

Books

Martina Thiele and Boris Romahn

Must read: Books by journalists

We, Martina Thiele (MT, University of Tübingen) and Boris Romahn (bro, University of Salzburg), are pleased to once again present a diverse selection of books by journalists in this edition. These recommended works explore both contemporary and historical topics and offer a wide range of perspectives on war and peace, fact and fiction, homelands and identities.

Armin Thurnher: *Unsternstunden der Menschheit. Wie die Welt unerträglich wurde.* [Dark hours of humanity. How the world became unbearable.] Vienna: Zsolnay, 303 pp., €27

If Stefan Zweig's (1881–1942) *Sternstunden der Menschheit* [The Decisive Moments in History] celebrates events that shaped the course of history for the better, then *Unsternstunden* – »dark hours« or »ill-starred moments« – refers to developments whose consequences have proved disastrous. In this book, Austrian journalist Armin Thurnher draws inspiration from Zweig's famous collection of historical miniatures to explore these themes.

The co-founder and long-time editor-in-chief of the Viennese weekly *Falter* (until 2025) depicts a world in permanent crisis. Authoritarianism, concentrated media power, and war provide the backdrop to his reflections on what he sees as an ongoing process of social brutalization. Thurnher begins in 1947, when the intellectual foundations of neoliberalism were laid at a meeting convened in Switzerland at the initiative of economist Friedrich August von Hayek, and concludes with Donald Trump's second inauguration in 2025. Between these two points lie twenty-eight further »dark hours,« nearly all centred on men from the Western world – entrepreneurs, scientists, publishers, writers, and politicians. Among them are American technology magnates such as Steve Jobs, Peter Thiel,

Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos; Austrian media figures including Hans Dichand and Dietrich Mateschitz; and politicians such as Sebastian Kurz and Herbert Kickl. Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin naturally feature prominently when the subject is division and discord.

But where are the women? At least one woman receives substantial attention. Thurnher describes Angela Merkel's 2015 decision to admit hundreds of thousands of refugees to Germany – and her much-quoted declaration, »We can do it« – as a defining moment of humanity. And without irony, he argues that this is how it should be remembered (p. 213). Yet he puts this argument into perspective. According to Thurnher, Merkel's decision also supplied the European far right with precisely the sort of political fuel it needed to rise (p. 214). In doing so, however, he partly reproduces a narrative advanced by the far right itself: namely, that its electoral successes stem primarily from its proposed solutions to the »migration problem.« That is not quite right. It is true, however, that increasingly restrictive migration policies pursued by governing parties have done little to halt either racism or the rise of right-wing extremism.

Thurnher is well aware that opinions differ regarding what constitutes humanity's finest moments and its darkest hours. His readers, however, are likely to share his diagnosis of the present malaise. It is the military-industrial complex intertwined with media power. His aim is to challenge these forces through critical reflection, which is intellectually rigorous, literarily sophisticated, and often highly entertaining. This ambition also explains why he refuses to accept the answers provided by ChatGPT when questioning it about the storming of the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021 and Donald Trump's role in the events. Not content with a standard response, he expands the prompt, requesting a critical account written in hexameters and recognisably in Thurnher's own style, while avoiding copyright infringement. The results appear in the chapter »2021: When the Geese Forgot to Cackle« (pp. 253–259). Reading these pages, one is inclined to think: it is a good thing that Thurnher, born in 1949, still does his own thinking – and his own writing. (MT)

Clemens Marschall: *Wilde Wanda. Wiens einzige Zuhälterin: ein Leben zwischen Emanzipation, Exzess und Zerstörung* [Wilde Wanda. Vienna's only female pimp: A life between emancipation, excess, and destruction]. Vienna: Brandstätter, 206 pp., €25

»If you move in certain circles in Vienna, Wilde Wanda is rather like Falco: mention the name and everyone has a personal story to tell – usually one so unbelievable that the teller might have risked a slap – if not from Falco, then certainly from Wanda.« (p. 179) But who was this legendary *Wilde Wanda*? Clemens

Marschall – musicologist, author, and freelance journalist whose work has appeared in *Die Zeit*, the *Wiener Zeitung*, and the Austrian public broadcaster Ö1 – recounts the extraordinary life of the woman who proudly described herself as Vienna's only female pimp.

