

10-1-2002

# Review of "Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945" by Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld  
*Fairfield University*, [rosenfeld@fairfield.edu](mailto:rosenfeld@fairfield.edu)

Copyright 2002 Gavriel Rosenfeld.

## **Peer Reviewed**

---

### Repository Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel D., "Review of "Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945" by Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert" (2002). *History Faculty Publications*. 46.  
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/46>

### Published Citation

Rosenfeld, G. (2002) Review of "Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945" by Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert in: *German Studies Review*, October, 2002, pp. 635-36.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

certainly relevant, the book drifts somewhat as the reader is submerged in a sea of detail. Nonetheless, this is an insignificant criticism in light of Scalia's great accomplishment in *U-234*, a first-rate work of important history that should sit upon every scholar's shelf.

GARY ANDERSON, *International School of General Management, Friedrichshafen*

Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert. *Geschichtsvergessenheit, Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999. Pp. 319. Hardback EUR 22.00.

Scholars interested in the Germans' ongoing struggle to "come to terms" with the Nazi past have been hard pressed in the last few years to keep up with the swelling literature on the subject. As public controversies over the Third Reich have multiplied in the last decade, they have been accompanied by a wave of studies that have attempted to situate them within a broader history of German memory. Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert's new book is at once a symptom of this trend as well as an attempt to explain its origins.

*Geschichtsvergessenheit, Geschichtsversessenheit* is composed of two separate analytical essays (each around 150 pages in length) in which the authors attempt to explain the puzzling coexistence—implied in the book's title—of a German tendency to avoid dealing with the past, on the one hand, and an inclination to be obsessively concerned with it, on the other. Assmann's contribution uses the Walser-Bubis controversy of 1998 as a point of departure to explore the deeper dynamics of Vergangenheitsbewältigung from a theoretical perspective. In analyzing the discursive dimensions of the Walser-Bubis controversy, she provides a useful typology of the different forms of memory that have coexisted within German society, as well as an analytical deconstruction of the central concepts that have been regularly used in the postwar German debates over how to go about remembering the Nazi past. Thus, Assmann differentiates between "communicative memory," "collective memory," and "cultural memory," while exploring the significance of such loaded concepts as "Schlussstrich," "normalization," "instrumentalization," and "ritualization." Space does not permit discussing the useful distinctions drawn by Assmann in defining these concepts, nor is it possible to detail her ensuing analysis of the concepts of "shame" and "guilt." On the whole, however, her discussion of the forms and terms of memory is carefully drawn and provides a useful means for clarifying a subject that is often explored with far less precision by others.

Assmann's focus on terminology is not meant to be an end in itself, but rather a means of tracing the broader trajectory of postwar German memory. Employing

the concepts outlined in the theoretical portion of her analysis, she periodizes the long postwar struggle over the Nazi legacy, differentiating between three phases (1945-57, 1958-84, and 1985 to the present), and arriving at some broader conclusions about what the controversies of the recent past portend for the future. In this historical section of her essay, Assmann (who is not an historian) is somewhat less successful than in her theoretical section. Some of her observations are important but deserve further exploration—for example her point that “every call for [...] a Schlusstrich [...] has brought about the exact opposite and caused the resurrection of memory” (53). Other claims—such as her confident assertion that Germans since the 1990s have largely abandoned any expectation of a Schlusstrich—are plausible but not supported by her essay’s thin empirical base. On the whole, her essay is cautiously optimistic about the Germans’ achievements in coming to terms with the Nazi legacy while avoiding any suggestion that these achievements indicate any imminent end to the process.

Frevert’s contribution to the volume is superior to Assmann’s in terms of its historical depth, but it does not really move beyond the familiar conclusions of such scholars as Norbert Frei, Jeffrey Herf, and Peter Reichel. Her essay does differ from Frei’s and Reichel’s accounts in being more of a cultural history of how remembrance—or, more accurately, “Geschichtspolitik”—in the FRG and GDR was used in the formation of the two states’ separate national identities from 1949 to 1989. Frevert’s broad synchronic focus on everything from flags, hymns, holidays, speeches, monuments, and museum exhibitions is impressive in its breadth, but she inevitably sacrifices depth in swiftly moving from one historical controversy to the next (a problem that is sharpened by her decision to discuss controversies unrelated to the NS-era in two chapters). Her diachronic discussion of the broader shifts in German memory from 1949 to the present is sound, though she (like Assmann) might have spent more time developing her larger conclusions. Some of her more interesting points include her belief in the superior effectiveness of those confrontations with the Nazi past that have had an affective dimension (the Holocaust-docudrama, the Wehrmacht exhibition, etc.) and her assertion that the intensifying German involvement with the past since 1990 is rooted in a widespread awareness of the imminent demise of the last living witnesses to the period (what she calls the “Letztmaligkeits-These”). In the end, Frevert’s most unprovable assertion is the one that bears the most watching, namely her view (formulated in opposition to the thesis of Hermann Lübbe) that the German engagement with the Nazi past will not continue to intensify as the past recedes in time. For Frevert, a strong effort will be required in the future to prevent the Nazi past from becoming inordinately ritualized and ultimately irrelevant for the generations to come.

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD, *Fairfield University*