



Norbert Frei. *1945 und wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2005. 224 S. EUR 19.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-406-52954-2.



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History as Critical Memory

The publication under review makes available in monograph form eight previously published essays and two original contributions by one of the leading scholars of contemporary German history working in the German language today. Ever since the publication of his groundbreaking study of *Vergangenheitspolitik* in 1996, Norbert Frei has been at the cutting edge of a wider historiographical trend that focuses on the legacies rather than the origins of National Socialism.[1] Unlike some scholars, however, Frei has consistently eschewed the temptation to separate the exploration of postwar representations of Nazism from the study of the Third Reich itself—that is, to explain “memory” without reference to “experience.”

In an essay not reproduced here, Frei has attributed to academic scholarship the role of “bearer of a critical memory.”[2] In view of this dictum, the present volume represents less of a retrospective than a powerful intervention in the current debate on the cultural representation of Nazism, war and genocide. With *1945 und wir*, Frei forcefully adds his voice to a number of scholars who view the recent self-victimizing turn in German political culture at the critical juncture of the “farewell to the era

of contemporaries” with considerable concern.[3]

This concern is most pronounced in the two original contributions to the collection, placed at the beginning and the end of the volume. In the opening piece, “Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit,” Frei brings to bear the insights derived from years of empirical research on an evaluation of current trends in German political culture. Despite the omnipresence of Hitler in the mass media, Frei argues, the critical confrontation with the Nazi past—a defining feature of the late Bonn republic—is in danger of being swept away by a tide of retrospective empathy, not with the victims of Nazism but with Germans as victims of war and expulsion. This turn from critical distance towards indiscriminate identification is epitomized by the “hypostatization” of the eyewitness, whose recollections are no longer subjected to critical scrutiny but treated as “authentic” visualizations of the past (p. 10f). According to Frei, the self-victimizing tendencies in the political culture of the Berlin republic threaten to undo the critical advances of the 1960s to 1990s, representing a revival of narratives that dominated the 1950s.

If the introductory essay sounds a deliberately

alarmist warning cry against the media obsession with the Allied bombing war and the expulsion of the Germans from the East, then the concluding piece serves as a reminder for the real reasons of the centrality of Nazism in postwar German, and indeed, European memory. In addition, "Auschwitz und die Deutschen" demonstrates the contribution that empirical research can make to a critical memory of Nazism. Drawing on recent work by Sybille Steinbacher on the Nazi "model town" of Auschwitz, Frei illustrates the "conceptual, spatial and temporal unity" between genocidal practices on the one hand and "racial reconstruction" on the other (p. 174). In pointing out that the town was annexed to the Reich province of Silesia by the end of October 1939, he debunks a popular postwar myth that located the mass killings at some faraway place in an unspecified "East." During the war no less than in the postwar world, Frei argues, the question of how much one could know about genocide was above all a question of "wanting to know" (p. 176).

Although the essays in this collection were produced over a period of ten years, they complement each other well, revolving around themes and approaches that Frei considers central to an understanding of the legacy of Nazism in (Western) Germany: the idea of a racial community; the analytical concept of "generation"; and, as productive fields of enquiry, the history of judicial prosecution and historical scholarship.

Frei's thinking on the post-history of Nazism is informed by an understanding of the Third Reich that emphasizes the strong consensual spheres between the regime and the German people. In the essay "Volksgemeinschaft: Erfahrungsgeschichte und Lebenswirklichkeit der Hitlerzeit," he turns against an older historiographical tradition that dismisses the broad allure of the idea of a racial community as a propaganda myth. Frei readily concedes that the Nazi leadership embraced the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* as a means to the end of racial-imperialist aggression, but stresses its very real impact on the social consciousness of the population, arguing for a "process of Fascisization" of German society between 1933 and 1943 (p. 113). While such a view of the Third Reich as a "consensus dictatorship" is now widely accepted, some concerns have been raised recently that the "voluntarist turn" might have gone too far, perhaps overestimating the individual scope of action in a dictatorship that was built on coercion just as much as on consent.[4]

