H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Biess. *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 367 S. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12502-2.

Reviewed by Thomas Kühne (Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University)

Published on H-German (April, 2007)

Perpetrators into Victims, Warriors into Citizens

As a result of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's trip to Moscow in September 1955, in the following months the last German POWs returned from the Soviet Union–all in all 9,262, including 3,000 civilian internees. West Germans sighed with relief. The postwar period, and thus the most terrible war in European history, seemed to come to an end. In fact, it did not. Innumerable former soldiers and POWs were left alone or had to burden their families when it came time to deal with the traumas resulting from actively exercised or passively suffered mass violence. The return of the last POWs in late 1955 did, however, constitute a caesura. "It completed the (re)constitution of the (West) German national body," as Frank Biess says in his masterly and well-written study (p. 227). Formal sovereignty was granted only weeks before Adenauer's trip to Moscow, when the Paris Treaties were signed and West Germany joined NATO. However, as one contemporary commentator put it, " 'only the return of the last POWs gives us the consciousness to be a nation with equal rights among other nations' since 'no state that is forced to accept foreign captivity of a part of its members is really sovereign' " (p. 206).

The last returnees also helped to reconstruct collective memory and the gender order. The public mostly ignored the returnees' "often compromised pasts" in the Nazi war of annihilation and rather "focused on the POWs heroic resistance and survival in Soviet captivity" (p. 206). Thus, they rehabilitated masculinity–which had been seriously damaged by military defeat and the widespread experience of powerlessness in captivity, hospitals, or during pension application procedures as well as the mass rapes of German women in 1945 and their fraternization with military occupiers afterwards.

Biess tracks the multifold process of how the returnees shaped Germany's search for normality between 1945 and 1955 along the trajectory of three terms: collective "memory," including the relationship between public and private memories, "gender" and the formation of "hegemonic masculinities" in East and West Germany, and "citizenship" as "a concept of belonging and as a marker of subjectivity that is located at the intersection between state and society." (p. 11-13). One of the strengths of Biess's book is that it explores both parts of Germany logically to demonstrate the divergent paths of

East and West as well as some surprising similarities between the two postwar societies. The narrative is shaped by two steps. Around and immediately after the defeat, collective and private experience revolved around "victimization"; in fact, the self-victimization of the German people. In the shadow of total defeat, both the political concept of citizenship and the cultural construct of masculinity were obsolete. Only after the late 1940s and early 1950s did West and East Germany return to a path of assumed normality which included political stability, redemptive (instead of victimizing) memory, and a tendency toward what gender scholars like to call "remasculinization."

Taking up recent research on the ideological and cultural framework of the *Wehrmacht* as well as of the home front, Biess shows how, as early as 1943, widespread knowledge of genocidal politics and the fear of revenge caused Germans to enhance their self-image as victims, be it of Allied air raids, the Jewish-Bolshevik threat from the East, or the National Socialist regime in general. Initial willingness to address guilt and responsibility in the fall of 1945 quickly gave way a "ubiquitous discourse of victimization that elided most distinctions between victims and perpetrators as well as between different kinds of suffering" (p. 49). This discourse was fed by actual individual suffering and the goal of political parties and governments across all ideological gaps to win over the millions of former Wehrmacht soldiers. Not only churches, but the conservative parties and the Social Democrats in the West as well as the communist regime in East Germany ambitiously "distanced returnees from their previous roles as bystanders, collaborators, or perpetrators during the Nazi period" and portrayed them as "passive victims of forces beyond their control" (p. 62).

