

Sammelrez: Holocaust im Radio

Gerlof, Manuela: *Tonspuren. Erinnerungen an den Holocaust im Hörspiel der DDR (1945-1989)*. Berlin: de Gruyter 2010. ISBN: 978-3-11-022589-1; XII, 396 S.

Wolf, René: *The Undivided Sky. The Holocaust on East and West German Radio in the 1960s*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010. ISBN: 978-0-230-57676-6; 269 S.

Rezensiert von: Bill Niven, Department of History, Heritage and Geography, Nottingham Trent University

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of books on the cultural representation of the Holocaust in West and/or East Germany, and on related debates. One thinks, for instance, of Ernestine Schlant's „Language of Silence“ on literary representations of the Holocaust¹, of Peter Reichel's „Erfundene Erinnerung“, which examines the portrayal of World War Two and the Holocaust in post-war films and theatre productions², or of Martina Thiele's sensitive and informative study on the controversies triggered by filmic representations of the Holocaust.³ The two studies under review are the first, however, to examine in detail the representation of the Holocaust on German radio.

In the conclusion to her study on representations of the Holocaust in German Democratic Republic (GDR) radio plays, Manuela Gerlof sums up her findings by arguing that, in contrast to the currently dominant scholarly opinion, the Holocaust was „ein wesentliches Thema des DDR-Hörspielprogramms“ (p. 346). She underpins her thesis by identifying and analysing some 50 relevant radio plays, which are listed at the end of the book. To give the reader an impression of some of these, the book includes a very welcome audio CD with excerpts from recordings (provided by the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv) of a number of GDR radio play productions: these include a 1945 broadcast of Friedrich Wolf's „Professor Mamlock“, a 1964 broadcast of Günter de Bruyn's „Aussage unter Eid“, and a 1965 production of Peter Weiss's „Die Ermittlung“. As this latter example demonstrates, Gerlof supports her discussion with

reference not just to radio plays conceived and written in the GDR, but also to GDR radio play productions of West German works such as „Die Ermittlung“ and Ilse Aichinger's „Knöpfe“ (1989).

Gerlof does not make clear, however, that the theme of the Holocaust was not always presented the same way in GDR radio. She identifies a number of phases. Between 1945 and the end of the 1950s, she argues, Holocaust memory in GDR radio plays largely served to legitimise antifascist discourse and to provide strategies of integration and self-exculpation. In the 1960s, as the Cold War was at its height and in the context of the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials, GDR radio plays such as Friedrich Karl Kaul's „Alles beim Alten“ endeavoured to persuade listeners that the Holocaust was something only the supposedly neo-fascist West Germany had to come to terms with. But in the 1970s and continuing up to the „Wende“, the political liberalisation triggered by Honecker's accession to power brought about a more open handling of the Holocaust theme in which there was a degree of acknowledgement of German (rather than merely West German) guilt, and in which a more individualised perspective on Jewish suffering outside of the constricting discourse of antifascism became possible.

This is an important book – and not just because it challenges received wisdoms about Holocaust memory in the GDR, at least as far as the treatment of the theme in GDR radio plays is concerned. Its other key value is its awareness of the need to differentiate between cultural modes of reception. As Gerlof argues, radio plays have not received the same degree of critical attention when it comes to analysing Holocaust memory as have

¹ Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence. West German Literature and the Holocaust*, New York 1999; in German as: Ernestine Schlant, *Die Sprache des Schweigens. Die deutsche Literatur und der Holocaust*, München 2001.

² Peter Reichel, *Erfundene Erinnerung. Weltkrieg und Judenmord in Film und Theater*, München 2004; cf. the review by Markus Roth: *Rezension zu: Reichel, Peter: Erfundene Erinnerung. Weltkrieg und Judenmord in Film und Theater*. München 2004, in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 11.08.2004, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2004-3-093>> (09.01.2011).

³ Martina Thiele, *Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust im Film*, Münster 2000.

other media such as film. This is justification enough, then, for Gerlof's study. In largely overlooking radio plays, critics have missed the particular ways in which they can articulate the impact of the Holocaust, particularly through their focus on the human voice and the range of emotional resonances it can convey, enhanced by techniques such as moments of silence, sound effects, and the overlapping and fading in and out of sound. There is, then, an intimacy and immediacy about radio plays perhaps not possible to the same degree in feature films or in literature. Throughout her book, Gerlof examines the use of such techniques in addition to exploring the texts of the plays. As she rightly argues, it is not enough to analyse the textual content. The same goes for film. The non-textual aspect of radio plays and films was not likely to be as prone to censorship in the GDR as the scripts, and therefore provided a possible space for the indirect expression of messages it would otherwise not have been possible to convey.

For all the thoroughness of this book – and thorough it is – one does wonder at the omission of certain radio plays which might be considered Holocaust-related, such as the radio play of Bruno Apitz's „Nackt unter Wölfen“ (Joachim Witte's 1958 production). Of course, one could argue that „Nackt unter Wölfen“ is about antifascism, not the Holocaust. But Gerlof herself includes quite a number of radio plays that, while certainly dealing with the persecution of Jews under Nazism, do not address the Holocaust itself, or only touch on it. Wolf's „Professor Mamlock“, for instance, is set in 1933 and depicts the anti-Semitism of the early Nazi period. Wolfgang Kohlhaase's „Die Grünstein-Variante“ (1976) is set in a Paris prison in 1939. Even where the Holocaust is addressed, then this is often indirectly, in the form for instance of radio plays set in or evoking a court-room (such as Weiss's „Die Ermittlung“ or Günter de Bruyn's „Aussage unter Eid“). The issue in many plays is not so much the Holocaust itself, as the way it is framed, remembered, confronted (or not). With Jurek Becker's „Jakob der Lügner“ (1973), set in a ghetto, we come closest to the Holocaust. I do not wish to suggest that drama should only focus on the process of extermination, as it were at the

expense of the prehistory or posthistory of the Holocaust. The issue of whether the Holocaust can be represented is in any case a much-discussed and clearly complex one. But I think it is important to understand the Holocaust as the genocidal dimension to Nazi anti-Semitism, rather than to use it as an umbrella term for post-1933 persecution of Jews as a whole.

