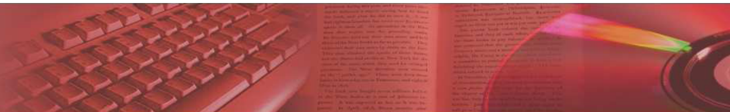

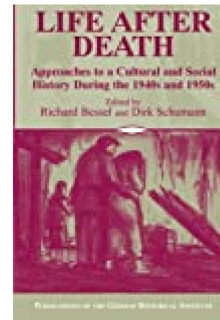

Richard Bessel, Dirk Schumann, eds. *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xi + 363 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-80413-4; ISBN 978-0-521-00922-5.

Reviewed by Michael Geyer (Department of History, University of Chicago)

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The main theme of this volume is "the relationship between the enormous outbursts of violence during the 1940s and the strange conservative normality that characterized so many aspects of life in European societies during the decade that followed" (p. 5). The editors, Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, approach this theme with the reasonable proposition that the mass experience of death and violence was "profound and colored all aspects of life during the postwar decades" (p. 7). They further reason that, perhaps, the massive shock of violence disabused European societies from the tendency, so visible after World War I, to seek meaning and salvation in past violence and, thus, paved the way for a more peaceful Europe. In order to elaborate these propositions they deploy two concepts: of "trauma" as catch-all term for the (mental) injuries caused by war, and of "normalization" as the key to the effort to get over the experience of violence. They warn that their's is a new field of study as far as the aftermath of World War II is concerned and that, therefore, the essays must be considered experimental.

The fourteen essays are, on average, solid fare, certainly worth reading, occasionally useful summaries of monographic work by the authors, with a few lively and acerbic essays thrown in. Pearls are rare, but there are quite a few mussels, which yield their precious load after some probing. Unfortunately, the conference that preceded the volume did not leave many traces in the individual essays. The authors did not listen to each other much, although they should and could have done so. Moreover, they all have trouble with the concept of "trauma" and the more adventurous ones rebel against its use or, in any case, its over-use. Also, they by and large think of "normalization" as rhetorical strategy or strategies and produce some fascinating comparative work. Still, the few cases when the practice of getting over war and violence is at issue look more promising for future research, but these are also the more tentative and unfinished essays. Overall, the essays of this volume give us a equitable account of the state of historiography on how Europeans got out of the war.

Alice Foerster and Birgit Beck elaborate the definition of trauma according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and come to the conclusion that there is sufficient cause to expect PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) as a consequence of violence in World War II.[1] The problem is that they suspect it, but cannot find it. Their failure is not for a lack of trying. Rather, the effects of war are simply not quite that obvious and by and large they are not where PTSD expects them, as Svenja Golterman has demonstrated.[2]

Public commemoration–whether commemoration is a public form of mourning is one of the debates right un-

derneath the surface of several essays–of war and its victims is one important trace that historians use to study the way people (and nations) coped with mass death. Sabine Behrenbeck's title "Remembering the Victims of Violence in Germany" points to her main argument. The key to postwar memory in the fifties consisted in establishing moral equivalency: the Germans atoning for their (otherwise unspecified) sins with their own suffering. The German "self," however, was defined quite differently depending on the political context. The East highlighted Communist resistance and the Red Army as model victims, whereas the West commemorated the war dead of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, POWs, and refugees. However, both had in common that the bonds between the living and the dead trumped the memory of both Jewish and non-Jewish victims of German persecution, and sheared the tenuous links to them. Perhaps the most striking, if underdeveloped, insight of Behrenbeck's essay is that honor and shame rather than guilt and atonement governed the remembrance of war and violence during the first postwar decades.

