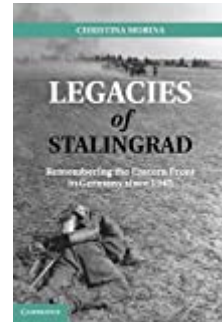


Christina Morina. *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 297 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01304-9.



Reviewed by Eric Langenbacher (Georgetown University)

Published on H-Memory (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Catherine Baker (University of Hull)

Christina Morina's *Legacies of Stalingrad* is a timely contribution to the scholarship on the evolution and impact of collective memories in the postwar Germanies. Her book focuses on the Eastern Front, epitomized by the Battle of Stalingrad—"the essence of the 'stigma of violence': the duality of German crimes and suffering" (p. 8). Given the sheer amount of public and private discourse since 1945, she convincingly argues that this was a key component of collective memory in both West and East Germany yet one that has been relatively neglected by both scholars and political actors. Morina has reconstructed elite political discourses in both countries in a chronological and comparative fashion.

In a conceptual introduction, she justifies her focus on political memory, "a distinct kind of discourse ... in which political and historical themes are interwoven for the sake of argument, persuasion, or demarcation ... narratives forged and communicated publicly by the political elite ... with the contingencies and choices they faced" (pp. 2-3). The investigation centers on how post-war elite actors (with their conditioning biographical experiences, worldviews, and circumstances) constructed and conveyed historical knowledge. Methodologically, "whenever politicians refer to the past, the degree of differentiation and veracity in their narratives can and

should be measured. If their references to the Eastern Front seem balanced and nuanced, if they seek to differentiate and comprehend, then I consider them sincere or even truthful" (p. 17). Next, a prologue, "The Eastern Front War in Nazi Propaganda," notes that Operation Barbarossa "referred to a historical event that symbolized both Nazi Germany's hybrid totalitarian imperialism and its abject failure" (p. 19). Morina outlines the staggering losses stemming from what the Nazis framed as an existential struggle against "Jewish Bolshevism." Over half (2.7 million) of the 5.3 million German soldiers killed in World War II died on this front—2,000 a day from 1941-44 and 5,000 a day between January and May 1945. Nazi leaders propagandized Barbarossa as a preventative war and their promises of living space and material gain "bought the nation's consent or at least its silence" (p. 22). Despite the apocalyptic defeat at Stalingrad, which Nazi leaders spun as an epic tale of heroism and sacrifice, the German population "continued to support the war effort to the very end. A persistent faith in the historical necessity and inevitability of Bolshevism's defeat, fear of a Soviet invasion, and the tightening grip of the terror apparatus inside Nazi Germany kept the home front on Hitler's side" (p. 23).

The empirical chapters begin with an examination of the genesis of competing memories in both the emergent German states, which faced the challenge of integrating diverse wartime experiences within ossifying Cold War ideological stances. Overall, the processes are generalized as internalization, absence, and negative identification in the West versus externalization, presence, and a positive historical narrative in the East. Looking at the East, Morina notes the strength of anti-Soviet feelings in the years after 1945 and the obstacles that the rapes perpetrated by Soviet soldiers posed to the early communist (SED: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Socialist Unity Party) leaders who deemed it indispensable to forge quickly a “fitted past to create the spiritual foundations for a new antifascist and socialist Germany” (p. 34). Writers such as Anton Ackermann and Johannes Becher created a nascent narrative focused on “never again” (attacking the USSR) that, in the name of antifascism, necessitated the elimination of any anti-Soviet and anti-SED opposition (p. 36). Red Army soldiers were cast as victims, heroes, and liberators, allowing East German communists (many of whom spent the war years in the USSR) to position themselves on the “right” side of history with a notion of “won defeats.”

