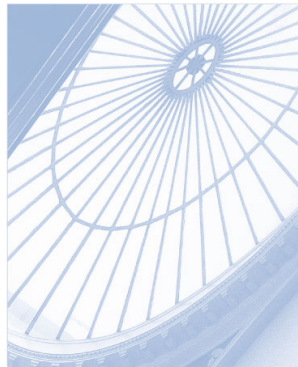


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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT: THE DEFORMATION OF THE SELF IN GERMANY'S DICTATORIAL REGIMES

BERND WEISBROD

MARY FULBROOK, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii + 515 pp. ISBN 978 0 19 928720 8. £35.00

This is an ambitious book. It comes on top of a number of outstanding contributions by Mary Fulbrook to the history of the GDR, the other German dictatorship, in which she claims a political reading of private lives and the 'normalization' of rule in a regime which had to rely on the support of reluctant citizens.¹ In many ways, her new book reinforces that interpretation, yet is much broader in range, more daring in analytical scope, and unsettling for a number of well-established readings of modern German history. It sidesteps the systemic comparison of the German dictatorships by looking at private experience and changing subjectivities, and takes leave of the well-laboured notion of political and intellectual generations by asking about generational opportunity structure and life course choices in 'sore-thumb generations' or 'cohort clusters' (p. 7). In doing so, it challenges the usual assumptions about the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. This is also, as will be argued here, the reason for a scathing review of her book by one of the protagonists of this debate, whose historical imagination seems to be limited by the numbers game of Nazi organizations.²

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1995); ead., *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005); ead. (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979: The 'Normalisation of Rule?'* (Oxford, 2009).

² Reviewed by Arnim Nolzen in *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 21 June 2012, <<http://hsoz-kult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2012-2-194>>.

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Numbers do play a part in Fulbrook's wide-ranging study. But what matters most to her argument is the experience and meaning of private exposure to life chances and choices in a century disrupted by violence and political upheaval. She is interested in the way in which real people, high and low, male and female, young and old, negotiated this exposure in all sorts of ego-documents, contemporary diaries and letters, and *ex post* questionnaires and interviews, but she also takes into account, at least to some degree, how this process was reflected in official sources. Yet this is neither a book about 'oral history' – many private stories reappear in the text and can only be put together with the help of the index – nor about the top-down effects of dictatorial rule, such as the dilemmas of political mobilization in symbolic rituals of belonging. It is about the historically contingent construction of the 'social self' as far as it is accessible to modern historians, about the ambivalent experience of disrupted and remade life chances in war and political turmoil, and ultimately about the deconstruction of moral and political 'identity', the secret hobby-horse of those who seem to mistake performing by the rules in dictatorships for the confession of a closed community of believers.

Interestingly, historians have always been reluctant to accept this notion for GDR society which, of course, also had to develop ways of accommodating the private needs of its citizens, especially when voiced in terms of labour demands, despite all the ruthless practices of political suppression and police surveillance.³ It is one of the great merits of Fulbrook's new book that, on the basis of overwhelming evidence, this ambivalence of belonging is also granted to those who were wrapped up in the Nazi mobilization and still felt in two minds about the *Volksgemeinschaft*. More is involved, therefore, in the concept of 'dissonant lives' than meets the eye, and little is gained if this argument is discarded simply because it was used in post-war exoneration and self-victimization. It is, in fact, much more helpful in explaining the radical escalation of the first German dictatorship and the long life of the second one than any notion of ideological cohesion or community spirit, even in a racially defined or politically homogenized society.

The argument about generation as a 'hidden factor in historical experience' (p. v) is set out in detail in the first chapter, where gener-

³ Andrew I. Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

ational 'sense' is defined neither as a matter of political or intellectual claim for leadership nor as a conscious taking of sides in a cultural conflict, but simply as a private way of navigating a typical condition of twentieth-century German history, that is, to be young at times of complete social and political reorientation. This 'cultural and structural availability for mobilization' alone, Fulbrook argues, makes the two war youth generations into 'sore-thumb generations' and this is also why these generations are compared in the two dictatorial setups and not in that of West Germany. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the stronger half of the book (chs. 6 to 11) deals with the prominence and fixation of the 29ers, as Fulbrook prefers to call the war youth generation, in the GDR whereas the first half (chs. 2 to 5) tries to establish the basic pattern of 'age-related challenges' from the late nineteenth century to 1945. Here, the lines are drawn out less consistently, certainly with regard to the firmly established reading of the political generation of 'heroic realism', which may offer an explanation for the high priests of Nazism but not necessarily for the broad church of believers.

