here simply because a similar argument about the transition from the GDR was so much at the center of discussion among the post-1989 children she taught off Frankfurter Allee.

For the postwar years, the author echoes the broadly felt sense of insecurity, which blended fears of armed occupation soldiers; the desperate search for food, housing and lost family members; and marauding criminals, into a vague angst over the future. Here she rightly questions the myth of the *Trummerfrau* and the strong women who managed everything in the face of weak, “feminized” men—an interpretation popular among historians in the last couple of decades. Redding’s interviewees reported mothers who were physically and psychologically drained even more than the men returning from the war. And from the perspective of the young, the Russian soldiers appear not nearly as consistently brutal and rapacious, but in many cases particularly kind, especially to children. Still there is a sense of moral decline, especially vis-a-vis Americans, which, from a later perspective, seems illogical, if not outrageous, coming from Germans after Nazism. Yet a craving for American things and popular culture blended with this contempt for America, even among the young.

Most striking for Redding is the almost festive atmosphere right after the defeat, during the extraordinarily warm and beautiful summer of 1945 in the memories of her conversation partners. In fact, she muses whether they played so hard in those years of fear and shortages because they were suppressing guilt. It seems more likely that this imbalance is simply a natural one. Do we not all remember the high moments of fun and romantic conquests from our youth far more than the daily drudgery?

Are not most of the cherished photographs from those moments, even when play took place in the ruins from mass bombing (which made for challenging climbing and splendid hide-outs), with the “ghosts” of the former inhabitants still in evidence from bits of wall paper and furniture?

Not surprisingly, the years of recovery did not yield terribly interesting stories. They confirm the rapid surge of consumption and the particular popularity of American products. In Berlin these years blended with the crossings between the two rapidly diverging worlds between East and West Berlin, which were still parts of one wide-open city. Redding’s young people chose living quarters on both sides, and moved back and forth for private reasons only rarely related to the great divide between Western freedom and Stalinist oppression. The famous flight of Humboldt University students and faculty from East Berlin to found the Free University in West Berlin only barely surfaced in a couple of interviews. The “world youth festivals,” conducted by the communists in the Eastern sector of the city, left a far greater impression with this group, as did the activities of the communist Free German Youth (FDJ) in rivalry with Scouts and other uniformed youth groups in the west.

There is a good deal of interesting material in these stories. Small as the sample is, they suggest valuable new perspectives and at least provoke questions of standard and recent accounts of Nazi, postwar, and Cold War Berlin and Germany. But it is also a rather awkward book. The narrative does not flow well between the numerous long quotes from the interviews and the author’s sometimes simplistic interpretations, general historical background, and rather forced, jargon-ridden comments about methodologies of social history. Even though, for instance, she lectures the reader that “the constructive power of memory became particularly apparent when cohort members recalled” (p. 78), she seems unaware of the rich literature on the patterns and pitfalls of people’s long-term memories. The thirty-one interviewees, supplemented somewhat with the Heimatmuseum collection, quickly become “the 1926-1933 cohort of Berliners.” Masterworks that would have been useful models for crafting a captivating narrative from these interesting sources, like Peter Fritzsche’s *Reading Berlin 1900* (1996) or Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *In a Cold Crater* (1998, which deals with the cultural context of part of the same years in Berlin) are curiously missing from the bibliography, as are Hanna Schissler’s *The Miracle Years* (2001) and Maria Hoehn’s *GIs and Fruleins* (2002), which provides a significant issue in the memory of several of Redding’s women.

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