Ido de Han, in his essay "Paths of Normalization after Jewish Persecution" treating the Netherlands, Germany, and France, flat-out denies the viability of the trauma concept and, particularly, of the sequence of trauma, repression, and recovery. He demonstrates successfully that the act of commemorating the persecution of Jews followed radically different strategies of normalization. These strategies were defined by the political and cultural context and, above all, by the ability and willingness of the victims to speak and of the nations to listen. Neither was self-evident particularly in France and the Netherlands, albeit for different reasons. In Germany, he insists, the well-organized Jewish community of survivors got their point of view across, many listened, and international pressure made acknowledgment of persecution the yardstick for German normalization. This feisty essay, despite some question marks one might attach, can serve as an excellent discussion piece in class. The contribution of Pieter Lagrou later in the volume and, less accomplished, the one of Donald Sassoon serve as valuable companion pieces.

Turning to the more personal and private aspects of coping with mass death, Atina Grossmann's path-breaking essay on "Trauma, Memory, and Motherhood," originally published in *Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte* in 1998, has lost none of its edge. It focuses on the striking difference in fertility rates between Jewish DPs and Germans in the immediate aftermath of the war and the reasons for the difference. The import of the essay is fourfold. First, it manages to record two incommensurate stories in a single history without equivocation. Second, it highlights the role of displaced populations in postwar history and finds a place for them in a general history of coping with the effects of war and persecution. Third, she cuts through the trauma debate on one hand and the equivalency-of-victims debate on the other to highlight the importance of envisioning a future for coping with the past (and with injury). Fourth and not least, she opens up a debate, hopefully to be continued, about the significance of mending the social fabric and rebuilding communities and what better (but also, what more problematic) sign is there than having babies? The Jewish DPs' desire to live (and, not least, to live it up) after *churban* was not "normal" in the eyes of their Allied handlers, but it was, perhaps, the most telling indication that, indeed, there is "life after death."

Grossmann also considers the impact of mass rape and more generally refers to the "virtually unanimous portrait of a thoroughly 'whipped and beaten' population, self-pitying, broken, in the grip of what one today might identify as mass clinical depression" (p. 109). This conclusion–more so than the rapes themselves–would need some more detailed analysis. The sheer difficulties of this kind of undertaking are demonstrated by Andrea Petoe in her preliminary study on rapes, and particularly the narrative of rape, in Budapest and Vienna. She concludes that there was a common interest (of perpetrators and victims) in silence and that this silence was only broken with the advent of feminism and democracy.

Joanna Bourke provides an important cue for the "silence" of soldiers/perpetrators. Her argument in *An Intimate History of Killing* is by now well-rehearsed, but it is worth recalling that it comes in two parts.[3] First, soldiers commit extraordinary acts of violence and do so with considerable involvement, if not enthusiasm. But they also yearn to be back home and to continue life as if war never had happened. Nightmares and feelings of guilt only occur after the fact (and, often, long after the fact). At least as far as British and American soldiers are concerned, they occurred mostly with regard to what these soldiers (and civil society into which they integrated) considered atrocities. Naturally, one wonders what this tells us about Soviet soldiers and their reintegration into civilian life or, for that matter, about German (and other) genocidaires. If American psychiatrists are right, they must have suffered grievously, for which there is no indication at all. She might have consulted the one or other continental European specialist. The latter would not have had ready answers, but surely some ques-

tion marks to be placed behind Anglo-American common sense.

Another non-conversation occurs between Grossman and Dagmar Herzog, who demonstrates in a challenging, iconoclastic essay that, maybe, it was sex, rather than having babies, that gentile Germans had on their mind–and that it took a great deal of effort to "normalize" this mindset. (What this says about our parents is a matter not discussed and it may not exactly be what Bessel/Schumann had in mind when they insist that *Life after Death* is a history about ourselves.) In any case, Herzog makes a good case that what has come down to us as the prudish fifties turns out to be a rather late-fifty-ish development and, possibly, more an indication of the strenuous effort to contain (perceived) rampant sexuality than of everyday life. The very least we can say is that German reality was surely not what Pat Thane, in her review essay of British family life, considers the key feature of Britain–that "the thirties to the fifties were the golden age, indeed the only age, of the near universal, stable, long-lasting marriage" (p. 198). Herzog puts, shall we say, the immoderate concern with sexuality (for the most part, with heterosexuality) on the map and makes the relation of sex to violence a key theme of postwar normalization. If her interpretation is corroborated by further research, it would constitute a significant breakthrough in our understanding of the postwar years.

