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## History as Memory

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### Review Essay:

**Elisabeth Domansky & Harald Welzer (Eds.) (1999).**  
**Eine offene Geschichte. Zur kommunikativen Tradierung der**  
**nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit**  
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## 1. Introduction

The theme of "memory and history" has been booming for quite a long time—just as the two editors Elisabeth DOMANSKY and Harald WELZER indicate at the beginning of the book. The present book itself proves this once again. In the introduction, however, approaches which could explain this "boom of memory and history" (p.9) are only touched upon lightly. This book does not focus on the causes of the actual presence of the past (cf. e.g. JOHNSTON 1991) but rather on the different manifestations of the ordinary "presence of the past" (AUGUSTINUS) and their consequences for the way the past is seen by individuals or groups. The object of this volume is to illustrate the different sides of the "complex processes in which individual and collective memory constitute each other" (p.23). Questions of remembering and forgetting, of history and memory have been dealt with from political, cultural and scientific perspectives, but in most cases either only the socio-political level or only the individual domain were considered. Therefore the editors are correct in pointing out that the interfaces of official and public uses of memory and individual

representations of the past, which should now be the focus of attention, have not been studied in more detail so far. [1]

The decision of the authors of this volume to take National Socialism as the central point of reference for a study on Germany is based on the actual presence of the Nazi past in the public and private sphere. This is why normative or moral aspects like the question of the ("right") way to deal with National Socialism and the question of guilt (e.g. BRENDLER & REXILIUS 1991, GIORDANO 1987, SCHWAN 1997) are not important. Attention is focused here on the transmission of history which is—as DOMANSKY and WELZER put it—"a constant element of everyday practices in which very different institutions, individuals and the media come to an understanding about what is part of history or 'their' history" (p.8). In the following review, after a short presentation of the content and the structure of the book, I would therefore like to make some comments on the way the different articles deal with the "interfaces" of individual and collective memory and on the use of the term "transmission" throughout the book. [2]

## **2. Content and Structure of the Book**

The book is the result of a workshop about "Communicative transmission of history. The example of the National Socialism". The individual authors' contributions to this volume are all of a consistently high quality often unusual for publications of conference proceedings. The individual essays, which in general can stand for themselves, mostly derive from larger studies which have already been published or which are currently in progress.<sup>1</sup> The introduction is also a shorter and modified version of an article by Harald WELZER published in 1998. [3]

The first five contributions treat certain generations or intergenerational relationships in respect to the National Socialist past. Michael KOHLSTRUCK focuses on the members of the third generation, that is the grandchildren of the contemporaries of that period. KOHLSTRUCK shows that the reference to the past can play an important role for the individual emancipation from one's family and social background; the dominant historical media such as movies or books used in the classroom, but especially the confrontation of contradictory interpretations are important for the development of the individual perspective. [4]

The articles in the second part of the book deal with the interpretation of the past in different kinds of media during the course of time. Judith KEILBACH, for example, traces the development of the presentation of the National Socialism and the Holocaust on television in West Germany and the United States since 1945. She proves that the way this subject has been dealt with on television has been influenced not only by social and political constellations but also by technical progress and especially by changing demands that define the "nature" of television. [5]

These different points of view reveal interesting insights into the way in which the Nazi past is dealt with on the private level and/or within the family on the one hand and—parallel to official or political statements (cf. e.g. KIRSCH 1999 on 8 May commemoration; DOMANSKY 1992 and REICHEL 1995 on 9

November)—in the public sphere on the other. The articles on the role of the media supply new information about the development of the "history of memory" (MEIER) since 1945 and confirm the way in which the development of official and public interpretations of the past has been classified so far (DANYEL 1995, KOCKA & SABROW 1994, MEIER 1990, REICHEL 1995, WÖLL 1997). [6]

The different articles together illustrate that the interpretation of the National Socialism is—as the title of the book announces—indeed an "open story": it includes innumerable elements which are constantly put together in new ways to form a permanently changing picture. The character of "history" as the result of a "process of permanent refiguration" (p.13) of interpretations which constitutes memory (and oblivion) are vividly illustrated. In this view of history based on sociological and psychological approaches, the difference between memory and history finally disappears: history based on a lot of different *histories* becomes a form of memory. Historians might have their problems with such a constructivist perspective since there is almost no place left for "scientifically established facts" or "historical truth".<sup>2)</sup> [7]

Nevertheless this book is not supposed to be a (another) volume about memory of National Socialism but to offer a special understanding of the interfaces of public and private interpretations of the past. This collection also raises the question as to how the different contributions hang together to form a coherent interpretation. [8]

### **3. On the Examination of the Interfaces of Individual and Social Memory**

The interfaces of social and individual representations of the past, which should be the common focus of all the contributions, are only treated within the first part of the book. These articles are all—if not exclusively—based on interviews and thus take account of the individual perspective. This can be clearly seen in the article by Alexander von PLATO, who is concerned with the reasons for the rivalry between victims of the Nazi regime and of the Soviet occupation in East and West Germany. He shows how the social and political framework, whose developments in the two states were contradictory, either encouraged or obstructed talk about the past and in this way influenced the individual memory of the people in question. [9]

