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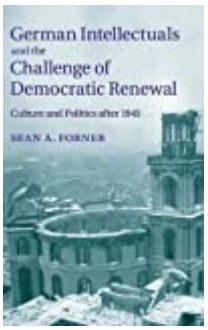

Sean A. Forner. *German Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democratic Renewal: Culture and Politics after 1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xii +383 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-04957-4.

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Envisioning Democracy: German Intellectuals and the Quest for Democratic Renewal in Postwar German

As historians of twentieth-century Germany continue to explore the causes and consequences of National Socialism, Sean Fornerâs book on a group of unlikely affiliates within the intellectual elite of postwar Germany offers a timely and original insight into the history of the prolonged âzero hour.â Tracing the connections and discussions amongst about two dozen opponents of Nazism, Forner explores the contours of a vibrant debate on the democratization, (self-) representation, and reeducation of Germans as envisioned by a handful of restless, self-perceived champions of the âother Germany.â He calls this loosely connected intellectual group a network of âengaged democrats,â a concept which aims to capture the broad âleftâ political spectrum they represented–from Catholic socialism to Leninist communism–as well as the relative openness and contingent nature of the intellectual exchange over the political ârenewalâ of Germany during a time when fixed âEastâ and âWestâ ideological fault lines were not quite yet in place.

Forner enriches the already burgeoning historiography on postwar German democratization and the role of intellectuals with a profoundly integrative analysis of Eastern and Western perspectives. He seeks to demonstrate that this specific group of (mostly) male journalists, publicists, academics, and writers addressed one of the key issues of the era–the problem of mass politics–from a rather âunlikelyâ place and perspective, namely defeated and occupied post-Nazi Germany. In the long run, he contends, they enriched not only divided Germanyâs rugged path towards democratization, but also formulated âa novel approach to the problematic of popular self-government in a mass ageâ to address a broader political challenge facing Europe in the wake of total war and totalitarianism (pp. 2-3). This ânovel approachâ challenged, irritated, and even transcended the ever-hardening Cold War dichotomies. Forner seeks to convey that we owe this insight to a historiographical vantage point that is not filtered by, or at least self-conscious of, the âCold War lensâ (p. 207).

The book graciously combines a specific interest in

intellectualsâ politics with a broader interest in the study of political cultures. Forner at no point exaggerates the influence his protagonists had on the development of the respective political systems and instead actually tells a depressing story of mostly failed initiatives. Yet he also identifies a wealth of medium- and long-term effects rendered by these initiatives. Therefore he has extended the bookâs focus from the immediate postwar years to the eras of revolt and revolution around 1968 and 1989, to which a substantive last chapter is dedicated. Yet, the greater part of his research has focused on the biographies and works of a diverse group of intellectuals whose main connection was a shared commitment to the legacies of âantifascismâ and a shared desire to contribute in theory and practice to the future outlook of âdemocraticâ politics, to be politically âengaged.â Using this broad common denominator, Forner pools together a group of idiosyncratic intellectuals who usually are not considered to have promoted compatible political agendas: Wolfgang Abendroth, Ernst Bloch, Walter Dirks, Axel Eggebrecht, Ferdinand Friedensburg, Wolfgang Harich, Werner Hilpert, Herbert Ihering, Karl Jaspers, Alfred Kantorowicz, Erich KÃ¤stner, Karl Heinrich Knappstein, Eugen Kogon, Rudolf Leonhard, Hans Mayer, Alexander Mitscherlich, Erik Reger, Peter Alfons Steiniger, Dolf Sternberger, Alfred Weber, and GÃ¼nther Weisenborn, to name the most prominently figured protagonists.

Around these men's more or less formal networks Forner identifies several ânodesâ of intense intellectual encounters across interzonal boundaries between 1945 and 1949, centered around Sternberger in Frankfurt/Main, Jaspers and Weber in Heidelberg, Eggebrecht in Hamburg, Kantorowicz and Harich in Berlin, and Mayer in Leipzig. These intellectuals shared a more or less persistent antifascist commitment. Their experiences during the Nazi years ranged from imprisonment to Wehrmacht service, and from exile to âinner emigration,â the most common form of enduring the regime in this group. Even though Forner dedicates the major part of this first chapter to these varied experiences and alludes to them frequently in his analysis of postwar discourse, the protagonistsâ personal memories of both the Weimar and Nazi years remain a rather blurry background. In rare cases, the horrors of the past surface with vengeance, for example in Alfred Kantorowiczâs reaction to details about denunciations in the Slansky show trials, which reminded him of the âmonstrousâ Nazi reality, âStreicherâs language, Himmlerâs mindset â¦ the âmoralityâ of the human-butchers at Dachau and Buchenwald, the gassers of Auschwitz and Majdanekâ (p. 253). Kantorowicz had spent the war years in New York and one wonders whether others who had been affected by the terror of the Nazi regime more directly did not address their experiences more often than Fornerâs account suggests. Notably absent are references to the persecution and murder of the Jews (among them many Jewish fellow intellectuals).

