H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dirk Rupnow. *Vernichten und Erinnern: Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächnispolitik.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005. 384 S. EUR 32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89244-871-6.

Reviewed by K. Hannah Holtschneider (School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh)

Published on H-German (January, 2007)

Are contemporary forms of Holocaust memorialization connected to ways in which Nazis chose to remember their Jewish victims? While it is apparent that the National Socialist government did not implement a national strategy of remembering Jews, evidence suggests that some institutions and initiatives in the Third Reich were concerned with collecting, categorizing and presenting the histories and lives of their victims to both an elite audience as well as the wider public. Some of these efforts have been researched in depth in recent publications, like the Jewish Museum in Prague, but no attempt has been made to link such projects methodologically in an investigation of Nazi strategies to commemorate their victims. Neither have links between such Nazi commemorations and contemporary forms of Holocaust memorialization been investigated, whether on the basis of shared source material or even in terms of their historiographical employment in specialist works or exhibitions aimed at a wider public.

Dirk Rupnow's most recent book begins such an investigation by proposing to fit a number of separate official and private Nazi engagements with the history of their Jewish victims into an analytical framework informed by recent discourses on memorialization. He makes no claims to comprehensiveness. Rather he assembles three case studies sometimes loosely connected through their personnel, linking them under the umbrella of "memorialization." Thus chapters about museums, "Judenforschung" and images investigate the various moves of Nazi institutions and individuals to present a narrative about Jews to the public. Rupnow's aim is twofold. First he seeks to challenge the notion that the Nazis not only wanted to eliminate all Jews in their sphere of power, but also destroy any evidence which could remind people of their murder and of a therefore "extinct culture" (p. 12f.). Through this somewhat eclectic assembly of different efforts to represent Jews before their murder, Rupnow gives further support to the thesis that the centrality of antisemitism to Nazism demanded a continuing presence of Jews even after a completed genocide. Since Nazism needed the "Jewish enemy" to justify its military and cultural exploits, memorialization of Jews arguably was a necessary condition for the future of the regime after the war and genocide. Second, Rupnow's study asks questions about the relationship between "remembrance and extermination," namely what kind of connections can be made, with the available evidence, between the plans to destroy and murder, and practices of remembrance (p. 15).

Methodologically, Rupnow begins with an overview of recent trends in research on memory and memorialization in cultural studies, in particular the concept of

the "murder of memory" in relation to National Socialist tendencies to destroy any evidence that they committed crimes against Jews. He concludes this discussion with references to contemporary German discourses on Holocaust remembrance, arguing that the emphasis placed on the need to remember is often joined by references to Nazis' desires to eliminate any trace of their crimes and their victims. Thus the Nazi "murder of memory" is invoked to justify and necessitate current memorialization. Rupnow joins this observation with methodological concerns regarding the prominence of counterfactual history in this field, which ends in speculation about what might have happened had Nazi Germany won the war. Such speculation about possible futures of the past remind one of the literary genre of parahistory of Nazism, which envisages a different present on account of the hopes and expectations expressed in Nazi Germany. Rupnow concludes that this re-visioning of the past is dangerous with regard to the representation of the perpetrators. Rather than imagining criminals, these re-constructions of historical visions of the future elevate perpetrators to creators of utopian civilizations. Thus, real victims would have no place in such a re-telling of history.

Rupnow's methodological reflections in the context of debates about the memorialization of the Holocaust are helpful in grounding the archival research presented in the following chapters. His aim, to read the current literature on memorialization from angles not previously considered in relation to each other, is promising, offering new perspectives while covering well trodden ground. Already at this point in the book, it is clear that this study is a very welcome addition to the ever-expanding literature on Holocaust remembrance, pushing the scholarly community to consider connections between fields of inquiry hitherto ignored.

