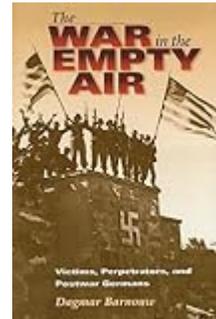




**Dagmar Barnouw.** *The War in the Empty Air: Victims, Perpetrators, and Postwar Germans.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xiv + 303 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34651-3.



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## **A Book in the Empty Air? Dagmar Barnouw's Critique of the Postwar Politics of Memory**

This book offers a passionate and at times polemical critique of the politics of memory in postwar (West) Germany. It adds to the series of publications in recent years that have demanded due recognition for German suffering during World War II. Following W.G. Sebald's critique of the omission of the air war from the literary discourse of the postwar period; Günter Grass's novella on the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff by a Russian submarine and the ensuing death of thousands of ethnic German refugees in January 1945; and the historian Jürgen Friedrich's account of the impact of Allied strategic bombing on German civilians, Dagmar Barnouw too charges that the "nearly total exclusion from historical memory of German wartime experiences, among them large scale air raids, mass deportations, and warfare involving millions of conscripts, has over the decades created a serious loss of historical reality" (p. xii). That suppression of ordinary Germans' memories resulted, according to her, from an Allied propagation of German "collective guilt" as well as from the elevation of Auschwitz to a "supra-historical status" (p. xiii) outside of history and beyond comparison with any other (especially German) forms of suffering. This enduring distor-

tion of the memory of World War II, Barnouw argues, has been perpetuated throughout the postwar period by Jewish and non-Jewish elites in Germany as well as by an increasing "worldwide Jewish interest in an enduring uniqueness and cultural centrality of the Holocaust" (p. 193). The fact that ordinary Germans, as she claims, have been "stripped of their individual memory" of wartime suffering severely limited postwar public memory and contributed to a "fragmented and uncertain ... German historiography of the recent past" (p. 31). A righteous moral certitude regarding the German past also shaped the production and reception of postwar German literature, thus contributing to the popularity of writers like Günter Grass and Siegfried Lenz, while condemning to relative obscurity a writer such as Wolfgang Koepfen, whose work offered a more complex message. "Censored memories" (p. 51) in postwar Germany finally also yielded problematic political consequences by legitimating U.S. bombing campaigns from Kosovo to Iraq and by endorsing Israel's "objectively destructive conduct in the Middle East" (p. 13). To counter such negative political consequences, the author pleads for a "more comprehensive historical memory of the Second World War" that

would give more room to German suffering, reduce the centrality of the Holocaust and also include a “more critical comparative study of Allied warfare” (p. xviii).

As the most important evidence for her argument, Barnouw discusses primarily recent debates about National Socialism and the Holocaust. She consistently sides with protagonists who advocate a more revisionist perspective that would bring into focus German suffering and reduce the centrality of the Holocaust. Thus she supports Martin Broszat’s position in his debate with Saul Friedländer over the “historicization” of National Socialism; she agrees with Martin Walser in his dispute with the then head of the Jewish community in Germany, Ignatz Bubis; and she defends Jörg Friedrich’s publication on the air war against Germany against critics on both sides of the Atlantic. In recounting these and other controversies, Barnouw’s narrative often shifts between an analysis of actual wartime history and contemporary memory debates. The text is also interspersed with her own recollections of the fire bombing of Dresden in February 1945, which she survived as young girl together with her mother, to whom the book is dedicated. The last chapter consists of a detailed discussion of the case of the left-liberal professor of German literature, Hans Schwerte, who, at the age of 84, revealed his true identity as the former SS-officer Hans Ernst Schneider. For Barnouw, this case again exemplifies the mechanisms of a “powerfully ritualized German collective guilt” (p. 259). Schneider/Schwerte was quickly condemned, even though he left behind, in her view, a past that was “dangerously confused and misguided but not personally criminal” (p. 229).

Before I offer a critique of this argument, let me stake out the areas where I agree with the author. I completely concur with her desire to take seriously German experiences of suffering in war and defeat, and to “explore the impact of different groups’ private and public memories of World War II on the different cultural and political ‘presents’ of the postwar period” (p. 11). It is indeed true that the consequences of total war and total defeat have not featured prominently in the historiography of the postwar period, and the integration of German wartime experience into the history of the postwar period constitutes an important historiographical task. I also share her general uneasiness regarding some manifestations of the politics of identity, which leads individual groups to claim exclusive authority over the past. Finally, I support Barnouw’s plea to integrate Allied warfare in World War II into “the larger context of ideological wars in the twentieth century” (p.63). This history

should consider how civilians—including Germans—were increasingly subjected to the mechanisms of industrial warfare; this massive expansion of violence constitutes a central element of last century’s dark history that deserves comprehensive analysis.

The problem with this book, however, is that it is based on a distorted diagnosis of the postwar politics of memory, which itself results from a highly selective and often factually inaccurate reading of both the history and memory of World War II. Let me begin with the facts. Since the book focuses on German suffering, it is imperative to be precise about the extent of that suffering. Yet Barnouw’s numbers are consistently inaccurate or simply wrong. The figure of “more than 16 million Germans” (p. 53) who fled or were expelled from Eastern Europe and the alleged death tolls of 2.5 million (p. 143) are wildly exaggerated. Current estimates amount to 14 million refugees and expellees and death tolls of as low as 500,000.[1] Simply wrong is the statement: “Russia kept back about 2.5 million POWs ... of whom only about 5% survived” (p. 285, see also p. 38, p. 53). The correct numbers are about 3 million German POWs in Soviet captivity of whom about two-thirds, or 2 million, survived.[2] In light of her own inflation of the numbers, it is rather ironic that Barnouw charges—without any supporting evidence—that “the official German figures” for fatalities of the Allied air war “tend to be on the low side” (p. 125). It is difficult to understand how this book could go to press without a correction of these errors.

