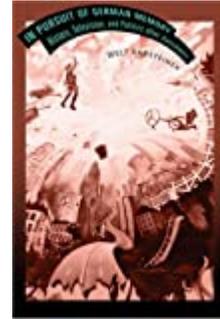




**Wulf Kansteiner.** *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. 438 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1638-9.



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## History in Hot Pursuit

It has long since gone out of fashion to judge a book of history by its ability to predict future developments. Although Wulf Kansteiner's book was published before Günter Grass's revelation of his brief membership in the SS, readers would have been well-equipped to guess which actors would be engaged in the ensuing flap, which rhetorical repertoires would be mobilized, and what (little) would eventually come of it. Although this ability to predict the terms of the debate it is not the book's finest achievement, it does constitute one indication of its value.

The book's title speaks to the multiple and ambitious tasks it takes on: not only has Kansteiner set out to pursue "a social geography of German memory" (p. 316), he also shows the many ways in which a number of cultural elites in Germany themselves have pursued the often elusive quarry of usable memory. He begins by observing the two main streams in German memory culture: one deals with the past in order to put it in the past, and the other has insisted on remembering Nazi and German crimes and transforming acts of individuals into "collec-

tive symbolic guilt" that helps define a number of social positions in the Federal Republic, as well as its position in the wider world. Rather than viewing these positions as mutually exclusive, Kansteiner sees them as perpetually interacting, and sets out to explore what these interactions have meant for the shaping of the Republic itself. He points out usefully that collective symbolic guilt "could *only* be addressed in terms of symbolic politics and cultural memory work" (p. 4) and goes on to show how these cultural processes have shaped a number of arenas. Indeed, whilst mapping the various collective memory cultures in the Federal Republic, he also shows how Nazism and the Holocaust functioned as effective political tools in a range of contexts.

In many ways, this book covers familiar ground, both in terms of scholarship more generally, and Kansteiner's own work. With regard to the former, Kansteiner takes on a number of familiar topics and controversies, notably the *Historikerstreit*, and the number of political celebrations and scandals that have rocked the Federal Republic up until Jürgen Möllemann and Martin Hohmann

and the debates on Europeanization. With regard to the latter, the first eight of the book's twelve chapters contain material previously published roughly over the course of a decade. *In Pursuit of German Memory* aspires to be more than just a collection and summary of past scholarship, however. Instead, it attempts to place these various debates within a broad contextual framework. In this regard, Kansteiner has made an important contribution to the crowded and growing field of works that explore the way we look at the Federal Republic's quest to find a way of remembering the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders of the twentieth century's worst, and perhaps least comprehensible, crime. Following an introductory chapter that sets out the book's overall concerns, and a theoretical and methodological essay on the nature of collective memory, the book is divided into three parts, "history," "television," and "politics," exploring how memories of the National Socialist past and particularly the "Final Solution" were produced and debated in each arena. Each of these parts consists of three chapters, which, as can be expected from a collection of individual essays, stands more or less independently.

Though seldom laying them out explicitly, and certainly not all at once, Kansteiner develops over the course of the book a set of criteria by which attempts to address the Nazi past and mass murder should be judged. Such attempts should be inventive and engaging, so as to expand our understanding of the past; they should be empirical, so as not to lose sight of their object; they should be moral and recognize the suffering of victims and crimes of perpetrators. While most of us aspire to these ideals, Kansteiner mobilizes them here to provide densely contextualized accounts as well as fresh, well-balanced, and insightful discussions of topics such as Philip Jenninger's disastrous 1988 speech and Guido Knopp's television documentaries. This didactic register of the book, coupled with Kansteiner's readable, down-to-earth prose, would make many of these chapters well-suited for use in teaching at a number of levels.

The section on "history" is devoted to various internal debates among historians. Kansteiner's focus here is not to show how historians shaped German memories of the Holocaust. Instead, his insightful consideration of the generation dynamics of these various debates reveals how such generational divides have influenced debates. The notable and obvious center of this discussion of the *Historikerstreit*, which Kansteiner dismisses as an unproductive exercise: "It did not settle any methodological disputes nor help find new material or interpretative avenues for the study of National Socialism and the 'Final

Solution'" (p. 58). Furthermore, he argues, it was largely irrelevant beyond a specific and limited circle of historians and the members of the small, educated elite who followed it in the print media. Indeed, Kansteiner's examinations point to the very limited role historians actually play in setting the course of German collective memories. They have long since been trumped, he argues, by television.

In his discussion of television, not only does Kansteiner bring new and clear insights into familiar controversies and debates, he also opens up new venues for exploring the places and forms of German memory production. His discussion of television generally and his use of television viewer statistics is a case in point. Noting the enduring problems historians face in gaining access to television archives (which is shameful), Kansteiner probes the wealth of audience research conducted on behalf of the stations, which is widely available. While rightly acknowledging the limits of such data, he nevertheless draws insightful conclusions by looking at the ways in which television audiences used their "veto power" over some programs. Both in his general overview of television programs on the Holocaust as well as his detailed discussion of the work of Guido Knopp, Kansteiner looks at the (mostly unrealized) possibilities of television as a medium to allow viewers to engage with the identities of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. Yet Kansteiner also reminds us of television's propensity to generate "an uncanny resemblance between the passive viewers who were surprisingly willing to watch the Holocaust unfold onscreen and the actual bystanders of the Holocaust" (p. 125).

The section on politics offers a lucid chronological narrative that seems (like German politics itself) to reel between ambitious initiatives for mastering (and using) German memory and political scandals that erupt to either entrench or help overturn the paradigms of collective memory in various administrations. In this compelling account, Kansteiner shows how often, in spite of themselves, German politicians occasionally advanced the cause of memory, as they used it to enact various concrete political goals. This discussion weaves in insights offered in the previous chapters. Thus Kansteiner shows how Willy Brandt's famous *Kniefall* in Warsaw became a sort of (initially lambasted) sleeper hit of German memory culture. He writes: "In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, West Germans would come to embrace emotionally engaging, biographically concrete and visually entertaining formats for the representation of Nazism, which explains why Brandt's visit to Warsaw, or, more

accurately, the footage of that visit, has retroactively assumed the status of a founding moment of West Germany's celebrated, self-critical memory culture" (p. 239). Kansteiner compellingly describes the changing set of unwritten rules for dealing with Nazi-related political scandal in the Federal Republic, which could almost be turned into an etiquette book entitled "How to Praise the Nazis and Still Keep your Job."

For all of its strong points, the book does not always meet its author's ambitions. This is particularly the case in dealing with the broader population's engagement in the issues Kansteiner describes. In examining the Bitburg fiasco, the author notes that "the participants rarely noticed that the general population, for whose benefit these battles were allegedly fought, paid little attention to the intellectual fracas among the elite" (p. 258). It is the members of this general population who are the hardest

to locate in this book. Kansteiner frequently re-iterates his insistence that we must find ways to address the task of making the modes of reception of this broader populace more visible, but beyond the notable work on viewing statistics, their voices are not heard strongly here. For the most part, he refrains from ventriloquizing the audience needlessly, but the book leaves the reader hoping to hear a voice there nonetheless. On the other hand, Kansteiner's confident attributions of motives to his actors in the political debates he discusses are usually compelling, but not always convincing. But following his empirical bent, these should be held up to further research and scrutiny. On the whole, however, the book remains insistently open to new insights and ways of conceptualizing German collective memories, and this openness will allow the book to function as a solid landmark and useful resource for years to come.

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