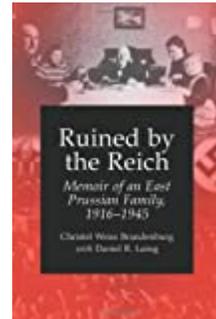




Christel Weiss Brandenburg. *Ruined by the Reich: Memoir of an East Prussian Family, 1916-1945.* Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, 2003. vi + 218 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-1615-8.



Reviewed by Stefan Gunther (Advanced Academic Programs, Johns Hopkins University)

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Too Close for Comfort

A casual Google search with the search terms “memoir” and “Nazi Germany” renders about 19,000 returns—a result that speaks to our long-standing desire to explicate the atrocities of Nazi Germany in general and a more recent, and, it seems, an increasingly more urgent, concern with the fate of individuals (both perpetrators and victims) whose lives intertwined with those horrors. We have come a long way from the time, up until the Eichmann trials, when the memoirs of Holocaust survivors constituted the overwhelming majority of first-person narratives about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany.

An emerging sub-genre among WWII memoirs is that which seeks to demonstrate that at least some Germans were among the victims, if not of the Nazis, then of the Allied reaction unleashed by German aggression. Most notably, in Germany itself they contribute to a larger body of literature that has been at the heart of a discussion about German victimhood during World War II. Beginning with W. G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction* (published as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in Germany in 1999), which marveled at what Sebald saw as the unwillingness of German literature after WWII to reflect

the war’s effect on Germany and Germans, a debate has arisen that has been discussing questions that up to that point had been relegated to the rhetorical domain of the far right and the neo-Nazis.

Asking questions about the putative victimization of German civilians by Allied bombardments (explored in Joerg Friedrich’s *Der Brand*) and the expulsion of populations from the eastern reaches of the *Reich* (the backdrop for Guenter Grass’s *Crabwalk*) has violated a German taboo that had been operative for almost sixty years: in the face of the atrocities Germany visited on its victims, talking of German victims would constitute a relativization of German crimes. When the subject did arise, it was in the context of far-right arguments, as Ian Buruma notes: “German victimhood—of allied bombs, or ethnic cleansing in Poland and Czechoslovakia—has been dwelled upon for years by rightwing revanchists, and self-pitying nationalists. Rancid little papers like the *National-Zeitung* specialise in articles about alleged allied war crimes.”[1] While Friedrich’s book was serialized in the populist German daily *Bild*, it would be, it seems to me, a misreading to attribute purely apologetic tenden-

cies to the books mentioned; they do not necessarily seek to even the scales of historical culpability, nor do they routinely ignore the chronological and causative logic of German crimes causing the Allied response. Typically, the Nazi atrocities form an indelible backdrop to the events described, and the notion, expressed by Grass, that German suffering during WWII needs to be addressed in order to wrest this discourse from those intent on relativizing is a laudable, albeit problematic, one.[2]

Where then, does a memoir like Brandenburg's fall in the discussion about guilt, suffering, and relativizing? As is likely for a first-person account, *Ruined by the Reich* does not rise to the same level of complicated cogitation the books quoted above display. The book starts off with a rambling introduction by Daniel Laing who alternates between intentionalist readings of Nazi history and unawareness of recent scholarship about Nazi Germany. ("When the Fuehrer's dictates were passed down the chain of command [in the Wehrmacht], there was little choice but to obey without question" [p. 4]; "In many ways Nazi fascism was modeled after Stalin's form of bloody communism" [p. 5].) Brandenburg's treatment does occasionally reflect an understanding of the ultimate causes for the author's family's suffering (namely German aggression against the Soviet Union), but primarily attempts to portray this suffering through the eyes of the author's younger, uncomprehending self (whose contemporary narrator version does, however, occupy a rhetorical position in the "German suffering" debate—see below).

Brandenburg structures her account chronologically; the rhetorical thrust of her argument becomes evident at the end of chapter 1, which covers the final years of WWI. Not taking into account much recent scholarship by Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Brandenburg argues that "a true conspiracy against the weak [Weimar] democracy was contrived in a smoky beer-graden by angry men, led by this tee-totaling fanatic [Hitler]" (p. 18). She further draws a distinction between the Nazis and "peaceful, law-abiding German families" (p. 18)—clearly, we are here thrown back to arguments that dominated much outdated scholarship about the Third Reich, [in this case] to the one about decent Germans being led astray by the Nazis.

Brandenburg squarely locates her own family within the camp of "peaceful" Germans when she claims that "the teachings of Christ and the Ten Commandments continued to mean far more to my parents than any of Goebbel's [sic] propaganda statements" (p. 40). De-

spite this professed distance from Nazi ideology, this narrative occasionally still finds itself within the thrall of what it explicitly rejects. When covering the invasion of France, the narrator feels compelled to mention that "what started as grudging acceptance by the pragmatic French eventually turned into outright collaboration.... As well, many of their young women developed dangerous liaisons with our handsome spirited soldiers" (p. 51). No mention is made of the French Resistance, nor does the author appear intent on maintaining a critical distance to the rhetoric of adulation for the Wehrmacht, a position that should have become untenable after the *Wehrmachtsausstellung*. (This position is reiterated when, during the chapter on the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht is contrasted with "the racist occupation forces who followed the army" [p. 64].)

Brandenburg's description of the terror brought to the Reich by the advancing Red Army is harrowing and sobering; her account clearly is better suited to describing what befell her family directly than to pondering the intricacies of historical developments. Even so, the emotional impact for the reader of how her family suffered is once more qualified by phrases that seem to question her ultimate distance from racist (and Nazi) rhetoric. Describing Russian soldiers as "animals" (p. 141) and referring to "Prussia's ancient, feared enemies, Cossacks, Tartars, and Mongol tribesmen" (p. 155) hews uncomfortably close to the ideology the author purports to disavow.

This tendency connects with a penchant for exaggeration when German suffering is concerned: for instance, the author claims that the "Allied firestorm" that incinerated Hamburg caused the death of "hundreds of thousands of civilians" (p. 188), when most historians tally the total victims of "Operation Gomorrha" (the July 25, 1943 bombing raid) at about 18,000. Brandenburg also muses that "perhaps whatever terrible things had happened [in POW camps] in occupied Germany could also [like the Germans intended for their crimes] have been hidden from the rest of the world" (p. 201).

Without, it seems, an intent to sound willfully incendiary, the author, through her rhetoric and exaggerations, falls short of the desirable goal of locating the suffering of German civilians within the overall context of the war of aggression begun by Nazi Germany. Instead, her account lacks the proportionality necessary to discuss soberly how and why German civilians suffered. In addition, this text could have used a more thorough editor: it is replete with misspellings and grammatical problems. As mentioned before, applying the rigorous

standards of historiography to a memoir may not be fair; however, an awareness by Brandenburg of the epistemology of memoirs would not have been misplaced. After all, “no matter how successful we may believe ourselves to be in ‘explaining’ the course of our own histories, the ‘interpretive’ dimension of the venture remains unsurpassable.”[3]

Notes

[1]. Ian Buruma, “Germany’s Unmourned Victims,” *The Guardian Unlimited*, online, 26 November 2002,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/germany/article/0,2763,847866,00.html>.

[2]. Alan Riding, “Guenter Grass Worries about the Effects of War, Then and Now,” *The New York Times*, online, 8 April 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/08/books/08GRAS.html>.

[3]. Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 119.

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