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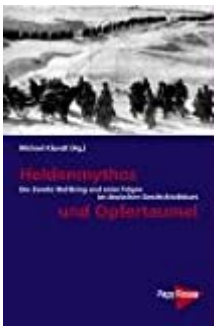

Michael Klundt. *Heldenmythos und Opfertaumel: Der Zweite Weltkrieg und seine Folgen im deutschen Geschichtsdiskurs.* Köln: PapyRossa Verlag, 2004. 191 S. EUR 13.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89438-288-9.

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Published on H-German (November, 2005)

The sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the gradual aging of the last participants in that conflict have inevitably given rise to an increased output of historical and commemorative studies. In Germany in particular this process has been accompanied by new debates over whether "ordinary Germans" should be seen as victims of the war rather than as perpetrators of war crimes. Recent books such as GÃ¼nter Grass's *Crabwalk*, Antony Beevor's *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945*, and JÃ¶rg Friedrich's *Der Brand* have attracted a great deal of media interest, and have prompted considerable debate within the international academic community as well.[1] In the process, a number of old taboos seem to have been broken, including criticism of the Allies' bombing campaign in the final months of the war, and discussion of the plight of German expellees from the East in the years 1944-1947.[2]

Heldenmythos und Opfertaumel, a collection of essays by left-wing writers and scholars, sets itself firmly against this new trend and offers instead a radical critique of the representation of the Second World War in contemporary German culture. Unfortunately, though, several of the contributors are guilty of the same tendencies that they oppose in others, namely the substitution of personal perspectives and emotion-laden styles of argumentation for sober and balanced forms of analysis. This necessarily undermines the impact of the volume as a whole.

This can be seen in particular in the essays written by Michael Klundt (the editor) and Kurt PÃ¤tzold (a respected East German historian). In the view of both of these authors, the recent discussion of the Allied bombing campaign over Germany between 1940 and 1945 offers no fresh insights into the historical causes of the war, but simply provides a new ideological justification for the "militarization" of German foreign policy since the late 1990s. If Germans were "victims" too, so the argument goes, then they have a moral right or even duty to intervene to save others around the world from the terrible consequences of civil war, dictatorship and "ethnic cleansing." According to PÃ¤tzold "Was sich an den Zeiten wirklich geÃ¤ndert hat, war der Schritt ins grÃ¶Ãere Deutschland und die Neuverwendung seiner StreitkrÃ¤fte. Der Wandel hieÃ Jugoslawien und heiÃt Afghanistan und Irak" (p. 28). Klundt puts this even more bluntly: "Sichtbar wird … bereits, dass die Debatten bis zum Ende der 90er Jahre (Holocaust-Denkmal, Goldhagen, Wehrmacht etc.) eher von deutschen TÃ¤tern und MitlÃ¤ufern handelten, wÃ¤hrend die neuerlichen Kontroversen (Bombenkrieg, Vertreibung, Stalingrad, deutsche Kriegsgefangene) stÃ¤rker den Charakter der kollektiven deutschen Opfergemeinschaft hervorheben

... Dazwischen liegt ein vÃ¶lkerrechts- und grundgesetzwidriger Angriffskrieg gegen Jugoslawien (1999)" (p. 8).

The problem here is that the authors offer absolutely no hard evidence to support their claims. The fact that Konrad Adenauer was declared to be the "best German of all time" ("Unsere Besten") in a poll conducted by the German television network ZDF in November, 2003, can hardly be taken as concrete proof of a sudden return to the conservative views of the 1950s, let alone of a desire for the emergence of a new "Greater Germany" in the twenty-first century. Economic problems at home have not led and will not lead to an increased aggressiveness in German foreign policy, particularly as Germany is now fully integrated into the structures of NATO and the EU. The authors also completely overlook the impact of the Brandt-Schmidt era (1969-1982) on (West) German historical consciousness, and of the Second World War itself in turning Germany into a predominantly pacifist nation. After all, Germany did not take part in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, in spite of considerable pressure to do so.

Conversely, the authors say little about the "militarization" of East German political culture under Ulbricht and Honecker and the development of an SED-sponsored *Opferdiskurs* which continues to have underlying echoes in today's discussions. As Josie McLellan has shown, from the 1950s onwards "ordinary East Germans were relieved of their responsibility for Nazi war crimes" through the historical myth of a "communist-led anti-fascist German nation," which was also used to justify rearmament and the creation of a National People's Army against the supposed threat from "fascist" West Germany.[3] Admittedly PÃ¤tzold does touch on this subject, but only very briefly and without linking GDR criticisms of Anglo-American imperialism and *Kriegsbarbarei* to East Germany's own reluctance to engage in an open confrontation with the Nazi past. Instead, his main target seems to be JÃ¶rg Friedrich and liberal newspapers like *Die Zeit*, and while I agree with many of the points he makes, they are hardly convincing as a general indictment of German politics and historical discourse today. The same must be said of the contributions from Klundt and from Gerhard Zwerenz on the recent discussion around Wehrmacht deserters.

Some of the essays, it is true, develop a more critical distance from current polemics over German foreign policy and *VergangenheitsbewÃ¤ltigung*. Erich SpÃ¤ter, for instance, discusses the historical background to the expulsion of some 2.5 million ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s, which he puts down to the role played by the Sudeten Germans in the destruction of the first republic in 1938/9 and in the mass murder of their fellow citizens (including 260,000 Czechoslovak Jews) between 1939 and 1945. The astonishing speed with which Jewish property was "aryanized" in the aftermath of the annexation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 is a case in point, paving the way for the near complete annihilation of the Jewish community a few years later. As SpÃ¤ter shows, the participants in and beneficiaries of this process included significant numbers of local Germans who were supporters of Konrad Henlein's pro-Nazi *Sudetendeutsche Partei*. Some of them went on to play leading roles in West German political life after 1945, especially in organizations representing the expellees and their descendants.

Gerd Wiegel offers a critical look at the work of the television documentary maker Guido Knopp, who has gained consistently high audience ratings for his remarkable run of films on the German experience of the Second World War (as well as successfully sponsoring Adenauer as the "best German" in the ZDF poll). In Wiegel's view the main problem with Knopp is not that he has sought to popularize history as a form of prime time family entertainment, but rather the manner in which he deals with historical explanation and causation. Taking the 2001 series and accompanying book *Die groÃe Flucht* as an example,[4] he shows how a presentation of history that relies on individual tales of suffering without considering the broader context can lead, perhaps unintentionally, to a "DÃ¤monisierung Hitlers" and the "implizite Freispruch der BevÃ¶lkerung durch die Delegierung der Schuld auf die enge FÃ¼hrungsspitze" (p. 85). "Hitler's war," for instance, is juxtaposed against "Germany's pain" after 1945, brought to life by pitiful images of defenseless German civilians in flight. As a result, the viewers–mostly older Germans–are offered only a limited framework within which to consider their own responsibility for Nazi war crimes and for the fate which befell their communities in the East after 1944/5.

Similar themes arise in Bernd Kleinhans's contribution on the portrayal of the Second World War era in (West) German cinema since 1945. The "triumph of entertainment," which began under Goebbels and survived, in only slightly altered form, into the Adenauer era and beyond, has led, he believes, to the reproduction of a familiar narrative (familiar, that is, to successive generations of Nazi and West German cinema audiences) in which the human consequences of the war (adventure, comradeship, sacrifice, betrayal, despair and ultimately defeat) are