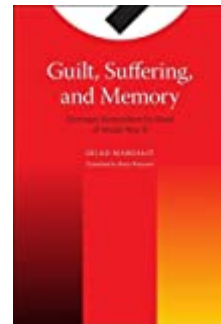


Gilad Margalit. *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory: Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II.* Translated by Haim Watzmann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. XI, 387 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35376-4; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22133-9.



Helmut Schmitz, Annette Seidel-Arpaci. *Narratives of Trauma: Discourses of German Wartime Suffering in National and International Perspective.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. VI, 223 S. \$64.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-3319-1; ISBN 978-90-420-3320-7.



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Sammelrez: Discourses of Suffering in German Memories of World War II

Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing interest in the question how Germans have remembered their experiences as victims of the Second World War. Both the books to be reviewed here address the issue of German discourses of suffering and how they relate to guilt for crimes committed in war and genocide. However, they do so in ways that are different in content, academic style, and format.

Helmut Schmitz and Annette Seidel-Arpaci's edited volume *Narratives of Trauma* brings together a

diverse set of scholars to write on the subject. Their essays were originally presented in 2008 at the University of Leeds as the culmination of a 3-year research project entitled *From Perpetrators to Victims? Discourses of German Wartime Suffering* from 1945 to the Present. The book, for the most part, succeeds where many other edited volumes fail: in providing a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives without losing sight of key themes to create common points of reference.

The introduction by Schmitz and Seidel-Arpaci re-

views the debate about German suffering during the 2000s and discusses issues that also re-appear throughout the volume as pivotal themes. The most important argument – for which many of the chapters offer further evidence – is that an alleged taboo about German suffering never really existed. In fact, Germans have talked about and actively commemorated their wartime experiences throughout the post-war period. What needs explaining, instead, is the persistence of the claim that there was such a taboo that needs dismantling. This ‘forgetting of a remembering’ (p. 4) served to legitimize precisely the continuance of the discourse itself. The renewed vigor behind the discussion about victimhood is explicated by the institutionalization of Holocaust memory in the Federal Republic, the globalization of memory discourses, and the end of the Cold War – all of which made possible a less politicized approach. While the taboo is regarded as a myth, the authors argue that a bifurcation of memory discourse existed – along both the political lines of left and right and along the lines of public and private discourse – (p. 4). After the fall of the Wall, this bifurcation seems to have been dismantled as ‘German suffering’ received more attention from the left and at the federal level of representation.

The volume consists of four sections: ‘History and Historiography’, ‘Public Memory’, ‘Visual and Literary Representation’ and ‘International Perspectives’. Aside from this, the articles can be sorted roughly into three categories. The first is made up of detailed studies about specific manifestations of discourses about German wartime experiences. These essays rely on a wealth of historical evidence and provide windows into obviously larger research projects. Suzanne Brown-Fleming traces reactions to Cardinal Aloisius Muench’s pastoral letter ‘One world in charity’, the first installment of which was published in the United States in 1946 and which surfaced in Germany the following year. Her carefully documented chapter is an original approach to understanding the selectivity of German Catholics’ wartime memories and their self-identification primarily as victims. Brown-Fleming argues that ‘Cardinal Muench’s philo-German position provided psychological comfort to many German Catholics’ (p. 25) as it absolved most Germans of responsibility for the Nazi regime and the Holocaust.

Bas von Benda-Beckmann analyzes the way in which GDR historians, especially the prominent Olaf Groehler, treated the Allied air war. He is able to tease out the nuances of Groehler’s position, who walked a fine line between conformity with the SED-regime’s official posi-

tion on the ‘imperialist air war’ and a more autonomous and serious academic endeavor to understand the politics and strategy behind Allied actions. Benda-Beckmann argues that though Groehler’s engagement with Western historians resulted in the maintenance of an academic distance from the SED line, he nevertheless remained within the parameters of the official narrative.