Yet prostitution and pimping were less a matter of choice than of necessity for Wanda Gertrude Kuchwalek, who in the 1960s and 1970 was regarded as »the most dangerous woman in Vienna« (p. 4). The daughter of a snake charmer and a Soviet occupation soldier, she grew up in post-war Vienna in a discarded circus wagon near the Prater, which at the time still resembled a field of rubble. Her school years – four years of primary school followed by four years of secondary school – were spent in her grandmother's apartment in Vienna's Floridsdorf district, where she was reportedly given a daily shot of liquor from an early age (p. 14). At fourteen, she formed a gang together with three twenty-year-olds, marking the beginning of a long criminal career. »We'd buy a few bottles of schnapps and head out. Somehow a huge brawl would break out, blood would be flowing – and who was responsible? Wanda, of course.« (p. 15) The immediate result was a one-month suspended sentence.

From then on, alcohol, violence, and prison shaped her life. A series of burglary convictions led to her placement in reform institutions for girls deemed difficult or delinquent. The educational methods employed in these institutions amounted to institutionalised violence with devastating consequences, designed to break people. During this period, Wanda discovered both her attraction to women and her willingness to inflict on others the suffering that had been inflicted on her. It was here that she developed a plan she would later put into practice: »I'll make women submissive and have them work for me. Why should pimps always be men? Why shouldn't there be female pimps too?« (p. 29)

She earned respect within the overwhelmingly male criminal milieu through extraordinary violence. Whenever excessive drinking was involved – which was often – even minor disputes could escalate into knife attacks or shootings. The women who worked for her were also victims of that violence. In this respect, Wanda differed little from her male counterparts. If she felt one of her prostitutes was no longer sufficiently loyal, she did not hesitate to slash her face with a razor blade.

Her reputation as »Wilde Wanda« was cemented by more than twenty »appearances« in court, which transformed her into a tabloid celebrity. These reports on sex and crime are reprinted in the book. Reflecting on her life, Wanda – who died at the age of fifty-seven – remarked: »I don't regret it. But I wouldn't want to live through it again.« (p. 202)

What makes Marschall's biography so compelling is the combination of meticulous archival research, extensive interviews with contemporary witnesses,

sober analysis, and »Der Schmäb rennt« – »The banter flows.«^[1] It presents an authentic Vienna that no longer exists, but which is particularly interesting for the »Piefke(s)«^[2]. Clemens Marschall's particular merit lies in the fact that, despite all the entertainment inherent in a legendary narrative, he never loses sight of the oppressive social conditions that turned Wanda into a »Wilde Wanda.« (bro)

Katrin Eigendorf: *Erzählen, was ist. Berichten am Limit in einer Zeit der Kriege.* [Telling it like it is: Reporting from the frontlines in times of war.] Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 255 pp., €25

Katrin Eigendorf has received numerous awards for her reporting from war and crisis zones. Today she is one of Germany's better-known television journalists, and her work is rightly admired. Yet relatively little is known about the professional path that led her there. In *Erzählen, was ist*, readers gain valuable insight into both her career and the experiences that shaped it.

Eigendorf's route into journalism appears, in many respects, typical of a woman coming of age in West Germany during the 1980s. Politically engaged and active in the peace movement, she was the first member of her family to attend university and was determined to see more of the world. Her ambition was to become a foreign correspondent, a field in which women remained significantly underrepresented. After studying at the Dortmund Institute of Journalism, writing for local and regional newspapers, and spending several years in France, she eventually left the security of a permanent position at the regional broadcaster NDR, took the plunge and moved to Russia. Moscow in the early 1990s was a place of excitement and optimism. Many believed that democracy was advancing and that an era of worldwide détente and shared prosperity lay ahead. Three decades later, little remains of those hopes.

In the book's prologue, Eigendorf surveys the current global political landscape. Her first chapter focuses on Afghanistan, where life has become extraordinarily difficult – especially for women and girls – since the Taliban returned to power in 2021 and Western forces withdrew from the country. The images of desperate people trying to reach Kabul airport remain vivid in collective memory. In two subsequent chapters, Eigendorf traces Afghanistan's trajectory from 9/11 and Operation Enduring Freedom to the present, drawing on repeated visits to the country over many years. Alongside Afghanistan, the Middle East forms a central focus of her reporting. Eigendorf writes about the Arab Spring, about Egypt as a

1 »Der Schmäb rennt« is a typical Viennese expression. It means that someone is so entertaining and funny when telling stories that it doesn't matter what's true and what's just a lie.

2 This is the Austrian, somewhat derogatory term for Germans.

»land of dreamers,« and about the continuing tragedy of Israel and Palestine, a conflict that remains deeply troubling to her. Several chapters are also devoted to Russia and Ukraine. Here she illuminates the long history that culminated in Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

What distinguishes Eigendorf's journalism – and this book – is her ability to connect with people. She observes, listens, contextualises, and tells the stories of those whose lives have been shaped by war and terror. Her style is clear and unpretentious, and her work is guided throughout by a deeply humanistic outlook. She emphasizes how crucial the category of gender remains – not only in societies such as Afghanistan's, but also in her daily professional life as a foreign correspondent.

