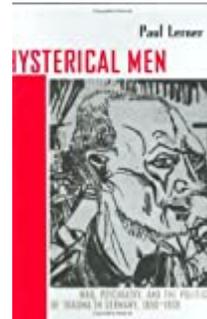




**Heinrich Best, Stefan Hornbostel.** *Funktionseliten der DDR: Theoretische Kontroversen und empirische Befunde.* Köln: Zentrum für historische Sozialforschung Köln, 2003. 375 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4094-6.



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## Putting the Front Generation on the Couch

### Putting the Front Generation on the Couch

Historians continue to explore the First World War and its influential and contested legacy during the Weimar era for insight into National Socialism and the Holocaust. Omer Bartov suggests that something so seemingly incomprehensible as the Holocaust was unimaginable before the First World War. The generation responsible for perpetrating the Holocaust either survived the war at the front or was inundated by the constant representation and memorialization of the war during the interwar period.[1] The criminal acts of the National Socialist regime relied heavily on the support of two professions most often associated with progress and modernity—medicine and law. Understanding how these professions evolved between the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich is not only important in its own right, but it prevents historians from embracing the *Sonderweg* theory too easily without accounting for context.

Paul Lerner contributes an impressive study of the German psychiatric profession in which he describes its development and political, social, and economic orientation between 1890 and 1930. Not only does Lerner write

an impressive history of German psychiatry, he reveals the degree to which the relatively new profession influenced and was influenced by the rest of German society. Lerner writes: “psychiatry in World War One had less to do with the murderous initiatives of the next generation than with the economic discourses of its own time” (p. 4). Lerner’s study engages successfully a myriad of issues including the historicization of hysteria and trauma and the pathologization of the November Revolution of 1918 by politically conservative psychiatrists.

Male hysteria was a diagnosis fraught with political and social significance. Once considered a phenomenon restricted to women, German psychiatrists detected symptoms of hysteria in German men soon after industrialization. Psychiatrists associated male hysteria with an inability or unwillingness to adapt to the modern age. More significantly, Lerner reveals that most psychiatrists viewed male hysteria as a sign of weakness, even corruption. In the eyes of many psychiatrists, men who behaved hysterically because they suffered some sort of trauma simply took advantage of Germany’s newly instituted insurance laws by collecting pensions instead of

contributing to the economy. This bias continued into the First World War when psychiatrists, now pressed into the war effort, generally dismissed the legitimacy of combat trauma and attributed hysterical symptoms to “a pathological lack of male behavior” and pre-existing nervous conditions (p. 8). During the revolution of 1918-1919, psychiatrists diagnosed “a national nervous collapse” and, according to Lerner, “used the language of psychiatry to describe political events and to pathologize revolutionary actors, equating war hysteria with political radicalism, unpatriotic behavior, and biological inferiority” (p. 194).

Lerner begins *Hysterical Men* by discussing the status of psychiatry in Wilhelmine Germany and the defeat of the traumatic neurosis theory by the male hysteria diagnosis. Most psychiatrists supported the male hysteria diagnosis because they suspected many men suffering from symptoms of trauma were milking Germany’s accident insurance laws. Chapter 2 reveals that German psychiatrists initially welcomed war as a healthy alternative to the perceived decadence of peacetime industrialized Germany. Lerner then delineates the debate between psychiatrists over the cause of the war neurosis crisis. Psychiatrists like Hans Oppenheim failed to convince his colleagues that the crisis was legitimate and that patients required long-term care. Instead, German psychiatrists attributed mental collapse to weakness and sloth and treated the symptoms without investigating the illness. Lerner describes in detail some of the disturbing treatments employed by psychiatrists in the field hospitals and special clinics devoted to the war neurosis crisis. The last three chapters are the most interesting for Germanists because Lerner places psychiatry within the context of the political, social, and economic tensions confronting both wartime and post war Germany. Most German psychiatrists adapted what may be called “rationalized psychiatry.” Under this system, patients’ mental health was considered less important than their economic productivity. Lerner includes an interesting chapter on how psychoanalysis responded to the war neurosis phenomenon and the external pressures to return patients to the field or war industries. It seems psychoanalysis was more influential within the medical profession than Freud suspected. Lerner relates how the mostly conservative and patriotic psychiatric profession politicized war hysteria in the November Revolution by declaring revolution and Social Democracy the work of mentally ill degenerates. Lerner concludes his study by analyzing the

formation and debate of “individual and collective memories of war and trauma in Weimar society, psychiatry, and culture” (p. 11).

The key to understanding the psychiatric profession in Germany during the time period studied by Lerner is its embrace of rationalization. The organization of psychiatric facilities and treatment emphasized “therapeutic speed and efficiency.” If hysterical patients could not return from the front, wartime planners used them for the war economy. Lerner discovered, “[m]edical power created a system to serve economic needs” (p.126). Lerner wisely avoids determining the validity of the hysteria diagnosis versus trauma by treating these psychiatric concepts as historical actors. Lerner also avoids drawing direct connections between the behavior of the medical profession during the First World War and the Third Reich. However, Lerner is on safe ground when speculating that “an approach to mental health that prioritized the needs of the nation over the welfare of the individual patient [...] may have contributed to the mentalities that made possible the path from ‘mass well-being’ to ‘mass annihilation’” (p. 247).

Lerner’s source base is as impressive as his writing and organization of ideas. He draws from a combination of federal and state archives in Germany, university archives holding personal papers from influential psychiatrists, and hundreds of published sources from medical journals and newspapers. Strangely absent from the bibliography are the military archives in Freiburg, which include record groups from medical services. Despite Lerner’s best efforts, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the parade of personalities discussed in his narrative. *Hysterical Men* will be of interest to anyone interested in modern German history and would make an excellent graduate seminar selection.

#### Note

[1]. See Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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