After the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), an entrenched master narrative emerged in which collective guilt was de-emphasized. The German working class (now synonymous with the entire population) was exonerated, and agency behind the attack on the USSR was foisted upon the “Hitler-clique,” monopoly capital, and/or “fascist hordes,” which were now either eliminated or in West Germany. Particularly important for the construction of this narrative was Walter Ulbricht (a communist organizer amongst German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union) who conceived of German communists as the victors and who helped to author several official histories in the 1960s. Feeling continually threatened by developments in West Germany and believing that another war would break out any time, Ulbricht’s SED constantly invoked the memory of Barbarossa at critical junctures in 1953, 1955 and, especially, when the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, which coincided almost exactly with the twentieth anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. They justified their own repressive “defensive” measures or “militant pacifism”—including the creation of an army (NVA: Nationale Volkssarmee, National People’s Army)—by citing the necessity of preventing another such attack.

In several interesting sections, Morina delves into the

East German regime’s efforts to reach out to former soldiers and to utilize many of these groups’ publications to foster its preferred view of the “illegal, aggressive nature of the past war” (p. 99). Indeed, the impact of the writing of “Stalingraders” like Wilhelm Adam was marked: “The subtle dialectic of admitting and erasing guilt in one stroke was a characteristic feature of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the GDR” (p. 142). It was important for the regime to make efforts to integrate veterans, in light of the 700,000 POWs who eventually made it back to the territory of the GDR. As with former Nazi Party members, the SED used “the mechanism of redemption through affiliation with the new system” (p. 159), and “in this peculiar sense, East German society was more thoroughly pervaded by a mentality of seeking closure (*Schlußstrich*) than West Germany” (p. 159). Throughout the Honecker years after 1971, the antifascist paradigm, platitudes, and glorification of Soviet liberators remained, albeit ossified. Yet, largely due to Honecker’s biography (he had spent the war years incarcerated by the Nazis), the Eastern Front was partially relativized.

In the West, political elites exhibited a degree of openness during the occupation years that dissipated after the Cold War, and the emergence of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949 induced an anti-totalitarian consensus. The Social Democratic (SPD) leader Kurt Schumacher (who had spent the Nazi years in domestic captivity) was an early proponent of contrition towards Jewish victims, but for him “the reality of Soviet totalitarianism was just as bad as the Nazi regime” (p. 47). Similarly to the East German communists, he considered World War II to be a prelude to another, even more destructive war. Schumacher and others quickly transformed the USSR into the “‘main’ perpetrator in the global East-West conflict” (p. 47). The Christian Democrat (CDU) leader Konrad Adenauer was the most influential voice, “maneuvering between condemnation and integration” of both former party members and soldiers (p. 49).

Adenauer was also “one of the most prominent contributors of the ‘Wehrmacht myth’” (p. 49), that is, the belief that the regular army was not implicated in Nazi crimes. This myth was buttressed inadvertently by the finding of the Nuremberg Tribunal that the army had not been a criminal organization like the SS. The Allies did a valiant job both of deflating the myth that Barbarossa was a preemptive campaign and of showing unequivocally that it was an aggressive act aimed at the economic exploitation of the USSR, thus violating international law. Such truths, however, largely fell on deaf ears: “the ma-

majority of Germans felt they were being subjected to the concept of collective guilt, and, besides, showed strikingly little interest in the trial proceedings" (p. 62).

Providing a partial explanation for this lack of interest, Morina cites the observations of writers such as Hannah Arendt and Raymond Daniell about "an emotional void in German hearts and minds" (p. 64). Moreover, with the emergent Cold War, "the present came to overshadow the past in every respect" (p. 66). Thus, a future-oriented yet restorationist and fearful mindset led to support for amnesties, a loss of the knowledge generated by the Nuremberg Tribunal, and Adenauer's "policy of strength" (p. 124). These policies and discourses were considered necessary both as a defense against the perceived Soviet threat and as a means to integrate the millions of former soldiers and Nazi Party members. The most prominent actors were Wehrmacht officers and soldiers who created a "romanticized" (p. 173) and "cleansed" memory of the war in the East through numerous associations and publications (*Soldat im Volk, Wehrkunde*) and the genre of "rehabilitation literature" (p. 138), which was epitomized by Erich von Manstein (*Lost Victories*).

