

Book Review

Marietta Meier, Mario König and Magaly Tornay, *On Trial: Testing New Drugs in Psychiatry*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025. Pp. xii + 344. £90. Hdbk. ISBN 978-1-5261-6980-8.

This is not a biography of Roland Kuhn, the Swiss psychiatrist born in 1912. It is not a monograph on the psychiatric hospital of Münsterlingen in the canton of Thurgau, in Eastern Switzerland. Nor is it a history of Tofranil, regarded as the first antidepressant.

What the Swiss historians Marietta Meier, Mario König and Magaly Tornay seek to accomplish in *On Trial: Testing New Drugs in Psychiatry, 1940–1980* is to interweave these three strands into a single narrative that intervenes in a broader historiographical debate on (psycho)pharmacology. For quite some time, this discussion was centred on *The Psychopharmacologists*—to borrow the title of David Healy's three-volume series of interviews from the late 1990s—before moving beyond these great-man narratives to examine the consumption of psychotropic drugs inside and outside psychiatric hospitals. Over the past decade, however, we have witnessed a certain return to the psychopharmacologists. This time, the aim is not to settle questions of priority—who can legitimately be called the 'inventor' of a given substance—but rather to reassess the conditions under which these drugs were tested.

Indeed, the past 10 years have seen an increasing scandalisation of practices from the 1940s to the 1970s. In a dynamic that mirrors other societal processes of *Wiedergutmachung*, Western societies have turned to historians to account for and process these episodes. In Germany, several research programmes were launched in the wake of such scandals: investigations into the use of the GDR as a testing ground by pharmaceutical companies from the Federal Republic¹ or the use of medications on children and adolescents in residential institutions, among others.² *On Trial* emerged from a similar context. In 2012, the Swiss daily *Tages-Anzeiger* published a critical article on the experimentation with psychotropic drugs at Münsterlingen in the 1950s to 1970s. As a result, the canton of Thurgau commissioned a historical study. The book under review is the outcome of this mandate.

Drawing on extraordinarily rich archival access—patient files, administrative records, company documents, and, crucially, the private papers of Vera and Roland Kuhn—the authors offer a dense reconstruction of how psychiatric drug testing evolved between the 1940s and 1980s. The result is a compelling account of shifting ethical and scientific norms: from descriptive case studies to double-blind trials; from an absence of patient

¹Hess Volker et al., *Testen im Osten: DDR-Arzneimittelstudien im Auftrag der westlichen Pharmaindustrie, 1964–1990* (Berlin-Brandenburg, Be.bra wissenschaft Verlag, 2016).

²Lenhard Lenhard-Schramm n., d. Rating, and m. Rotzoll (dir.), *Göttliche Krankheit, kirchliche Anstalt, weltliche Mittel. Arzneimittelprüfungen an Minderjährigen im Langzeitbereich der Stiftung Bethel in den Jahren 1949 bis 1975* (Bielefeld, Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2022). Jonathan Holst, 'Die Wiederkehr der

Vergangenheit – Skandalisierung und Aufarbeitung von Arzneimittelversuchen', in Cornelius Borck and Gabriele Lingelbach, eds, *Zwischen Beharrung, Kritik und Reform. Psychiatrische Anstalten und Heime für Menschen mit Behinderungen in der deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Frankfurt, Campus, 2023), 375–98. Heiner Fangera et al., *Missbräuchlicher Einsatz von Medikamenten an Kindern und Jugendlichen in Nordrhein-Westfalen seit der Gründung des Landes bis in die 1980er Jahre* (Weinheim, Beltz Juventa, 2025).

information to mandatory informed-consent procedures. The authors show how resistant Kuhn remained to these emerging norms, and how this resistance had virtually no consequences for his professional and scientific trajectory.

Even though the three historians assert that ‘history is not a court of law’ (p. 12), the wordplay in the title *On Trial* nonetheless permeates the book. As readers, we cannot entirely escape the impression that Roland Kuhn himself is on trial. The commissioned nature of the project occasionally leads the authors into detailed enumerations—of substances tested, of the exact financial remunerations Kuhn received—that come at the expense of broader historiographical reflections. These would have included, for example, the institutional transformations of psychiatry during these decades and the place of psychopharmacology within them; the shift of pharmaceutical firms from national to multinational structures; the evolution of paper technologies that underpinned contemporary regimes of scientific credibility; the changing socio-professional configurations of the psychiatric field; and the reconfiguration of the welfare state from the *Trente Glorieuses* to the era ‘after the boom’. Situating the book more firmly within these historiographical contexts, rather than primarily within the memorial and moral debate surrounding Roland Kuhn, would have given it greater scope.

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