Instead, three aspects which carry the full weight of the argument are highlighted: a) generational experience is ambivalent and always challenged by individual choices and political chances; b) there is no foregone conclusion in the way in which political and economic crises impact on the life stories of a 'divided generation', left or right; and c) the mobilization of the war youth generation for the Nazi experiment set the pattern for 'dissonant lives' which re-emerged in the second German dictatorship as lives which had to be lived in 'two worlds', the world of public performance and the world of private knowledge. The generational analysis, therefore, aims to detect 'patterns of accommodation to dictatorial regimes of opposing political colours, and the shifts across major moments of historical rupture' (p. 5).

When looking at ego-documents as evidence, working with rules of collage and narrative plausibility to flesh out the argument is almost unavoidable, especially when such a long story line has to be sustained. Different sorts of private evidence are, therefore, artfully crafted together—letters, interviews, questionnaires, and so on—without giving prominence to the individual life story as such but to the way in which the construction of the 'social self' can be detected in the multiple layers of self-questioning and self-delusion in

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breadth, not in depth. This may be considered problematic for in-depth stories of changing subjectivities over time, but it makes sense for clustering evidence in historical patterns of self-perception. Some personal stories, therefore, reappear at different points in the book, where they are regrouped with other sources and, unfortunately, lose some of their individual clout. A good example of this methodology and argument a) is provided by the life story of Hans Paasche as told in chapters 2 and 3. A practitioner of colonial violence, Paasche rather unexpectedly embraced pacifism under the influence of the youth movement. In line with contemporary assumptions, this could only be regarded as a mental condition, especially in a privileged member of the officer class. But he persisted, and eventually fell victim to political murder. This intimate and well-documented story is closely interwoven with a number of life stories, collected in an essay competition by some Harvard professors in 1939–40, which show the full range of experience before and after 1933. This approach allows Fulbrook to conclude that ‘generational experience’ was not a foregone conclusion:

We should, therefore, not simply read backwards from the carriers of the Nazi regime, appealing to some ‘generational experience’ which allegedly mobilized significant numbers to the right-wing cause. Rather, it was the specific historical constellation of 1933 which determined that those who had been mobilized for radical causes and who now took a disproportionate role in the historical record were on the right rather than on the left (p. 81).

Clearly, this is not about generational homogenization, but the importance of personal choices and political opportunity structure in life stories punctured by violence.

The Paasche case can be said to set the tone of the whole narrative: personal stories, although patterned, are far from consequential. The same is true of the ‘class of 1935’ (ch. 4, II) as seen through the lens of the letters exchanged by the girl graduates of Augusta High School in Charlottenburg. Despite the common excitement about the new political beginning coinciding with their own start in adult life, they show the full range of options available for self-experience, depending on political affiliation, personal friendships, and racial denomi-

nation. This evidence keeps popping up throughout the book to give added value to these different options and to show the consequences of personal choices in a system which, in general, left little option but to learn how to play by the new rules. What matters to Fulbrook is the high degree of ambiguity and self-delusion in the process of mobilization. 'Enactment' of these rules should not be mistaken for 'commitment', she argues, as long as it was sufficient for most of the people to behave 'as though they believed in the cause', with a substantial windfall for 'those who rode the Nazi tide', and devastating results for those oppressed by Nazi politics (p. 99). In many of the ego-documents ideology hardly plays; rather, enacting the Nazi script seems to have suspended judgement on whatever was claimed as the appropriate belief system, however internalized, played out, or simply 'mimed'. Under conditions of violence, personal ties could easily be dissolved and decent behaviour suspended. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to count all these cases as recruits to the *Volks-gemeinschaft*: 'Outward conformity was for many people clearly compatible with a sense of inner distance' (p. 115).

This interpretation is endorsed by a close reading of the 'class of 1935', which makes use of the collection of Old Girls' letters in public and private family archives. Hans Paasche's daughter was one of them. The generational bond may have helped them to play by the rules and take on board racial prejudice in their daily lives but, strikingly, as would be expected from ambitious girls with a middle-class education, they also displayed a considerable amount of soul-searching and a muted sense of obligation. Not so in one particular case, where the marriage bond tied one of the girls to Udo K., a Silesian SA fighter and government official who ended up as *Landrat* in annexed Upper Silesia, also in charge of the Auschwitz region. His personal story is a favourite plot, already lined up by Fulbrook for another book project, as a typical case of unavoidable involvement with Nazi violence in pursuit of a 'normal' career, eventually ending up in the *Wehrmacht*.⁴ Here it serves as a prop for the 'availability for mobilization' of those who were also 'psychologically available' because of their early start in adult life through male activism. Yet, here again, with ever increasing pressures to conform, it was far from clear whether such outward behaviour was always free from 'duplicity',

⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford, forthcoming). See p. 156, n. 161.

