H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wolfgang Bergem. *Die NS-Diktatur im deutschen Erinnerungsdiskurs.* Opladen: Leske + Budrich Verlag, 2003. 243 S. EUR 16.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-8100-3706-0.

Reviewed by K. Hannah Holtschneider (University of Edinburgh)

Published on H-German (September, 2005)

This collection of essays is both infuriating and rewarding. Infuriating, because it repeatedly narrates discussions about the memory of the Nazi past which have been written about at length and which could be dealt with in a much more succinct way. Such repetition stands in the way of the occasional scholarly gems which reward the reader's time and effort.

The majority of the contributions to this volume were presented at a 2002 conference entitled "Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust als negative Sinngeber der Berliner Republik." Despite its occasional repetitiveness, the research gathered here makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debates on the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust. The contributors range across the academic hierarchy, from relatively junior scholars to a number who are already well established.

The central thesis uniting the otherwise diverse contributions is the unsurprising suggestion that political and social discourses in Germany remain occupied by the memory of the Nazi past. Thus, Reinhard Wesel develops the concept of "ritual" and applies this to rhetoric characteristic of current political discussion on the memory of National Socialism. Analyzing biographical-narrative interviews, Birgit Schwelling sketches the processes through which Germans related to the newly constituted democratic FRG and concludes that democracy was not embraced in a process of "collective conversion" or a "working through" of their relationship with National Socialism, but rather through conformity and assimilation to the new political system. Both contributions revisit familiar territory and analyze it from a different perspective.

Horst-Alfred Heinrich investigates the connections between national identity and collective historical memory, drawing on empirical evidence for representative samples of the population. He sets out to test several hypotheses about the links between historical memory and national identity that derive from research based on individuals or which are simply asserted in the scholarly literature about collective memory. Thus Heinrich provides an interesting critique of Habermas's *Verfassungspatriotismus*. Heinrich distinguishes between forms of nationalist and patriotic identifications with "Germany" as a nation, though some discussion of the difficulties involved in defining a nation would have been a helpful addition.

The next contribution, by Bergem, also tackles the connection between historical memory and national identity. In contrast to Heinrich's analysis, Bergem discusses the development of the discourse of remembrance of the Nazi past in public debates from the 1990s onwards. This reader longed for some reference to the previous article, and for some engagement on the part of both au-

thors with each other's findings and research methods, which might also have demonstrated their original contributions to the wider debate on historical memory and identity.

Darius Zifonun's innovative interpretation of the museum "Topography of Terror" charts the "discourse of guilt" and its relation to German identity. He argues that, in contrast to earlier postwar decades, the 1980s have brought about a change in the discourse of memory: previously a positive identity in the present was formulated in sharp contrast to the Nazi past, leading to an eclipse of the past in favor of the present. However, since the 1980s, the present has become the focus of the discourse of memory: by trying to connect the present symbolically with the past, remembrance of the Nazi past is established as part of present identity (p. 118).

Erik Meyer investigates the political decision making processes involved in the establishment of memorials to Nazi crimes in Germany. His analysis of political debates is complemented by observations about the involvement of civil society in these processes. Dovetailing with Meyer's article, Julia KÃ¶lsch analyzes the discourse of memory, and concludes that the instrumentalization of memory–the politics of history–has become a recognized part of the political process of establishing cultural institutions of national memory. Both contributions revisit well-covered ground with respect to memory discourse in Germany. Wolfgang Bialas widens the discussion, though hardly covering new ground, by including East German interpretations of anti-fascism in his analysis. He explains the foundational character of the anti-fascist discourse in the GDR and demonstrates the dangers of uncritical comparisons between the Nazi dictatorship and the GDR regime.

The final four essays bring the German debates into the context of international politics. Michael Schwab-Trapp examines the references to the Second World War in political debates about German military involvement in the Balkans. He concludes that there has been a shift in the foundational narrative of the FRG regarding World War II and the Nazi regime. While previously the legacy of Nazism had been used to justify German non-involvement in military operations, since the recent Balkan wars the same historical legacy has been drawn on to legitimate active German military contributions in the area by tapping into the discourse of "normalization" and casting the united Germany as a "grown up" nation state. Volker Heins's essay on discussion of foreign policy following September 11 moves in a different direction, postulating that the legacy of Nazism did not play a role in the debates over whether or not U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan should be supported. Heins speculates that in debates about active German military involvement in the future, references to the Nazi legacy will continue to be absent. Since the previous essay appears to argue the opposite, it would have been helpful to include some discussion between these two contributions.

Next, Harald Mey offers an interesting analysis of developments in post-war German communitarianism against the background of the legacy of Nazism and contrasts this with its more fruitful developments in the Anglo-Saxon world. Finally, Lothar Probst closes the collection with critical observations about the problematic development of a Europeanization of Holocaust remembrance. He contrasts German public Holocaust commemoration with the British Holocaust Memorial Day, first observed on January 27, 2001, suggesting that the British model has a universalizing message which would be inappropriate in Germany. However, Probst seems unaware of the controversies surrounding the establishment of such a (universalizing) national Holocaust Memorial Day in the United Kingdom. The effort to commemorate and oppose all genocide and persecution brought the exclusion of certain victim groups from the ceremony in 2001 into sharp relief. This universalizing tendency also makes it more difficult to discuss the relationship of Britain to genocidal events such as the Holocaust in ways that acknowledge the ambiguity of British foreign policy in the twentieth century.

In sum, the scope for debate between "cutting edge" scholars that the book initially promises is missing from this volume. While the collection is interdisciplinary, including contributions from political scientists, sociologists and scholars of cultural studies, it misses the chance to explore the links between the different subject areas. However, on the whole this is a well-organized and well-edited volume. It clearly addresses a scholarly audience, though it is also useful for graduate students, since many essays sketch basic background before getting to the heart of their argument. While at times annoying for the scholar, the repetition between essays will be helpful for students.

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: K. Hannah Holtschneider. Review of Bergem, Wolfgang, *Die NS-Diktatur im deutschen Erinnerungsdiskurs*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11128