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Beschweigen und Bekennen: Die deutsche Nachkriegsgesellschaft und der Holocaust (Book Review)

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Beschweigen und Bekennen: Die deutsche Nachkriegsgesellschaft und der Holocaust, edited by Norbert Frei and Sybille Steinbacher. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2001. 168 pp. Euro 15.00.

Beschweigen und Bekennen is based on the proceedings of a symposium held in Dachau in April 2000. As the title suggests, the aim of the volume is to examine German responses to the Holocaust since the end of World War II. Following a brief introduction by Norbert Frei, the six essays by symposium contributors are organized in roughly chronological order beginning with treatments of the immediate post-war period and ending with the 1990s. The volume concludes with a transcript of the closing podium discussion. The central questions driving both the essays and the discussion are: how does increasing temporal distance to the event affect public attitudes and commemorative practice in Germany? How much and what kind of remembrance was possible at different times? What is the connection between history and memory and how has this been used and abused in scholarship? A corollary to the first question is the role of generational differences and how these affect perceptions of the past, yet the essay contributors are without exception of fairly recent vintage: all were born between 1959 and 1969. It is not until the podium discussion that a wider sweep of generations is included and clear differences in perceptions and expectations come to the fore.

The choice of the Dachau memorial site as the setting for the symposium was most appropriate to the theme—as the first concentration camp established on German soil in 1933, Dachau's history nearly overlaps with that of the Third Reich. In the first essay in the volume, Sybille Steinbacher examines Dachau as a site of confrontation between the Germans and their Nazi past in an analysis of German attitudes in the early post-war period. Steinbacher foregrounds the Germans' tendency to focus on their own suffering and the competition for victim status this created. The prevailing attitude of self-pity among the German civilian population obstructed any sense of remorse and contributed to the widespread refusal to accept either guilt or responsibility.

Karin Hartewig's essay addresses the response to the Holocaust in East Germany from 1945 to 1989 and outlines five phases from the immediate post-war period (characterized by a diversity of perspectives and relative openness) to the gradual standardization of a monolithic, ideologically-driven standpoint emphasizing GDR

antifascism and the heroism of the Communist resistance. In her concluding comments, Hartewig argues that the tendency to read history in ideological terms gave rise to a preference for broad political analysis over empirical research that dominated GDR historiography until the 1980s.

The third essay, by Marc von Miquel, focuses on the debates regarding the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes and the impact the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials of the 1960s had on public opinion. While these media-driven trials generated strong popular interest, the sensationalized presentation of the perpetrators encouraged perceptions that they had acted alone and that the rest of the population was blameless. Von Miquel concludes that the successive extensions of the statute should not be read as indications of changes in public attitudes since they were largely promoted by pressure from outside Germany and were implemented without much conviction by the German justice system.

The role of external influences in the German response to the Holocaust is the centerpiece of Matthias Weiss's discussion of how the broadcast of the American TV series "Holocaust" and Spielberg's "Schindler's List" affected popular awareness and attitudes toward Germany's Nazi past. While the impact of these media events has been the subject of numerous articles, Weiss succeeds in producing some new insights, particularly in his discussion of how the "Holocaust" series was packaged by the German media and the editing changes made to the copy aired on German TV. In comparison to "Schindler's List," Weiss argues that the Holocaust series had a much greater and more lasting impact on the German public and inspired a degree of interest in the facts about the Nazi past that has not been equaled since.

The final two essays by Nicholas Berg and Raphael Gross each deal with the evolution and perception of Holocaust historiography. Berg looks at developments in the 1990s and notes a shift from concerns with facts and truth to questions of plausibility. He argues that the ideal historiography of the Holocaust would combine both empiricism and ethics and dismisses approaches that divide history and memory. The creation of a false dichotomy between history and memory is one of the problems Gross perceives in contemporary Holocaust scholarship on witness testimony. He criticizes the work of Ulrich Baer and Dori Laub in particular, arguing that both present distorted views of contemporary historiography and substitute aestheticization for theoretical analysis. Gross argues that there is a strong potential for a productive interface between historical inquiry and witness testimony yet to be explored.

Gross's comments on the interpretation of testimony and the treatment of the witness bring up significant questions that the volume does not address in any depth: How does the survivor's perspective fit into the discourse of analysis and evaluation of responses to the Holocaust? Where is the common ground for dialogue between survivor-witnesses and scholars whose knowledge of the event comes through research rather than experience? The concluding podium discussion gives some indication of the tensions and clash of perspectives that can arise when representatives of different

generations and experiences (one former camp inmate is among the group) come together and adds a layer of realism to the academic analyses preceding it. On the whole, *Beschweigen und Bekennen* is a compact and compelling study of responses to the Holocaust in Germany that provides an excellent introduction for non-specialists, while the questions it leaves unanswered should inspire further research among scholars in the field.

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