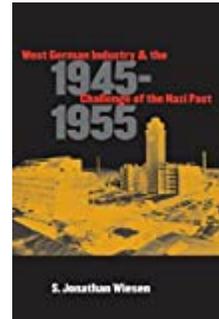


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S. Jonathan Wiesen. *West German Industry and the Challenge of the Nazi Past, 1945-1955.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xvi + 329 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2634-8.



Reviewed by Ronald J. Granieri (Department of History, University of Pennsylvania)

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Recent high-profile reparations agreements have rekindled old debates about the role that large German corporations played in the National Socialist regime and its crimes against humanity. The connection between big business and the Nazis has been a controversial subject for years among scholars, and the depth and apparent inflexibility of these controversies could lead one to assume that there is little new to say on the subject. Jonathan Wiesen's very fine book, however, demonstrates that there are approaches to the history of industry's relationship to National Socialism that remain fresh and interesting. What interests him is less the question of industry's behavior during the Nazi period than the ways that industry attempted to respond to its history. Wiesen comes neither to praise German industry nor to bury it, but rather to examine the strategies by which industry, and by extension West German society as a whole, attempted to come to terms with the then-recent past. The result is a very interesting analysis that should find a wide readership among students and scholars.

Wiesen's primary argument is that, far from avoiding or forgetting the past, German industry was aware from the beginning that the history of its behavior during the Nazi years required careful and conscious engagement, lest that story be told by others to its detriment. The past thus had to be confronted, not avoided. As he argues

in his discussion of industrial giant Siemens, "German industrialists devised narratives of the past that would be useful not only in exculpating themselves legally, but in refurbishing a corporate self-identity ... that would resonate with the Allies, employees, managers, and the public" (p. 35). These self-defenses constituted a "counternarrative of the past, intended as much for themselves as for a limited public" (p. 50).

A lot of cynicism was included in this process, as companies and individuals often stretched or obscured the truth to make themselves appear as anti-Nazi as possible, in order to avoid either individual or corporate punishment from the Allies. When that alone was not enough, however, corporations attempted to overcome Allied restrictions by emphasizing their importance for the reconstruction of German society. The soap manufacturer Henkel, for example, facing large-scale dismantling as punishment for its wartime production of glycerin for explosives, mounted a massive public relations campaign including lurid flyers warning of the "death by dirt" that threatened the people of Germany if Henkel's production facilities were closed down (pp. 61-64). Though Henkel was eventually forced to apologize to Allied authorities for its aggressive campaign, the appeal to Allied concerns about stability and recovery ultimately proved successful when dismantling was abandoned as policy by

1949. Henkel could continue to produce Persil, the ubiquitous laundry detergent whose promise to make everything white and clean offered one of the dominant ironic metaphors for postwar *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Probing this combination of selective memory and proactive defense of industry forms the core of Wiesen's analysis, though he also touches on other questions of postwar German industrial development. The organization of the book is largely thematic rather than strictly chronological. Some of the chapters are therefore focused more narrowly than others. The first chapter discusses the reaction of Siemens to the initial problems of postwar reconstruction, and the last chapter traces transatlantic efforts to exonerate industrialists such as Alfred Krupp, concluding with a discussion of American journalist Louis Lochner's apologetic 1954 book, *Tycoons and Tyrant*. This organization of chapters can sometimes lead to repetitions and overlaps, which account for the book's only notable weakness. The most important sections, however, are the middle chapters, in which Wiesen traces how the reaction of industry to the Nazi past shaped and was shaped by the emerging prosperity of the Federal Republic and its Social Market Economy. He shows that industry worked consciously to construct an image of *Der Unternehmer* (the industrialist) as a representative of postwar German society, contrasting his individual accomplishments with the tyranny of both Nazism and Communism.

As Wiesen describes this process, he shows how West German industry participated in a transatlantic dialog, gradually adapting strategies from abroad to serve domestic purposes. The new image of the heroic *Unternehmer* required a mixing of old and new images, the romanticism of small capitalism and the appeal of new PR strategies from the United States. This industrialist ideal-type was "a hybrid created from different national and economic traditions" and "it was thanks to the putatively American methods of public relations that this new creation could take hold in postwar society" (p. 156). In this way Wiesen deepens our understanding of what his doctoral adviser Volker Berghahn called the Americanization of West German Industry. Wiesen goes even further to discuss how this German adaptation of American marketing techniques fit into a larger strategy for repositioning industry in postwar society. Defending industrialists as the key to a stable liberal political and social order served the larger goal of providing a usable past and a secure future for German capitalism, even when the industrialist in question was someone as problematic as Alfred Krupp. In his discussion of *Tycoons and*

Tyrant, Wiesen concludes that Lochner's book was "part of a much broader effort in both countries to promote the industrialist as the embodiment of core Western values that had been threatened by Nazism, war, and big government" (p. 232).

