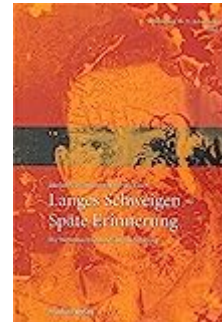


Markus Zöllchmeister, Joachim Sauer. *Langes Schweigen–Späte Erinnerung: Die Wehrmachtsausstellung in Salzburg.* Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 191 pp. EUR 22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7065-1927-4.



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The “Wehrmacht Exhibition” in Salzburg

The controversy unleashed by the “Wehrmacht exhibition” rumbles on. Eleven years after the Hamburg Institute for Social Research launched what it planned as the demolition of the “legend” that the Wehrmacht had emerged from the Second World War with clean hands, publications on or around the exhibition now amount to a mini-library; they range from empirical investigations into the killing fields in the East to “meta-level” reflections on the place of the exhibition within German (or Austrian) collective memory. The polemics sparked off by the original exhibition have been followed by arguments about the decision by the Hamburg Institute to withdraw it, pending an investigation of the provenance of its photographs, and then to replace it by a more distanced, or to its critics, more anodyne exhibition.[1] However the final balance sheet may be drawn up, the exhibition’s impact has clearly been enormous, probably greater than any comparable exhibition in postwar Germany.

This impact was not uniform. Because the exhibition traveled to thirty-three different venues in Germany and

Austria, discussions in each place involved a different interplay between national and sometimes very intense local politics; often the controversies started before the exhibition arrived, with the question of who would be willing or able to sponsor it; who would speak at the lectures organized around it and how local politicians, associations or societies would respond, or fail to respond to it.[2]

Salzburg experienced this pattern early in 1998. However, despite its subtitle, this book by Markus Zöllchmeister and Joachim Sauer is much less concerned with the provincial setting than with postwar repression of Nazi crimes in general. Its focus is what might be called a post-Nazi collective psyche. Staying on this level of analysis is not perhaps in itself a problem, especially as Salzburg’s controversies have already been the subject of a very useful collection.[3] However, the choice of level is aggravated by the language in which the analysis is couched, which is often jargon-ridden and repetitive. Specialist terms are often invoked but not embedded in a clearly stated argument. An emblematic example is

the frequent use of the term “narcissistic ego.” The resulting language barrier means this book will probably not achieve the popular readership the authors hope for. This is a pity, for a central purpose of the book, as stated at the outset, is a praiseworthy one: to break down the communicative blockage between a younger generation and their parents and grandparents “with critical discussion and with the remembering of the horrors of Nazi rule” (p. 11). But will a dialogue really be helped when it is based on the view that the existing inter-generational silence “can be understood as a defense against personal complicity and of a possible, real or imagined guilt, continuing identifications and idealizations on the part of the generations of perpetrators” (p. 15)? It seems unlikely.

One of the charges made against the Wehrmacht exhibition was that it preferred moralistic condemnation to the attempt to understand the constraints under which soldiers acted. The authors are presumably responding to this charge when they disavow any intention to “to condemn ‘arrogantly’” past generations (p. 11). The problem, of course, as reactions to the exhibition showed all too clearly, is that the borderline between condemning and “promoting critical discussion” is often extremely fuzzy and, like charges of “moralism,” these terms tend themselves to become weapons in polemical exchanges. A key issue here, which the revised Wehrmacht exhibition attempted to explore, is the amount of leeway in fact available to individual soldiers; studies of deserters from the Wehrmacht raise the same questions in a different context.^[4] Zschmeister and Sauer take a similar line, though without any historiographical backing.

On the postwar period—their main concern—the authors repeat (repetitively) the fairly well-known story of what has been called the “second guilt.” To summarize: participation in the Nazi regime and the successful assertion of German supremacy gave the majority of Austrians and Germans a sense of unchallengeable power, racial and psychological security. Defeat brought this edifice down in ruins and placed the collective ego under threat: hence, an admission of the criminal dimensions of the Nazi regime would have led to a collapse of collective self worth.

Though this picture appears plausible enough in its broad outlines, its lack of concreteness is frustrating. It makes no room for politicians who make decisions, editors who decide what to print or lobbies who apply for subsidies or fail to get them. More fundamentally, a focus on the functionality of the collective ego makes it difficult to see why postwar Austrian (or German) society could

have done anything other than pursue the path of collective repression. We are almost back, via a social psychological route, to the old argument of Herman Löbbe, that postwar silence about Nazi crimes was functionally necessary for the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Yet the authors would presumably reject this suppression as an abdication of moral responsibility.

Although their pedagogical and moral concerns appear to fall firmly in the tradition of the 1968 or perhaps 1986 (Austria’s “Waldheim year”), the authors are not uncritical of the 68ers. They argue that while the students attacked the taboos of their parents, many shared their parents’ profound wish to draw a line under the Nazi past; while some rejected the silence of their parents, though in an unnecessarily offensive form, others—perhaps thanks to the authoritarian education they had undergone—preferred the alternative of identifying uncritically with their parents (or grandparents). These circumstances led to a continuation of the “generational pact” of mutual agreed silence. The “Wehrmacht exhibition” offered a chance to break this pact, but it succeeded in doing so only partially and the backlash against it demonstrated a shocking persistence of prejudice and showed that “a large amount of consciousness-raising [Bewußtwerdung] lies before us” (p. 172). This kind of professional pessimism is de rigueur amongst some educationalists and—without wishing to sound complacent—I think it should probably be taken with a grain of salt.