The following two chapters, which offer Rupnow's own archival research on the Jewish Museum in Prague and "Judenforschung," are the most original pieces in the book. Appropriately eclectic, in accordance with his aim of connecting as yet unconnected research themes, Rupnow leads the reader in an exploration of the ways in which Nazis categorized the history of their victims, assembled and exhibited artifacts of Jewish life in central and eastern Europe and justified scholarly work on a people doomed to be murdered. In particular the relationship between ideological Nazis and the desire to study and present research results on Jewish history, and Rupnow's discussion of how to frame the field of "Judenforschung," makes for a fascinating account of Nazi perceptions of their victims. In particular the chapter on "Judenforschung" illustrates the ideological conflicts that led both to the need to research and present Jewish history and at the same time to downplay any fascination or attraction of the subject matter through more or less subtle antisemitic emplotment, lest Jewish culture and civilization become attractive to a popular audience. Hence publications of the Institut zum Studium der Judenfrage trod a fine line between having to acknowledge indebtedness to Jewish scholars while at the same time discrediting their achievements and ability. These observations lead Rupnow to consider the field of historiography and the role of the scholar: can this ideologically biased work still be understood as "scholarship," or does such overt association of the scholar with a political regime and an ideology immediately discredit the work? Questions such as these tie this chapter in particular to wider debates about ideological trends in historiography in general as well as to debates about the role of scholars in relation to the government of the country they work in.

More immediately, these considerations enable Rupnow to demonstrate that far from following a policy of obliteration of their crimes and the entire history of their victims and creating the impression that those murdered never existed in the first place, parts of the Nazi state not only tolerated but enabled the commemoration of Jewish communities. Why would a regime set on the elimination of this group of people wish to assemble, store and publicize reminders of Jewish history? Rupnow suggests that Nazi ideology, in order to continue to function even after the murder of Jews in Europe was completed, needed a tangible enemy that would serve to justify the existence of Nazism. As a result, if Jews did not exist, Nazis would need to invent them, as otherwise they stood to lose their *raison d'Ã*[a]*tre*. Hence, assembling, categorizing and disseminating information about Jews would become a crucial part of the perpetuation of the regime after a completed genocide.

Rupnow continues the theme of documentation in a chapter about visual evidence of the Nazi regime that documents the crimes of murder themselves. While this chapter is not based on Rupnow's own archival work, but rather addresses existing studies of photographic evidence of Nazi crimes, it forms an important contrast to the previous chapter on "Judenforschung." While "Judenforschung" aimed, at least on some level, at the preservation of Jewish history, albeit for purposes perpetuating and necessitating antisemitism, photographic evidence of the persecution of Jews and their murder was more clandestinely assembled. Discussions about what to do with this documentation were more cautious when re-

garding the ability of subsequent generations to comprehend the ideological motivation of the first generation of Nazis to commit genocide. Thus, prohibitions on photographing murders contrast with the relative liberty with which soldiers circulated such trophy pictures among their families.

To strengthen his thesis about National Socialism's need to commemorate its victims' history and its crimes, Rupnow also discusses documentation efforts of members of the Jewish resistance to the Nazis. How and why Jewish scholars and lay people decided to chronicle their suffering serves to illustrate a completely different project to remind others of a people persecuted and a civilization extinct. The need to gather evidence of crimes that are too awful to contemplate and indeed resist belief is prominent in Jewish narratives, as is the need to leave a trace of Jewish life for future generations. The discussion in this chapter centers on the use of evidence as much as on the representation of crimes that can only be believed if one is presented with evidence of the victims' lives and their dying. Jewish efforts to gather evidence and write the history of their murder as the events were unfolding reveal an existential urgency. Nazis' efforts to commemorate their victims and their own crimes, by contrast, center on the need to place Jewish history and the murder of Jewish people into an ideological context that necessitates their extinction.

Rupnow's study closes with considerations about the use of evidence created by National Socialists in contemporary commemorations of the Holocaust. Here, as in the conclusion, the book comes full circle in its desire to chart new ground in the debates about memorialization of the Holocaust. The intricate connections Nazis drew between their crimes and the history of their victims are, to some extent, replicated in contemporary forms of Holocaust remembrance and representation. In particular museums may be deemed guilty of relying too readily on perpetrator evidence to represent the lives and deaths of the victims. Rupnow's study challenges the existing practice of and scholarship on memorialization and gives impulse to further investigations. For this reason alone, it should be noticed.

Citation: K. Hannah Holtschneider. Review of Rupnow, Dirk, *Vernichten und Erinnern: Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächnispolitik*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12778