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especially in cases where private standards could only be upheld by leading a 'double life' (p. 142). As Fulbrook points out, it is almost impossible to establish precisely what performing to the public role model actually reveals about inner engagement. For example, young people seem to have been less ready to confess to being 'ashamed to be German' because of excessive violence during the *Anschluß* or *Kristallnacht*. Yet enacting the Nazi script often came with some sense of unease and 'dissonance', despite the very real longing for national belonging and personal advancement (p. 165).

Detailed cases like these are, of course, hard to come by. But Fulbrook manages to bring together enough evidence to give her argument cohesion and to break it down into individual and convincing stories. This is not just about adding colour to the general story; it is about painting a complex and adequate picture for a history 'from within', in which the 'social self' is negotiated between outer behavioural patterns and the 'inner self'. This is neither an 'oral history' nor a 'collective biography'; it is, she claims, a 'completely new perspective on history' (p. 477). Fulbrook, of course, is aware that 'changing subjectivities' cannot simply be read straight from sources such as, for example, letters home from the front during the war. In fact, such private documents, she argues, often merely reflect an established code of conduct and a fairly deep-seated 'nazification of mentalities'. When following up the story of Udo K. in Upper Silesia again (pp. 184–5), it appears that the very real 'two worlds' which had opened up physically between Jews and non-Jews in the wake of *Einsatzgruppen* killings and ghettoization did, in fact, eclipse any 'humanist education' which his wife had acquired at Augusta High School. Kattowitz sources give some texture to this argument, which is expanded in other letters home from the collection of the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte in Stuttgart. The question here is not who did what and why, but what it did to people's perceptions of their own selves when it happened. The war which had placed the community over the individual submerged private hopes and aspirations and enforced a belief in some sort of common destiny, as Fulbrook argues: 'Commitment to a wider sense of community and purpose was arguably the only way to deal with the deprivations of the self' (p. 189). Private sources like letters are, therefore, replete with 'dissonant rationalizations' which somehow bring the actual evidence of brutality and danger into line with the public script of

national duty and personal character, but not necessarily with the holy grail of the Nazi activists, that is, redemption by killing the Jews. Even in the innermost circle of SS killers, Heinrich Himmler found a way, in his famous Posen speeches, to acknowledge the ambivalence in their ruthlessness (p. 218). But, in general, Fulbrook is not concerned with the individual motivation or social psychology of perpetrators. Rather, she is interested in the sense of subjectivity in 'normal' lives when almost everybody seemed to be 'enacting' a script over which they had little command.

It has to be said that when it comes to the horrors of war, or the ultimate human catastrophe of the Holocaust, unanimous voices are not to be expected anyway, as Nick Stargardt has shown.⁵ These horrendous facts are hardly reflected in what could be said privately, never mind publicly. In the relevant chapters of the book, the general narrative is only punctuated by a few personal stories—a family correspondence involving the euthanasia of a daughter, some reflections on fighting on without belief in the Führer, or the experience of shock in bombed-out cities—as if private voices were muted and 'enforced silence' the only possible answer to the degree of self-delusion which had made all this horror possible. More could certainly be said about this shock transfer in the post-war generation, another of Fulbrook's projects,⁶ but for the second part of her book all she needs to highlight is the sense of loss in the mobilized young, who felt betrayed not just by the regime, but also by their very own selves.

It is a mainstay of the argument on which the whole book turns that this pattern of self-delusion in public acts of mimicry not only provided the legacy for the mobilization of the second war youth generation in the GDR, but was also the same pattern of dissonance which likened the GDR *Aufbaugeneration* to the equally delusive self-mobilization of the first war youth generation in the Third Reich. Both were structurally available for mobilization, both had to some degree found their emotional and professional chances of identification in the new regime, and both had to pay for this with a measure of delusion and insecurity in their very private selves. As a structural interpretation this can be nicely put to the test in the analysis of the cohort of '29 in the GDR's *Who is Who?* (ch. 6). In contrast to the rela-

⁵ Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* (London: 2005).

