



**Magnus Brechtken (Eds.), *Life Writing and Political Memoir- Lebenszeugnisse und Politische Memoiren.*
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For anyone interested in political memoirs the question of their value and influence is intriguing. Of course, few will now believe that politicians' memoirs and autobiographies should be taken as objective stories people can rely on. But how far can we go in indeed believing them? In other words, do politicians in general write the truth about themselves or is any political memoir whatsoever by definition an unreliable piece of work?

The reader can expect an answer to this question in the newly appeared volume *Life Writing and Political Memoir*, that mostly contains articles about the 19th and 20th centuries written in German, by German authors, mainly historians. And in a way, this is indeed the case, but more indirectly than through an explicit answer. The Introduction, written by the editor Magnus Brechtken, touches on the above mentioned dilemma, but does not explore it in depth. He explains the history of political memoirs from being outstanding and important documents in the midst of the twentieth century developing into only some of the many sources available today. Audio-visual sources and new media, scrutinizing politicians, have left their marks and so did the influence of postmodernism and narrativism in the historical and political sciences. These new scholarly trends have raised serious doubts on the possibility of finding truth in history; and this holds also, and the more so, true for political memoirs. For some historians nowadays, political memoirs are more important because of the identity of the writer-politician and his or her motives appearing from the memoir, than the actual facts and deeds that have been written about by him or her. The facts presented are even more critically and also more

sceptically looked at by historians than already happened in the past in good historical research. But the reader of this volume would like to have read more about this question and is hardly satisfied by only the reference in the footnotes to the debate around postmodernism raised by the famous British political historian Richard Evans (7).

But the articles together do indeed deliver an answer to the question of truthfulness of political memoirs. Let us take for instance the thorough article by Dominik Geppert about Margaret Thatcher's political memoir that appeared in 1993 and 1995. Geppert is an authority on Thatcher and he does not disappoint us now either. From his article it is clear that at least some truth about Thatcher is to be detected. It lies beneath the surface of her memoir and can be extracted by comparing it with other sources, like primary documents recording her acts and deeds and critical biographies, as well. One aspect of the truth seems to be that her political character had two sides: on the one hand, she was a cute, pragmatic politician, who operated in a shrewd and careful way, biding her time when necessary. But at other moments she was a conviction politician, who did not hesitate to utter her political opinions and was often too busy to try and convince other people and fellow politicians of the rightness of her opinions (129, 130). She valued strong mindness and the upholding of principles very much, but it is obvious that she herself had to make concessions in view of political reality, although she did not like to admit that (142). The reader must be very careful, so we read in Geppert's article, in believing what Thatcher writes about her fellow politicians, especially the colleagues in her last cabinets. It appears that she intended her memoir to serve as a political weapon (140ff.). It should help "punish" those former colleagues who manufactured her downfall and was also meant to influence the direction of politics from the moment her memoir was published. John Major, whom she incidentally helped in his career before he became Prime Minister, was Leader of the Conservatives then; he is her special target. And it is certainly not always evident, to say the least, that she is right in her negative judgments about his government policy. One thing stands out: she may have been a good, although controversial, politician, she certainly was not a good loser.

The article by Julia Hildt and Dittmar Dahlmann about the memoirs of members of Russian nobility in exile after the Soviet Revolution in 1917 also demonstrates that it is more than necessary to compare autobiographical writings with primary sources, in this case, sources from the year 1917 and before. From these last mentioned sources it appears that certainly part of the nobility was in favor of "a revolution from above" beforehand (210). These liberal nobles had been convinced of the necessity of a monarchy, but had been opposed to the authoritarian and unsuccessful

regime of Tsar Nicolas II. They favored a constitutional monarchy. Hildt and Dahlmann point out that memoirs are often being written from a wish to belong to a certain group (206–208). Therefore memoirs by members of a social group often demonstrate certain common characteristics and opinions. In this particular case the common characteristic is that many memoir writers in hindsight have a more negative view about the need for change than in the year 1917 itself. Their memories have clearly been influenced by the fact that these writers from the nobility had been driven into exile and that the revolution had blotted out their social class.

The overall conclusion from this valuable volume should be that political memoirs convey their own special truth. They sometimes highlight – or highlight partially – the beliefs and opinions of the writer/politician, and often shed light on the general opinions of the social and cultural group he or she belongs to. However, the actual facts inserted in the writings should be treated with caution and more critically compared than usual with crucial primary sources, if possible. This is not a surprising insight for any serious historian. Nevertheless, it is good to have read a valuable volume, demonstrating this point.