Eigendorf reflects on the role that journalists can and should play in reporting on war and terror, and she goes into detail when it comes to the responsibility journalists have toward their interviewees and colleagues on the ground.

The result is a powerful defence of serious, fact-based journalism in times of crisis and war – and therefore also in times of propaganda and organised disinformation. In the concluding chapter, »Truth and Lies,« Eigendorf recounts the personal attacks and campaigns of discreditation directed against her by Russian authorities. She refuses to be intimidated. As she writes: »Those who are informed are not so easily manipulated.« (p. 253) (MT)

Peter R. Neumann, Richard C. Schneider (2025): *Das Sterben der Demokratie. Der Plan der Rechtspopulisten – in Europa und den USA* [The death of democracy. The right-wing populist project – in Europe and the United States]. Berlin: Rowohlt, 224 pp., €24

Richard C. Schneider (b. 1957) is an award-winning journalist, author, and filmmaker; Peter R. Neumann (b. 1974) is Professor of Security Studies at King's College London. »Is democracy dying?« they ask, presenting findings from six countries (Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, France, the U.S., and Germany), which suggest that (right-wing) populists are now not only planning an illiberal democracy but are also implementing it at varying speeds.

According to Neumann and Schneider, this process unfolds in three steps. The first involves systematically weakening or eliminating institutions that stand between »the people« and political power. The paradox is striking: The right uses democracy against democracy by arguing that liberal elites in the judiciary, parliaments, media, civil society, and international organizations dilute or distort the will of the people. »In their view,« the authors write, »true democracy can only exist once the elites have been removed and a strong executive implements the unfiltered will of the people« (p. 29).

The second step consists of claiming exclusive representation of that supposedly authentic popular will. Other political actors are denied legitimacy, while political pluralism is increasingly depicted as unnecessary. The third step is more subtle. Right-wing populism does not initially seek to abolish democracy altogether. On the contrary, it values the legitimacy conferred by »(more or less) free elections« (p. 17). The real danger lies elsewhere: »If right-wing populists succeed in implementing their project, they can more easily become fascists, because the weakening of the separation of powers creates a situation in which no effective mechanisms remain to prevent a slide into autocracy, kleptocracy, or even fascism« (p. 17). Particularly troubling, the authors argue, is the fact that large segments of society fail to recognise this process. Liberal democracy is eroded from within while many of its formal institutions and procedures remain intact.

Using the example of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, which they see as a kind of model for implementing the plan outlined above, Neumann and Schneider show how attacks on judicial independence and media freedom – including restrictions on editorial autonomy and the establishment of a powerful National Media and Communications Authority responsible for allocating broadcasting licences (p. 81) – have steadily undermined democratic safeguards. At the same time, Orbán's government has cultivated hostility towards migrants and Muslims while questioning the legitimacy of the European Union. Following Péter Magyar's electoral victory in April 2026, it remains to be seen whether – and how quickly – Hungary can embark on a process of democratic renewal.

Italy, meanwhile, is portrayed as moving towards a form of post-fascism. The authors point in particular to judicial reforms, e.g. requiring candidates for judicial office to undergo state-administered psychological assessments. In the Netherlands, the success of Geert Wilders illustrates how contemporary nationalism no longer depends primarily on race or ethnicity but instead invokes the defence of a supposedly homogeneous »Christian-Jewish Western culture,« from which »foreign elements« (p. 119) – especially immigrants and Muslims – must be excluded.

France offers a further example. The electoral successes of Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National demonstrate how an illiberal democratic project can gain legitimacy through democratic means. In 2024, the party announced plans to privatise public broadcasting and to purge it of alleged »left-wing influences« (p. 155). Ironically, the authors note, Emmanuel Macron had already weakened the independence of public broadcasting in 2022 by shifting its funding from licence fees to the state budget.

Under the heading »I, the People« (p. 163), Neumann and Schneider analyse the United States under Donald Trump. In their view, Trump has thus far been prevented from carrying out a more far-reaching authoritarian transformation only by the resilience of the constitutional system and the reluctance of parts of

his own political camp. »Whether this will remain the case during his current term,« they write, »nobody knows. Both the party and the administration are already fractured, and it remains unclear how long the judiciary can withstand his attacks« (p. 177).

