

Corinna R.Unger, *Ostforschung in Westdeutschland. Die Erforschung des europäischen Ostens und die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 1945-1975.* Franz Steiner, Stuttgart, 2007. 56 euros. 441pp. Appendix, Bibliography, Index.

Ostforschung, purporting to be the scientific study of former German areas of Eastern Central and Eastern Europe, has its origins in the years immediately after the First World War. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw researchers focusing more on the study of Germany's role in the historic settlements of Eastern Europe, a trend reaching its high point during the Second World War. From the outset such research had a political slant and this was particularly marked in Hitler's Germany. There existed, as Dr Unger makes clear, a basic affinity of ideas and politics between the regime and most of those engaged in *Ostforschung* —a theme treated at length in an earlier study by Michael Burleigh (*Germany turns eastwards. A study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich*, C.U.P., 1988).

Although the years 1945 to 1949 witnessed a temporary blip in *Ostforschung* it returned with a vengeance in the 1950s. Key dates were the creation of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) in 1951 and the formation of a Committee for *Ostforschung* by the rectors of West German universities and the Minister of Culture in 1953. Given the focus of Burleigh's study, his trenchant criticism of those *Ostforscher* still active after 1945 was confined to a concluding chapter. Corinna Unger's book has far more space and adopts a diachronic approach to explore the changes within *Ostforschung* over the period 1945–1975.

Ostforschung, as Unger points out, was 'a conglomerate of the most diverse specialities'(p.31) rather than a discipline in its own right, embracing among other specialisms history, demography and anthropology. Naturally, the author also draws

our attention, as so many have before, to the difficulty of agreeing what ‘Osteuropa’ encompasses. In this study the geographical areas involved are Russia, the USSR and Poland, with comparatively little attention given to the Baltic states or south eastern Europe.

The starting point for examining the framework of *Ostforschung* in West Germany after 1945 is the limited extent to which de-nazification took place, thus allowing many academic and other professional elites to retain their status. Certainly, there was an absence of critical examination of the work done by *Ostforscher* during the Hitler era. Many Germans refused to face up to their individual roles after the war ended, retreating to being victims of collective guilt. For *Ostforscher* this entailed viewing the Nazi era as an almost autonomous phase, something that merely impacted superficially on their longer term researches before and after the Third Reich.

Not surprisingly in such an environment, the DFG faced quite a challenge from 1951, in reaching its goal to encourage research independent of political goals and pressures. Moreover, research carried out on eastern Europe could hardly fail to reflect the fact that some 85% of west Germans believed the Federal German Republic had a legitimate claim to East and West Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia. Equally, the hard line taken by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer on re-unification minimised the possibilities of more constructive thinking on the German problem. As Dr Unger succinctly comments: ‘The readiness of west Germans to revise their position vis-à-vis the east was thus slight.’ (p. 91)

Equally, the anti-totalitarian, anti-communist mood encouraged by such circumstances made it easier to draw a veil for the time being over German wartime crimes in the east. A somewhat baleful influence was also exerted by those Germans driven out of their original homes in eastern Europe as a consequence of the war—the

Vertriebene, while territorial losses generally hindered the development of German-Polish relations. The gathering of documentation on *Vertriebene* experiences and the attention given to the study of *Vertreibung* showed how quickly a research field could be institutionalised in West Germany on the basis of political relevance, even though researchers did not necessarily see their work in revisionist terms, but rather as promoting understanding of peoples in the east.

When the new chairs of east European history began to be established—the first in Mainz in 1946—the DFG insisted on purely academic criteria in selecting professors, thus establishing ‘the border between university research and political interest’ (p. 118) and limiting the influence of political authorities on university *Ostforschung*. Unger acknowledges that in the post-war era and early 1950s the German-centric, nationalist motivated research on the east underpinned West German’s wish to revise the Oder-Neisse line. Despite similarities with the pre-1945 mindset, however, the author stresses that the strong research interest in German achievements in the east no longer served expansionist goals. Indeed, shared German-Polish hostility towards the Soviet Union relativised the conflict between the two countries and drew attention to shared historic interactions transcending the iron curtain.

For all that, critical perspectives within practitioners of *Ostforschung* were not well developed during the 1950s. How could they be in view of the continuing stress on West Germany as the border against barbarism in the Soviet east and the attendant unwillingness of *Ostforscher* to face up to their own roles under National Socialism? The continuing influence of anti-communism on *Ostforscher* is illustrated in the part of Unger’s volume on research on Russia, the Soviets and communism. From the mid-1950s the need to think through the West’s stance towards the Soviet Union

fuelled a demand for more information on the realities of communism to counter Moscow's propaganda. The West German government set up several centres to meet this need thus 'institutionalising' anti-communist research on the Soviet Union. (p.220)

Such 'scientific containment of communism' witnessed the development of paradigms of totalitarianism which stamped the research perspective of West German academics on the USSR and, for some, encouraged a belief in the duty to advise the government at policy level. An overlap became apparent between academic researchers and those 'experts' engaged in briefing the government with specific detail on the Soviet Union. The case of Werner Markert, a university professor and political adviser, shows how hard it remained to draw the sort of boundary that many researchers would have wished and how fitting in with the regime's concerns could help advance one's career. Unger finds in these respects additional continuities with the period before 1945. Differences in context remained, nevertheless, all important.

The sense of national duty that had motivated researchers after 1918 to prioritise German interests in eastern central Europe gave way after 1945, Unger believes, to supranational justification in terms of countering a threat to the West as a whole. How difficult it was to make a clean break is illustrated by the book's analysis of the implications of both the Nazi past and the cold war era encouraging perceptions of Russia and the Soviet Union as 'strange' and 'foreign' to the West. 'This perception had been combined under National Socialism with an aggressive anti-Bolshevism, which continued thereafter to influence the conception of Russian and Soviet history in the Federal Republic. In the transformation of the racist, national socialist anti-bolshevism to the anti-totalitarian, western anti-communism of the cold war lay one of the reasons why contemporary-orientated research on Russia and the

Soviets could establish itself so quickly and successfully in the Federal Republic.’(p.276)

In considering subsequent developments in West German *Ostforschung* Unger looks at the shift from a preoccupation among researchers with the moral dimension towards a more nuanced study of the system. That is to say, questions raised had less to do with the threat from communism to western values and more with how the communist system related to different forms of government. One of the important preconditions of this shift was the movement towards general east-west détente and of course the emergence of the new Ostpolitik, associated above all with Willy Brandt. Another factor was the growing awareness of the inappropriateness of a German-centric *Ostforschung*. The author rightly attributes this to greater public discussion of the recent past and of the Nazi role in eastern central Europe. The process naturally was aided by the growing number of east-west exchanges from the 1970s, ultimately contributing to the revision of long held ideas on the basis of direct experience of life in the eastern bloc.

The discussion of Russian-Soviet research in the United States since World War two is offered for comparative purposes. The field was dominated until the 1960s by political considerations and defence concerns—generating pressure on academics to provide information for policy analysis, from which the careers of many of those concerned undoubtedly profited. However, in the end this closely argued book is chiefly valuable for its insights into the German academic scene after 1945. Unger observes that despite some unfortunate continuities and attitudes before and after 1945, there were always critical voices, which in the end won through. ‘The transformation of *Ostforschung* resulting from this to an *Osteuropaforschung*

unburdened by nationalist assumptions was part of a comprehensive process of change in society.’

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