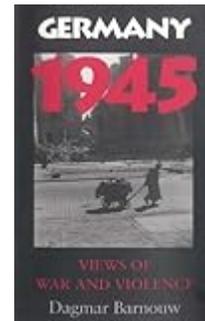




**Dagmar Barnouw.** *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. xviii + 255 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33046-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22043-1.



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**Published on** H-German (July, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## illuminating the “German Question”

The late Dagmar Barnouw’s 1996 study of photographs of Germany in 1945 has recently been published in paperback for the first time, and a number of recent scholarly developments suggest its renewed relevance. Since its original publication, scholars have challenged the notion that the immediate post-World War II years in Germany merely represented an era of violence in which the difficulties of the war years continued for the civilian populace as well as for POWs,[1] noting that the early period of occupation is worthwhile terrain for inquiry because of the widespread presence of perpetrators and “fellow travelers” in a destroyed Reich where the legacies of war and the Holocaust were still vivid.[2] Instead of simply epitomizing a “transition” of chaos and survival, scholars argue, Germans in the immediate postwar period had already begun to forge a new culture of memory and articulate a coherent narrative of their own past and present. *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence* contributes a vigorous voice to the expanding chorus of scholars who have called for increased examina-

tion of the immediate postwar years. Through a scrutiny of American, British, and German photodocumentation from this period, Barnouw argues that the images and their captions and texts offered a complex, ambiguous inquiry into German guilt and shame. Often undermining themselves, these depictions repeatedly moved beyond the dramatic, rigid gaze of the “morally pure” victors to foster a compassionate, poignant narrative of German suffering. Through them, an ambiguous definition of the victims and their victimization emerged that profoundly shaped how Germans in the Federal Republic wrestled with their pasts. In order to elucidate the particular dynamics of how the “German question” emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, Barnouw employs a rich array of photodocumentation, which she contextualizes using contemporary letters, diaries, essays, and memoirs. Her materials derive from U.S., British, and German sources.

Barnouw commences her study of the photodocumentation of 1945 with an examination of images created

by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the subject of chapters 1 and 2. This unit provided roughly half of all pictures of the war published by the Allies. Young American photographers considered themselves liberators and attached this label to everything they photographed. In their images of a broken enemy army, devastated cities, ghostlike people inhabiting ruins, and the brutalized victims of the concentration camps, they aimed to convey that the defeat of Nazi Germany was not only a military victory, but also a moral one justified by the attempt to restore freedom. Both anonymous young soldier-photographers and seasoned photojournalists pursued a clear-cut notion of deserved punishment and stark depictions of the victory of “good” over “evil.” Much of their documentation was meant to impress upon Germans that they must acknowledge responsibility for and see Nazi brutality as their own. Such revelations were intended to prepare the ground for a complete transformation of German identity and society. Feelings of moral certainty often inhibited Allied photographers from looking beyond the concept of collective German responsibility. With few exceptions, mostly British, Allied photographers demonstrated scant interest in individual German experiences of total war. Approximately every second German was on the move during 1945, and although Allied photographers sometimes mentioned this homelessness, they largely left it unrecorded. Indeed, their work reveals their conviction that the Germans had “asked for it” and “brought it on themselves” and emphasizes that through its crimes, Germany had excluded itself from the community of “civilized” nations. Barnouw makes certain distinctions between U.S. and British photodocumentation. While Signal Corps photographs explicitly documented American expectations that Germans individually identify with the victims and collectively acknowledge their own roles as victimizers, they often also betrayed their own self-righteousness. When the British captured the same images as their U.S. counterparts, though they certainly did not exonerate or sympathize, they did not accuse or despise, either. Unlike American photos, British images sometimes suggested more tolerance for ambiguity concerning victim and victimizer. British photographers seemed less interested than the Americans in documenting insufficient German remorse.