Frei's own work on postwar Germany demonstrates

the potential pitfalls of an overemphasis on the consensual spheres of Nazi rule. In the essay "Von deutscher Erfindungskraft," he explains the near-universal rejection of the charge of "collective guilt" in the early Federal Republic as an involuntary admission of the complicity of broad sections of the population in the Nazi project of a racial utopia. To Frei, a "slightly secularized *Volksgemeinschaft*" reacted violently to an accusation born of its own imagination (p. 155). Yet, as recent research has demonstrated, the accusation was not wholly imaginary but was discussed among British publicists and decision-makers during the war and found expression in a postwar directive of June 1945.[5] Moreover, the polemical point runs the danger of drawing too simplistic a picture of a fragmented postwar society that pitted the haves against the have-nots, the indigenous population against the refugees and supporters and fellow travelers of Nazism against their (German) victims.

To great heuristic benefit, Frei employs the concept of "generation" in order to explore continuities and ruptures in the confrontation with Nazism. In "NS Vergangenheit und Generationsfolge seit 1945," he offers a compelling argument that links distinct periods in the politics of memory with the succession of several generations. Drawing on his seminal monograph of 1996, he argues that the 1950s witnessed a series of administrative, legislative and journalistic initiatives that reversed the results of Allied denazification, re-integrating the perpetrators and bystanders into the Federal Republic while marginalizing the victims of Nazism. This revisionist "politics of the past" was supported by the "war youth generation" born around 1905, from which the functional elites of the Third Reich had been recruited.

By the late 1950s, the very success of *Vergangenheitspolitik* produced a critical backlash that was carried by members of the "skeptical" generation born around 1925. The *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of 1958 to 1979 was characterized by judicial confrontation with the Nazi past on the one hand and historiographical exploration of "origins" and "structures" on the other. By the end of the 1970s, "mastering the past" gave way to "memory," as evidenced in the twelve-year commemorative cycle of 1983 to 1995. Commemoration was accompanied by an "empirical turn" in Holocaust research, which was driven by the children and grandchildren of the war generation—not least of all scholars like Frei himself (born in 1955).

In a number of essays, Frei probes further the issues of evasion and confrontation in the areas of judicial prosecution and historical scholarship. With re-

gard to both, he argues for contextualization, contending that the achievements and limitations of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can only be assessed if one bears in mind the strong currents of defensive apologetics among broad sections of the population at large. "With the International Military Tribunal the rule of law returned to Germany; but one may hardly say that it was welcome there," Frei writes in characteristic fashion in "Die Rückkehr des Rechts" (p. 69). Here, he makes a persuasive case for putting the judicial confrontation with Nazi crimes at the center of any study of the legacy of the Third Reich, both as an important issue in its own right and as a marker and catalyst for turning points in the wider memory culture.

Frei emphasizes the decisive contribution of the Western allies—and in particular, the Americans—to the gradual emergence of a self-confrontational political culture, reminding his readers in "Farewell to the Era of Contemporaries" that the institutionalization of critical history in postwar Germany was born out of an "intellectual demand for reparation by the Allies" (p. 45). In another piece, he argues that the neglect of the Holocaust in early postwar historiography is best explained with the self-perception of the discipline as "scholarship for democracy" (p. 87). In so doing, Frei puts forward an alternative explanation to Nicolas Berg's controversial thesis of a "bystander narrative" that is worthy of further exploration.[6]

1945 und wir offers a thought-provoking and stimulating analysis of the presence of the Nazi past in postwar Germany by one of the most influential scholars working in the field today. This collection of essays will be recommended reading for specialists and the interested public

alike.

Notes

[1]. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996).

[2]. Norbert Frei, "Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei (Munich: Beck, 2002), pp. 389-397, here p. 394.

[3]. Compare, for example, Micha Brumlik, *Wer Sturm sät. Die Vertreibung der Deutschen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2005). On the context see the special issue "Germans as Victims during the Second World War," *Central European History* 38/1 (2005).

[4]. Neil Gregor, "Nazism—A Political Religion? Rethinking the Voluntarist Turn," in *Nazism, War and Genocide*, ed. Neil Gregor (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), pp. 1-21.

[5]. Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit -Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1999), pp. 112-139; Jan Friedmann and Jörg Später, "Britische und deutsche Kollektivschuld-Debatte," in *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland. Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung 1945-1980*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), pp. 53-90.

[6]. Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

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