⁶ 'Reverberations of the Second World War'; see p. 485, n. 10.

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tive silence of the 'not-quite' generation of those born in 1949,⁷ the prominence of the 29ers is indeed remarkable. It was the East German generation of social climbers who filled the vacant positions in the career structure of the new state, which provided openings, especially for newly qualified teachers and functionaries, and expected full loyalty in return. A brief comparison with the 'sceptical generation' in the West only suggests that it was not just the pre-1945 experience which shaped the post-war generations, but the generational dynamics of the post-war opportunity structure, East and West (pp. 257, 292).

It may be doubted whether the newly labelled 45ers in the West were, indeed, equally ready to mobilize for democracy at the time, or even 'available for conversion' in the way much of the GDR *Aufbaugeneration* fell for the new regime. They found their private aspirations and political ambitions blocked by the generational inertia of a political system which kept ex-Nazi functionaries on board, as shown by the second life of Udo K., who even avoided denazification (pp. 277–8). This is certainly one of the reasons for the 68er revolt. In the East, on the contrary, the generational inertia of a political system dominated by the *Aufbaugeneration* blocked the way for the post-war generations which, according to Lutz Niethammer's 'oral history' team, eventually contributed to the collapse of the regime.⁸ What Fulbrook adds to this well-known story is the importance of ambivalence, even in the life stories of those who could claim 'conversion' and personal success. In fact, she claims, the sense of 'normlessness' which was left behind in 1945 spoke of the destruction of any sense of community, or any continuity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* for that matter—'to the extent that there ever had been' (p. 265)—so that the newly established socialist community needed even more convincing.

There were, she argues, basically three ways of renegotiating the 'presented self' in the new socialist regime: 'claimed conversion', 'claimed consistency', or, most likely, the excuse of a 'life with little agency' (pp. 280–1). It is, therefore, more than unfair to level the

⁷ Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR: Versuch einer Kollektivbiographie* (Berlin, 2002).

⁸ Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR: 30 biographische Eröffnungen* (Berlin, 1991).

charge of tacit approval at this analysis of post-war transformations, as Armin Nolzen does in his review, since Fulbrook is fully aware of the political self-delusion involved in this apology:

As far as an individual's sense of self was concerned, there clearly was a degree of dissonance between inner views and regime constraints at the time, providing a degree of plausibility, even a sense of authenticity, to this later defence. In terms of denazification, however, this sort of testimony was clutching at straws! (p. 283).

It is to the great credit of Fulbrook that her far reaching analysis goes beyond deconstructing this obviously flawed justification. For her, it is the dissociation of the self which not only provided a 'degree of plausibility' in denazification but, in fact, the basis of the whole *Volksgemeinschaft* delusion in the first place, which later reappeared in the second German dictatorship as the spectacle of a socialist community under police observation. Like the Nazi regime and for the same reasons, it could never really rely on the formation of an authentic personality streamlined by a scripted community spirit. The re-making and un-making of identities thus did not just serve the purposes of denazification, but was a basic condition of dictatorial regimes, both before and after 1945, and it showed most clearly in the young of both war youth generations because they were asked and given a chance to make the leap.

The post-war shock of non-identification was thus transformed into a sense of shame, as can be made out in a number of school-leaving essays from Schleswig-Holstein. Or, as in the case of Christa Wolf, it was transformed into a longing for the new anti-fascist utopia, particularly in those who were young enough and, anyway, forced to remake their lives under the new regime. The New Teacher programme served as an ideal script for the new engaging 'socialist personality', but here again, even for the 'winners' in this social revolution, an 'atmosphere of mutual suspicion' (p. 315) was unavoidable in a system which always distrusted its own efforts at mobilization. Given the exodus of about 3 million people before 1961, ever more organizational 'gestures of belonging' were required and, for that very reason, were hardly convincing, even for the party faithful. Official reports about widespread resentment against resettlement on

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the border, remilitarization, the publicly proclaimed friendship with wartime enemies, and the hero-worship of anti-fascist fighters in the camps all seem to confirm this, although more could be said about how such bureaucratic over-exposure actually contributed to the pervasive sense of a fake reality (pp. 319–24).