These definitional issues aside, I can strongly recommend Gerlof's book; it is an insightful, thought-provoking book which demonstrates that, while GDR politics may have marginalised or ideologically framed the theme of Nazi anti-Semitism, in GDR culture a greater variety of responses was possible. The same is true, by the way, of the theme of the flight and expulsion of Germans, traces of which can be found in GDR literature and film to a wider degree than commonly thought.

The other book to be considered here is René Wolf's „The Undivided Sky“. Wolf's book, at first glance, would appear to be both wider and narrower in focus than Gerlof's: wider in that Wolf considers both West and East German radio, but narrower in the sense that he concentrates on one particular decade, namely the 1960s. That said, Wolf's book also provides discussion of the emergence and use of radio in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany, and of Allied as well as West and East German broadcasting policies and politics in the 1945-1970 period. Whereas Gerlof analyses radio plays, Wolf discusses radio programmes reporting on the key Nazi trials of the 1960s. The book opens and concludes with an analysis of „Das Lager“, a programme transmitted by „Deutsche Welle“ relating to the third Auschwitz trial (1967-1968) of Auschwitz kapos Bernhard Bonitz and Josef Windeck. The intervening chapters – after a chapter providing an overview of theoretical writings on radio largely reflecting on its relationship to modernity (e.g. by Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht) – consider radio reports on the Nuremberg trials, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, and the Auschwitz trials of 1963-1965. The penultimate chapter examines radio as a medium of memory. How did West and East German listeners react to the programmes they heard on the subject of these Nazi trials? Did the reports shape the way

they came to regard the National Socialist era? Wolf makes clear just how hard this question is to answer on the basis of ultimately inadequate polling data – a problem particularly acute as far as our knowledge of the GDR is concerned. Nevertheless, Wolf ventures the argument that, while West German radio may have succeeded in helping West Germans to work through the past to a degree and certainly served the purpose of contributing to the acceptance of liberal-democratic values, this did not necessarily stop West Germans imagining the perpetrator as „the other“ or exonerating their own families of responsibility (p. 201).

Wolf's study reinforces the points made by Gerlof about radio's function in the Cold War battle over interpretations of the Nazi past. In an attempt to transform the Auschwitz trials into an indictment of supposed continuities between fascism and capitalism in West Germany, GDR radio programmes supported the attempts by the SED to highlight the contribution of the I.G. Farbenindustrie AG (IG Farben) to the murderous regime at Auschwitz-Monowitz. In West Germany, there was often severe criticism on radio as well as in other media of the SED's interference in the trials through the person of adjunct prosecutor Friedrich Kaul. Wolf's analysis is sensitive to nuances in the West German reporting, and his book provides insight into the important role of individual radio personalities such as Axel Eggebrecht and Peter von Zahn, whose reports on West German trials relating to Nazism reached the living-rooms of many West Germans. What becomes clear from Wolf's book is that, while most East German radio reports on the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials routinely endeavoured to project responsibility for Nazism onto West Germany, West German radio reports – while not missing the chance to condemn the SED's anti-western campaigns – did not shirk from confronting West Germans with the question of German connivance in the crimes of Nazism.

I have one or two reservations. Wolf approaches the topic from various angles – modernity theory, the use of radio under different regimes, the structural reorganisation of the media in the post-war period, and memory theory. But the book does not always si-

tuating the discussion of the individual radio programmes within these frameworks successfully. A more sharply defined line of argumentation might have helped. At one or two points, I found myself a little confused. The text refers a number of times to the „Buchenwald ZK“, for instance, or „Buchenwald Central Committee“ (e.g. p. 205), which Wolf describes as the „incarcerated KPD leadership“ (p. 73). But the ZK of the KPD was in Moscow (and Thälmann in Berlin, Hannover, and Bautzen), not Buchenwald. Of the leaders of the German communist group at Buchenwald, Walter Bartel had been excluded from the KPD in 1935, while Harry Kuhn had merely worked for the press agency of the ZK of the KPD before being marginalised in 1931 because of his views. Wolf suggests that, in 1965, a law was passed in West Germany which limited the prosecution of crimes committed during the Third Reich, with only murder being prosecutable after 20 years (p. 209). But in fact a statute of limitations already existed and had come into application for some Third Reich crimes. Is the „Gesetz über die Berechnung strafrechtlicher Verjährungsfristen“ meant here? If so, surely what this law did was set the starting-point for the commencement of the period of possible prosecution at 31st December 1949, with the result that the murder crimes in question could still be prosecuted in and after 1965.

These caveats notwithstanding, Wolf has written an engaged, intelligent and sophisticated book which – alongside Gerlof's – does much to enhance our understanding of the role of the radio in disseminating information about and views of the Holocaust.

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