Through their images, Signal Corps photographers sought to undo the distance between ordinary Germans and victims of the Nazis and insist on absolutely clear distinctions between good and evil, perpetrator and sufferer. Published in magazines such as *Illustrated* and *Life*, the depictions were meant to foster the perception of

guilt on the part of Germans for the crimes of Nazism, thus transmitting expectations about German collective guilt that have endured for half a century. Barnouw argues that they often demonstrated the ordinariness of people who could not respond to the war's horrors adequately and could not show their guilt. Allied photographers believed that news of previously hidden crimes would shock Germans into awareness of their true criminal identity. According to Barnouw, however, German shock was the result of the sheer alien nature of the horrible. In the atmosphere of the spring of 1945, Germans—mostly women—simply could not explore the meanings of what they saw. Under the watchful eyes of the victors, Germans appeared in photographs submissively exhuming and sorting corpses, placing them in caskets, decorating coffins with flowers, and burying Nazi victims in their own well-tended cemeteries. In their very obedience and propriety, Germans betrayed that they could not conceive of how such violence could have taken place. At the precise moments Allied photographers recorded, the visible results of the war seemed to exceed the capacity on the part of the German populace to assume responsibility or show remorse for Nazi crimes or accept them as part of their cultural identity.

In chapter 3, Barnouw zeroes in on the particular manner in which Allied photographers depicted a destroyed Reich. For many, shooting the devastation enabled them to see clear but one-dimensional shapes in visually exciting constellations removed from human fears and hopes. The images preached that the merciless retribution was ultimately just. Epitomizing expectations that a total military, political, and moral victory demanded and unconditional surrender affirmed, these images erased the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in concepts of collective dishonor, guilt, remorse, and atonement. In the images of battles, concentration camps, and piles of ruins gathered for her book *Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly* (1946), for example, Margaret Bourke-White exhibited rigid self-righteousness in her attempts to capture existential differences between good and bad Germans. She sought stereotypically to categorize everyone she met. Perhaps unsurprisingly, more balanced attitudes than hers were rare in 1945, though Barnouw argues that the imbalance had profound consequences for the memory and historiography of the period, as unexplored aspects of the chaos and despair remained unarticulated in German memory and history. Barnouw informs readers that certain commentators, both American and British, always reflected a degree of openness to a variety of voices and troubling

questions. Writers such as British war reporter Leonard O. Mosley and American captain H. E. Saunders, for example, demonstrated awareness of the danger of simply stereotyping “the Germans.”

Throughout her study, Barnouw reminds readers that images often record visual information that differs from that consciously sought by the photographer at the moment the image is “shot.” Often unwittingly, the photographer’s lack of absolute interpretive control allows for accessible ambiguities and contradictions, and contributes to a less selective, exclusive historical memory for both contemporary and later observers of an image. In addition, captions may simultaneously limit, distort, and enlarge meanings. In the photodocumentation of 1945, varied observers thought different views worth “capturing,” and they often pictured the same or a similar subject in disparate ways, especially over time. The invasion of alien and hostile spaces gave way to a more relaxed approach with increasing familiarity as the Germans became less threatening, fostering a perspective that could more easily tolerate obscurity.

In the spring of 1945, Allied photographers often took shots of Germans without concern for their privacy, dignity, or consent. When Bourke-White depicted German refugees, she found impossible even a momentary identification with the plight of her subjects. Even as the captions of her images reaffirmed that the world owed the Germans nothing but punishment, however, her photographs did not always present such a position unambiguously. Photos shot at the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, for example, ultimately tell a number of different stories more varied than their captions indicated because the photographic medium sustained the disjunction between what she allowed the camera to picture and what she felt about what she saw through it. For example, some of her images recorded the sheer chaos at the train station, a microcosm of a larger German chaos. Indeed, her explicitly distancing orientation perhaps encouraged such a perspective. Then and now, different viewers could interpret such depictions in varied, ambiguous, and conflicting ways.

Viewers were at times told to avoid these conflicting interpretations. For instance, Leonard McCombe’s photographic essay on the Anhalter Bahnhof, “Displaced Germans Driven from Their Homes by Poles and Czechs, They Pour Unwelcome into Berlin,” published in *Life* on October 15, 1945, focused on the fears and disappointed hopes of refugees and returning soldiers. *Life* explicitly instructed its readers to not allow the images to af-

fect their emotions. Even so, McCombe’s photographs left room for interpretation, as they did not of themselves establish clear moral separations. If good Germans did not stand out in the chaos, particularly bad ones did not, either. For the observer, relativism persisted. Robert Capa’s photographs for *Life* in early September 1945, “Sommertage, Friedenstage, Berlin 1945,” reflected a more generously hopeful perspective, especially concerning children and the elderly. His photography did not intrude into his subjects’ cautious, still incredulous sense of relief that the war was over. His photos searched his subjects’ faces gently for clues as to their anxieties and desires in order to restore to them the concreteness of an “ordinary” existence. Capa sought to depict everyday struggles in Berlin by showing how Germans coped and which goods (such as potatoes) they considered important. Capa did not comment upon whether his subjects were Nazis, and they consequently ceased to look like “the Germans.” His images were open to different shades of meaning and reveal the differing experiences, pasts, hopes, and futures of Germans in 1945. His subjects’ lives seemed suspended in time, after a catastrophe but before a future.

