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Continuities of Marginalisation

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Continuities of Marginalisation*

In her new book, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, Director of the Centre for Research on Antisemitism at TU Berlin, investigates the experiences of those persecuted under National Socialist rule whose subsequent lives in the Federal Republic remained defined by these experiences – not merely as traumatic memories of a horrific but distant past, but as a continued reality of marginalisation, humiliation and ongoing criminalisation. The period she explores spans the first 25 years after the war. In just 250 pages, Schüler-Springorum offers a compelling synthesis, demonstrating that while there were some improvements in the early years of Allied occupation, the situation for many victims – Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, forced labourers, so-called »asocials« and those classified as »hereditarily ill« – often worsened with the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949. Consequently, many survivors quickly lost faith in West Germany's commitment to a democratic renewal. Despite governmental promises of »generosity« and »unbureaucratic aid« to Nazi victims in the 1950s, in practice, compensation efforts and social policies were often undermined by suspicion and outright hostility.

The focus of the book, therefore, is not on the liberalisation expected with the establishment of democracy, but on the continuities with the dictatorial past. Schüler-Springorum argues that the experiences of former victims of Nazi persecution reveal that many non-persecuted Germans remained deeply resentful long after 1945. She contends that there was a »persistent desire to uphold a societal hierarchy that differed from that of the National Socialists only by the constraints imposed by defeat in the war«. The ideal of a racially homogeneous *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) – a core element of Nazi ideology – remained influential in shaping attitudes towards marginalised minorities. This mindset continued to inform the treatment of survivors and other marginalised groups in police stations, courts and public offices well into the 1960s. In this way, institutions reflected the prevailing views of the broader population. Alongside the country's rapid economic recovery, the ongoing »antisemitic, racist and homophobic practices« played a central role in stabilising the emotional landscape of the majority society in early postwar West Germany. This only began to change gradually from the late 1960s onwards.

Schüler-Springorum substantiates this argument through five thematic chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion that engage with historiographical trends and recent developments since the 1990s. She begins with a brief, expertly condensed overview of Nazi persecution measures between 1933 and 1945, followed by chapters that provide numerous examples showing that for many victims, the end of the Nazi regime did not signal an immediate improvement of their lives. Whereas only a very small number of perpetrators faced trial and most of them were quickly reintegrated into West German society, those previously labelled as socially or racially deviant struggled to clear their names or receive compensation and support. Many victims quickly realised that speaking out publicly was dangerous, as the same people who had persecuted them during the Nazi era often still (or again) held positions of power in the West German judiciary and police. Consequently, survivors faced profound isolation. In many cases, their previous social and professional networks had been permanently destroyed. Although they longed for recognition, they were frequently ignored and confined to suffering in silence.

Despite decades of research on Nazi persecution and its aftermath, the continuities Schüler-Springorum highlights remain startling in both scale and brutality. Local police forces, for example, often blamed displaced persons – such as released concentration camp inmates and former slave labourers – for rising crime rates in the postwar years. Some authorities even advocated for reimposing concentration camps to separate these individuals from mainstream society, effectively maintaining the exclusionary policies of the Third Reich. Holocaust survivors continued to face open antisemitism, and although physical violence against them was no longer permissible, many

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Germans made it clear to them that they were unwelcome. While Jews received at least some support from international Jewish organisations, Sinti and Roma were largely unable to organise and remained isolated. Many had been stripped of their German citizenship, had little political representation and were the subject of continuous persecution by the West German authorities throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Since their »complete expulsion« from German soil was no longer possible, they were often relocated to the outskirts of towns and had to live in flood-prone areas or near garbage dumps.

Many Nazi-era laws and court rulings were not overturned, which further legitimised the social stigmatisation and ongoing persecution of the individuals targeted long after 1945. Victims of forced sterilisation, numbering around 400 000, struggled to gain compensation or public recognition, as the rulings of Nazi-era hereditary health courts remained in force. Maybe even more striking is that those who had been subjected to human experiments in concentration camps or asylums were excluded from any compensation under the Federal Compensation Law *(Bundesentschädigungsgesetz – BEG)*. Male homosexuals continued to be prosecuted under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code. Although the Nazis had tightened this law in 1935, it remained in place during the early years of the Federal Republic. Between 1949 and the late 1960s, around 50 000 men were convicted for male homosexuality in West Germany. They were only rehabilitated less than a decade ago, in 2017. Even international organisations sympathetic to the suffering of the survivors largely ignored those forms of violence that had targeted mostly or exclusively women, such as forced abortions, rape or the deliberate starvation of newborn babies.

While the situation was already dire for German victims, it was substantially worse for foreigners or those who found themselves stateless after the war. The Federal Compensation Law from 1953 mirrored this hierarchy of victims. It benefited German claimants, including former German nationals stripped of their citizenship, while non-German victims, particularly those living in Eastern Europe, were excluded from redress. Limited compensation for the latter group of victims came only decades later, after most had passed away. In the early postwar period, the tone towards non-German victims was often openly hostile. Public law expert Ulrich Scheuner, whom Schüler-Springorum quotes, even questioned whether there would be »any right of existence for Slavonic groups in Germany« after 1945. Unlike most victims, Scheuner himself fared very well in postwar-Germany. His biography illustrates the general point: a former NSDAP member and Nazi professor, he managed to secure a position at the *Evangelisches Hilfswerk* (Protestant Relief Organization) in Stuttgart before he was appointed, in 1950, to a professorship at the University of Bonn, where he also became the director of its Institute of International Law.

In her final chapter, Schüler-Springorum advocates for a better integration of the survivors' shameful treatment in future histories of West German democracy after 1945, which should generally pay more attention to continuities of racism. Considering the ongoing international debate about the achievements and shortcomings of unified Germany's culture of remembrance, she argues that the integration of marginalised voices would effectively undermine »any kind of national or postnational sense of superiority«. Given her claim to contribute to the debate on contemporary memory politics and in light of the fact that many contemporary historians have emphatically highlighted the entanglement of West and East German postwar history since the 1990s, it is surprising that a synthesis written more than three decades after the end of the Cold War rarely addresses the experiences of survivors in the GDR, Austria or other European countries, which makes it difficult to identify and contextualise the peculiarities of the West German case. Schüler-Springorum's perspective and core arguments align more with a number of pioneering studies from the 1980s that challenged self-complacent narratives of the Federal Republic as an outright »success story« by focussing on the experiences of marginalised and persecuted social groups – such as Detlev Peukert's *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde* of 1982 (Engl.: *Inside Nazi Germany*, 1987), Ulrich Herbert's history of foreign labourers in the Federal Republic published a few years later (*Fremdarbeiter*, 1985) and Christian Pross' *Wiedergutmachung:Der Kleinkrieg gegen die Opfer* of 1988 (Engl.: *Paying for the Past*, 1998). Stefanie Schüler-Springorum makes an excellent contribution to this important tradition of critical West German historiography by providing a powerful and empathetic analysis of the continuing marginalisation experienced by the victims of Nazi persecution in the early Federal Republic.

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