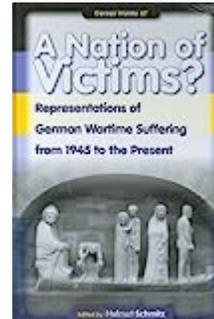


Helmut Schmitz, ed. *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 265 pp. \$73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-2209-6.



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Victimhood, Memory, and History

Scholarship on German memory of the Holocaust has recently focused on Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which has intensified debates over whether unified Germany has come to terms with its past. The Federal Republic has pointed to the memorial, erected in 2005, as symbolic of a key moment in decades of memory work. The memorial locates, both physically and psychologically, the central significance of the Holocaust in German society, which has not always been so clearly recognized. Since 1945, Germans have often focused on a discourse of "German victimhood," even portraying Germans as Hitler's first victims, and preferring a narrative of the war that emphasizes trauma from civilian bombings, expulsions, mass rapes, and POW experiences, ultimately marginalizing the Holocaust. The politicization of memory debates during the Cold War fed this narrative, as some West German historians and politicians attempted simultaneously to relativize the Holocaust and portray "ordinary" Germans as victims of the Nazis, and East German ideologues emphasized Nazi attacks on socialists over Jewish suffering.[1] The Berlin memorial would seem to suggest that post-unification Germany has come to terms with a his-

torical narrative that finally identifies Hitler's victims as the Jews. This volume of fascinating essays edited by Helmut Schmitz presents an interesting challenge to Germany's project of coming to terms with its past.

Schmitz argues that despite Germany's apparent institutional progress, a recent resurgence in memory production, especially in literature and film, shifts focus back to "German suffering" in a style reminiscent of the 1950s.[2] In the last ten years, feature films like *Der Untergang* (2004) and the made-for-TV movie *Dresden* (2006), as well as GÃ¼nter Grass's *Im Krebsgang* (2002) and JÃ¼rg Friedrich's work on civilian bombings, *Der Brand* (2003), have attempted to break the post-1968 taboo on discussing "German suffering" and signal a new obsession with representing Germans as victims. This re-emergence of a German victimhood discourse, Schmitz claims, represents "the greatest shift of memory discourse" since the appearance of the American-made television series *Holocaust* (1979) triggered widespread debate (p. 2). Schmitz successfully synthesizes the ideas in these twelve essays into four major intertwined arguments. First, he notes that while the Berlin memorial

seals a collective identity based on responsibility for Nazi crimes institutionally, it risks producing a homogenous public memory culture that fails to reflect heterogeneous, and much more complex, private memories. Secondly, the resurgence of “German suffering” narratives suggests that the German war experience has not been sufficiently communicated or represented. Thus, the focus on histories of family stories and eyewitness accounts sometimes devolves into emotionalized, de-contextualized “histo-tainment.” Thirdly, the resurgence of German victim discourses signals a manifestation of repressed private traumatic experiences, silenced for years by uniform public and political discourses. Like family secrets, private memories have retudiscussing German suffering has crossed political lines as both liberals and conservatives advocate more inclusive representations of Germans as both victims and perpetrators. Ironically, because the historical responsibility of German perpetrators has been cemented in public memory, claims to “German victimhood” are made with greater confidence by groups who do not claim to represent radical political agendas, even though the problem of relativizing persists.

The anthology is organized into four clearly defined sections related to the political and cultural implications of German victim discourses. The first section provides interesting context for the current obsession with German suffering by discussing literature and film in the 1950s. Depending heavily on Robert Moeller’s argument that the rhetoric of victimization was a central part of the civic culture of the early Federal Republic, these essays demonstrate in many ways that the last ten years of memory production suggest a return to the immediate postwar trends. Gregor Streim analyzes several lesser-known texts on Allied internment camps in the western occupied zones after 1945. He argues that these texts competed with Nazi victims for remembrance by comparing Allied camps to Nazi camps, reversing victim-perpetrator roles. These internment narratives, Streim emphasizes, are a perfect example of the political function of historical memory, where memory building is not at all innocently confined to private stories, but politically driven. Hans-Joachim Hahn focuses on a more famous cultural work, Wolfgang Staudte’s film *Die Mörder sind unter Uns* (1946) and various literary texts by Wolfgang Weyrauch. Hahn argues that Staudte and Weyrauch de-particularize the Jewish experience of victimhood and try to replace it with a more universalized representation of suffering that can be applied to Nazi victims and ordinary Germans, contributing to the establishment of a postwar German victim mentality. Helen

Wolfenden explores this theme further by looking at several popular films from the 1950s, including *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* (1958), that attempted to depict German soldiers as victims of National Socialism and communism rather than as perpetrators of atrocities. Wolfenden convincingly places such attempts in the context of the West German state’s efforts to promote a positive image of the military in light of rearmament, and she notes that these films set the pace for propagating the myth of a “clean Wehrmacht,” which lasted for decades.