A depressing chapter provides the subjective basis for that discourse: the physical and emotional damages and problems of returning POWs and the diagnostic and therapeutic responses by medicine and psychiatry to them. The POWs suffered twice: first from the wounds and traumas the war and camps had caused, and second at the hands of doctors, whose attitudes toward their work after 1945 corresponded largely with those of the National Socialist period. With regards to the widespread diagnosis of "dystrophy," a new catch-all term for a variety of physical and psychological diseases, among returnees, the medical doctor Hans Malten, for instance, "identified a specific 'neurosis of the returned POW' that, as he argued, derived primarily from 'endogenous factors' and 'manifested itself in an insufficient capacity toward all demands of the new life.' In this view, returnees' symptoms derived from their individual inadequacy and not from their external conditions of captivity and homecoming" (p. 77). On the basis of such diagnoses, it was easy to reject returnees' pension claims. In East Germany, there was no chance even to address damages from captivity in the Soviet Union. If returnees were understood to have suffered at all, it was due to western captivity or Nazism. Eastern doctors drew on the theories of the Soviet psychiatrist Ivan Petrovic Pavlov, who emphasized external societal factors as shaping psychological conditions, to teach returnees and the public that all suffering would disappear with improved living conditions under communism and with ideological conversion.

Things changed during the early 1950s, however. The ideological climate of the Cold War allowed psychiatrists to pay more attention to the external causes of psychological issues and thus assign legitimacy to deprivations associated with Soviet captivity. Party leaders became more and more concerned with how to entice millions of former soldiers and POWs to support their careers. At the same time, all over Europe and not only in Germany, national societies "searched for more heroic narratives that would meet the functional and symbolic requirements of postwar reconstruction" (p. 97). Memories of resistance and survival in concentration camps became particularly popular outside of Germany. But "West German redemptive representations of returnees bear a striking resemblance to Western European images of returning concentration camp survivors.... The structural similarity of these redemptive memories was not accidental: they projected the war's deprivation onto the (Nazi or Soviet) 'camp' as the central symbol of the totalitarian 'other' in the Cold War" (pp. 97f). Such redemptive memories presented a new ideal of masculinity, one in fact deeply rooted in older Christian traditions. It did not revolve around toughness and courage on the battlefield but rather on heroic survival under extreme conditions and it did not just glorify physical survival but even more the survival of "allegedly timeless and essential German values such as Heimat, family, and Freedom" (p. 102). Emerging pressure groups, such as the Verband der Heimkehrer (the association of returnees), and other agencies presented the returnee as the best transmitter of these values and thus as the perfect post-totalitarian citizen.

Biess puts much weight on the conservative, if not authoritarian, dispositions among the returnees, as did the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in its famous study on the "political consciousness of former POWs" in 1957. We should realize, however, that authoritarianism

was not limited to Germans but was in fact widespread in western democracies in the 1950s, not least in the United States. On another different but related issue, however, Biess is certainly correct. West Germany's success story includes the paradigmatic build-up of a democracy, the integration of innumerable people with ambivalent political opinions, and the pacification of former genocidal warriors. The price had to be paid in private and intimate relations. The experience of mass violence and total defeat "permeated the inner fabric of interpersonal relations in postwar society. This 'privatization' of the consequences of the war channeled a great deal of frustration and resentment resulting from a lost war into the family and towards women" (p. 124). The same happened in East Germany, where former soldiers were recognized only for their communist conversions during Soviet captivity, which transformed them into valuable citizens of the German Democratic Republic.

In both parts of Germany, returnees faced social and political ostracism and even new judicial persecution for moral failure in Soviet or western captivity. Between 1948 and 1956, West Germany courts sentenced about one hundred *Kameradenschinder* (torturers of their comrades) to prison terms ranging up to fifteen years for having denounced their comrades to camp authorities or for other mistreatments and thus prolonged their internment. In East Germany, on the other hand, thousands of returnees from the West became victims of purges that swept the communist SED. In both the GDR and the FRG the reconstruction of the returnees' citizenship was based on "parallel exclusions" (p. 153).

This book is a pioneering and exemplary exploration of the first decade of post-WWII German culture and politics. Biess's investigations into the mental and structural parallels between East and West Germany, which actually overarched the ideological and institutional division, are particularly convincing. The scholarly significance of this volume reaches far beyond its topic. It is an outstanding model for how to intertwine political, social, cultural, and gender history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Thomas Kühne. Review of Biess, Frank, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13072

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.