International Social Science Review

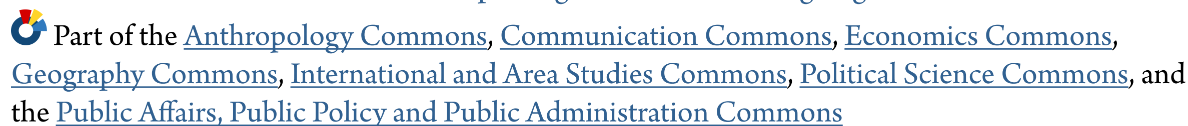
Volume 90 | Issue 1 Article 10

2015

A German Generation: An Experiential History of the Twentieth Century by Thomas A. Kohut

Laurence Hare
University of Arkansas

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr


Part of the Anthropology Commons, Communication Commons, Economics Commons, Geography Commons, International and Area Studies Commons, Political Science Commons, and the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

Recommended Citation
Hare, Laurence (2015) "A German Generation: An Experiential History of the Twentieth Century by Thomas A. Kohut," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 90: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol90/iss1/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized administrator of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Kohut, Thomas A. ***A German Generation: An Experiential History of the Twentieth Century*****. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. x + 335 pages. Paper, $30.00.**

In June 2014, *Arts.21*, the cultural magazine of German news service Deutsche Welle, unveiled "When We Were 17: Youth at the Crossroads," an online exhibit showcasing the experiences of young Germans at six key moments in the country's history during the last century. The exhibit followed closely on the heels of the television miniseries, *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (*Generation War*), which was produced by German broadcaster ZDF and told the story of five friends coming of age in Germany during the Second World War. Such examples attest to the ways in which generational approaches to the German past have recently became all the rage. Scholars, too, have undertaken new studies of German history through a generational lens, including the historian Mary Fulbrook, whose 2012 work, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships*, followed two "war youth" generations through the years of Nazism and Communism. And now fellow historian Thomas A. Kohut has joined the conversation with his latest, *A German Generation: An Experiential History of the Twentieth Century*.

Kohut, whose background is largely in psychohistory, comes to the study of generations to understand how historical events shape the human psyche. Such questions, of course, tend to be controversial among many historians, who debate whether scholars can derive a psychological profile utilizing only the limited resources of the historical record. But here Kohut is on firmer ground, as he turns to sociology to frame a set of historical questions in the context of collective experience. Specifically, he builds on the work of the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, who argued for a notion of "generational consciousness," for individuals who, in his words, "had been exposed to the same—generally destabilizing—social and historical forces in adolescence" (p. 5). Kohut examines one such group belonging to the so-called Weimar-youth generation, whose members grew up during the First World War and Weimar era, reached young adulthood during the years of the Third Reich, and retired in the postwar Federal Republic. His first objective is to reveal the ways in which "different historical experiences gave distinct shape to each German generation" (p. 8), with a specific focus on how these experiences are imprinted most strongly during childhood and adolescence.

Kohut's approach largely succeeds, mainly because his source base is so unique. Mary Fulbrook attempted to convey the experience of two wartime generations by leaning heavily on statistics and contextual sources and embossing them with rich anecdotal evidence. Kohut, by contrast, focuses on a much smaller sample to yield a more in-depth assessment of a single generation's experiences. Specifically, he relies on a set of interviews of former members of a German youth group known as the Free German Circle. The cohort is fascinating because they had so much in common, including a predominantly middle-class upbringing and a similar set of encounters with the troubles of the Weimar years, and also because their experience in the Free German Circle led them to willing participation in the Nazi movement. At the same time, there are only sixty interviews, which raises the question of whether there are enough sources to speak for an entire generation. Kohut claims that there are, arguing that the interviewees were highly representative in terms of class, gender, and age. However, one might counter that what he has actually delivered is the history of a cohort rather than a generation at large.

Kohut divides his book into three sections covering the years between the First World War and the rise of the Nazis, the era of the Third Reich and Second World War, and the postwar years. Within each section are chapters providing glimpses at the personal stories of both a male

and female subject and an analysis of the stories for the given period. By far, the analysis sections are the strongest components of the book. Rather than force the accounts into a theoretical framework, Kohut is content to observe moments in which patterns in experiences and responses seem to emerge. Though qualitative, these points are illuminating and persuasive. Kohut notes common instances of rebellion within the cohort, revealing the ways in which the communal ethos of the youth movement provided ways of coping with the devastating changes that the cohort encountered at each stage of Germany's convulsive history. At the center of the trauma was the notion of loss, which Kohut traces from a personal to a societal level. "The losses suffered by the family," he writes of the Weimar years, "were inscribed by the losses suffered by the nation" (p. 63). Kohut is also keenly aware of how the historical periods were experienced along gendered lines. In the 1930s, for instance, he notes that both males and females supported the Nazis' concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*, or national community, and though they were pushed out of the youth movement, they nevertheless gravitated towards activities within Nazi-oriented groups. But their motivations bore gendered characteristics. He notes, "Whereas the women seem to have welcomed the opportunity these institutions provided to prove themselves to *themselves*, the men appear to have felt the need more to prove themselves to *others…"* (p. 129).

With these insights, Kohut manages to capture the experiences and responses of the interviewees. But he also seeks to explain their choices. Here the interviews are especially fascinating, as we see the subjects relate accounts of Nazi genocide that move inexorably from disavowal of any knowledge of atrocities to admission and apologetics. In his analysis, Kohut argues that this response is conditioned by social experience. "What Germans 'knew,'" he explains, "was, in part, a product of social consensus, and accepting what was commonly known was a condition for membership in the community" (p. 141). Kohut thus shows how the intense need for belonging informed a specific way of knowing, and more specifically a way of seeing, and how this in turn led a group of "ordinary" Germans into complicity with the crimes of the Nazis. The conclusion is chilling: "It seems important to remind ourselves that what ultimately separates us from those who carried out and enabled the genocide is historical experience" (p. 240). Kohut further strengthens his arguments by including in each section an essay situating his analysis within the current historiography. In many cases, we see that the literature supports his analyses, but it would also have been nice to see Kohut use his study to challenge or otherwise suggest new possibilities within current scholarship.

The chapters that are at once the most promising and the most disappointing are the interviews themselves. Kohut maintains that the interviews have so many commonalities that they border on redundancy. For this reason, he elects to present them as "composite biographies," in which the details of several individuals merge together in a single narrative. While I am sure this approach improves the narrative flow and helps readers more readily see the points Kohut makes in his analyses, I nevertheless find this strategy troubling. As a historian, I would much prefer to see the author present the authentic experiences of the individuals he is studying, even if there is repetition or the occasional lapse into the mundane. Moreover, the incongruities of the accounts may be bothersome to readers familiar with Germany. For instance, in the Weimar interviews, the male subject recalls a childhood in eastern Germany, but then his story jumps awkwardly to Flensburg in the far north before resting in Berlin. In reality, these were the accounts of three different subjects, which forced Kohut to add sentences to make sense of the geographical discrepancies in the story. It would have been far better either to produce an exemplary interview or to offer selections from multiple interviews. Otherwise, the approach threatens to efface the authentic experience of individuals in search of broader patterns.

Despite this regrettable shortcoming, the fact that it provides a glimpse of the interviews and then supports them with analysis and historiography has made *A German Generation* a great addition to my own advanced course on twentieth-century Germany, and I would further recommend it for readers interested in historical methodology, historical sociology, or psychology. I simply hope that Kohut may have the chance to produce an updated edition in which he can let the subjects speak more for themselves. As he has so ably shown, they have a lot to tell us.

J. Laurence Hare, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of History
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas