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## Germany from Defeat to Partition, 1945-1963

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**Author:**

David G. Williamson

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**Reviewer:**

Pertti Ahonen

D. G. Williamson's *Germany from Defeat to Partition* is one of the latest additions to the Seminar Studies in History series. Since its founding in 1966, the series has brought out an extensive range of short texts on numerous aspects of English, European and world history, and new titles keep appearing at a steady pace. The stated aim of the series, according to the general introductory statement included in Williamson's book, is to "bridge [the] gap" between "the specialist article or monograph" and the "general survey", or -- in other words -- to make the latest research findings accessible to a broader (student) audience in concise and readable form.

Williamson provides a brief, narrative overview of German history from the late stages of the Second World War to the early 1960s, as the title suggests. The book is organised chronologically, primarily on the basis of political developments. Thus the background section, which covers the late stages of the Second World War, is followed by a segment on the occupation era of 1945-1949. There then follow sections on the Federal Republic between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, the GDR in the same period, and finally a conclusion, entitled "Assessment", which attempts to compare and contrast the early development of the two German states. In addition, the book contains several appendices: some forty pages of excerpts from relevant primary

documents, a brief chronology of main (political) events, a short glossary of key terms relevant to the periods, a "who's who" section with biographical sketches of around 100 key players in early post-war Germany, and a bibliography with 131 suggested titles for those in search of further reading on particular issues.

In many ways Williamson's book is a useful introduction to the general literature on German history in the early post-World War II years. It is written in a lucid, fluent style, and it provides a clear overview of the main political developments in Germany between the Second World War and the early 1960s.

Undergraduates in particular should be able to peruse the book with profit, and the appendices, especially the primary source excerpts, will undoubtedly prove to be a very handy resource.

But Williamson's study also has its problems. I was puzzled by the book's title and chronological focus. It is not immediately obvious why the years 1945-1963 form a distinct period in German history and how these years correspond to the title's keywords "from Defeat to Partition." Germany's division into two opposing states had been completed well before the early 1960s, and in many ways the early 1970s -- which witnessed the onset of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the resulting search for a modus vivendi between Bonn and East Berlin -- mark a much more significant turning point in post-war German history than the start of the 1960s. Presumably Williamson views the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 as the key event that sealed Germany's Cold War partition, but an explicit discussion of the rationale for the book's focus would have been welcome. Perhaps this could have been done in a brief, thematic introduction, which the book now lacks entirely.

More significantly, in some ways the book fails to live up to its announced overall objective of integrating the latest research findings into a general narrative. Although the basic political events so fluently described by Williamson are crucial for understanding post-war German history, they have not stood at the forefront of much of the most recent specialised scholarship. Many of the key publications of recent years have instead explored issues such as culture, mentalities and memory, often in a broader social and political context, but Williamson's study pays little attention to this material. To be fair, the book does include two brief chapters on social and cultural trends in the two Germanys, but these are short and rather superficial. The section on social and cultural developments in the Federal Republic, for example, takes up only four of the book's total 116 pages of text.

The author's failure to integrate some of the most recent literature is evident in his select bibliography. One searches in vain for such a standard work as Norbert Frei's *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996), for example, despite its far-reaching impact in reshaping scholarly debates about West Germany's political and social development during the 1950s. And although the absence of a thick German-language study from a bibliography aimed primarily at English-speaking undergraduates could perhaps be excused on linguistic grounds, it is harder to understand why various key works in English are not included either. To take just two examples, neither Geoffrey Herf's influential *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) nor Robert G. Moeller, ed., *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) can be found in the bibliography, although the latter does a particularly good job of making influential articles and essays accessible in a reasonably priced paperback volume.

These oversights are, in turn, reflected in the book's narrative. In his conclusion, Williamson acknowledges in passing that coming to "terms with their Nazi past" was a key challenge faced by both German states (p. 111). But he fails to pursue the matter systematically, despite the fact that much recent scholarship -- including the studies by Frei and Herf cited above -- has addressed these problems in detail and thereby cast a good deal of new light on Germany's post-war history more generally. Apart from a brief discussion of the initial de-Nazification policies of the early post-war years, Williamson has little to say about the way in which the two Germanys confronted their problematic recent past, which detracts significantly from the book's stated objective of introducing the results of the latest research to a broader audience.

The organisation of Williamson's book raises a broader, methodological point, which relates not only to his study but to surveys of post-World War II Germany in general. Williamson has chosen to analyse each of the two German states in turn, in separate chapters, and to limit direct comparisons to a handful of concluding remarks at the end of the study. This is in many ways understandable, given the book's introductory character and the word limit constraints under which the author undoubtedly had to labour. But a more extensive comparative section would nevertheless have been very useful, particularly as none of the existing surveys of post-World War II Germany approach the topic in an explicitly and consistently comparative fashion. To be sure, the shortage of comparative work is evident on the monographic level as well, which obviously limits the possibilities open to survey authors. But the situation is gradually changing. Several younger scholars in particular are currently working on ambitious comparative projects, which will in due course make a major impact on the field and ultimately find reflection in survey texts as well. One worthy example of this trend is Frank Biess's award-winning dissertation 'The Protracted War: Returning POWs and the Making of East and West German Citizens, 1945-1955', completed at Brown University in 2000 and currently being revised for publication in book form.

Although Williamson's book is generally well-presented and accurate, a few annoying errors have unfortunately managed to creep their way into the text. At one point, for example, Williamson claims that Ludwig Erhard, the so-called father of the West German economic miracle, became chairman of the Bavarian CSU in 1949 (p. 33), which must be news to the Christian Social Union, whose records show the actual party chairman at the time to have been the similarly named Hans Ehard. Another problem lies in repeated misspellings of German names and words, which are hardly reassuring in a book about German history. The Nazi hero Horst Wessel, for example, becomes "Horst Wesel" (p. 54), the leftist literary circle Gruppe 47 turns into the "Grüppe 1947" (p. 79) and the Trümmerfrau, the female pioneer of post-war reconstruction, loses her umlauts and thus transforms to "Trummerfrau" (p. 5). All of these are minor mistakes, of course, but cumulatively they make a negative impact, and they could have been avoided without much additional effort in proof-reading and fact-checking.

Despite its problems, Williamson's book is nevertheless a useful addition to the growing pile of survey texts on post-war German history. It provides a lucid and readable introduction to the main political events of the 1945-1963 period. For that purpose it can be recommended for undergraduate usage, even if it falls a bit short in its coverage of other aspects of the period and fails to integrate some of the recent key historiography.

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