

Schilling, Britta: *Postcolonial Germany. Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-870346-4; XIV, 258 S.

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In „Postcolonial Germany,” Britta Schilling rejects the notion of an abrupt colonial amnesia in Germany after 1945 and instead argues for a longue durée of colonial memory that extends from the end of the Great War until the present day. Schilling suggests using material culture – that is, the history of colonial „things” (p. 9) – as a prism through which memory practices that have hitherto remained hidden can be made visible. Building on the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann on collective and cultural memory, she distinguishes between a private and public realm of memory production in which items such as books, state gifts, memorials, and family heirlooms constitute more than mere public symbols of remembrance. Rather, these items encapsulate the mnemonic interstice between private and public memory production – between individuals, families, society, and the state – in the form of actual „‘physical traces’ of the past” (p. 8). Embodied in these physical traces, both the private and public realm of memory informed and influenced each other, thereby filling „gaps” and memory lapses caused by the reverberations of twentieth-century German history. To Schilling, „[t]he significance of German colonial memory” arises from „its controversial nature, longevity, and repeated impact on politics and cultural life,” that is, from its „adaptability” (p. 12).

In six case studies, Schilling presents a vast tableau of the formation of colonial memory in Germany that spans almost a century and is based on an impressive selection of primary sources. First, the author highlights the history of the *Afrikabuch* during World War I and its aftermath as the corner stone of German colonial memory. The genre of *Afrikabücher* ranged from travel accounts, novels, memoirs, and geographies to children’s books, in which authors such as Hans Grimm represented Africa as an adventurous space of looming opportunity and thereby sought to familiari-

ze the wider German public with the colonialists’ experience and ideology. Second, Schilling looks at colonial balls in Weimar Germany through the lens of Freudian dream theory as performative acts of an exclusive ex-colonial elite, which sought to re-imagine and re-create the colonies in the metropole in the form of colonial wares and representations of blackness. Third, she examines how this elite discourse evolved into a different mass memory of colonialism that stressed *Koloniale Willensbildung* and allegedly German character traits through schoolbooks during the ‘Third Reich.’ Thus, in Weimar and National Socialist Germany, a small elite of colonialists and their direct descendants largely succeeded in establishing a positive collective memory of colonialism.

In contrast, after the Holocaust and the Second World War, public discourse on the colonial heritage in both German states fragmented. On the basis of hitherto untapped diplomatic records, Schilling reveals how both the West and East German state struggled to avoid pitfalls when choosing state gifts for newly independent former German colonies in Africa and posits these items as mnemonic artifacts that can be analyzed through French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift-giving. Mauss interpreted the exchange of gifts as systems of „total social phenomena” which expressed the plethora of „religious, legal, moral, and economic” relations of the two parties involved.¹ In this sense, state gifts such as the envisaged *Klinomobil* for Togo – a mobile medical station – functioned as „a representation of the giver’s self-worth, as well as their relationship to the receiver” (p. 109). Thus, West German diplomats presented the gift expecting it to be returned in the form of favorable future trade and development cooperation, while the Togolese consciously employed the colonial past and the inter-German rivalry as a lever to obtain a more suitable gift – an X-ray unit – and more development aid (p. 110).

The author then considers the effects of decolonization and global moments such as 1968 on West German public memory as well as the reverberations of historiographical deba-

¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London 1966 (1950), p. 1.

tes and the conflicts over the Namibia question in both German states. After 1968, colonialism had been recast as wrong, morally reprehensible, and as a possible prelude to the Holocaust. But instead of falling into complete oblivion, the memory of colonialism survived privately: on the basis of unique oral interviews conducted with descendants of colonial actors, including the von Trotha, von Kessel, von Lindequist, and von Puttkamer families, Schilling illustrates how a positive image of German colonial rule was transmitted to succeeding generations through family heirlooms such as hunting trophies, carpets and photos. At the same time, the author emphasizes that these families at times tried to influence – and in turn were influenced by – a predominantly negative public memory dominated by the *Denkmals* of the 1960s.

Britta Schilling has produced a highly readable and informative study, which is at once breathtaking in scope and swift in style, especially for a doctoral thesis. Effortlessly, she takes the reader through almost a century of German history and memory production without succumbing to superficiality or truisms. Instead, she carefully evaluates the evidence at her disposal and provides a fresh approach to historical memory studies by focusing on material culture and the complicated interplay of public and private memory. Her combination of historical scholarship with insights from anthropology and cultural studies – especially the analysis of state gift giving from a Maussian perspective – deserves great merit.

Nevertheless, some reservations remain. Although the individual chapters provide fascinating cross-sections on colonial memory within a specific time period, the heterogeneity of sources actually serves to undermine the validity of the whole argument. The reader is left to wonder, for instance, whether colonial memory all but disappeared from German schoolbooks after 1945. Arguably, a more diverse public memory of colonialism extended longer into the Cold War period as Schilling assumes. Similarly, the different sources in the other chapters – albeit cogent in themselves – complicate comparisons and the author does not elaborate why certain sources – including interview partners – were included

in the first place, but others not. As a result, her claim to a *longue durée* of colonial memory comes across as overly artificial and somewhat forced.

In her study of colonial balls, Schilling does not address the analytical gap between what is a theory of dream interpretation by a however famed yet nevertheless outdated Austrian psychologist and real historical actions by a group of independent individuals. This becomes most obvious in the discussion of the Zwickau colonial ball, but permeates the whole chapter (pp. 54, 56, 60) and culminates in the questionable assertion that „the performance of German jazz was a way of masking [the] true desire“ of listening to real jazz music (p. 64). Far from being the result of a misguided subconscious desire, German jazz developed due to social conventions regarding appropriate forms of dance and the conscious opposition to what some contemporaries perceived as dangerous and subversive elements of the real thing.² To make use of Freud for the sake of a metaphor is perfectly acceptable, as long as it does not contradict historical fact.

Bearing in mind these caveats, „Postcolonial Germany“ is above all a timely book. Despite all commemorative festivities regarding the 100th anniversary of the Great War, Germans largely appear to omit the colonial dimension of the nation's past and its implications for memory in their remembrance. Schilling's study promises to be a valuable reminder of it.

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² Michael H. Kater, 'The Jazz Experience in Weimar Germany', *German History* 6/2 (1988), pp. 145–158.