

Mary Fulbrook. *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 528 S. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-928720-8.



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German Lives in a Violent Century

Mary Fulbrook has, in recent decades, been a beacon of scholarly achievement in modern German history, particularly but not exclusively in post-1945 East German history. Her numerous monographs and many articles have become a staple resource for those working in this field. Lately she has applied herself to the study of mass perceptions and attitudes as those relate to the larger political and institutional history of twentieth-century Germany. In the volume under review here, she has embarked on an ambitious, difficult, and often fascinating undertaking, one wherein she tackles a large and complex topic, involving provocative issues of historiography and social science explanations.

Fulbrook's goal is to provide an additional dimension to standard explanations of how the Germans—the cultivated population of an advanced country—could be available for mobilization in implementing policies that produced the genocide summed up under the label “Auschwitz.” Her thread through this labyrinth is to follow the response of individuals to crucial events of modern German history; these responses she organizes

into social collectives (“generations”) reacting to particular “transitions.” She writes, “We can only begin to comprehend the century that produced Auschwitz if we try to understand the ways in which individuals lived through these turbulent times” (p. 3). Perhaps conscious that this stance may be thought to imply a causal chain from ordinary Germans to the organized genocide of the Nazi regime, she adds that it is important to understand the functionaries who executed Adolf Hitler’s plans, but hastens to add that even they were shaped by the events of their time.

Fulbrook tracks the responses of such generations across a series of transitions, somewhat vaguely defined, but including such historical thresholds as these: the military culture of imperial Germany, pre-1918 colonial practice, the First World War and its aftermath, the Nazi era, the defeat of 1945, and for East Germans, both the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its collapse in 1989-1990. She is mostly concerned with “the significance of generations in the transitions into, through, and out of Nazism and Communism” as

well as “patterns of accommodation to dictatorial regimes of differing ideological colors, and the shifts across major moments of historical ruptures” (pp. 4-5). Such response patterns provide Fulbrook with the basis of what she calls “history from within.” She writes, “The concern of history from within is ... with the ‘social self’ over longer stretches of time and across major historical transitions ... [its] focus is collective” (p. 480).

To provide the evidence for her thesis, Fulbrook produced an impressive and fascinating body of sources. In amassing this data, Fulbrook has found an amazingly wide set of sources; they include letters and diaries, class yearbooks and reunion chronicles, political reporting from both within and outside Germany, memoirs, police reports, archives, correspondence, and much more. Anyone interested in modern German history will want to keep this book handy so as to dip into its storehouse of vivid detail and keen perception. At every point in this long work, one finds arresting insights, interesting observations, and usefully provocative assertions. This is a scholarly work with which one is glad to agree!

So let us argue and begin with definitions. Nowhere in the book is there a clear definition of what is a generation. Fulbrook pays special attention to those born about 1929, as well as those born soon after each world war. Left unclear is whether these cohorts are more important than others. While it is true that Germans lived under a series of very different regimes, and learned socialization under differing slogans, it is not clear what the political consequences were. Fulbrook does not show evidence of changes in political culture that would allow us to generalize beyond the (necessarily) spotty and often random evidence she assiduously gathered.

The transitions themselves are not defined nor ranked. The advent of the Nazi regime is clearly crucial; are later changes such as the escalation of violence in war and genocide equally central in shaping the responses of “history from within”? Fulbrook wavers as to whether such experiences have long-range historical consequences or not. Did “distant reverberations” of German colonial practice help produce later attitudes? Fulbrook cannot decide, perhaps because she does not clearly delineate what the link between her “history from within” and regime policy is. She argues that for those who experienced the transition of 1943-49, there was no *Stunde Null*—rather there was an effort to live through calamitous and totally changing times. But anyone (surely including the author herself) who has had candid conversations with Germans of that time will

know that for many there was indeed a *Stunde Null*).^[1] The lack of clarity as to the mechanisms involved here makes it difficult to see clearly what one has learned from this material. If “history from within” helps explain how individuals reacted to, and could be mobilized for, extreme violence, then it is difficult to understand Fulbrook’s discussion of the two postwar generations. Why did the reactions to German defeat in 1918 and 1945 depend largely on the political and social conditions that individuals did not create? It was “history from without” that made the difference. Here we may note a weakness in Fulbrook’s use of sources. Given the scope and intensity of her labors, it may be churlish to ask for more. Nonetheless, I missed an explication of her criteria for using some sources and not others. Were there not sources that suggested resistance to mobilization for genocide?

