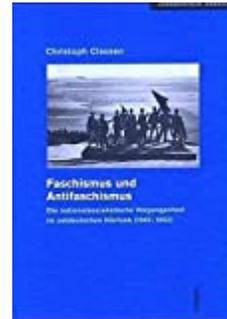


**Christoph Classen.** *Faschismus und Antifaschismus: Die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit im ostdeutschen Hörfunk (1945-1953)*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2004. 384 S. EUR 44.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-15403-5.



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## The Nazi Past in Early East German Radio: Scarce Resource or Inflated Currency?

Christoph Classen's book belongs to a new generation of historiography on radio in Germany that does not seek primarily to explain the history of the radio, but rather responds to the repeated calls made in recent years to explore how the radio made history in Germany. As a point of departure, it looks at the myth of "antifascism" as a central part of the *Selbstdarstellung* and self-legitimation of the SED and the GDR, and seeks to explore through the radio programs the uses and limitations of such myths in the early years after the war. The radio was at once an important location for collective identity formation and collective remembering, and at the same time a key instrument of Soviet and later SED domination. The radio was the most popular and most widespread mass medium almost everywhere in Germany following the war; in the Soviet Zone it was under the direct control of the group of exiles surrounding Walter Ulbricht (at first even without Soviet censorship). At the same time, it was the medium with the greatest potential to travel beyond the boundaries of the occupation zones. Drawing on the sometimes scant manuscript and sound documentation from Radio Berlin (most of which is preserved in the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (DRA) in

Potsdam), as well as internal documents of various SED bodies, Classen provides a detailed analysis of the themes and discursive frameworks for discussion within the programs as well as the conditions of program production. With its thorough understanding of radio program history, institutional history and its focus on myth and memory formation in the GDR, the book will be of interest to a wide range of scholars interested in GDR history and on the immediate post-war period.

After a theoretical chapter in which Classen lays out an interdisciplinary approach to his subject (which draws on the notion of symbolic politics, Jan Assmann's notions of communicative and cultural memory and Foucauldian discourse theory), the study proceeds to outline, chapter by chapter, the institutional and social framework in which the communist myth of antifascism was produced and negotiated. This section of the study includes a chapter exploring the notion of antifascism current before the Nazi takeover and the period of illegality, and then traces developments through 1953, the time of the June uprisings and the reconstitution of broadcasting in the GDR. One of the book's great strengths is that it does not take

the myth of antifascism as static and unchanging, but rather remains alert throughout to its transformations throughout differing circumstances.

The main body of the argument is laid out in two chapters, devoted to 1945-47 and 1948-53, respectively. This division is due to a marked shift Classen identifies in the portrayal of the past, which began with the deterioration of public East-West relations in 1947, and reached its height in 1948/49 as the SED sought to establish its dominance over all state institutions, including the radio. This transformation was the result not only of institutional changes and the ongoing purges typical of late Stalinism everywhere, but also of a shift in emphasis from the priorities of the Soviet occupiers to the legitimization of the SED. The first phase was marked by an attempt to create a "controlled plurality" of voices in the airwaves aimed not least at making Soviet occupation seem acceptable, or at least inevitable, to as broad an audience as possible. A variety of different voices and memory discourses came to the microphone to discuss the National Socialist past, including representatives of bourgeois groups and even commanders of the Soviet army in order to create the image of a widespread "antifascist consensus" that would allow most Germans to view themselves as victims rather than as perpetrators of National Socialism. It is particularly interesting in this regard that the desire of the Soviet occupiers and the exile KPD to appear not to be in control of the radio meant that KPD members who spoke of their experiences of resistance and repression were not allowed to portray them as part of communist resistance. Following such a course, while providing the appearance of plurality and a more widely diffused myth of widespread German resistance against a "bestial" minority of National Socialists, actually ran counter to the later attempt to establish the myth of communist antifascism.

Classen shows how, after 1948, the intensifying Cold War and the desire to legitimate the SED government led to a re-centering of memory discourses around communist resistance (and eventually around the murdered KPD leader, Ernst Thälmann). As it had been before the war, fascism became increasingly associated with capitalism, and thus marginalized a large number of experiences and actions previously associated with the Nazi regime. Whereas initially the planners of the July 20, 1944 assassination plot were portrayed as heroes of the resistance, for example, after 1948 they were cast as members of the misguided and reactionary right (pp. 253-254). While memories of resistance that did not fit into the growing antifascist myth were increasingly marginalized, references

to the National Socialist past became increasingly scarce in the program and were produced, as Classen demonstrates, mostly in relation to events in the present. This limited version of the past had to be inflated to cover over a variety of different pasts. Indeed, Classen shows how the past was increasingly "deconcretized," with commentators mobilizing it as an empty signifier of an "other" repressive period that could be easily remapped onto events in the West. Classen cites in particular a commentary by Herbert Gessner in which the terror of Allied bombing was invoked, complete with a sound clip of sirens and falling bombs, in connection with the Berlin airlift (p. 239).

In the final section, Classen attempts to draw some conclusions about the reception of the various forms. In the absence of useful audience research from the period, Classen looks to studies of memory formation in Germany, as well as some studies on opinions in the West, to help draw tentative conclusions about what the reception of such programs might have been. It will come as very little surprise (particularly to those familiar with radio audiences of the period) that programs of propaganda and political commentary, particularly during prime time, did not sit well with an audience that mostly desired light music and local programming of different varieties. Here Classen's analysis of the reception of the programs as a generational question appears particularly insightful in showing how programs that had little appeal to a broad range of the population nevertheless did offer opportunities for identity formation, particularly among the "Hitler Youth" generation (pp. 302-308).

For its many strengths, the book is not without weaknesses. If anything, the study errs on the side of being too thorough. The theoretical ideas and assumptions presented in the first part of the study are well developed, and the first chapter can be seen as an interesting methodological/theoretical essay in its own right. But this basis does not always add a great deal of value to the actual analysis of the rich program material in the program chapters. Similarly, the in-depth discussion of the various institutional shuffles, particularly in chapter 4, sometimes overshadows the book's main objective of examining the various levels at which myths and memories of fascism and antifascism were established following the war. While occasionally bringing too much detail to bear in the analysis of the programs and their production, the study also comes up somewhat short on some external contexts of those programs. While it makes some brief references to trends in newspapers, for example, the book might have made more of this comparison. The same

may be said of film, especially considering some of the connections between some of the radio station personnel and the DEFA. Finally, with the exception of Petra Galle's recent comparative study of RIAS and the (Soviet-controlled) Radio Berlin, programs from the West are largely absent in the study. It is particularly surprising in this regard that neither Christof Schneider's study exploring the Nazi past in radio programs from the British controlled NWDR, nor Edgar Lersch's more recent overall review of the topic, is mentioned at all [1]. While the study at hand is primarily concerned with memory formation in the East, such information would still seem relevant, given that increasing numbers of listeners in the East were also tuning in to such stations in the West, es-

pecially the NWDR, as Classen notes (pp. 273-278). Such weaknesses in the book do not greatly detract from the wealth of original research and insightful analysis it contains, however, and overall it represents a valuable addition to our understanding of the role of the radio in constructing history and memory in Germany.

#### Note

[1]. Christof Schneider, *Nationalsozialismus als Thema im Programm des Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunks (1945-1948)* (Potsdam: Verlag f¼r Berlin-Brandenburg, 1999); Edgar Lersch, "Die Thematisierung des Nationalsozialismus im Rundfunk der Nachkriegszeit," *Rundfunk und Geschichte* 29 (2003): pp. 5-19.

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