Nicholas J. Steneck seeks to understand the impact of the ubiquitous wartime memories of bunkers on post-war German public policy on civil defense systems. He provides a good summary of the Nazi regime’s handling of bunkers and of post-war discussions about the possibility of building new ones to protect the population during an expected third world war. Steneck suggests that post-1945 sentiments about bunker-construction are rooted in negative wartime experiences. However, since the post-war debate seems to be concerned chiefly with financial viability and the futility of bunkers in the face of atomic war, a more explicit linking of West-German policy with individual memories would have been useful.

Christian Groh uses the example of Pforzheim to show that the aerial bombardment of German cities was not off-limits discursively. Commemoration was ever-present at the local level and done in a way as to re-imagine Germans as innocent victims. Using commemorative pamphlets and visual representations of Pforzheim before and after the bombing, Groh contends that, until recently, there was virtually no reflection on the meaning of the town in the Nazi war economy or on the support of the local population for the regime.

Jeffrey Luppés reports results from the cataloguing of the over 1,400 local expellee monuments in Germany as part of a dissertation project. Luppés argues that these monuments are evidence that the idea of German victimhood was never a taboo. On the contrary, the coherent symbolic language of this public art suggests a conscious ‘agenda that has gone beyond commemorating the dead to obfuscating causal links between the Nazi war of aggression and the forced migration of Germans’ (p. 93). Luppés backs his argument with poignant examples of monuments and explains the main artistic themes that range from references to ‘Grossdeutschland’ to Christian symbolism of universal victimhood.

Michael Heinlein’s chapter on the trauma of German children during the war is different from the others on several counts. It is the only one in German and the only one that relies heavily on a psychological conceptualization of trauma. Heinlein examines the boom in inter-

est in the generation of war children. In particular, he looks at two strategies of using this discourse to promote a Europeanization of memory at the psychological level. Though his attention to how psychological research interacts with political debate is innovative, Heinlein's account is based primarily on one conference and one non-profit organization, making his evidentiary foundation a little thin.

A second portion of the edited volume is written in the tradition of cultural and literary studies. Helmut Schmitz investigates the use of wartime trauma as foundational narratives in German literature of the last few decades. All the work included uses the concept of trauma to conjure up a mnemonic community founded on historical rupture. Based on her comprehensive research on representations of queer femininity in Holocaust films, Cathy S. Gelbin offers a brief history of the depiction of lesbians in Holocaust narratives. After initial marginalization, feminist film-makers have portrayed lesbians as victims, losing sight of the complexity of queer relationships during the Holocaust – something that has been addressed only recently. While Gelbin bases her argument on a wealth of material, Annette Seidel-Arpac's chapter is concentrated on the analysis of one movie and its representation of German victimhood and Israeli masculinity. "Walk on Water" (2004) by Eytan Fox is seen as "a discursive space for 'German suffering' in Israeli cinema" (p. 213), in which the themes of guilt, intergenerational trauma, and gendered notions of nationhood appear. Though this treatment is arguably too specific, it does provide an interesting perspective on the international reception of German victimhood discourses. As such, it can be placed alongside two other chapters that offer an international viewpoint.

In this third category, Krijn Thijs examines how the Dutch reacted to debates about German suffering and concludes that, with the exception of two well-regarded novels, there was very little public interest in the issue. Bill Niven contextualizes German discussions and compares them with those in East-Central European societies, particular with respect to their experiences with communist regimes. Niven, one of the most well-published authors on the subject of German memory culture, thereby offers a more general perspective – a refreshing departure from the otherwise very specific contributions.

The specificity of the topics discussed and the fact that the book does not translate German language quotations indicates that it is aimed at a specialized academic

audience in German studies, history and cultural studies. Despite the variety in academic styles and quality of articles, overall this is an excellent contribution to the field of German memory studies. The strength of the book lies precisely in its interdisciplinarity and its grounding in primary data which give concrete voice to the discourse on victimhood without losing sight of the bigger picture.

Gilad Margalit, a historian at the University of Haifa, in his "Guilt, Suffering, and Memory" picks up on many of the same issues when he examines how Germans have remembered their wartime experiences in a manner that obscures the specificity of the Holocaust and prevents a straightforward acknowledgement of guilt. The monograph deals with the remembrance of Wehrmacht soldiers, aerial bombardment, and the "expulsion" from Eastern Europe and its manifestations in memorial days, monuments, and politics. Margalit bases his arguments on an impressive amount of original archival research, as well as analyses of relevant fiction, memorials, public debates, and the pivotal secondary literature. Though most of his own research focuses on the immediate post-war era, the author extrapolates from this to the contemporary period. His final chapter is concerned with the "Resurgence of the German Sense of Victimization since Reunification".