The generational dynamics in the East thus had more to do with the structural opportunities for young social climbers in key areas of administration and politics than with any war experience, which should have made their counterparts in the West equally 'culturally available' for mobilization (p. 333). But character (de)formation under the conditions of the new dictatorship only replayed the scenario which had lured the first war youth generation into the same pretence of a simulated community of believers in the first place. To detect this ambivalence between private objectives and official expectations Fulbrook makes use of interviews which she conducted only a few years ago. They are, of course, tainted. What could be said after reunification had made these life stories almost obsolete. Yet again, she is very good at deconstructing the self-delusion in what people have to say in order to adapt to the new requirements, and in what they cannot hide from themselves in their own pasts. Their 'normal' lives even produced the illusion of some real agency and allowed for a more or less reluctant adaptation and routinization (p. 343). The official paranoia, for example, with regard to youth culture, hardly makes it into such accounts of 'normal lives'. But it is likely that a more stringent set of oral history rules might have revealed the same sort of ambivalence about multiple realities if applied to a closely defined set of interviews. Instead, Fulbrook again and again tries to give the whole background story – the youth campaigns, Cold War culture, generational differences in the response to the *Wende*, and so on – in order to make the personal stories in her interviews stick. She also refutes recent efforts to see the different regime stages in terms of a succession of model generations for lack of any other distinctive generational formation like the 29ers, which, she insists, was 'the relatively most homogenous generational group of the entire century' (p. 397).⁹

It is clear that most of her post-unification stories have to do with renegotiating insecure or lost identities of the 29ers. They bring back

⁹ See Annegret Schüle, Thomas Ahbe, and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive: Eine Inventur* (Leipzig, 2006).

the major point which runs through the whole argument about generations, that is, that defining past selves has a lot to do with future expectations, especially when previous selves have to be redefined in terms of present opportunity structures. This is why, understandably, in the case of the 29ers, *Ostalgie* comes into play when taking stock of 'normal' lives under less than normal conditions (p. 463). This *ex post* romanticism reinforces the major story line, since projections of the past also made up much of the fantasies about the *Volks-gemeinschaft*. But sometimes this fundamental bias is almost buried in the plethora of life stories and general arguments about the character of SED rule in which the threads of the argument tend to get lost, especially when the defence of Fulbrook's 'normalization' thesis takes centre stage, as in the final chapters of the book.¹⁰

Despite this criticism it is no small feat for Fulbrook to have stepped back from the well-trodden paths of interpretation and started from the assumption that for both war youth generations, the lived-in world was characterized by the 'ambivalence' of 'the two worlds' (young) people had to live in when (self-)mobilized for dictatorial regimes. As she states at the beginning of her book: 'The apparent antinomy between repression and enthusiasm – giving rise to repeated debates about the balance of consensus, conformity, and coercion in Nazi Germany – is dissolved once we realize the extent to which people were able to dissociate their inner reservations from outward accommodation to both the perceived and the undeniably real and unavoidable demands of the regime' (p. 19).

There is one caveat, however, at the end of the book which seems to give prime place to ideological persuasion in an argument which otherwise highlights behavioural and attitudinal patterns in the generational opportunity structure of dictatorial regimes. When comparing the two sets of accommodation, both embraced by and forced on the young in the two German dictatorships, she argues, older East Germans, even after two decades, 'had apparently "still" not internalized the new dominant rules of the game to quite the same degree that, in the 1930s, Germans had "learned" the racist practices and

¹⁰ For the multiple uses of these interviews by Mary Fulbrook see also her essay, 'Living Through the GDR: History, Life Stories and Generations in East Germany', in Caroline Pearce and Nick Hodgin (eds.), *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State Since 1989* (New York, 2010); see p. 360, n. 7 and p. 441, n. 2.

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beliefs in “German superiority” that were so rapidly acquired in the Nazi period’. For all the belief in the powers of socialist persuasion, Fulbrook argues, ‘it seemed increasingly unlikely that most East Germans would ever become quite as enthusiastic for communism as many had been for Hitler’ (p. 373).

This may be just a function of the relative longevity of the SED regime, or of the violent surge for war in the case of the Third Reich. It may also allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the strength of ideological socializations in the two war youth generations, however adaptable they might have been in the situation of fully re-scripted life chances. But, on the whole, this does not distract from the true merit of this book. From her vast experience with the coping mechanisms needed to survive in the GDR with some sort of self-respect Fulbrook also adds to our understanding of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, not just as an ideological propaganda performance or a symbolic shambles of mass belonging, but as an enticing double act which allowed people to live in ‘two worlds’, a simulated social self and an insecure inner self. In the end, this subjective experience, which Fulbrook culls from hundreds of private stories, is the hidden transcript which destroyed not just the ‘public sphere’ but also the idea of an authentic self in both German dictatorships.

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