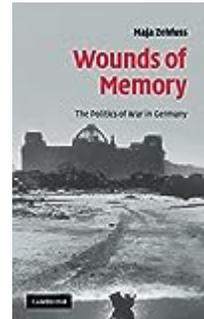




**Maja Zehfuss.** *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 294 pp. \$95.40 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87333-8.



**Reviewed by** Kimberly Redding (Carroll University)

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## Extracting Wartime Memory from Contemporary Politics

In a thought-provoking appraisal of contemporary German politics, twentieth-century literature, and post-modernist theory, political scientist Maja Zehfuss challenges the validity of using collective memory to defend contemporary political decisions and positions. Given what scholars know about memory construction, she argues, politicians' tendency to justify contemporary policies through references to World War II-era experiences are fundamentally flawed. Drawing examples from both political speeches and postwar literature, she illustrates the fragility of memory and the malleability of remembered narratives. While novelists can accommodate multiple memories in their fictional narratives, politicians—and their audiences—often confuse personal memories with authoritative knowledge of the past. The German public's sensitivity to historical references makes this potential exploitation of memory particularly problematic in German politics, Zehfuss claims, because remembered narratives tend to oversimplify both historical context and contemporary dilemmas.

Chapters 1 and 2 outline the basic premise of the

book: namely, that even as politicians invoke personal memories to establish expertise and claim authority, academics assert memory's malleability, often demonstrating that memories reveal more about present contexts than any specific historical event or experience. Zehfuss uses Günter Grass's novel *Im Krebsgang* (2002) to demonstrate how memories are perpetually reinvented as individuals negotiate—and renegotiate—relationships between past, present, and future. In political debates, she argues, contemporary tensions dominate; politicians' need to *use* the past, usually to justify positions, sharply colors their narratives *of* that past. Novelists, on the other hand, make relatively few demands on their fictional characters' imagined memories. Consequently, literature provides opportunities to interrogate both public and private memories of World War II as evolving, atemporal negotiations, rather than the established truths politicians often claim them to be.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the particularly problematic nature of inserting memory into German politics. In the mid-1990s, politicians frequently cited memories of

World War II-era strategic bombing to justify their responses to the Gulf War, claiming to have drawn lessons from the campaigns of 1944 and 1945. Zehfuss shows that these politicians' narratives revealed much about their own attitudes and political identities, but comparatively little about World War II or its impact on German society. For example, opponents of German intervention in the Gulf War highlighted civilian casualties and social devastation in their narratives of World War II. Advocates, on the other hand, depicted the strategic bombing campaigns of the 1940s as measures that liberated entrapped civilian populations. This example reveals a fundamental tension: although often portrayed as a cache of experience-based knowledge, human memory in fact rewrites experience in response to contemporary needs or questions. As alternatives to this political misuse of personal memory, Zehfuss offers Gert Ledig's *Vergeltung* (2001) and Harry Mulisch's *Das Steinere Brautbett* (1995). These novels, she argues, deny readers simple dichotomous answers about good and evil or victim and perpetrator. The authors avoid drawing conclusions or lessons from individual wartime experiences, and, unlike political speechwriters, make no attempt to pigeonhole individuals based on particular narratives of the past.

Zehfuss finds another example of how memory obscures, rather than clarifies, historical knowledge in the fervent public debates that surrounded the 1995 version of the traveling exhibit Crimes of the Wehrmacht. By depicting the atrocities committed by German soldiers, Zehfuss argues, the exhibit asserted the collective guilt of all Wehrmacht veterans. Many visitors, however, "remembered" the experiences of individual soldiers (their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and so on), whose stories shared little with the exhibit's graphic images. What troubles Zehfuss is not the guilt or innocence of particular men, but rather the reduction of soldiers to the status of either enforcers (in the exhibit) or victims (in family stories) of Nazi policy; rarely, she argues, was actual wartime experience so easily categorized. Looking for alternatives to such deceptive oversimplification of the past, Zehfuss again turns to war literature. Ledig's *Die Stalinorgel* (2000), she suggests, not only depicts war itself as unredemptively chaotic, but also rejects the possibility of any single cohesive narrative of wartime experience. The reception of Martin Walser's *Ein springender Brunnen* (2000), meanwhile, highlights how contemporary needs limit memory; Walser's protagonist, Johann, seems hardly impacted by the total war that envelopes his

country. Indeed, contemporary critics accused Walser of creating an unacceptably apolitical protagonist.

Having shown some of the problems that arise when memories are invoked to justify political decisions, Zehfuss devotes chapter 5 to what she sees as the basic, underlying issue: human memory, she claims, refuses to conform to the chronological time that structures day-to-day life. In memory, the past is ever-evolving, shaped by a present which itself is always in flux, and the impossibility of pinning down either the past or the present is at odds with western notions of past, present, and future as distinct, following one after the other in a temporal fashion. Novels offer opportunities to explore alternative perceptions of time, claims Zehfuss. Uwe Johnson's *Jahrestage* (1970-83) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) for example, suggest that time is malleable, little more than a useful convention that can be quickly thwarted by conflicting memories.

Chapter 6 draws together Zehfuss's critique of the use—or rather, the misuse—of memory in politics. While conceding that collective memories do provide common reference points, Zehfuss insists that the commonly held belief that memories represent truth overdetermines their value in political debate. In German political culture, the imperative to remember is especially strong, and Zehfuss warns of the desire to limit those memories to the politically acceptable. While powerful and emotion-laden, she concludes, memories cannot guide individuals or societies attempting to solve today's dilemmas, because those very issues in fact shape the memories themselves.

Although this is a thought-provoking book, readers not well versed in postwar German literature may find Zehfuss's frequent references to specific scenes in each of seven novels somewhat confusing. Similarly, her assumption of readers' familiarity with the theoretical writings of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Halbwachs may prove problematic to some audiences of the uninitiated. However, for scholars trying to assess the burgeoning memoir market, seeking fresh interpretations of recent political debates, or wondering how literary and historical scholarship might work together, *Wounds of Memory* is delightfully stimulating and interdisciplinary. Zehfuss's clear style, obvious mastery of wide-ranging literatures, and carefully nuanced observations invite readers to consider not only how past wars shape contemporary politics, but also how politics shapes memories of war.

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