The weakest part of the book is that devoted to the GDR and its demise. (I should make clear here that I was deeply involved in GDR studies in this country.) I found this part of the book interesting, but it fit oddly into a book focused on mobilization that led to war and genocide. Aside from beating the tired horse of “totalitarianism” once more is it really plausible that claims of ignorance of regime acts by ordinary people were “rather more genuine” regarding the Stasi than the Holocaust? Fulbrook presents the usual argument that “[t]he Nazi and Communist dictatorships were very different from one another in character and aims, beyond some striking but ultimately rather superficial similarities” (p. 473), especially because unlike Nazi Germany, the GDR “did not actively wage war and spread terror abroad” (p. 475). The difference in ideology is certainly there, although I find it doubtful that East Germans whose lives and careers the regime ruined took much comfort in that; as for the GDR not lusting to conquer the world—how could it possibly have done so?

Fulbrook continually argues that the experience of living in the GDR was significantly different from that of living under Nazi rule. Of course on a banal level, that is true: Nazi Germany and the GDR differed in size, power, freedom to act, and many other ways. Not least among them was the fact that Nazi Germany, after the violent initial mobilization, experienced a very short time of dull peace before being plunged into an ever more violent war. But that does not mean that individual responses to regime pressure were intrinsically different. If (as she correctly asserts) many East Germans “sought ways of living and developing a more authentic sense of self than the restrictive corset of GDR structures seemed to allow” (pp. 485-487), such adjustments would undoubtedly have

developed had Nazi Germany lasted longer. For a sense of what the counterfactual experience of a “normal” Nazi Germany might have been like, consider the Robert Harris novel *Fatherland* (1992).

Finally, it seems to me that Fulbrook’s argument rests on the assumption that a particular set of experiences must have so impacted a significant portion of a generation (however that is defined) so as to produce a resulting behavior. So the experiences of the post-1918 age cohort must have predisposed a significant proportion of them to support the Nazi genocidal project. However, Fulbrook herself muddles this line of reasoning with qualifying wording. For example, she declares that “*Substantial* numbers [of *certain* age cohorts] ... were in fact eventually to prove *disproportionately* the most ardent carriers of the new Nazi institutions” and their experiences “*arguably* predisposed *some* active minorities among them to be *disproportionately* supportive of the Nazi regime” (p. 54, my italics.) Does this tell us anything more than that large numbers of Germans were ready in 1933 to support Hitler and his program? That the number of such facilitators surely grew as the regime established itself cannot be readily linked to formative experiences of the preceding decade, not when regime control of career paths made going along essential. In any case, Fulbrook makes it quite plain that explaining events is not her purpose in the book. In a statement she somewhat strangely

relegates to a footnote, she declares that “[i]t cannot be emphasized too strongly that here, as throughout the book, I am not seeking to explain the course of events; I am rather trying to understand the differential impact of key events and periods on people of different ages who lived through them” (p. 54). But where does this leave us? We already knew that a large number of Germans were susceptible to Hitler’s appeal in part because of their prior experiences, and we know that such diffuse support would not by itself have brought him to power: that was determined by a chain of path-dependent events. We can certainly learn from the rich trove of material Fulbrook provides how and perhaps why some people supported the Nazi regime; this material does not, however, tell us why others in these particular cohorts were not Nazi supporters, or indifferently passive in their response to the regime. “History from within” does help illuminate that which we already knew: that many Germans supported the regime—to its bitter end.

Note

[1]. Nicolaus Sombart, *Jugend in Berlin 1933-1943. Ein Bericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003). Seeing the destruction of 1945 led Sombart to abandon architecture as a career.

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