Germany occupies a somewhat different position in the authors' narrative. Compared with the other countries, it entered the era of right-wing populism relatively late. It was not until 2017 that the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) entered the Bundestag as a significant right-wing force. Unlike in the previous country reports, which use criteria such as the restructuring or circumvention of the judiciary and executive branches, the muzzling of independent media, and issues such as migration, Islam, and criticism of the EU for comparison, the chapter on Germany focuses largely on leading figures within the party: the »hater« Alice Weidel (p. 181), the »autocrat« Maximilian Krah (p. 184), and the »ultranationalist« Björn Höcke (p. 187).

The discussion of a possible ban on the AfD occupies only two pages (pp. 190–192) and feels rather brief. More substantial is the concluding section, in which the authors propose strategies for resisting democratic erosion. Political conflicts, they argue, should be defused rather than escalated; mainstream parties should resist adopting the rhetoric and demands of right-wing populists; and the political »firewall« separating democratic and anti-democratic forces must remain intact. »Anyone who wants to prevent the death of democracy,« they write, »must not allow themselves to become a stepping stone – even if that means that complicated or seemingly unnatural coalitions become the norm for a while« (p. 202). Further recommendations include subjecting right-wing populist policies to much more rigorous scrutiny, strengthening political education, and renewing liberal democracy itself. Too many citizens, the authors argue, take democratic institutions for granted, appreciating neither their value nor their fragility (p. 203). Above all, defenders of liberal democracy must develop more compelling visions of the future than the right-wing populist dream of a return to an imagined past.

The attempt to formulate such a counter-strategy is both timely and commendable. Equally persuasive is the comparative analysis that precedes it. So is the preceding analysis, in which Neumann and Schneider use cross-country comparisons and a systematic approach to show how similarly the creeping erosion of democracy proceeds – and how central questions of media ownership and media financing are to that process. (*bro*)

Konstantin Richter: *Dreihundert Männer. Aufstieg und Fall der Deutschland AG*. [Three hundred men. The rise and fall of Germany Inc.] Berlin: Suhrkamp, 543 pp., €30

In a 1909 essay, Walter Rathenau famously observed that »three hundred men determine the economic destiny of the continent« (p. 227). Two decades later, anti-Semites would deliberately distort this statement into a conspiracy theory about »three hundred Jews.« Konstantin Richter, born in 1971, author and business journalist for publications including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Die Zeit*, takes Rathenau's observation as the starting point for an ambitious exploration of the rise and decline of what became known as *Deutschland AG*.

Across 543 pages, Richter reconstructs the history of a tightly interconnected economic elite. Drawing on economist Andrew Shonfield's description of Germany's post-war economic model as an »organised private enterprise,« he depicts a world in which banks, industrial firms, and business associations exercised influence through dense networks of personal and institutional relationships. Yet *Deutschland AG*, Richter argues, was always more than a web of shareholdings. It was »an attitude, a culture, and a mindset« (p. 399) – a system built on power, discretion, and mutual obligation.

The book is divided into three major sections: In the first section, Richter traces the formative years of German industry (1870–1914), a period shaped by brilliant inventors and engineers who forged personal ties with one another and with bankers in order to manufacture and market their innovations on an industrial scale. In a series of highly readable episodes, none longer than three pages, he focuses on the founding fathers of the German economy and shows how closely intertwined entrepreneurs, finance, and industry were from the outset. It is no coincidence, for example, that one of the founding directors of Deutsche Bank was Georg Siemens, while Werner and Carl Siemens headed the company that bore their family name. Nor is it insignificant that Nicolaus August Otto, inventor of the four-stroke engine, not only worked alongside Gottlieb Daimler at the Deutz gas engine factory in Cologne but also shared a semi-detached house with him opposite the company premises. The two men could not stand one another and became bitter rivals, competing even while tending vegetables in their adjoining gardens.

The second section examines the period from 1914 to 1945, when German industrialists became indispensable suppliers to successive war efforts and, in many cases, willing collaborators with dictatorship. Richter rejects simplistic explanations. »It was not sadism that made them accomplices and perpetrators,« he writes, »but a completely amoral pursuit of efficiency, the determination to preserve their businesses in an increasingly catastrophic situation and secure

the greatest possible advantages« (p. 326). The consequences were devastating. During the Second World War, more than twenty million people are estimated to have been subjected to forced labour (p. 345). Satellite concentration camps were often established in close proximity to strategically important industrial sites. »Whether BMW, Krupp, or Continental,« Richter notes, »hardly any major corporation failed to profit from forced labour in one form or another, willingly accepting mass death in the process« (p. 345).

The third section covers the period from 1945 to 2000 and the reconstruction of German economic power. Richter argues that Germany's long trajectory of industrial success, interrupted by the catastrophes of the two world wars, quickly resumed after 1945. Integration into the Western economic order – with its stable institutions, fixed exchange rates, and expanding international trade – provided favourable conditions for renewed growth. Yet significant changes were already underway.