To create such a new image for German industry, it was necessary to overcome tensions between capital and labor, not an easy task in the immediate postwar years, when unions faced industry across a huge chasm of justified suspicion. Seeking to protect their holdings, industrialists tried to defuse union demands for fundamental social reform by changing the terms of the debate. To industrial advocates, "democracy ... unleashed a romantic spirit of individualism—of the artist, the musician, and the industrialist—and protected a liberal political order in which these figures flourished." This positive image contrasted with the social leveling that would come with totalitarianism, leading to a narrative of National Socialism that emphasized its hostility to individual freedom, and linked it to the present threat of communism. This "explosion of symbolic language" was about both dealing with the past and "skillfully maneuvering the legacy of Nazism and the tensions of the Cold War for a present political purpose" (pp. 187-188). Eventually, this emphasis on individual freedom led to potential cooperation with the labor unions on the notion of generalized prosperity and the avoidance of revolutionary social change within the Social Market Economy. Changes in language accompanied this development, as the term *Arbeiter*, associated with labor radicalism, was gradually replaced in industry publications and also in generalized discourse by terms such as *Mitarbeiter* or *Arbeitnehmer*. As Wiesen concludes, "While 'the worker' was associated with an inharmonious past, when the proletariat was considered a downtrodden and revolutionary underclass, the 'coworker' was one among equals, along with the shareholders rooting for, profiting from, and taking pride in the financial success of the company" (p. 190).

Attempts to redefine industry's societal role went beyond immediate economic concerns. Industry also encouraged the creation of cultural organizations such as the *Kulturkreis* and the *Deutsches Industriemuseum* (DI), which promoted a particular image of western culture opposed to totalitarianism, both in their own publications and lecture series, and in their larger patronage of the arts. Not Nazis themselves, *Kulturkreis* leaders such as Otto Vogel and Hermann Reusch represented "an industrial type who survived the Nazi years with career and reputation intact and who, therefore ... could afford to defend German industry with elaborate theses about the

political and cultural significance of the economy. With more or less clear consciences, they countered the prevalent images of capitalism as greedy and morally pernicious with the weapon of culture” (p. 176). Although their emphasis on the threat of “mass man” would be challenged during the 1950s and afterward, the cultural efforts to link the *Unternehmer* with the struggle against totalitarianism did help West German industry polish its image.

These efforts were certainly aided by the rapid return of prosperity after 1950, which encouraged efforts to link successful industrial recovery with social and political reconstruction. The concept of the West German economic miracle was not just a post facto creation, according to Wiesen, but rather a “contemporary invention consciously embraced by [all] West Germans.” Nor was this connection merely left to chance. “Rather, the story of West Germany’s almost magical rebirth was actively imagined, scripted, and propagated, often by businessmen and firms who recognized the power that a post-Hitler national myth would have in securing the free market and taming the working classes” (p. 195). As many business writers of the 1950s themselves argued, West German recovery was far from a miracle, but rather, the concrete result of a conscious economic and rhetorical strategy.

Therein lies Wiesen’s most telling insight. The entire response of West German industry to the past, with all

of its positive and negative aspects, was the product of a conscious strategy. “Accounting for industrial behavior, usurping the status of victim and resister, discussing the nature of terror and totalitarianism—these moments of reflection were not passive events or coincidental motifs that accompanied economic rebuilding. They were carefully created, packaged, and sold in service of an ‘Occidental’ moral ethic that would accompany an ascending West German market economy” (p. 235). As he concludes with reference to the work on collective memory from Maurice Halbwachs, Wiesen reminds us that memory “does not exist in a vacuum. It manifests itself as a conscious process of selection, as the strategic choices of language, and as the studious presentation of symbols and stories from the past and their marketing—and manipulation—in the present” (p. 244). Despite past criticisms of the 1950s as an era of forgetting (a position also challenged by the recent work of Norbert Frei), Wiesen’s analysis of West German industry’s *Vergangenheitspolitik* demonstrates that the past remained a constant and very controversial issue throughout this period. Industry’s goal was not necessarily mastering the past, a phrase that suggests a teleological process with a clear conclusion, but rather managing the memory of events that many wanted to forget, but could not. By charting the strategies pursued by West German industry, Jonathan Wiesen has reminded us how much we have yet to learn about the relationship between Germany’s past and present, and the high social and cultural price of West Germany’s material recovery.

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