In chapter 4, Barnouw takes up the work of German photographers, many of them returning exiles who worked for new city administrations. They visually documented vast destruction and migrations. Generally, their images betrayed a perspective differing from that of the U.S., and to a lesser extent, British photographers. Most notably, one discerns in German photodocumentation of ruined cities a profound sense of absence and loss. German photographers focused on chaos in order to demonstrate the disastrous results of catastrophically false choices. For them, the streams of German refugees resulted from calamitous Allied agreements at Yalta and Potsdam. Allied photographers who documented the immense movement of humanity did so mostly to emphasize general chaos. In contrast, German observers aimed at showing the misery of individual families uprooted and “swept away” in the gigantic migrations after the war.

The young German Jew Henry Ries, who had left Berlin in 1938 and came back to Germany in 1945 as an observer for the U.S. Army Air Corps, took a series of shots at Anhalter Bahnhof in the summer of 1948. In contrast to Bourke-White, he had not come there to pose the “German question” but to reveal the violence of the war his subjects had managed to survive. The stories that the German faces in his images told did not emerge as much different from those of other suffering groups following

the end of the Second World War. For instance, the photos of the journalist Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, who aided victims of the regime in Berlin during the war years, clearly revealed the physical and psychological shattering of soldiers returning from Soviet captivity and of distressed veterans wrestling with their experiences of having participated in a shameful war. Her work shared with that of publicist Ernst Friedländer the critique that the Allies were only willing to see all Germans as bad. Readiness to see Germans as victims had its consequences. Even wartime images could support meanings contradictory to their original purposes, as in the work of Hilmar Pabel, who had served as a war photographer in the Third Reich for the army publication *Signal*. After the war, he “recycled” some of his photographs in a collection entitled *Jahre unseres Lebens* (1954), which explicitly assigned his images a dramatically new visual message that drew attention to human suffering in war and emphasized passivity rather than agency. His emphasis on victimization, no matter how perceptive and effective in terms of revealing the inhumanity of war, ultimately evaded the complex issue of individual and group responsibility. These photographs reveal that the question of simultaneous German responsibility and victimhood remained unanswerable and troubling. With few exceptions, German observers emphasized vulnerability, desolation, separateness, and anonymity in their images and reflections, revealing a view that did not directly address questions of retribution. A need to address the “German question” did not inform their perspective, since from the perspective of their current moment, their subjects did not deserve punishment.

In her final chapter, Barnouw focuses on how the interpretative perspectives that influenced photodocumentation in the immediate postwar period ultimately shaped the politics of memory and history in the Federal Republic. Images of destroyed cities and desperate people, like many other sources from the period, all made first attempts at dealing with “the German catastrophe,” documented the degree of destruction, and revealed an incredible determination to rebuild. They demonstrated an all-powerful instinct to set order and normality against near total chaos. Moreover, the images of the sorting, arranging, cleaning, and stacking of every usable stone in the rubble reveal a strikingly symbiotic relationship between destruction and reconstruction. Despite a near unanimous drive to rebuild, however, the politics of memory and history have been otherwise erratic throughout the history of the Federal Republic. Confronted with the victors’ forceful expectations regarding collective respon-

sibility, guilt, and remorse, Barnouw argues, Germans had to acknowledge both the obvious, powerfully visible enormity of the atrocities and take up the burden of responsibility. Photodocumentation of atrocities was crucially important in this regard because Germans had to see the “unbelievable” in order to believe. Such evidence, however, often contradicted their own memories of what they had “really” seen and believed at the time the events took place. Barnouw contends that lack of German authority over their own past overwhelmed Germans, who became unable in the short run to engage with remembrance of their recent pasts. German history as a sense-making construct was shattered, and differing, contradictory, and competing German histories and memories emerged after 1945.

