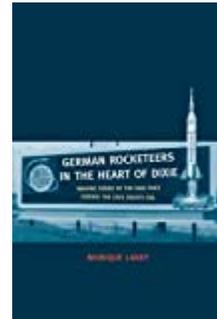




Monique Laney. *German Rocketeers in the Heart of Dixie: Making Sense of the Nazi Past during the Civil Rights Era.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-19803-4.



Reviewed by David Jünger (Free University of Berlin)

Published on H-TGS (February, 2017)

Commissioned by Alison C. Efford (Marquette University)

Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the American South: Confronting Huntsville's German Past

The German past of various American regions—meaning mainly the history of German immigrants and their descendants—is well known and an ongoing source of pride and remembrance. The story of Huntsville, Alabama, is similar to many others—and yet different. The German immigrants shaped the city during a boom time, became eminent community members, and have been held by Huntsville's white Christian community in highest esteem right up to the present day. But Huntsville's story is not of nineteenth-century German immigration but of the transplantation of around two hundred engineers and their families from Nazi Germany's military rocket program to the small town in the Deep South in the early 1950s. After World War II, the US military brought Nazi Germany's top rocket engineer, Wernher von Braun, and his team to the United States, incorporated them into their own military program, and finally made them the spearhead of the US space race.

This story has been told many times. The first accounts praised the achievements of the German space warriors, their German pasts relegated to obscurity.

Later accounts, however, dealt with the collaboration of von Braun and his colleagues with the Nazi regime and their personal involvement in the exploitation and murder of concentration camp laborers. Monique Laney chose a different approach. In her book *German Rocketeers in the Heart of Dixie*, she applies the German model of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to the memory culture of the Huntsville community. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which can be literally translated as "coming to terms with the past," refers exclusively to the Nazi period and sometimes means "to move beyond the past" rather than to grapple with it seriously.

Laney is therefore less interested in retelling the story of Huntsville and the German rocketeers than exploring how current residents of the city remember the Germans and Huntsville's postwar history. She differentiates among four main groups: non-Jewish whites, Germans and their ancestors, African Americans, and Jews. Her central sources are interviews she conducted with members of these groups, having the advantage of being a native speaker of English and German. Her re-

search gives very interesting insights into the memory culture of this city and reveals the differences of each group's recollections. The non-Jewish whites welcomed the Germans, included them in the white community of Huntsville, and praised them for their contributions to the city and to the nation. When in the late 1970s the debate of the Nazi past of the German rocketeers began, this group predominantly maintained its allegiance to the Germans. The accusations were seen as disloyal to the American government or as a Jewish conspiracy. The Jews of Huntsville, who had been more cautious from the beginning, distanced themselves from the Germans and sometimes even from their offspring. The African Americans seemed not to have any stake in the history of the German rocketeers in Huntsville. They did not remember the arrival of the Germans, did not know their status within the white community, and hardly noticed the debates about the Germans' Nazi past. The Germans remember the warm welcome by the Huntsville community and cherished their new home. Not surprisingly, they denied any involvement in the Nazi atrocities and presented themselves as typically secret or forthright opponents to the Nazi regime. Most astonishing are the tremendous differences between the memories of the black and the white community. Whereas for the latter the Germans took center stage of Huntsville's postwar history, for the blacks they did not register at all.

Laney connects the different stories and shows that Huntsville's memory culture is similar to the memory culture of a family, both being a kind of mnemonic community. This is the reason, she concludes, that most of Huntsville's residents defend the Germans in spite of their implications in the Nazi crimes: "To the white Christian majority, the Germans and their families ... became like extended family members" (p. 202). The quintessence of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is illustrated in the famous quote "Grandpa was no Nazi"; a similar idea surfaces in Huntsville's memory culture: "Our Germans were no Nazis."

In spite of the new insight into the memory culture of Huntsville's community that the book offers and the compelling analysis of mnemonic communities, the oral history approach is problematic. Laney privileges her interviews over other sources. The problem is that she seeks to reconstruct events as well as investigate current perspectives on this history. It may make sense not to use primary or secondary sources to evaluate the validity of material gathered in interviews when it is used as evidence of historical memory, but that decision is ques-

tionable when she relies on the same sources to tell the story of Huntsville and the German rocketeers. In short, statements in the interviews are at times taken as facts even though one knows that such statements reflect individuals' current state of mind rather than accurately relate the events of the past.

More problematic, however, is the book's punch line: the Jim Crow South can be compared to Nazi Germany. In the very last paragraph of the book, Laney writes, "Maybe one day, this attempt at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* concerning the rocketeers' past in Nazi Germany will affect how Huntsville grapples with its history of slavery and Jim Crow" (p. 205). Indeed, the question itself is compelling and seems somehow self-evident: how do people who have lived in a country that had killed millions of people for anti-Semitic and racist reasons react to the segregation of the Jim Crow South? Yet the answer is as revealing as the question. Almost none of her interviewees saw this connection for good reason. The anti-Semitic and racist regime of Nazi Germany was quite different to the racial segregation of the Jim Crow South. The former was a system of deliberate, industrial mass murder, the latter an economic system transformed into a culture of racial segregation. They are hardly comparable. But, for the sake of her argument, Laney decides to compare. She also depicts anti-Semitism and anti-German sentiments by Jewish victims of Nazi Germany as somehow equivalent when she writes, "Just as the German POWs at Redstone Arsenal tried to veil their hostility toward Jews, Jewish community members tried to hide their feelings toward the German rocket specialists and their families" (p. 81). Likewise irritating is her description of "the contentious relationship between Jews and non-Jewish Germans during and after World War II" (p. 80), as if the mass murder of the Jews amounted to one side of a feud driven by mutual antagonism. Even though none of the people she interviewed—neither the Germans nor the non-Jewish whites and not even the African Americans or the Jews—explicitly compared the Holocaust and Jim Crow, she holds tight to this idea. Talking of the "similarity" of anti-Jewish boycott and Jim Crow segregation, she writes, "None of the interviewees stated this explicitly, but they may have been surprised to encounter Jim Crow because they did not expect to see this similar scenario in a country that prided itself on having recently overthrown the regime they came from" (p. 125). Because no one sees the connection, she tells them what they should have seen.

To sum up briefly, the book offers a very precise description of the memory culture of Huntsville, Al-

abama, with regard to its immigrants from Nazi Germany. Laney's interviews are as interesting as her analysis of mnemonic communities is compelling. Unfortunately, her approach of drawing parallels between the racism of the Jim Crow South and of Nazi Germany is supported by neither her material nor her interviews and is in my opinion misleading.

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

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

Citation: David Jünger. Review of Laney, Monique, *German Rocketeers in the Heart of Dixie: Making Sense of the Nazi Past during the Civil Rights Era*. H-TGS, H-Net Reviews. February, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47315>



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