

H-Net Reviews

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Christoph Klessmann, ed. *The Divided Past: Rewriting Post-War German History*. New York: Berg Publishers, 2001. vii + 200 pp. \$88.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-511-4.



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In January 2000 Andreas Daum, Director of the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C., interviewed Hans-Ulrich Wehler about recent historiographical trends within German history. Wehler, the dean of German historians in the Federal Republic, remarked, “work on my *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* has been conducted independent of the fashionable trends in the United States.... The so-called linguistic turn is epistemologically the return of a neo-Kantian epistemology.” Although clearly suspicious of some intellectual trends emanating from across the ocean, Wehler has always been a strong supporter of trans-Atlantic dialogue. Nonetheless he noted, “there remain surprising gaps. As an approach cliometrics has almost been completely ignored in the Federal Republic.... Our argument in regard to a German *Sonderweg*—an interpretation that is of course specific to the ‘civilization break’ in 1933—has not persuaded all of our American friends.” Daum then asked about the history of everyday life and Wehler delivered a death sentence, “it has been clear for some time that *Alltagsgeschichte* has been a failure, theoretically speaking. All of the smart people have moved on to the New Cultural History. This development also will take its course in America, where currently students of those historians who once declared themselves enthusiastically for the history of everyday life are fighting a rearguard battle.”^[1]

I suspect that most Anglo-American readers of H-German will be surprised to learn that the linguistic-cultural turn is based on Kant, that the *Sonderweg* still provides the best means of interpreting modern German history, and that *Alltagsgeschichte* is dead. Nonetheless, Wehler highlights a real divide in approach between historians working in and outside of Central Europe. Anglo-American scholars have the luxury of studying Germany as an intellectual exercise; they are looking for answers to big questions. This is equally important to native German historians, but they are also engaged in creating a usable past for the democratic citizens of the Federal Republic. For Wehler, the *Sonderweg* is a much more useful component of the latter project than “fashionable” post-modern theories. It is in this context that one should read the fifteenth volume of Berg’s German Historical Perspectives series, *The Divided Past*, which translates research written in German in hopes of making it more accessible to English speakers. Eight scholars explore ways to write a unified social history of East and West Germany in traditional but fruitful ways.

Editor Christoph Klessmann sets the theoretical stakes by conceptualizing the relationship between the two Germanies as one of separation and interconnection. He tests this theory by looking at the ways the two states impacted each other’s policies towards workers. In

the German Democratic Republic, the creation of an economically and culturally mobile proletariat represented a key governmental goal. Workers happily embraced opportunities for greater salaries and vacation, but looked with ambivalence at the time and educational commitments needed to become intellectual leaders of the revolution. They complained that night classes and political meetings reduced leisure opportunities after a long day at the factory. Just as important, the Socialist Unity Party's efforts to politicize workers were complicated by propaganda disseminated by the West German *Ostbuero* in the 1950s, the lingering appeal of social democracy, and the magnetic pull of rising standards of living and increased leisure time in the west. Klessmann uses this example to remind us that we cannot understand what happened in the East without looking at the West. The model also works in the other direction. East Germany aggressively marketed itself as the only legitimate representative of German socialism to workers in the Federal Republic with unexpected results. The venerable Communist Party declined as moderate West German politicians painted it as a tool of the East, leaving the field open to the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Although parts of this argument are controversial and require more research, there seems little doubt that Klessmann is right to argue we should think in terms of two mutually dependent state policies towards workers.

Other contributors demonstrate that Klessmann's dual focus on interconnection and separation potentially has great value. Dorothee Wierling extends it to generational conflict in the two Germanies, while Ina Merkel explores how these societies mutually influenced each other's visions of gender. Detlef Pollack explores the increasing secularization of both countries while Konrad Jarausch examines the divergent ways the East and West Germany dealt with trauma and broken memories. Martin Sabrow's intriguing article on historians reminds us that professors in both states saw themselves as part of a unified intellectual endeavor as late as 1956. All of these articles are competent, factually driven explorations of the possibilities of envisioning German history since 1945 in terms of mutual but ambivalent interdependence that give American readers a good idea of the questions most German historians are now asking.

Fascinatingly, one article by Thomas Lindenberger breaks this mold. A *Privatdozent* and project leader at the Center for Contemporary History in Potsdam, he has published two books and edited four more but is not well-known in the United States. His article on *Alltagsgeschichte* suggests that some of the post-modern theo-

ries Wehler looks at skeptically offer exciting opportunities to re-think post-war German history. Lindenberger believes the history of everyday life provides a way to link the two Germanies conceptually. It acknowledges that elites and ordinary people engage in a constant conversation about the meaning of the past and the present regardless of whether or not they live in a democratic or a socialist system. He tantalizingly hints that a post-modern focus on the way Germans used the past to define themselves since 1945 could provide the nexus for writing a unified history of the two Germanies. He provides one example, gender, to show how this might work. Robert Moeller has already demonstrated how women as care-givers and consumers for the family were central to the reconstruction of democracy in the Federal Republic. Lindenberger believes this experience could be usefully compared and contrasted to the work collective in East Germany which also rested on the backs of females. Socialist leaders created super-moms long before they emerged in the west. In their new roles, women in both countries played an important role in enabling Germans to make a clean perceptual break from the past and cast themselves as new, progressive socialist (or democratic) citizens who had overcome Nazi taint.

This approach strikes me as a valid alternative to Wehler's *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* and a useful complication of *Zeitgeschichte* (the study of contemporary history), both of which are designed to locate objective historical truth. Rather than aspiring to a universally accurate representation of German history, Lindenberger asks us to focus on how people used the past to define themselves as good, progressive, and civilized. In addition to offering a way to comparatively approach East and West Germany, it entails the possibility of integrating the Nazi period into post-war German history in the same way that American historians (and Wehler) have usefully integrated nineteenth-century slavery and empire into understanding twentieth-century American national identity. Just as important, Lindenberger's methodology gives us a chance to narrow the surprising gap in trans-Atlantic approaches to German history. For that more than anything else, he deserves the praise of scholars on both sides of the ocean.

Note

[1]. See Andreas Daum, "German History in Historical Perspective: Interview with Hans-Ulrich Wehler," <http://www.ghi-dc.org/bulletin26S00/b26wehler.html>.

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