In the studies on the treatment of National Socialism in the media, however, the individual level is overlooked—unless you consider the media itself to be such an interface, where you can or do no longer have to distinguish between "sender", "message" and "receiver", referring here to a simple model of communication. It is undeniable that the question of what is "on demand" and especially of how the "supply" will be received, can only be examined with difficulty—e.g. by taking into account the number of viewers (KEILBACH) or number of listeners and opinion polls (MARSSOLEK)<sup>3)</sup>. One also has to admit that in the first part of the book, the social and/or collective "input" is examined less closely than reception. The difficulty of analyzing empirically the type and structure of the interaction between collective and individual levels stands out clearly. Problems of this kind, like methodical questions in general, are nonetheless almost entirely ignored by the editors and authors. [10]

To sum up, one can state that all sides of the model of communication mentioned above are taken into consideration, although only half of the articles deal with all aspects and their mutual relations. This is particularly important in order to better understand the meaning of the "transmission of history" mentioned in the subtitle of the book. [11]

#### **4. On the Meaning of the Expression "Transmission of History"**

The introduction begins by pointing out that the debate in the public as well as in the humanities often employs "vague notions of 'memory', 'recollection', 'commemoration', 'historical knowledge', 'historical conscience' and also 'transmission' " (p.11). Consequently, the editors present their own definitions. The most important aspects of memory—the best and most fully treated notion—are summarized both very precisely and with many nuances. A clear definition of "recollection" (in contrast to memory) and—which is even more relevant—of "transmission" is nevertheless missing. [12]

Instead of the "transmission" of history, the notion of "conveyance" or sometimes also of "passing on" is used. It is not clear if conveyance and passing on really are synonyms for transmission or if they stand for elements of a process called transmission. Does the expression "transmission of history" only refer to the interaction of the different levels (e.g. of the "sender", the "message" and the "receiver" and their interfaces), or do studies of single components also deal with the transmission of history? [13]

In any case, the individual authors proceed differently in this matter: In their article Sabine MOLLER and Karoline TSCHUGGNALL call transmission an "interactive event" (p.59), that is, the interaction of various actors (or levels). In their study on family memory the two authors do not only consider the situation of conversation and the role of the respective family members taking part in the conversation (of the grandfather as narrator and the grandmother, the daughter and the granddaughter as his listeners). They also take into account the transmitted history from the narrator's and the listeners' point of view, e.g. also the way in which the latter tell others what they have heard. [14]

In examining the role of National Socialism and the war period for the first generation born after the war in the GDR, Dorothee WIERLING also speaks of transmission. But as she explains, she uses this notion reluctantly, preferring to speak of "tradition" because in her opinion this term refers more to "what is passed on but defines less how the things passed on are taken up and changed" (p.37, note 5). So what is indicated as the transmission of the Nazi past and the history of the war refers to those family or official representations of the past which the members of the first post-war generation of the GDR have integrated into their own life in this form—that is without changing the interpretation. [15]

Klaus NAUMANN finally does not use at all the notion of transmission in his study on press articles of the "year of commemoration" 1995. Like KEILBACH with respect to the television and MARSSOLEK in regard to the radio NAUMANN takes the print media as a mirror of collectively shared "patterns of perception and interpretative perspectives" (p.176).—Unfortunately, nothing is

said about the differences between these three kinds of media and what they have in common. The three authors do not refer at all to each other, which one has to regret a little especially since each time the same characteristics of the media are pointed out.—The media regarded as "messenger and message" (NAUMANN, p.178) or "constructors and transporters" (MARSSOLEK, p.146) mention certain events and pass over in silence over others. They give expression to interpretations of the past and perpetuate them in this way. This could also be called the "transmission" of history. [16]

## 5. Conclusion

A collective volume resulting from a conference is not a publication of articles drawn from a research project. The editors themselves speak of "*reflections* on a theory of communicative transmission of history" (p.8). For this reason, the different use of the notion of transmission and the continuing absence of a general classification of the respective articles with regard to this problem certainly cannot be overestimated. In classifying the contributions in such a way, however, the quality and the originality inherent in the notion of transmission (cf. WELZER 1998 and WELZER, MONTAU & PLASS 1997) would be more pronounced. [17]

The final report of a research project supported by the Volkswagen Foundation and directed by Harald WELZER will be presented at the end of this year. This deals with the subject of "transmission of historical conscience"; the contribution by MOLLER and TSCHUGGNALL in this book is also a result of this project. Open theoretical and methodological questions concerning this problem which have been partly raised in this review, might then be clarified. [18]

This volume contains a number of questions and theses relevant to all scholars interested in the role of the media for public representations of the past. This is also the case for those who do qualitative empirical research and are concerned with questions concerning generations or with the attitudes of younger generations towards the Nazi past: e.g. with respect to the way in which the social environment can be considered in relation to a comparison between several members of one generation, or how the individual relationship to the Nazi past can be examined analytically—without relying heavily on psychoanalytic concepts or moralizing judgements heard so often in relation to the Nazi past. [19]

The quality of this book consists in the fact that it covers many different interpretative levels, including the individual and collective memory of National Socialism—even if the general conception of the volume is not totally consistent. [20]

## Notes

1) Only the article of Heinz BUDE, dealing with the relationship between wartime childhood and youth rebellion constituting a "feeling of we" (Wir-Gefuehl) for the generation of 68, is so brief—it is by far the shortest

contribution of the whole book—that without knowing the larger study which this article is based on (BUDE 1997) one might find it difficult to follow the author's conclusions. [<back>](#)

2) Recent historiography nevertheless no longer regards history as an exact image of the past events but rather as a construction of the past. Lutz NIETHAMMER (1993), for example, considers history as memory, which is very close to the concept the editors outline here in this book. [<back>](#)

3) Inge MARSSOLEK is concerned with the role of radio with respect to the interpretation of history in the post-war period in East and West Germany. [<back>](#)

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