West Germany in the early 1950s saw the solidification of "an official, categorical anticommunism mingled with a popular distrust, indeed fear of all things 'Russian'" (p. 87). The Hallstein doctrine—proclaiming that the FRG would not have diplomatic ties with any country that recognized the communist authorities in East Germany—coupled with plans to re-arm West Germany contributed to a hostile international atmosphere. Yet Adenauer and others soon came to understand that this situation could not last in perpetuity. In 1955, Adenauer went to a summit in Moscow to negotiate the release of the final POWs (fewer than ten thousand out of the original two million). His speeches there revealed his contorted *Vergangenheitspolitik* (policy or politics towards the past) and his attitudes towards "the war thing" (p. 91). Although "downplaying the extent of popular support for much of Hitler's agenda" (p. 90), and manifesting "a reluctance to acknowledge the difference in kind between Hitler's war of annihilation waged against 'Jewish Bolshevism' and the Red Army's invasion of Eastern Europe and Germany in response" (p. 91), he did recognize that "terrible" or "bad" things had happened during Barbarossa.

Another important moment for West German memory of the Eastern Front was the 1955 debate over plans

to establish the Bundeswehr. These plans contained quite a bit of discussion about issues of (dis)obedience of criminal orders, the necessity of democratic control over the army, and the importance of having citizens in uniform. Nevertheless, when referring to the past, "this was not the time of attributing historical guilt in a balanced manner and weighing the level of responsibility and suffering on both sides" (p. 121). Instead, the master narrative emphasized "the role of Hitler as the great abuser and seducer of the German people, the dutiful German soldier, and the crusade against the Bolshevik threat from the East" (p. 164). Overall, "context and consequences remained marginal and, in effect, were still absent a decade after the Wehrmacht had been defeated on the Eastern Front" (p. 169).

These memory discourses only slowly and partially began to change—towards "normative internalization" (p. 194), a situation where Germans fully recognize the crimes of the Nazi past and the corresponding lessons for a democratic present—in the 1960s and 1970s with the SPD-Liberal coalition's new Ostpolitik. Willy Brandt evinced quite a bit of contrition towards Poles, but not towards the Soviets, where "a certain inner distance, even coldness" was evident (p. 205). For Brandt, "the historical burden appeared mitigated by the powerful position the Soviets had attained after World War II" and "his historical statements as chancellor" lacked historical detail and depth" (p. 206). This stance applied even more so to Brandt's successors: the Eastern Front veteran and strong advocate of the "clean" Wehrmacht myth, Helmut Schmidt, and (to a lesser extent, perhaps because of Kohl's "grace of late birth" [p. 224]) to Helmut Kohl in the 1980s. Nevertheless, other prominent politicians of this era such as Walter Scheel and Gustav Heinemann—and, a little later, Richard von Weizsäcker—were stronger advocates for a more prominent and honest memory of the Eastern Front and the crimes committed there.

Unified Germany continued, perhaps even accelerated, the process of honestly remembering the Eastern Front and the millions of victims there. The 1990s saw "pluralization and differentiation" and "a more empathetic understanding of history" (p. 243). Kohl actually mentioned the siege of Leningrad along with Stalingrad in a speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Barbarossa, and there was intensive media coverage of the 1995 anniversaries. Russian-German relations improved over this period and a degree of reconciliation was finally achieved. Nevertheless, as the often irate responses to the "Crimes of the Wehrmacht" traveling ex-

hibition of 1997-98 showed, there was still an unwillingness to do away fully with the myths and historical evasions of earlier decades. In sum, Morina observes the “propensity of politicians (and ideologues) to keep references to the historical events largely ambiguous and vague instead of fleshing them out with specific details (which) contributed to the public misuse of history—of history’s bold instrumentalization in the East, and elusive avoidance in the West” (p. 264).