The great entrepreneurial dynasties increasingly withdrew from day-to-day management, replacing owner-managers with professional executives such as Berthold Beitz, Eberhard von Kuenheim, Alfred Herrhausen, and Edzard Reuter. From the 1970s onward, financialisation transformed the landscape even further. International capital markets gained influence, while a new generation of investors focused less on the long-term survival of companies than on short-term returns.

The result, Richter suggests, was the gradual dissolution of the old *Deutschland AG*. »Some companies no longer exist; others have merged. Others again have bought and sold so many divisions that they are barely recognisable« (p. 527). Corporate leadership changed as well. The Krupps and Daimlers of earlier generations largely disappeared, replaced by rotating managerial elites whose ties to individual firms often seemed temporary.

Richter concludes by asking whether the great names of German industrial history still matter. Have these traditions, with all their achievements and crimes, become irrelevant? The question is provocative, though not entirely satisfying after more than five hundred pages of economic history. One of the book's strengths is also, at times, its weakness: economic history is transformed into a series of compelling stories, yet broader interpretive questions occasionally remain unresolved.

Several issues linger after the final page: Why is this history largely confined to West Germany? Where are figures such as Bertha Krupp, Friede Springer, or Susanne Klatten? And why does the analysis stop at the national border just as economic power becomes increasingly global? After all, power remains concentrated in remarkably few hands. The difference is that today the dominant figures are no longer the »three hundred men« of *Deutschland AG* but technology

billionaires such as Peter Thiel, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk, together with the exclusive networks through which they exercise influence. (*bro*)

Susanne Götze, Annika Joeres: *Die Milliarden-Lobby. Wer uns von Öl und Gas abhängig macht* [The billion-Euro lobby. Who keeps us dependent on oil and gas]. Munich: Piper, 288 pp., €22

The fundamental purpose of lobbying is to represent particular interests in ways that generate public support. Unsurprisingly, the term »lobby« appears throughout *The Billion-Euro Lobby*, the latest book by investigative journalists Susanne Götze and Annika Joeres. Their focus ranges from the oil and gas lobby to the automotive lobby, the anti-electric-car lobby, the e-fuel lobby, and the agricultural lobby.

The book's central argument is straightforward. The profits generated by fossil fuels are simply too great for those who benefit from them to abandon the business voluntarily. At the same time, the catastrophic consequences of continued dependence on oil, gas, and coal are often obscured by narratives that are easier to market politically. We are told that modern economies cannot function without fossil fuels, that phasing out the internal combustion engine threatens prosperity and mobility, and that rolling back climate policies is therefore both necessary and reasonable. Such narratives, the authors argue, are promoted by powerful lobbying organisations and amplified by sympathetic media outlets.

Götze and Joeres take an unequivocal stance against these forms of lobbying and propaganda. As in their earlier book *The Climate Pollution Lobby* (2020), they assemble a substantial body of evidence demonstrating why continued reliance on fossil fuels is neither economically nor politically sustainable. These arguments have become even more urgent in light of Russia's war against Ukraine, escalating geopolitical tensions, and growing concerns about energy security. Dependence on fossil fuels, the authors contend, creates dangerous vulnerabilities while simultaneously accelerating climate change and increasing the likelihood of future conflicts.

The first part of the book is devoted to what the authors call the »blockers« – those who seek to roll back measures, such as Germany's Building Energy Act and the phase-out of combustion engines, advocate expanded oil and gas extraction, promote fracking and LNG terminals, call for a return to nuclear power, and celebrate meat consumption as a political statement. These actors are closely linked to the »mind manipulators« discussed in the second part of the book. Here, the authors examine right-wing populist parties, free-market think tanks, and academics willing to produce commissioned studies that support

predetermined conclusions – provided the funding is sufficient and university administrations, eager for external resources, raise no objections.

The third section addresses what Götze and Joeres regard as a series of technological pseudo-solutions: hydrogen hype, small modular reactors, LNG infrastructure, and the frequently invoked principle of »technology neutrality.« In each case, they ask whether these proposals genuinely facilitate the transition away from fossil fuels or merely delay it.

Unlike many contemporary critiques of social and political conditions, however, *The Billion-Euro Lobby* does not stop at diagnosis. The authors also seek to formulate practical alternatives. In the concluding section, they outline »five steps towards independence«: renewable heating, oil-free mobility, fossil-free agriculture, green electricity instead of coal and gas, and industrial production based on greater self-sufficiency. For each of these goals, they pose four questions: How can Germany become more independent? What political measures are required? What can individuals do? And how can new dependencies be avoided?

