

Classen, Christoph: *Faschismus und Antifaschismus. Die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit im ostdeutschen Hörfunk (1945-1953)*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln 2004. ISBN: 3-412-15403-2; 384 S.

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A number of years ago, Christoph Classen published an excellent book on images of National Socialism on West German television between 1955 and 1965.¹ He has followed this with an equally thorough, perceptive and meticulously researched monograph on representations of antifascism and fascism on the radio in the Soviet-occupied zone (SBZ) and the early years of the GDR (up to 1953). His new book is not without occasional weaknesses. It is characterised by a degree of repetitiousness in places. Sometimes the admittedly always fascinating detail, particularly where administrative changes within eastern German and GDR radio are being described, tends to obscure the main lines of argument.

Also, if I might make a typically Anglo-Saxon observation, the long theoretical introduction to the book might have been slightly reduced. I was not convinced that the references to theorists such as Assmann and Foucault illuminate Classen's argument – which, being both admirably well-defined and intricately set out, is more than capable of speaking for itself. By contrast, I did feel that Classen could have done more to set his highly differentiated exploration of east German radio off against the rather monochrome portrayals of the SBZ and the GDR which emerge from the reports of the Federal Enquete Commissions. In recent years, research into the SBZ and the GDR has increasingly shown that terms such as „prescribed antifascism“ or „antifascist foundation myth“ are only of limited, relative validity – and indeed they hardly apply well to the early years of Soviet occupation, when a certain pluralism of memory discourses and even of political positions underpinned by such discourses was not untypical.

This is well illustrated by Classen's exploration of the evolution of the Deutschland-

sender and Berlin Radio, discussion of which form the centrepiece of his book. Classen argues that, before 1948, east German radio played host to a variety of memory discourses and of perspectives on the war; it also retained a certain similarity in terms of its emphasis on entertainment with radio during the latter years of the National Socialist era. As of 1948, however, with the intensification of the Cold War, radio became increasingly politicised in the interests of anti-western propaganda. „Antifascist“ no longer meant, or no longer just meant opposition to Hitler. More importantly, it came to signify opposition to the perceived threat of American imperialism and west German revanchism and neo-fascism. Classen shows that the term „antifascist“ also gradually shed its umbrella function. Instead of denoting a collective resistance to Hitler staged by a variety of social and political groups, it came to be identified with communist resistance in past and present. Faced with the need to legitimate itself in the confrontation with the west, the SED encouraged this semantic constriction. Accordingly, too, the staff of Berlin Radio were gradually either brought into line or removed.

But it was not just those who would have argued for a more plural approach to remembering the Nazi past who were weeded out; in the course of the intra-communist power struggle between former Moscow exiles around Ulbricht and western communist exiles, western emigrés working in radio were also forced out. Classen demonstrates that, as of 1948, interest groups who wished to publicly disseminate memory of their suffering and endurance had to subscribe to its instrumentalisation in the anti-western propaganda war. Yet the example of the ex-Buchenwalder which he chooses to illustrate this point is only partly valid. Classen argues with reference to a 1948 radio broadcast that Walter Bartel, former head of Buchenwald's International Resistance Committee, felt bound to subordinate his memories of Buchenwald to the party-political interests of anti-westernism (pp. 228-229). But

¹ Classen, Christoph, *Bilder der Vergangenheit. Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus im Fernsehen der Bundesrepublik 1955–1965*, Köln 1999.

Bartel had been giving his memories an anti-western slant long before 1948. Nor was this an act of subordination. By yoking his memories to anti-westernism, Bartel was implying that Buchenwald's legacy was of vital importance in the present. This was self-assertion rather than subordination. Nor is it the case that the Moscow exiles had won their struggle against the „Inlandkommunisten“ by 1948/49, as Classen suggests. They were certainly in a powerful position by then; but Buchenwald's communists and others in the KAW („Komitee der antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer“) came back fighting in the mid-1950s (in the conflict between Selbmann/Schirdewan and Ulbricht), and the struggle for how Buchenwald was to be remembered came to a head in 1958.

The strongest aspect of Classen's book is its commitment to differentiation. Thus he shows that, even in the 1945–1948 period when a more plural memory discourse was possible on east German radio and when there was an emphasis on various forms of victimhood, Jewish suffering tended to be marginalised (p. 130), as was the theme of Nazi racial theory, and there was little reference to eastern European annihilation camps (p. 132) – a lop-sidedness, incidentally, also characteristic of the Nuremberg trials, where, as Donald Bloxham has shown, camps such as Dachau were given much more prominence than Auschwitz, while Sobibór, Treblinka and Chełmno were hardly mentioned.² Classen also demonstrates that SBZ radio programmes between 1945 and 1948 sought to find ways of supporting the process of integration of the German populace into the new antifascist, and therefore Soviet order. This was attempted by glorification of the role of the Soviets during the war – a glorification which listeners however were reluctant to buy into. Most Germans still regarded Russians through the eyes of Nazi propaganda, and Red Army atrocities had not been forgotten. It was also attempted by offering listeners the chance to regard themselves as victims – of Hitler, Stalingrad or the bombing war. But whether this sense of victimhood led to Germans identifying the Soviets *post hoc* as „liberators“ remains a moot point. It is to Classen's great credit that he does not confuse

what the radio was trying to do with the effect that it had.

Altogether this book can be warmly recommended for its careful research, the subtlety of its argument, its spirit of differentiation and its contextualisation of radio programmes within shifting political agendas and sometimes contradictory approaches. Perhaps part of the introduction might have been more usefully given over to a comparison of radio in the SBZ and GDR with other mass media; what, for instance, was the situation in the newspaper landscape? But Classen has done a fine job in his chosen area. And a reviewer can only be pleased when a book helps him or her with his own research – as happened in the case of this reviewer.

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² Bloxham, Donald, *Genocide on Trial. War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory*, Oxford 2001.