Overall, this is a well-written and researched study, yet several points remain somewhat unsettling. Morina presents a normative perspective that is implicitly and explicitly woven throughout the book: the Nazi regime unleashed an unprovoked and criminal war that killed millions and that average Germans wholeheartedly supported at home and on the front. “Proper” truthful memory, she suggests, entails a clear, detailed, and contrite recognition of these facts and any deviation from such a perspective shows moral shortcomings. Thus, as she constantly shows, public memory in both West and East Germany left much to be desired. For example, of the Adenauer era, she writes: “Denial or complete silence was not the order of the day, but rather a passing referral to Wehrmacht crimes on the Eastern Front revealing an astounding lack of emphatic interest in the fate of millions of victims” (p. 167). Alternately: “This lack of empathic imagination for the gruesome realities of this war on the other side of the front is the common feature of all published texts dealing with the war against the Soviet Union in veterans’ publications” (p. 173). Morina offers only minimal explanation for such deviations from “proper” memory. Abjuring (social) psychological and psychoanalytic theories, she often cites postwar “coldness” (e.g., p. 65) and especially continued Nazi mentalities (retroactively legitimized by the Cold War): “It was not that Germans did not realize the crimes debated at Nuremberg, they just did not see their basic wrongness, because Nazi indoctrination still continued to influence most Germans’ world view” (p. 64). Mourning for one’s own losses is mentioned in passing, as well as the need to create “legitimate narratives” (p. 134), the biographical idiosyncrasies of relevant political actors, and the perceived needs of the present.

Moreover, Morina neglects the 1943-45 (or 1943-49) period on the ground and the experiences of Germans during those years. It appears that the author’s perspective is that, since Germans willingly perpetrated, supported, and benefited from the invasion of the USSR, whatever happened to them as a consequence of this

criminal act and whatever the victors in the East did to them is unimportant. The author is entitled to this normative perspective (and surely many readers will agree with it), but excluding this context to the degree that she does weakens the argument. In short, one may agree that the Germans deserved what they got. To fully understand postwar Germans’ memory discourses, however, one has to integrate these wartime and early postwar experiences into explanations in addition to—not in lieu of—persistent Nazi (and older) forms of nationalistic chauvinism/racism, the Cold War context, and Adenauer’s center-right restorationist governance in the West. This is to say that a degree of old-fashioned “Verstehen”—trying to understand the meaning of an action or discourse from the point of view of the actors—would have strengthened Morina’s account.

At the time, many Germans felt that they had gotten as good as they gave when their total war turned on them. The consequences of this war—millions of war dead, millions of expellees, the permanent loss of one-third of Germany’s pre-1937 territory, the bombing of virtually every city, the rape of as many as two million women, the POWs, the division of the country—were all considered payment in kind, a settling of scores, a balancing of accounts. In addition, the context of coercive Soviet hegemony in the Eastern bloc and ongoing human rights abuses, especially before Stalin’s death, is salient. Whether this widespread stance that the slate was balanced or even clean was moral or not is a different concern than taking these experiences seriously as the context in which memory was made and against which a more contrite discourse eventually had to struggle.

Morina is not, of course, completely oblivious to such concerns. She does mention the rapes in the context of early SED memory discourses, but more typical is: “even though Cold War tensions and the realities of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe make this indifference somewhat explicable” (p. 173), or “[o]n the whole, the ‘brutality of the Russians seems to have been a great a priori expectation at the end of the war,’ instantaneously overshadowing the Soviets’ dreadful experiences during World War II” (p. 254). There are only a couple of passing references to “the fate of the population fleeing the Red Army in the last year of the war” (p. 267). How can we understand postwar German-Soviet relations or memory discourses with so little mention of the Oder-Neisse line, Silesia, East Prussia, Sudeten Germans, or expellees? Also overlooked is the fact that the persistence of the Hallstein doctrine and the contentiousness of the *Ostverträge* was largely

due to the influence and pressure of the 20 percent of West Germans in the postwar years who were expellees, and the electoral and lobbying influence of organizations representing this milieu (e.g., the Bund der Vertriebenen).

There are some other points that I would have liked to have seen addressed. Perhaps the author could have devoted some attention to the Soviet side of the dyad. Did the Soviets ever extend contrition—even partially—such as for rare “excesses?” The book would have also

benefited from some treatment of international political and discursive factors that impinged upon West German discussions. Indeed, Holocaust memory rose to prominence after the 1960s and much of this was due to heroic efforts from within West Germany. Yet the rise of Holocaust memory overseas, especially in the United States, was a massive factor in the diffusion and sustenance of this memory in the FRG. There was no similar external impetus for memory of the Eastern Front.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-memory>

Citation: Eric Langenbacher. Review of Morina, Christina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34768>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.