Besides such factual errors, the book’s argument is a based on a series of omissions and flawed interpretations. Throughout her narrative, the author often puts forth broad claims about the attitudes of ordinary Germans during the Nazi period, who had “not voted for Hitler, had not welcomed the war, and demonstrably changed their attitude toward the Nazi regime as it changed for the worse” (p. 110-111). Yet she never engages the massive literature on the social history of the Third Reich, which, if anything, has brought into focus the Nazi regime’s considerable and increasing popularity among ordinary Germans, often up to the last minute. Along the same lines, it is highly debatable whether it is indeed a “historical fact” that “millions of [German] common soldiers had been victims of the most terrible war in Western history” (p. 65), as the author claims. The extensive literature on the Wehrmacht’s participation in genocidal warfare on the Eastern front certainly suggests a much more complicated picture. And finally, a consideration of the literature on the political generation of right-wing, academic youth in the interwar period could have done much to il-

illuminate the case of Schneider/Schwerte and might also have led to different conclusions.[3] It is indeed true that the binary opposites of “victim” and “perpetrator” cannot capture the complex historical reality of ordinary Germans in World War II. Yet the author often reproduces precisely the mechanism she criticizes by uncritically replacing an allegedly exclusive emphasis on German perpetrators with an equally exclusive emphasis on German victimhood. The author’s argument clearly derives, at least in part, from her own family’s experience in World War II, which, like many other similar stories, deserves to be told and heard. Yet such memories also need to be placed in context by a critical historiography that incorporates yet also transcends individual experiences.

The same necessity for context also applies to the Allied air war. The genesis of strategic bombing culminating in Dresden, Tokyo and Hiroshima deserves critical analysis, yet this analysis remains insufficient without due attention to the previous German escalation of air warfare as experienced by civilians in Guernica, Warsaw, Rotterdam and Coventry. It is this kind of “historicization”—the integration of National Socialism in the longer continuities of the twentieth century—that Martin Broszat advocated, not an uncritical, one-sided emphasis on German suffering. The author also does not engage with the largely critical reception of Jörg Friedrich’s book in the H-German forum on the bombing war in November 2003.[4] She obscures important moral and political distinctions by asserting that Allied “mass destruction was similar to the scale and strategies of National Socialist persecution” (p. 139), thus echoing Friedrich’s similar deliberate usage of Holocaust terminology in describing German civilians’ experience during Allied bombing raids. While the Holocaust indeed needs to be subjected to comparative analysis, such comparisons need to incorporate similarities *and* differences. Individual human suffering defies hierarchical categorization, and every individual death deserves to be mourned. But it is important to maintain that the National Socialist genocide of European Jews differed quantitatively and qualitatively—in intent, motivation, and ultimate aim—from both the Allied air war and from the “ethnic cleansing” of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe.

Equally flawed and unpersuasive as her rendition of the history of the Second World War is the author’s interpretation of the postwar politics of memory. Throughout her study, she asserts that U.S. occupation authorities imposed the concept of “collective guilt” on postwar Germans. Except for references to her own previous publications, she again does not provide any evi-

dence whatsoever for this thesis. It is highly debatable whether an assumption of “collective guilt” ever became part of official U.S. occupation policies, since those aimed precisely at detecting individual guilt and responsibility through denazification and war crime trials. Instead, as Norbert Frei has argued, the notion of “collective guilt” may well have been a German invention rather than an Allied construct.[5] Likewise, it is simply not true that, as the author asserts, “in the last half century, there have been very few accounts, whether documentary or fictional, of the war experience of common soldiers, of civilian experiences of air raids and deportations from the East, of large scale destruction and chaos” (p. 27). A now sizeable literature on postwar memory has persuasively demonstrated that concepts of German victimization were at the very center of postwar commemorative culture. As Robert Moeller’s work in particular makes clear, the collective experience of German POWs and expellees was told in multi-volume publications sponsored by the West German government, and it was the subject of countless popular novels and movies in the postwar period.[6] The experience of the Allied war, it is true, has been less present (albeit never completely absent) in public memories—at least in the West, though not in East Germany.[7] Here, W.G. Sebald did indeed have a point. Yet the reasons for this relative silence are complex and cannot be reduced to an alleged Allied or German (self)-censorship of memory. The (mostly female) experience of being bombed was more difficult to incorporate into public memory because it did not lend itself to redemptive resolution as heroic survival, as was the case, for example, with the experience of (mostly male) returning POWs.[8] Moreover, postwar Germans themselves often exhibited a deep reluctance to acknowledge their wartime losses, which may also have resulted from the fact that such acknowledgments would have raised all too uncomfortable questions about the causal chains leading up to these losses.

Postwar German memory was indeed “selective and exclusive” (p. 66), but in a very different sense than the author suggests. Stories of German victimization were central to postwar memory in the 1950s, and, given the numerous publications and TV broadcasts on German POWs, expellees and air raid victims in recent years—they seem to be gaining popularity, notwithstanding the alleged “censorship” of memory.[9] Some political activists in the 1960s, it is true, engaged in a collective condemnation of their parents as the “generation of Auschwitz” (the phrase is Gudrun Ensslin’s).[10] Yet it does not help to replace this verdict with the author’s equally problem-