In the last third of the book, the authors provide an analysis of visitors’ responses to the exhibition in Salzburg, as recorded in its visitors’ book. This turn to empiricism is not particularly satisfactory, either.^[5] Though some of the entries are striking in their emotional intensity, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from them. As the authors acknowledge, the 500 entries they examined (out of 20,000) are in most cases unverifiable in terms of the background or age of the visitors. It is therefore difficult to know what to make of the precision of the conclusions that 13.6 percent of the entries shown an “undifferentiated” level of confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with the exhibition while 29.2 percent display only a “slightly differentiated” level (pp.162-3). Members of this last group, the authors argue, adopt a range of mechanisms in order to prevent themselves from being emotionally affected, including “relativizing” (*Relativierung*), naïve pacifism and “anonymizing the perpetrators” to “move the reality of the Nazi regime to a secure distance” (pp. 167-173). At this point, some interviews with some actual people would surely have helped flesh out these hypotheses.

Finally, what of the Austrian angle? Though the authors do give due weight to the official doctrine of Austria as a “nation of innocence” (“Unschuldsnation” [p. 23]), the psychological strategies they describe are basically “post-Nazi” rather than a specifically Austrian phenomena. How and where Austria differed from Germany is a complicated question that has not really been systematically researched, although there has been plenty of finger-pointing on both sides. Walter Manoschek has argued that in order to deny the pan-German element of Austrian soldiers’ wartime experiences, an apolitical *Heimat* had to be substituted for the German fatherland as a focus of popular memory, while at the same time a patriotic, state-sponsored memory rewrote the fallen soldiers as anti-Nazi victims. However, Manoschek (one of the organizers of the [first] Wehrmacht exhibition) also points out many similarities in responses to the exhibitions in the two countries.[6] ZÄ¶hmeister and Sauer do not seem to add much to this conclusion with their argument that Austria’s “victim myth” allowed a “narcissistic recourse to the individual and collective self as a subject which had been misused by a foreign regime, was pitiable and innocent” (p.109).

Overall, then, this is a disappointing book. As an analysis of collective post-Nazi evasion, it has less to recommend it than classics like the Mitscherlichs’ *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (1967). But neither does it provide much insight into the kind of controversies which in Salzburg even saw the governor of the province press his 93-year-old father into service to refute the “slanders” directed against the Wehrmacht.

Notes

[1]. For the perspective of two of those involved in the first exhibition see Walter Manoschek, “Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944: Innenansichten einer Ausstellung,” *Zeitgeschichte* 29 (2002): pp. 64-75; Hannes Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter. Der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt aber keiner war dabei* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2004). Heer’s pessimistic conclusion that the revised exhibition undid all

the progress made by the first contrasts with Heidemarie Uhl’s view that the first exhibition had helped create a new critical mainstream in her “Lesearten des ‘Vernichtungskrieges’” in *Wie Geschichte gemacht wird. Zur Konstruktion von Erinnerungen an Wehrmacht und Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Hannes Heer, Walter Manoschek, Alexander Pollak and Ruth Wodak (Vienna: Czernin Verlag, 2003), pp. 269-284.

[2]. On the Wehrmacht exhibition in Austria see, for example, Walter Manoschek, “Die Wehrmachtsausstellung in Österreich,” *Mittelweg* 36 (1996): pp. 25-32; and Brigitte Kepplinger and Reinhard Kannonier, eds., *Irritationen. Die Wehrmachtsausstellung in Linz* (GrÄ¶nbach: Sandkorn, 1997).

[3]. Helga Embacher, Albert Lichtblau and GÄ¶nther Sandner, eds., *UmkÄ¶mpfte Erinnerung. Die Wehrmachtsausstellung in Salzburg* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1999).

[4]. Walter Manoschek, ed., *Opfer der NS-MilitÄ¶rjustiz. Urteilspraxis–Strafvollzug–EntschÄ¶digungspolitik in Österreich* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2003); Maria Fritsche, *Entziehungen. Österreichische Deserteure und SelbstverstÄ¶mmelter in der Deutschen Wehrmacht* (Vienna: BÄ¶hlau, 2004).

[5]. For other analyses, see the film of interviews of visitors to the Vienna exhibition by Ruth Beckermann in the edited selection *Jenseits des Krieges. Ehemalige Wehrmachtssoldaten erinnern sich* (Vienna: DÄ¶cker, 1998) and Hannes Heer, “Das ist das Schreckliche, daß da Millionen Soldaten waren, die heute behaupten, nie etwas gesehen zu haben,” in *Wie Geschichte gemacht wird*, pp. 81-108.

[6]. Walter Manoschek, “Österreichische Opfer oder große deutsche Krieger?” in *Eine Ausstellung und ihre Folgen. Zur Rezeption der Ausstellung “Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944”*, ed. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (Hamburg: Hamburger Editions, 1999), pp. 87-111.

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