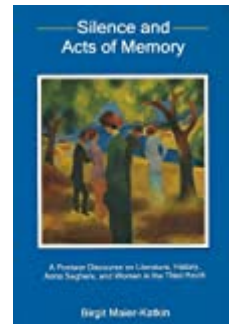




Birgit Maier-Katkin. *Silence and Acts of Memory: A Postwar Discourse on Literature, History, Anna Seghers, and Women in the Third Reich.* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007. 214 pp. \$47.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8387-5664-5.



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Anna Seghers for the Twenty-First Century

Maier-Katkin's title piques the reader's interest by invoking some of the most frequently discussed issues among scholars and critics interested in the legacies of the Third Reich from a literary as well as a historical perspective. Yet it also points to the problems with this slim volume: the topics enumerated here remain just that, a list of elements rather than an integrated analysis of the changing attitudes toward the Third Reich and its memory from the immediate postwar period to united Germany. The book's overall assumption is that literary texts can be read as documents that add to our understanding of a particular period and the mindset that guided people's thoughts and actions. More specifically, Maier-Katkin proposes re-readings of two exile works by Anna Seghers as contributions to the continuing interest in questions of memory and history. In the end, however, this study falls short of achieving this goal and does not yield new insights into the writing of Seghers in the context of contemporary memory culture.

The texts in question are Seghers's 1942 novel *The Seventh Cross* (*Das Siebte Kreuz*) and her 1946 short prose piece, *The Excursion of the Dead Girls* (*Der Ausflug der*

toten Mädchen), both of which were written in Mexico. The discussion of these works, which appears in the book's fifth and final chapter, is preceded by various reflections on the silencing of memory of the Third Reich, in particular the Holocaust, in the 1950s and 1960s. While Maier-Katkin offers a competent overview of this and other phenomena she discusses, such as the roles of women during the Nazi period, these passages, which make up a substantial percentage of her study, raised some methodological questions for me. How do we make existing scholarship from related yet different disciplines relevant for our own arguments? And, perhaps even more importantly, how do we account for specific historical contexts while at the same time making a particular body of texts relevant to current discussions? The story of postwar silence has been told repeatedly, and, moreover, the assumption of a blanket refusal to address questions of guilt and responsibility has been challenged. Also, the discussion focuses almost exclusively on the West German case, with the argument that East Germans did not engage in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* until after 1989 (p. 66). Conceptual gaps remain between the elements of this account, between the West German project

of coming to terms with the past and texts written in exile by an author who choose to return to East Germany, that this study does not address. If the overall argument is that Seghers's two exile texts can make an important contribution to contemporary memory politics, I would have expected a more nuanced assessment of the present-day debate beyond the certainly correct argument that Germany is trying to create an "acceptable social memory frame" (p. 150). With unification, generational shift, and, perhaps "normalization," German attitudes and approaches to memory culture are indeed undergoing change, and a discussion of this process would have been useful in particular with reference to Seghers's fairly well-known texts. The neglect of the exile context and the somewhat superficial references to the contemporary period make this study, which, after all, engages with a historical topic, strangely a-historical.

The discussion of Seghers's texts is organized around the individual female characters that appear in them, making it somewhat difficult to conjure up an impression of the works as literary texts. Brief plot summaries

would have been helpful here. Of importance is the mundane nature, if not triviality, of the women's motivations, and, more often than not, indifference toward the fate of others. Maier-Katkin's interpretation bears out what we know about women's (or people's) range of roles and choices during the Third Reich and I would have wished for some analysis of that "excess" that literature offers us beyond history or sociology. Maier-Katkin wants to underscore the "significance of [Seghers's] literature to social discourse" (p. 143) and she hopes that future researcher will pursue her line of questioning. I completely agree with her on the importance of Anna Seghers today, but I am afraid the present volume does not make that case.

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