The core of the book is dedicated to the visions of the âengaged democratsâ for a future German body politic, its desirable rules, institutions, agents, and principles. These visions circled around a number of interrelated, long-lingering issues in German political culture: the relationships between freedom and order and between individual liberty and communal interests, forms of publicness, representation, and participation, as well as the meaning and function of culture in politics and vice versa. Forner shows that in the âcharacteristic opennessâ (p. 198) of the immediate postwar years, these visions brought together–albeit often in dissent–groups of intellectuals whose primary concern was to make the most of the opportunity the disaster of 1945 offered and whose primary tools comprised journalism (such as *Ost und West* or *Die Wandlung*) and âpublicâ-forming associations such as the Deutsche WÃ¤hlergesellschaft, the Aktionsgruppe Heidelberg zur Demokratie und zum freien Sozialismus, or various cultural clubs and acclamatory âcalls to the people.â Most intriguing is the plethora of shared, âforward-lookingâ yet often vague proposals: a socialism of all kinds, various âunityâ-conceptions, emphatic references to the tradition of German *Geist*, including a propensity to identify oneself as a member of the *Geistâs* "parliament" or even âarmyâ (pp. 213, 220), subtle adherences to much older âtropes of cultural critique,â third-way explorations, and resentment against the âcapriciousâ (Dirks, p. 81) Western concept of freedom as well as against the totalitarian effects of a âfunctionariesâ dictatorshipâ (Kantorowicz, p. 276). Last but not least, âengaged democratsâ debated the recipes against mass manipulation in an age of mass political participation. One way or another, they all remained attached and dedicated to the perceived liberating and self-emancipatory potential of the triangle of *Geist*, *Kultur,* and *Bildung* (p. 113).

If they ventured to put their proposals and ideas into practice, âengaged democratsâ failed more often than they succeeded. Grappling with the dynamics of the unfolding Cold War, interventions by the occupiers, and the effects of a capitalist currency reform or of Stalinist one-party rule, none of them ever gave up. Even the often bit-

ter and halfhearted flight of many âEasternâ protagonists did not result in a retreat from politics into a secluded academic or private life. However, on a personal level, an aspect Forner discusses quite reluctantly, it could mean finding some sort of âpeaceâ (Leonhard, p. 246) after years, even decades of political and personal unrest. Those who stayed and remained dedicated to the SED project sometimes even âsucceeded.â The most telling example might be the inventor of the âbloc-partiesâ-system Peter Alfons Steiniger, a jurist who managed to inject his peculiar understanding of representative âdemocracyâ into the emerging political system (p. 242). In contrast, his Western counterparts (in Fornerâs view), even when they were organized in the most elaborate political platforms, the Aktionsgruppe and WÃ¤hlergesellschaft, failed to significantly influence the provisions for the electoral system written by the Parliamentary Council into the Basic Law (p. 182).

Overall, Fornerâs book offers a meticulously researched and densely written narrative of the mutually resonant left intellectual scene in postwar Germany, focusing on a period during which a long-existing, discursive East-West âframework,â cultivating a peculiar, âundogmaticâ mindset, transformed into the ideological front line in a global conflict. One could question the vague concept of âengaged democrats,â because Forner does not spend much time defining either of the two terms (pp. 3, 21); one could lament that the potential of his integrated approach is not fully explored because the actual discussions and personal contacts in the quest for mutual understanding are rarely reconstructed in full detail or are confined to a footnote (pp. 83, 109, 174, 188, 202); and one could object that this approach is insufficient to unearth the discordant meanings of the hot terms in these debates and to fully understand what contemporaries meant by âmisunderstanding,â by the âtwo languagesâ and âdialectsâ (p. 218) which disguised the otherâs conception of âfreedom,â âdemocracy,â or the âmassesâ instead of revealing it.

Yet, Fornerâs book brings to life an era of intense intellectual engagement, reconstructs their networks, interactions, and exchanges, perhaps sometimes even overstating the profundity of these contacts. He delineates the divergent opportunities, choices, and fates of advocates of democracy in a post-dictatorial Germany. The fact that one half of the country was to endure a second dictatorship until 1989, embraced even by some âengaged democrats,â and that âdemocracyâ and its discontents meant and were two radically different things in divided Germany–Konrad Adenauerâs easily criticized â*Demokratur*â (KÃ¤stner, p. 280) versus the ruthless suppression of dissent in Walter Ulbrichtâs GDR–underscores the complex analytical and narrative task the author has set for himself. His book offers rich insight and should inspire further, similarly creative research on postwar Germanyâs divided and divisive political culture.

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