

*Experiment Einheit. Zeithistorische Essays.* Edited by Martin Sabrow and Alexander Koch. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015. 168 pp. €16.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-3-8353-1864-9.

As Andreas Ludwig characterizes it in a qualification at the start of his contribution to *Experiment Einheit*, the period following German reunification was one of ‘ruptures and continuities’, disorienting and difficult to make sense of ‘academically or personally’ (p. 95). Sabrow and Koch’s edited volume is very successful in its treatment of this confusion, and of the scale of the challenges posed by the reintegration of two societies that had diverged, albeit to a debatable extent, over forty years. Its essays highlight the rapidity with which Germans, particularly East Germans, were obliged to adapt, and the biographical disruption that this often caused. Just as importantly, it also addresses the difficulties of longer-term societal reintegration, continuing long after formal political and legal union had been achieved. This conception of reunification as a problematic transition, an ‘experiment’ in the German sense of an uncertain and potentially damaging enterprise, is the volume’s theoretical focus and principal strength.

Sabrow and Koch have compiled this collection as one of two accompaniments to an exhibition, titled *Alltag Einheit: Porträt einer Übergangsgesellschaft*, held at Berlin’s Deutsches Historisches Museum between May 2015 and February 2016. In a similar way to the exhibition before it, the book aims to investigate reunification as an everyday lived experience in the political, economic and cultural spheres, on both the societal and the individual level. Several of this book’s contributors, notably Koch, Étienne François and

Doris Müller-Toovey, were closely involved in mounting the exhibition; indeed, Müller-Toovey's essay focuses on an analysis of the sociolinguistic information gleaned from one particular exhibit. In the main, however, *Experiment Einheit* uses the exhibition as the basis for a more reflective and scholarly work.

The book is structured as a collection of ten essays examining the theme of post-*Wende* German unity from different viewpoints, and in a refreshing variety of styles. The contributors of these essays come from a range of academic and journalistic backgrounds, bringing experience of such diverse fields as political history, social and cultural history, media culture, material culture and art history. The inclusion of such a wide array of different voices greatly enriches the collection, and goes some way to addressing its stated aim to provide 'diverse perspectives' on its subject (p. 7). A range of popular perspectives is also represented within many of the essays. The most impressive in this respect are Dorothee Wierling's study of reunification as an often violent biographical event, supplemented by case studies drawn from oral history interviews, and Wolfgang Engler's discussion of working life and the personal consequences of economic restructuring. These entries are also among the most effective at combining these 'contemporary experiences' with appropriate 'historical distance', the second main aim of the volume (p. 7). Other standout examples include Frank Bösch's and Christoph Classen's overview of changes to the Eastern German media landscape during the 1990s and, to a lesser extent, Pascale Hugues' retrospective on her personal fascination with the GDR in the brief period between its opening to the West and its demise. The book's emphasis on everyday life is perhaps most prominent in the more journalistic offerings of

Hugues and Ludwig, who illustrate their points with impressionistic descriptions and accounts of personal encounters. It is, however, also inherent in Engler's essay, Müller-Toovey's piece on changes in language use, Hermann Rudolph's chapter on the evolution of Berlin's urban environment, as well as most of the other contributions. While it is true that entries with a more political or theoretical focus, such as those by Jaraus and François, address this side of the transition more obliquely, these contribute instead by drawing the reader's attention to the larger picture of reunification: the intense and introspective national and societal redefinition triggered by the events of 1989/1990.

The volume's origins as an accompaniment to a museum exhibition, and the wider readership at which it is therefore aimed, seem to have led the editors to take a less rigorously academic approach, to its presentation if not to its content. Certainly, it bears few of the hallmarks of an academic text: it contains no bibliography, index or similar back matter; and its essays vary considerably in structure, referencing approach and tone. Similarly, the editors have assembled the book around an overarching theme, rather than specific research questions. This is reflected in the fact that most of the essays take a broad, synthesizing approach to their subject matter, drawing above all on secondary literature, or indeed the author's own body of prior work. This relative lightness of touch throughout the volume makes for an engaging and accessible discussion of the topic, and is a major part of its success.

A concomitant of this, however, is that the overall argument of the volume is less clearly expressed than might be desired. It contains no editorial content aside from the

foreword and the contributor list at the back. An editors' introduction, or a thematic reorganization of the essays, would have been welcome additions. Such features would have given a greater sense of cohesion to the collection; the essays would still have combined to offer a rich selection of perspectives on the theme, but the reader would have been granted a greater understanding of why these particular topics were chosen, and which conclusions, in the editors' view, might be drawn from them concerning the shape of German society since reunification. This is not to argue that Sabrow and Koch ought to have attempted any definitive judgements in what is a complex and controversial field; merely that a clearer editorial voice would have strengthened this contribution to the discussion.

This is a minor criticism, however, particularly for a book aimed at a broader, non-academic readership. It does not detract in any way from the insights offered by the book, nor from the assurance with which it achieves its aims. As a set of treatises on different aspects of life in a 'society in transition' (p. 7), *Experiment Einheit* is informative and eminently readable, and can be recommended with confidence.

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