The next section explores political issues surrounding representations of German suffering, especially in the context of expellees. Recently, expellee organizations have lobbied for a Center Against Expulsions memorial to be built next to the Berlin memorial. Samuel Salzborn argues that the aim of this memorial is to ascribe the role of victim to the collective body of the nation, furthering the myth of German innocence and relativizing Nazi crimes. Such a memorial would turn history upside down by comparing expellee experiences to the suffering of Jews and would deny the historical causes of flight and expulsion from Eastern territories. Bill Niven examines the Bund der Vertriebenen, a group that plays a key role in representing Germans as victims through exhibits like the recent “Erzwungene Wege” (2006), which produces a narrative that takes the Holocaust out of twentieth-century expulsions, comparing German expellees to victims of the Armenian genocide. While German expellees plead for an indivisibility of human suffering, Niven argues that they are ideologically driven and promote a selective memory that refuses to acknowledge German responsibility for actually starting the war, and deliberately distracts attention from Jewish suffering. Niven suggests that the Bund’s exhibit omitting the Holocaust, and creating a cult-like image of *Heimat* and German soil.

Section three focuses on representations of the air raids and civilian memories of trauma, perhaps the most taboo element of German victimhood discourse. Gilad Margalit analyzes public commemorations of air raids on Hamburg and Dresden, offering an interesting argument that conservatives in the West gradually appropriated the GDR’s interpretation of the air raid on Dresden as a useless act of aggression and war crime. While the GDR at first linked the bombing of Dresden to the effects of German aggression and implied German guilt, the Cold War shifted this narrative and led the GDR to compare the western Allies’ actions to Nazi militarism. By the 1950s, conservatives in the West had begun to parrot the GDR’s arguments and, fed by reactionary books like David Irving’s *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963), portrayed the at-

tacks on Dresden and Hamburg as war crimes, culminating in recent books like Friedrich's *Der Brand*, which described Dresden as a kind of "German Holocaust." Heinz-Peter Preusser further examines the representation of the Allied bombing campaign in photography and novels. He argues that photographic collections, including a photo book that accompanies *Der Brand*, implicitly compare shocking photos of bombing victims to iconic Holocaust images, leaving it to audiences to make the link, out of context, between German trauma and Jewish suffering. Anette Seidel-Arpaci evaluates W. G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), which she notes has re-opened an international debate on the memory of the Allied bombings. She analyzes Sebald's definitions of trauma and argues that his work attempts to establish competitive concepts of "German suffering" under Nazism by assuming, in a most historically perverse way, that "the Germans" were victims of Nazi attacks, thus turning the society of perpetrators into one of victims. Seidel-Arpaci carefully notes that Sebald should not be charged with an explicitly reactionary political agenda, but rather that his work falls in line with those who try to represent an out-of-context image of universal victimhood.

The final section deals with most recent images of German suffering in contemporary literature and film. Odile Jansen presents an interesting study of Christa Wolf's texts dealing with expulsion and mass rapes on the Eastern Front in 1945. Jansen argues that Wolf's work is a perfect example of the conflict between personal memory and historical truth, where perceptions of Germans as victims clouds the broader historical context of perpetration and the origins of the war. This theme of memory as dominated by emotions, perception, and the need for empathy is expanded upon in Helmut Schmitz's essay, which examines problems inherent in fictional and non-fictional representations of German suffering. Schmitz argues that the legitimization of empathy with the German war experience is the primary goal of German memory discourse ranging from the TV film *Dresden* to Uwe Timm's memoir *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003), both of which decontextualize suffering in favor of provoking horror and empathy, thus resorting to 1950s-style dichotomies between "Nazis" and "ordinary" Germans. These works valorize trauma and victimhood while relativizing, or simply avoiding, the ethical and political implications of Nazism. Stuart Taberner problematizes private memory building and obsessions with German suffering by examining Christoph Hein's *Landnahme* (2005) and Grass's *Im Krebsgang*. Both works claim to deal with the dilemmas that arise with breaking the post-1968 taboo on German empathy, but Taberner

argues they are primarily depictions of how private recollections of hardships endured by ordinary Germans are passed through families and are mainly concerned with literary issues related to the themes of memory and victimhood rather than actual events. The final essay concerns the extremely popular film *Der Untergang*, which depicts the last days in Hitler's bunker. In one of the most interesting arguments offered in the volume, Paul Cooke convincingly demonstrates that the film reverts to 1950s-style representations of German suffering, while at the same time borrowing from the new German cinema's agenda to hold the German nation accountable for its complicity with Hitler. At the same time, Cooke finds the film problematic as it attempts to "be all things to all spectators," while ultimately disengaging from deeper debates over the boundaries between victims and perpetrators in favor of capitalizing on the "authenticity" provided by a German-speaking cast and attention to details that feed the international market's hunger for "fascinating fascism" (p. 251).

This excellent collection of essays will intrigue specialists and students of German memory of the Holocaust. Schmitz expertly ties together these essays to analyze continuity and change in German memory-building, in particular uncovering this recent pattern of a return to 1950s tropes and obsessions with German suffering. At the same time, these essays also identify new developments since the construction of the Berlin memorial. The official, institutionalized recognition of Jews as victims that has paradoxically given breathing room to private, family disseminated memories has also led many Germans to feel free to break taboos and claim victimhood in public discourse through film and literature. Most interesting is the recent phenomenon of universalizing victimhood to come from writers and filmmakers identified with the political Left. Though their work is not part of an explicit agenda often found in the Right's attempts to relativize the Holocaust, most famously projected during the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, the tendency to decontextualize suffering and replace questions of moral responsibility and historical accuracy with cathartic images that fill emotional needs is just as troubling.

Notes

[1]. Scholarship on German memory is vast. For an introduction, see Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (New York: Polity, 1999).

[2]. On the context of 1950s German memory work, see Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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