Though not all of its contributions are novel (publications by Norbert Frei and Jeffrey Herf come to mind), this book does a very good job of carefully documenting that discourses of German suffering were not a taboo in either East or West Germany. Margalit argues that post-war remembrance can best be understood as a competition of two narratives: the Jewish one about the Holocaust and one he calls the "reconciliation narrative". While the Jewish narrative slowly made its way into the (West) German public sphere, growing in strength since the 1960s, the reconciliation discourse has been a mainstay of German political culture. Remembering the war through reconciliation meant that Germans were constructed as victims of Hitler, thus placing them on an equal footing with those persecuted during the war (especially the Jews) and obscuring Germans' guilt and responsibility. In many of the examples Margalit employs, Germans' suffering "makes up" for everything that came before and therefore suggests that reconciliation (rather than atonement) should be pursued. Indeed, the greatest strength of the book is that it shows how this narrative operated in many different incarnations and in many localities in the post-war decades. Furthermore, Margalit consistently demonstrates that memory discourses had their roots in the Nazi period and the propaganda of the

regime. In other words, there was no such thing as a *ÄS-tunde Null* when it came to recalling war experience. In his research, the author pays special attention to the actions and discussions within the Catholic and Protestant churches. He contends that even despite the low level of religiosity among Germans today *ÄChristian morality and conscience are still salient in many fundamental concepts in German culture* (p. 74). This is certainly an interesting perspective and helpful for understanding early post-war commemoration which drew heavily on Christian symbolism.

Margalit's emphasis on religious approaches to memory and his division of the Jewish and reconciliation narratives works best to explicate Germans' refusal to face their responsibility in the post-war decades. However, it is less convincing when extended into the present period, as he does at the end of each chapter and in the final one. In it, the author argues that there is now a *Ärenewed German preoccupation with their victimhood [that] indicates a resurgence of German national narratives purged of the moderation offered by World War II's victors and Nazis* (p. 285) and that *ÄGerman politicians never acknowledge the necessity of the expulsions from their former Slavic states* (p. 287). He worries that this view might in the future lead to a questioning of *Äthe legitimacy of the geopolitical arrangements that have prevailed in central and eastern Europe since the end of World War II* (p. 287). Though Margalit briefly discusses the developments of Holocaust memory since the 1990s, in his account the narratives of victimhood are overpowering. He does not do justice to the intensity and diversity of memory-political debates in 1980s West Germany and during the Berlin Republic, instead granting proponents of backward-looking and national-

istic viewpoints more cultural power than they deserve. The main flaw of the book, then, is that it takes arguments that are based on evidence from the 1950s and 1960s and stretches them into the present period. This extension is not backed by an equally close reading of the memory conflicts of the last thirty years and Margalit's conclusions are therefore one-sided.

I find the notion of only two competing narratives *Ä Jewish and reconciliation* to be too simple. Certainly since the 1980s, there were many uncritical views, but also a growing number of critical voices about memory that cannot all be categorized in this way. For example, many of the initiatives that sought to remember the Nazi past in recent decades consciously sought to *Äwork through* the memory of German perpetrators and bystanders, rather than of the Jewish victims. In sum, Gilad Margalit has provided an impressive work of historical research. His commentary on the meaning of contemporary German memory politics, however, is a matter for further discussion. Finally, one critical note for the publisher of this book: in the field of German studies, having so many errors in German spelling and grammar should not be acceptable.

These two books offer an introduction to the key debates in the field of German victimhood memory and politics, as well as a good sense of the current state of scholarship. The portions of Schmitz and Seidel-Arpac's that are devoted to transnational and comparative perspectives on wartime suffering suggest an area that will hopefully see further research. Such transnational approaches will, I believe, do much to advance the field of memory studies which is at times constrained by its attention to local and national details.

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