



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Sarah Colvin, *Shadowland:
The Story of Germany Told by Its Prisoners*

by Annelie Ramsbrock

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLVI, No. 1 (May 2024), 109–13

ISSN 0269-8552

SARAH COLVIN, *Shadowland: The Story of Germany Told by Its Prisoners* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022), 280 pp. ISBN 978 1 789 14627 1. £25.00

Anyone who believes that everything essential about the history of the Federal Republic of Germany has already been written should read this book by British literary scholar Sarah Colvin. Colvin is the Schröder Professor of German and a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. So she is not a historian. And it is particularly important to emphasize this because her carefully researched study makes an extremely important contribution to the history of the Federal Republic of Germany that no one has written before, and perhaps no one has wanted to read. *Shadowland* is an uncomfortable book. It examines West German society from the perspective of those whose very existence is not mentioned, even in passing, in the standard histories of the Federal Republic: the people in prison. A section on the GDR shows the extent to which the penal system in East Germany had parallels in the West. Colvin does not write about well known prisoners such as Red Army Faction founder Ulrike Meinhof, whose writings she has analysed in another book on how terrorism takes root.¹ Instead, she takes up the ‘stories of the “little people” in prison’ (p. 10) and shows the extent to which these stories express the history of an entire country. Very different people have their say: women and men, Black people and people of colour, rarely also disabled and elderly people.

Colvin states that her book ‘is the story of Germany told, as far as possible, in the words of people in prison’ (p. 10), and this certainly makes it a ‘different’ history of the Federal Republic. Colvin deserves credit for writing it. However, it was inspired by Ralf Dahrendorf, who emphasized in the mid 1960s in his book *Society and Democracy* that ‘adequate witnesses’ for the liberal, democratic constitution of West German society were not politicians or lawyers, but ‘foreign workers, mentally ill, [and] prison inmates’. This is because outsiders are particularly good at documenting ‘what is happening in a society’.² In order to show what was happening in West German society, Sarah

¹ Sarah Colvin, *Ulrike Meinhof and West German Terrorism: Language, Violence, and Identity* (Rochester, NY, 2009).

² Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (London, 1968), 351. First published in German in 1965.

Colvin has organized her book into four chronologically arranged parts, one of which deals with living conditions in the GDR penal system. The sources used are mainly letters and memoirs written by prisoners, with the GDR section—inevitably—drawing on memoirs published after 1989. The immediacy of the letters on which the other parts are based is therefore found only to a limited extent here.

One common thread in *Shadowland* is the experience of violence. In part one, 'Unity, Rights and Freedom: West Germany, 1949–68', readers meet Germans—mostly children—who had lost both parents in the war and were wandering around alone, stealing in order to survive. Many of them ended up in institutions, where they were beaten and often abused. Their life stories, as becomes clear in *Shadowland*, reflect the story of a society that was not really interested in the fate of the 'rubble children'. Many of those who experienced such a 'mid-century childhood' (p. 45) were never able to lead law-abiding lives. Their 'careers' on the streets and in closed institutions also determined their future development. *Shadowland* reports on these often very personal experiences and draws on sources such as the collection of letters assembled by the Swedish publicist Birgitta Wolf (1913–2009), who lived in Germany from 1933. As Carin Göring's niece, Wolf had good contact with prominent representatives of the Nazi state. At the same time, she began campaigning on behalf of prisoners and concentration camp inmates in the 1930s and continued this commitment after the end of the war. By the early 1960s she had already received 6,000 letters from prisoners. By the time of her death she had amassed 60,000 letters, some of which are now in the archives of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and have been published.³ All the letters that Sarah Colvin quotes in this section point to a fundamental problem: 'Continuity, rather than change, is the leitmotif in stories from the post-war prison' (p. 30). Apparently, the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners signed by the UN in 1955, which strictly prohibited any form of violence behind bars, did nothing to prevent physical abuse of all kinds from determining the everyday lives of prisoners.

In the social liberal reform years from 1968, when the Federal Republic of Germany wanted to 'dare more democracy' (in Willy

³ Birgitta Wolf (ed.), *Die vierte Kaste: Junge Menschen im Gefängnis. Literarische Dokumente* (Hamburg, 1963).