This is one of the book's greatest strengths. The concluding overview serves as a concise guide to action, while the book as a whole provides readers with a rich repository of arguments and evidence. It is a resource that can be drawn upon not only in political debate but also in everyday conversations with friends, relatives, and colleagues. (MT)

Angelique Geray: *Undercover unter Nazis. Als Frau im Herz der rechtsextremen Szene* [Undercover among Nazis. A woman at the heart of the far-right scene]. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 256 pp., €18

It is 21 May 2025. At around six o'clock in the morning, some 220 police officers and investigators carry out coordinated raids across several German states. Apartments, garages, and gardens are searched. In total, thirteen locations are targeted. The operation is the result of anonymous tip offs – and those originate from a research team led by investigative journalist Angelique Geray. For years, Geray infiltrated Germany's far-right milieu under the alias »Isabell«, gathering information from within a scene that has become increasingly radicalised and appears to hold particular appeal for very young adults.

Geray's entry into this world was carefully planned. Social media played a crucial role. Through posts that initially seemed harmless but contained coded references and ideological signals recognisable to insiders, she attracted the attention of far-right activists. Friend requests followed, then invitations to gatherings, concerts, demonstrations, and training camps. Digital contacts gradually developed into real-world relationships. She joined far-right dating platforms

and met men with highly specific ideas about what a »German woman« should be and what role she ought to play in a future national revival.

The risks involved in such an operation were enormous. Geray proceeded with caution, aware that she could rely on the support of trusted colleagues and friends should her cover be compromised. Even so, readers cannot help but wonder how she will eventually escape the role she has created for herself – and what years of living a double life do to a journalist.

Following the police raids of May 2025, Geray knows that she is no longer safe within the circles she infiltrated. »No longer a comrade« is the title of the book's final chapter. Its subtitle is both quotation and threat: »Find the [expletive]. Find everything.« From that moment on, »Isabell« ceases to exist. Yet Geray also recognises that undercover journalism has become increasingly difficult in the digital age. »Anonymity is a thing of the past,« she observes. Facial-recognition technology, searchable networks, and digital footprints make it almost impossible to remain invisible until the conclusion of an investigation. The fact that her own name and face eventually became public knowledge was therefore not an accident but a deliberate decision.

Through reports for the German commercial television station RTL and *stern*, Geray has documented far-right networks and their recruitment strategies for years. She even returned to far-right demonstrations openly as a journalist after her cover had been exposed. Her hope is that at least some of the young people drifting into extremist circles might recognise alternative paths before it is too late.

The research presented here reveals the remarkable density of far-right networks, including their international connections, and demonstrates how deeply radicalised even very young members have become. Particularly alarming are the insights into groups such as the terrorist cell *Letzte Verteidigungswelle* (»Last Wave of Defence«). Geray shows how recruitment works, how social media facilitates networking and mobilisation, and how extremist identities are cultivated. At the same time, she exposes a striking contradiction: beneath the aggressive rhetoric and martial self-presentation often lie profound insecurity and an intense desire for belonging. Among the book's most disturbing passages are those that demonstrate just how normalised racist and anti-democratic attitudes have become in certain social environments.

Günter Wallraff and numerous other investigative journalists have praised Geray's courage. In his foreword, Wallraff emphasises the importance of precisely this kind of journalistic insider perspective for understanding contemporary right-wing extremism. Without it, such insights would remain largely the preserve of state security agencies and undercover investigators. Geray's book demonstrates why independent journalism remains indispensable. (MT)

Thomas Muggenthaler: *Mit dem Leben davongekommen – Exil und Neuanfang. Bayerisch-jüdische Lebenswege* [Escaping with their lives – Exile and a new beginning. Bavarian-Jewish life stories]. Munich: Volk Verlag, 280 pp., €24.90

Those who were persecuted, deported, and murdered under National Socialism can no longer tell their own stories. Only the few who survived are able to bear witness – and only if someone is willing to listen. Thomas Muggenthaler is one such listener. The journalist records, preserves, and amplifies voices that might otherwise be lost. In this volume, forty people recount how they »escaped with their lives«, how they experienced persecution and exile, and how they sought to build new lives after the Holocaust while carrying the burden of mass murder and irreparable loss.

These forty individuals share more than a Jewish identity. All spent formative years in Bavaria. Many were born there before being driven from their homes; others returned after the war. Among them is the writer and literary scholar Ruth Klüger, who survived the Holocaust and eventually found herself in Straubing before later studying in Regensburg.

