

## **Political Life Writing: Forger of or Forged by Historical and Media Discourses?**

Danae Gallo González

### **Abstract:**

Life Writing and Political Memoir – Lebenszeugnisse und Politische Memoiren aims at analyzing political memoirs from the 19th and 20th centuries. How is it that they both shape and are shaped by historical and media discourses? This interdisciplinary volume provides ten case studies of life writing produced by political actors through the light of a post-modernist approach. The authors identify the discursive points of contradiction that reveal the artificiality and non-factuality of such cultural products. By doing so, this edited volume sheds light not only on past methodological shortages in history research but also on the conscious or unconscious motivations of political memoir writers discursively constructing a certain identity.

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Brechtken, Magnus (Hg.): *Life Writing and Political Memoir – Lebenszeugnisse und Politische Memoiren*. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2012. 290 S., Hardcover, 43.90 Euro. ISBN: 978-3899719789

Life, Writing, Political, Memoir: Four words that within the flourishing interdisciplinary research context of the field of Memory Studies could be considered synonymous with success. In spite of some scholars' criticism of the inflationary and sometimes vague use of the term 'memory', certain mass medial appearances indicate the great societal interest in the memories of the so-called 'war generation'. This subsequently reveals the necessity of dealing and coping with the memories of a traumatic past. And if these are the reader's expectations, this edited volume will not disappoint in this regard.

In the introduction, editor Magnus Brechtken situates the volume within the field of Memory Studies and compares the position of political memoirs within historical research of the 20th and 21st centuries. His work revolves around the preeminent significance of Winston Churchill, Otto von Bismarck and Charles de Gaulle's political memoirs as first-rate sources. They shaped a sometimes uncritical history writing in comparison to the current day's developed methodologies and critical approaches to these cultural products (8). Among those developments Brechtken states that the post-modern theories applied to specific case studies delegitimize autobiographies as sources of historical facts and stress the identitarian constructionist processes they expose. Finally, the author continues with acknowledgements and unfortunately closes the introduction without providing a theoretical or rather methodological framework; furthermore a presentation of the articles and the structure of the book is missing.

On the one hand, the reader does not feel satisfied with the side-reference within a footnote about the debates around postmodernism and historical research raised by Richard Evans. One could still wonder what the difference between a 'memoir,' an 'account of life writing,' and its translation in German as 'testimony' ('*lebenseugnis*') is. Similarly, the use of the adjective 'political' remains unclear. What is it that makes these manifold discursive constructions of the self 'political'? On the other hand, the volume consists of ten articles including seven contributions dealing with accounts situated in post-Second World War Germany, one in the abolitionary US, one in Margaret Thatcher's England, and one in post-October Revolution in Russia. However, the alphabetical order of appearance of the articles is quite misleading since

the reader keeps looking for a spatial, temporal, national, or trend-focused structure. In consequence, the volume lacks both an explicit composition and a theoretical or rather methodological foundation that could guide the reader.

Magnus Brechtken's contribution shows Albert Speer's performance as charming interviewee and willing penitent, on the one hand, and as a non-political technocrat during National Socialism, on the other, thereby influenced his contemporaries to naively accept his testimony as an historical hegemonic fact. In contrast to Speer's mastery of his narrative memory constructions, Petra Weber's examination of Carlo Schmidt's *Erinnerungen* reveals how this selective memory construction was contradictorily stylized and therefore did not convince historians and, as Eberhard Kolb stated, were not considered as a proper historical sources (261). However, Petra Weber defends the relevance of autobiographical materials as historical sources in a new light: not as bearers of historical facticity, but as a proof of the complexity of identity and history writing in general. She emphasizes the particular need of Schmidt to produce a lie about his life in the form of a Bildungsroman where he could existentially take hold.

In the same line, Kai Burkhardt, Joanne Sayner and Rafaela Hiemann's articles explore German public debates around anti-Nazi resistance movements in the case of three political authors as well as their reactions to these societal debates: Adolf Grimme and his strategic silence, Greta Kuckhoff's *Vom Rosenkranz zur Roten Kapelle* and Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr's *Soldat im Untergang*. Hiemann for instance examines in depth Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr's account of life writing *Soldat im Untergang* and argues that his discursive memory production after 1945 emerged as a reaction to the reproaches that the occupation powers leveled against Prussian noblemen's militarism. According to the author, this cultural product follows mandatory compositional trends standardized within nobility and military commemorative culture. This is the reason why their re-verbalization of past memories remain stable throughout decades, independently of the production context, and therefore cannot be considered as a central source of historiographical research (172). Curiously, Ralf Forsbach's article complements Hiemann's argument by regarding Erich Hoffmann's curriculum and self-representation as paradigmatic for a member of the medical elite educated during the German empire (125). Julia Hildt und Dittmar Dahlmann also focus on aristocratic autobiographical reinterpretations of the past and observe how aristocrats sympathized with the 'people' by adopting an oppositional attitude towards the czarist system before the Soviet Revolution; they rather tended to depreciate the Revolution and the 'masses' in exile. Similarly, Ulrike Jureit uses Hans Wassermann's accounts of life writing about his experience in a German KZ in order to show how his memory productions vary and are re-shaped. New life-experiences and new public memory re-interpretations of the remembered situation are the patterns for this reproduction.

On the whole, *Life Writing and Political Memoir* constitutes a thoughtful and thorough body of case studies and a valuable resource for researchers. Nevertheless the bilingual title is misleading, since the reader expects a bilingual and international volume. Eight out of ten articles are written in German and seven out of ten concentrate on contemporary German post-Nazi history. Second, although the editor claims that the volume has an interdisciplinary

nature, eight out of ten contributors are historians working within Academia. Third, the above-mentioned unbalanced thematic and geographical focus in Germany, the unbalanced length of the articles ranging from a four-page-long introduction to a 60-page-long article, as well as the unbalanced use and application of theories and materials leave a bittersweet aftertaste. However, in spite of everything, one cannot downplay the merit and important contribution that this edited volume makes to the field of Memory Studies. By critically revisiting historiographical and autobiographical sources, the volume highlights the relational nature of life writing and history as forgers of each other's discourses.