

Thomas A. Kohut. *A German Generation: an Experiential History of the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 335 pp. \$38.00 (cloth). ISBN-10: 0-300-17003-3. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN-10: 0-300-17003-0.

What distinguished America's "greatest generation" from their German contemporaries who supported and enabled the Third Reich's murderous projects? Given their dramatically different reputations but also the similarities in their general values and outlooks, it is an intriguing question and one that gets to the heart of Thomas Kohut's argument in *A German Generation*. To explain why so many Germans enthusiastically welcomed and participated in the projects of National Socialism, Kohut takes a psychologically informed approach that privileges the concrete, formative experiences of the individuals in question over long-term historical trends. In particular, he points to the overwhelming loss, disorder, and hardship endured by those who grew up in the Weimar Republic and to a lifelong coping strategy that involved submerging themselves within a particular collectivity (*Gemeinschaft*), in which they found a harmony of feeling and a sense of social superiority that would carry them through disorderly times. In other words, what distinguished Americans from their German counterparts was simply "the grace" of historical experience.

Kohut's rich and thoughtful study focuses on the experiences of sixty-two members of the Free German Circle, an organisation with roots in the youth movements of the Weimar era that continued to provide sociability and support for its ageing members until its dissolution in 2000. Interviewed in the late 1980s and 1990s for a government-sponsored, multi-disciplinary study, members recounted common experiences of good times and bad, and their adolescent social network was a red thread running through their lives and narratives. Directly affected by the disorder of Weimar and disenchanted with parents who came to embody the weakness of Germany, they sought out fulfilment and meaning by subsuming themselves within the youth movement. Members cultivated an elitist and cohesive group identity based on a rejection the materialism, individualism, and "politics" they saw around them and a celebration of their own

asceticism, moral purity, and harmony. While this encouraged a sense of social mission and an embrace of hard work, it also encouraged a sense of exclusivity and an avoidance of conflict, and these traits laid the foundation for their endorsement of National Socialism. They enthusiastically sought out Nazi institutions for a sense of collective purpose and achievement that they continued to value long after the destruction of the Second World War destroyed their illusions. Forced to rebuild their lives in the war's aftermath, they reconstituted the youth movement for support through the many challenges of the postwar era: the struggle first for survival and then for normalcy; the tortuous conflicts with rebellious children (the generation of 1968) who could not empathize with their parents; and the loneliness and deterioration of ageing.

Central to Kohut's analysis of these interviews is his emphasis on the repeated experience of loss, and herein lies a valuable scholarly contribution. He inverts the theory, made famous by the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich in 1967, that Germans' repressed guilt over Nazism's crimes manifested itself in an "inability to mourn." For Kohut, the same Germans who joined the youth movement and embraced Nazism in part because they were unable to process the familial and national losses experienced in their childhood were also unable to mourn the loss of National Socialism after 1945. But it was that inability that prevented this generation of Germans (as well as, Kohut controversially suggests, their children the 1968ers) from feeling guilt. Feeling guilt would have required a sense of empathy with the victims of National Socialism. But feeling empathy would have required not only acknowledging their deep personal investment in the regime and its ideals but ultimately also breaking down the carefully constructed, harmonious collective that was the foundation of their sense of self. Kohut's persistent reliance on such intensely personal and internal drives, especially individuals' troubled relationships with their parents, provides an enlightening addition to our understanding of the appeals of National Socialism and the difficulties some Germans have had in coming to terms with that past. His use of composite characters whose "interviews" he constructed from the actual interviews excellently evoke their particular experiences; instructors will find them useful for discussing the authority of particular modes of historical presentation.

There are limits, however, to what we can conclude from the sources at the heart of Kohut's analysis, and the book's title and subtitle suggest two. First, whom should we include in this "German Generation"? He explains in the introduction that he means to use "generation" to refer to a group with common experiences and a cohesive identity consciously cultivated over time. At the same time, he also generally has his sixty-two subjects stand in for their entire birth cohort. But how representative were these members of the educated middle-class with distinctly nationalist and conservative inclinations? Kohut's analysis does not engage with the significant divisions of class, region, religion, and political persuasion that played important roles in shaping Germans' experiences in these eras and determined, among other things, the sorts of support the National Socialists could call upon.

Second, what sort of "experiential history" do Kohut's sources allow him to write? Do they faithfully represent the actually lived experiences of the interviewed, or do they convey the lived experiences of the 1980s as filtered through decades of convoluted individual and collective memory-making? One example can illustrate the question. Kohut's sources repeatedly speak of not having been aware of crimes against the Jews or having simply "looked away" and failed to really comprehend the extent of what was happening. Kohut tends to take them at their word, arguing that they resisted *knowing* the truth because it would disrupt their sense of harmony. But could the persecution of the Jews really escape their perception at the time, or was it only nudged out after the fact as they tried to rationalize their behavior? This is a critique that Kohut briefly acknowledges, but it raises fundamental questions about using the tools of psychoanalysis (rather than, say, the rich literature on historical memory) to crack open these particular sources.

Scholars, instructors, and students will grapple over whether these sources can really give us the lived experience that Kohut wants to prioritize in his historical analysis, but all should agree that *A German Generation* excellently shows how these individuals translated historical context into lived experience, filtered it through the most personal relationships, and ultimately wove it into the fabric of identity and memory.

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