The book is organised geographically rather than chronologically. Its chapters follow the places where survivors rebuilt their lives: above all Israel, the United States, and Argentina, but also many other countries that became substitute homelands. Some eventually returned to Germany itself. As Erich Spitz, businessman and chairman of the Straubing Jewish community, puts it: »Bavaria is Bavaria; this is my home.«

The portraits are based on interviews conducted over many years. Family photographs showing the interviewees as children and young adults, often alongside parents and relatives who would later be murdered, lend additional emotional weight to the narratives. They make visible not only the loss of homeland but also the destruction of families, friendships, and entire social worlds.

The book's greatest strength is also the source of a certain frustration. Each life story is deeply compelling, yet necessarily brief. After four or five pages, readers often find themselves wanting to know more, to ask further questions, and to follow these lives in greater depth. Any one of these biographies could have filled a volume of its own. Some survivors, such as Ruth Klüger, eventually did write such books themselves, reflecting on the difficult task of continuing to live [*weiter leben* (1992)].

That these forty stories have been preserved at all is due largely to Muggenthaler's persistence. Inspired by his radio documentary series *Das ist nicht mehr meine Heimat* (»This Is No Longer My Homeland«), he decided to publish the portraits in written form as well. The project was supported by foundations, archives, and numerous individuals – a reminder that while memory remains deeply

personal, the conditions that make collective remembrance possible must be created together.

In this sense, *Escaping with Their Lives* is more than a collection of interviews. It is a contribution to the ongoing work of remembrance and a testament to the importance of listening before the remaining witnesses fall silent. (MT)

Caro Matzko: *Alte Wut. Warum ich an den Ort reiste, von dem mein Vater einst fliehen musste* [Old Anger. Why I travelled to the place my father once had to flee]. Munich: Piper, 224 pp., €24

Caro Matzko – born Carolin Matzko in 1979, journalist, author, and familiar to many German viewers as co-host of the Bavarian television programme *Ringlstedter* – has written what she describes as a therapeutic road movie in book form.

Travelling in reverse along the route her father once took while fleeing the advancing Red Army as a ten-year-old boy, the journey takes her back into the past of a man who lost his homeland as a child and witnessed terrible things, yet rarely speaks about the traumatic experiences he endured.

Anger shapes his worldview: There is anger at the government, hostility towards foreigners, contempt for perceived weakness and mediocrity. Over the decades he supported various far-right parties, provided they advocated forcefully enough for the recovery of the former eastern territories. Today, he is a member of the AfD.

What does such a father mean for a daughter? A man who asks »What's going on?« rather than »How are you?«, answers the telephone with a loud »Knallo« because »Hello« sounds too American, invariably ends conversations with »Good night, Germany,« insists on maps showing Germany within its 1934 borders, affectionately calls his daughter »my Prussian tank track,« and shares his extreme political views with anyone willing to listen, insisting that the government and politicians in Brussels are »all criminals«?

For a long time, this left Matzko feeling simultaneously helpless and angry. Her rebellion began in adolescence with anorexia, leading to treatment after treatment in locked psychiatric wards, followed by depression, anxiety disorders, and burnout. She blames herself for much of this while also sensing an uncontrollable rage. The source, she suspects, lies somewhere in her father's untold story.

Accompanied by her husband, daughter, and dog, she sets out to visit the places that marked the flight of the boy who, with protruding ears and short trousers, proudly poses with his dog Harras in one of the few surviving photographs of her father, Ekkehard – a photograph now reproduced on the book's cover. The journey begins in Ulm and leads to Weißenfels an der Saale, where her father found refuge with an aunt after fleeing the Red Army together with his

mother and sister. While playing with weapons and ammunition that were still lying around in large quantities after the war, he suffered serious injuries to his face and eyes. Later, while canoeing on the Saale river with a friend, he discovered the body of a dead foetus caught by its umbilical cord on a landing stage. »What did you do with the foetus?« Matzko asks her father (p. 50). »We untangled it and let it drift down the Saale,« he replies. »You know, after everything we had been through, we were completely desensitised.« (p. 51)

In Weißenfels, Ekkehard graduates from school in 1953. Riding a bicycle he built himself, he wins an important race and is recruited by officials seeking athletes for the new East German national cycling team. He declines. »He would have competed for Germany,« Matzko writes, »but not for the GDR« (p. 54). As a result, despite excellent grades and practical experience in a local hospital, he was denied admission to medical school. The official explanation cited insufficient socialist commitment. In 1954, he left for Ulm in West Germany.

The journey eventually takes Caro Matzko to Elbląg (formerly Elbing) in Poland, where her father and his family were overtaken by the Red Army in January 1945 as part of a large refugee convoy. Members of a German-Polish cultural association help her locate places that her father only described in fragments. She learns how he survived attacks by Soviet aircraft because the shock wave from an explosion threw him beneath a grand piano that shielded him from shrapnel. She learns how he narrowly escaped a firing squad when a passing Soviet general shouts to the soldiers that German officers' children must not be killed. Yet history leaves few visible traces. A site of violence and suffering has become a highway ramp with a McDonald's.