Brandt's famous formulation), prisons also became the subject of reform. Sarah Colvin describes these developments in part two ('A Model and Looking Good? West Germany, 1968–89') without any sugar-coating, because her material—letters from another generation of prisoners—gives no reason to do so. In 1976 the Prison Act was passed, a law that was intended to grant rights to prisoners and which stood at the end of a long reform process that aimed to achieve the goal of rehabilitation through educational and socio-psychological means. In those years, the Federal Republic was certainly looking to Northern Europe and the Scandinavian model, which allowed prisoners more freedom and led to recognizably lower recidivism rates. However, this model was not implemented in the Federal Republic. Prisoners certainly realized this and were often stunned by how much was said about rehabilitation and how little of the supposed spirit of reform reached the prison walls. In this section, we learn about issues such as sexual distress, sexual violence, and homosexual seduction, which women encountered more than men and of which they were generally ignorant and fearful. There is also an impressive description of what it meant to be a transgender prisoner in a men's prison (and not to survive). It is as sobering as it is remarkable that self-harm and suicide were apparently the only possible form of self-empowerment for many of the prisoners. The fact that a supposedly liberal law granting prisoners educational and socio-psychological treatment as well as extended personal rights was passed at this time sheds a different light on the often-cited success story of the Federal Republic. Progress and stagnation could apparently stand side by side, and this contradiction is therefore just as much a part of the history of the West Germans as their supposedly straightforward path to a 'better world'.

The third part, 'Risen from the Ruins: East Germany, 1949–89', makes it clear from the outset that no account written by a prisoner of the GDR was published in East Germany during the forty years the state existed. One exception is the *Hohenecker Protokolle*, based on interviews with former inmates of the infamous women's political prison.⁴ Ulrich Schacht, who conducted the interviews, epitomizes the brutality of the GDR penal system more than almost anyone else. He was born

⁴ Ulrich Schacht (ed.), *Hohenecker Protokolle: Aussagen zur Geschichte der politischen Verfolgung von Frauen in der DDR* (Zurich, 1984).

in Hoheneck and was taken away from his mother, Carola Schacht, when he was just a few weeks old – a completely normal fate for mothers and their newborns in East German jails. Readers also learn about the experiences of Black GDR citizens in prison, as well as the arbitrariness, violence, and hopelessness that characterized life behind bars. The situation improved somewhat with the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the GDR's new Penal Code of 5 May 1977, which consigned to history at least the worst instruments of torture, such as standing cells and water cells. This development was hardly reflected in the prisoners' stories, however. Even after the reforms, imprisonment meant that most people had to give up their personal rights completely. 'Foucault could not have known it', Colvin writes, 'but even before he famously revisited Jeremy Bentham's panoptical vision of the prison in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), East German prisoners were experiencing prison as a reflection of the panoptical or all-seeing state' (p. 147).

'Wind of Change: Germany after 1989' is the title of the fourth and final section, which left this reader in disbelief. Colvin jumps forward to the present and reports that even in 2020, there are still communal cells in German prisons that do not have a separate toilet area and therefore do not guarantee a minimum degree of privacy. What Sarah Colvin has emphasized in the stories of prisoners since the post-war period still applies today: 'over and over again, the story of people in prison is the story of not being believed' (p. 55). Regardless of how they are treated and what they have to suffer, they are hardly considered credible. Peter-Paul Zahl called the fate of people in prison 'nobodification' in 1977, a term that is obviously still relevant today (p. 173). Not being heard and seen is reminiscent of what Johan Galtung dubbed 'structural violence' in the late 1960s. Structural violence, according to his conceptualization, is the avoidable impairment of basic human needs or, to put it more generally, of life, which reduces the actual degree of satisfaction of needs below what is possible.⁵ It is 'built into the system and manifests itself in unequal power relations'.⁶ As much as the prisoners' letters express these unequal power

⁵ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6/3 (1969), 167-91.

⁶ Johan Galtung, *Strukturelle Gewalt: Beiträge zur Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), 9.

relations in the past, Colvin's book also makes it clear that it would be wrong to believe that a transformation has taken place in the institutions of the Western world since the 1970s. On the contrary, prisons are still violent places today. Prisoners kill and are killed behind bars. The drug trade also flourishes behind prison walls. And people who have been in prison for a long time are not rehabilitated, but fear that they will no longer be able to live in freedom. Giving these people a voice and showing the extent to which writing can be a form of self-assertion is one of the great merits of Sarah Colvin's book. Another is that it inspires Germans to reflect on their country. The experiences of prisoners leave no doubt that the development of West German society, although it has largely succeeded politically and legally in (re)building a democratic community after the 'shock of inhumanity',⁷ cannot adequately be described with the still frequently invoked narrative of 'liberalization'.⁸ 'Most of us prefer to believe we live in a (more or less) rational modern democracy. But stories from prison say: this is not the country you thought it was' (p. 22).

⁷ Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995*, trans. Brandon Hunziker (Oxford, 2006), 5.

⁸ Ulrich Herbert, 'Liberalisierung als Lernprozess: Die Bundesrepublik in der deutschen Geschichte – eine Skizze', in Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland: Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung 1945–1980* (Göttingen, 2002), 7–49.

ANNELIE RAMSBROCK holds the Chair for Modern History at the University of Greifswald. Her publications include the monographs *Geschlossene Gesellschaft: Das Gefängnis als Sozialversuch – eine bundesdeutsche Geschichte* (2020) and *The Science of Beauty: Culture and Cosmetics in Modern Germany, 1750–1930* (2015; paperback 2017).