The author finds that history became an issue primarily in the context of the undesirable politics of history, as in the *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s. Fragmented and uncertain, German historiography of the recent past has reflected a general and political inability to deal with Nazi aggression, particularly where it concerned Jews. Modern acknowledgement of the historicity of human agency has seemed curiously suspicious, for any critical historical inquiry into events subsumed under the monumental concept “Holocaust” seemed to permanently diminish or deny, rather than temporarily explain, their cultural meanings. Instructively, the historians’ debates ended only after Richard von Weizsaecker promised that the uniqueness of “Auschwitz” would never be questioned. Still, half a century after the events, Barnouw reminds her readers that these varying perspectives on history were also characteristic of earlier periods. Indeed, the photodocumentation of 1945 provides a useful comment on the question of German collective guilt and atonement as it emerged in the still “pure” and “existential” situation before the reestablishment of political parties and their ensuing conflicts. The images and texts encourage a dialogue, over the distance of half a century, between historians debating the significance of the past for Germany’s future at the end of millennium and intellectuals and commentators who tried to envision a future evolving out of the chaotic present of 1945.

Through an in-depth and careful scrutiny of a variety of photos emerging from a multiplicity of Allied and German sources, Barnouw argues persuasively that a study of the collapse of the Third Reich and the immediate postwar period is integral for any understanding of how Germans began “coping with the past.” Calling for a more complex historicization of the Third Reich and the years immediately following its demise, Barnouw’s work can

be newly read within an array of post-unification literature that has called for more nuanced attitudes concerning German narratives of perpetration and suffering.[3] Her reflections on the fervent German desire in the aftermath of the Second World War to bring order out of chaos and forge a “normality” removed from recent history presaged the efforts of historians to employ examinations of *Heimat* in conceptualizing the manner in which Germans staked out identities following the fall of the Third Reich.[4]

Despite the strength of the author’s reminder of the importance of the immediate postwar years for discerning the subsequent struggles Germans would undertake with their past, however, subsequent scholarship reveals the extent to which the book neglects the attempts of Germans to begin to deal with Nazism even during the period under study. As Alon Confino has written, the idea that Germans repressed the Nazi past is too simplistic because it ultimately presents only two explanations for German behavior after the war: atonement or repression.[5] Instead, one must examine more precisely the particular forms German remembrance actually took, perhaps within daily social practices not explicitly linked to Nazism. Indeed, the photodocumentation that Barnouw analyzes, some of which directly or indirectly emphasizes articulations of German suffering and victimization at the hands of some “fate” called war, emerges as a fruitful starting point in order to examine the ways in which Germans had already begun “coping” with the Third Reich and its legacies. By emphasizing the notion that Germans still have an “unmasterable” past, the author also perhaps failed to acknowledge sufficiently the grading and ongoing nature of “coping” with a past. Ultimately, Germans have gone quite a way in exploring their relationship to Nazism.[6] By calling for a more subtle study of individual complicity, for example, more recent historical research has not necessarily reflected efforts to reject the Nazi past and refuse acknowledgement of its crimes, but has, as Robert Moeller has pointed out, excavated the ongoing incorporation of the Holocaust into the individual memories of Germans, thus revealing a critical and vigorous struggle with a difficult past in the search for a sustainable present and future.[7]

#### Notes

[1]. Sabine Behrenbeck, “Between Pain and Silence: Remembering the Victims of Violence in Germany after 1949,” in *Life After Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37-64.

[2]. Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, “Introduction,” in *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*, ed. Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5, 14.

[3]. Robert G. Moeller, “Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies,” *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 1-35.

[4]. Norbert Frei, *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xi-xv; Confino, “The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory and the German Empire, 1871-1918,” *History and Memory* 5 (1993): 46-86; Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 6; Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Pafreyman, *Heimat: A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 183; Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (New York: Camden House, 2002), 136, 148; and Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 128-129.

[5]. Alon Confino, “Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960,” *History and Memory* 12 (2000): 92-121.

[6]. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1975); Confino and Fritzsche, “Introduction.”

[7]. Moeller, “Germans as Victims,” 23.

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**Citation:** Alexander Peter d’Erizans. Review of Barnouw, Dagmar, *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

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