The journey concludes in Ostróda on Lake Drwęca, where Matzko's grandfather once ran the Hotel Bismarckturm. Of the grand hotel with its lakeside terrace, only the tower remains. On the opposite shore now stands the modern Lake Hill Mazury Resort, a luxurious hotel where Caro is staying with her family. There, in an ironic twist of fate, she discovers that »in this modern family resort of the present day... the place of my family history is immortalized« (p. 140). Covering the stairwell wall is an enormous photographic mural depicting the Bismarck Tower and her grandparents' former hotel. »The place where my father spent the only carefree years of his childhood,« she writes, »the place he has longed for over seventy-nine years. It is exactly the image I grew up with because he showed it to me again and again, the image he has clung to all these decades.« (p. 140) When she tells her father about the discovery, he insists that she sign the mural with the words »In memoriam Fritz Matzko.« She complies. Later she takes home a bag of earth from the former hotel grounds and a stone from the ruins.

Alte Wut is a sensitive and moving book about memory, family legacies, and the often-frustrating search for mutual understanding. Historical explanations of flight and expulsion remain relatively brief. Nationalism, racism, and war appear

largely in the background. Far more present is the figure of an ageing father whose worldview has been shaped by trauma and resentment.

Matzko explores how experiences of violence reverberate across generations and how difficult it can be to find language for inherited wounds. Her search for traces of her father gradually becomes a search for herself. Matzko describes her insecurities, her expectations, and the emotional strain of the journey. Yet despite the emotional weight of the subject, the narrative remains remarkably light on its feet, sustained by humour and self-deprecation that accompany the struggle between closeness and distance.

She notes: Her father's worldview remains fundamentally different from her own, but she refuses to reduce him to his political convictions. »I will never accept his party affiliation,« she writes. »But he cooked porridge and eggs for me in the morning. He paid for my education. He drove my moving boxes from A to B. You have to be able to tolerate grey areas and contradictions. Democracy is like that too – laborious, but without alternative« (p. 204). (*bro*)

George Orwell: *Zeilen der Zeit. Kolumnen aus einem Jahrhundert im Umbruch*
[Lines of time. Columns from a century in upheaval. Selected and translated from English by Lutz-W. Wolff]. Ditzingen: Reclam, 265 pp., €25

Most readers know George Orwell (1903–1950) as the author of the political fable *Animal Farm* and the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Far less familiar, however, is Orwell the journalist. Reclam's elegantly produced volume *Lines of Time* offers an excellent opportunity to (re-)discover the journalistic side of his work.

The collection brings together a selection of Orwell's columns from the series *As I Please*, originally published between 1943 and 1948 in *The Tribune*, a left-wing weekly. Readers are indebted to translator, editor, and publicist Lutz W. Wolff – whose career has included work for the BBC – for making these texts accessible to a German-speaking audience and for illuminating the many facets of Orwell's life and thought. Here we encounter not only the independent-minded left-wing free thinker, but also the veteran of the Spanish Civil War, the BBC employee who resigned in 1943 because he no longer wished »to waste time and public money on work that leads nowhere« (p. 251), the rose connoisseur and the keen observer of what Jürgen Habermas would later describe as the deliberative public sphere.

One column, published on 7 December 1945, reflects on Hyde Park's famous Speakers' Corner and the foundations of freedom of expression: »The crucial point is that the relative freedom we enjoy depends on public opinion. The law is no safeguard. Governments make laws, but whether they are enforced, and how the police behave, depends on the general mood of the country. If the mass of the

people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech, even if the laws forbid it; if public opinion is sluggish, troublesome minorities will be persecuted, even if laws exist to protect them.« (p. 130)

The columns collected in *As I Please* were written at the same time in which Orwell was working on *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. What the journalist Orwell presents pointedly in *As I Please*, he elaborates upon in his literary works. Throughout his writing runs a sustained critique of the political and ideological conditions of the 1930s and 1940s – conditions that, alarmingly, are not so dissimilar from our own as one might wish.

Two people deserve particular gratitude for this volume: George Orwell himself, whose enduring critique of totalitarian language, political manipulation, and intellectual conformity remains illuminating to this day. Second, the great literary scholar and translator Lutz W. Wolff, whose careful selection, translation, and contextualisation provide readers with ample background information on the life and work of an author who died far too young, while demonstrating that classic texts are rooted in humanity, intellectual independence, foresight, and a commitment to both inner and outer freedom. (MT)