Herzog's sexual revolution before the revolution came to naught, because one of the real winners of Nazi defeat was the Catholic church according to Damian van Melis, who makes a good case for a stunning ecclesiastical triumphalism. The church saw itself as the martyred victim of Nazi violence and considered survival as justification for a continuation and last excrescence of a nineteenth-century ultramontane politics of anti-modernism. In a somewhat uneven, but provocative essay, "Nationalization of Victimhood: Selective Violence and National Grief in Western Europe," Pieter Lagrou picks up on a similar argument and puts the Catholic church into the company of the reconstructed nation states of Western Europe. Donald Sassoon explores the same theme for Italy and rightly points to the political competition over who, the Christian Right or the Communist Left, would control the memory of victimization and heroic survival. But it is Lagrou who clinches the argument. Nations and political actors within nations exploited victimhood and sought to make the (their) nation the prime victim of Nazi aggression and violence. He contrasts the nationalization of victimhood with the de facto differentiation of targets of violence and the resulting competition over who would speak for the victimized nation after World War II and sees in this am inversion of the World War I experience. The bottom line is that, in order to understand violence, death, and their postwar memory, we must stop thinking of it as a common "war experience." Why victimhood is such a powerful source of legitimacy in Western culture–think of Aeneas and Troy–is left for others to answer.

Michael Wildt's essay on "Consumer Mentality in West Germany" returns us to some of the observations of Grossmann and Herzog in that he links the turn to consumption to the feeling that "life is worth living again," as, ironically, a cigarette add put it in 1954. Paul Betts looks at this phenomenon with more originality and depth in his captivating study of West and East German industrial design that shaped so much of consumption or, in any case, of its ideals. The problem he faces is that the Third Reich, somewhat contrarily to its image, had bought into industrial design, although it did not deliver. His solution is to suggest that industrial design became the iconic expression of the good life in the turbulent twenties and thirties. It became the "abiding iconography of normality and prosperity" (p. 320). This conclusion still begs the question why of all nations, Japan, Germany, and Italy were so enthralled by industrial design and what their peculiar penchant for aestheticization might be. But suffice it to say that it was not butter, but a well-designed quality-product like a Constructa, the tell-tale brand-name for a washing machine, that turned out to be the alternative to war. Such was life in the fifties. It is left to Alon Confino to wonder how we might get from the embrace of the beautified trivial and normal to the exception of mass murder and genocide and back again, using tourism as his opening gambit. One could read his essay as simply saying that soldiering always had an element of tourism attached to it. (Well, at least in the twentieth century, because in the eighteenth century nostalgia or *Heimweh* were the most common diagnosis for "trauma.") However, Confino rather wants to question the concept of "normality," taking on the debate on the historicity vs. exceptionality of the holocaust with good sense. Needless to say that the move from tourism to genocide is rather bracing. But he admonishes us that mass murder cannot possibly have been so abnormal as to be beyond comprehension, for otherwise murder would not have been committed. Conversely, a normality in which the monstrosity of genocide disappears must be quite extraordinarily crazy. Confino explicates what the best essays in the volume elaborate subterraneously. If genocidaires can become tourists without much

second thought, the European normality we encounter as historians in the wake of the war is quite seriously deranged or, in any case, deeply damaged and we had all better take note. Any talk of normality in the late forties and fifties is wishful thinking.

Notes

[1]. See American Psychiatric Association, Task Force on DSM-IV, and Task Force on Nomenclature and Statistics, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

[2]. Svenja Goltermann, "Im Wahn der Gewalt: Massentod, Opferdiskurs und Psychiatrie 1945-1956," in *Nachkrieg in Deutschland*, ed. Klaus Naumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), pp. 343-365.

[3]. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

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