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Gavriel David Rosenfeld. *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 524 S. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84706-3.

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Amazing Tales

Whether literary, popular or scholarly, the vast majority of alternate histories about the Third Reich have been produced in the Britain and the United States (p.15). Gavriel Rosenfeld's encyclopedic survey of "what if" narratives includes fictional literature, mass media and even counterfactual histories written by academic historians and professional journalists. He uses evidence from biography, context, hermeneutics and reception in considering these largely marginalized cultural products in order to draw fascinating generalizations about trends in postwar memory.

In the 1940s and 50s, the works themselves were few and far between; but some were quite popular and they all served triumphalist purposes. By positing the horrific outcomes of alternate scenarios (for example, a Nazi victory creating hell on earth), these works legitimized Britannia's "finest hour" and U.S. interventionism by criticizing the policies of appeasement and isolation. After the 1960s in Britain, and the 1970s in America, the number of alternate histories dramatically increased, but their content tended to "normalize" the Third Reich. In the wake of the "Hitler Wave," the feared figure of a fugitive Hitler ("He's alive!" [1]) cast the Führer as more human; his supposed successful flight made it seem unlikely that he would find justice. His absence from history no longer seemed to assure a better world. (Understandably, given the ways in which they might be misunderstood, Germans did not initially produce alternate histories, but they were rabid consumers of Anglo-American ones.) Given the persistent commitment of some read-

ers and viewers to the earlier, more "narrow spectrum of representational boundaries," as well as the tremendous popularity of many of these "allohistories" despite negative reviews, Rosenfeld views the production of these new alternate histories as evidence of a regime of public memory that had become "more pluralistic, contested, and divided" (p.25). By indexing, criticizing and periodizing these rich sources in postwar remembrance, Rosenfeld has opened new terrain for scholars of memory.

Yet a more significant contribution of this book lies in Rosenfeld's attempt to define normalization (esp. pp. 15-25, 392-395). At times, Rosenfeld uses normalization to refer to the teleological shift in any post-traumatic society towards an ideal-typical condition of normality. As they began to produce more of their allohistories, particularly after reunification, Germans increasingly demonstrated a yearning for this state. Normalization also refers to the process by which a particularly extraordinary and/or vivid historical legacy becomes viewed, treated and remembered like any other. Here Rosenfeld identifies various interpretive techniques: universalization (typically liberals warning the contemporary world of the persistent threat of fascism), relativization (typically conservatives who see more of a danger in communism), aestheticization (those who use Nazis for entertainment), humanization (those who aim at normalizing perpetrators) and humor (most surprisingly as practiced by Germans who, for good reason, preserved the taboo against laughing at the Nazi past for the longest [p.382]). These strategies amount to "the waning of a moralis-

tic perspective towards the past” whereby a “dominant moralistic view of the past” is challenged by dissenting authors and readers with “views that are less committed to perceiving it from an ethically grounded vantage point” (p.16).

This shift was caused not just by instrumental attempts to ignore the Nazi past but also by “organic” normalization and “presentism” (pp. 17, 385-366). Rosenfeld describes the pattern of gradual normalization that includes, but is not reduced to, prescriptive attempts to pursue normalization intentionally for polemical purposes (p. 372). Almost universally, the authors who lived through Hitler’s war wrote allohistories with the intent of reminding their readers of the horrors of National Socialism. With less fear in their hearts at the Nazi past (p. 380), postwar authors were more willing to think outside *that* box. More concerned after the 1960s with a present than a past evil, authors who engaged in normalization used the Nazi past instrumentally to criticize Western imperialism, the corporate-minded BRD, or promote anti-Communism. According to Rosenfeld, alternate histories of the Holocaust tend to suggest the “futility of remembrance” (p. 367), particularly when part of an obligation for public remembrance as in Germany. Rosenfeld is wonderfully ecumenical in showing that all this criticism emerges from both left and right.

To be sure, Rosenfeld’s own analysis demonstrates the political nature of alternate history even during the crucial first decades. Already in the 1940s and 50s, the Nazi past was used to constitute moral communities by legitimizing or delegitimizing the postwar order. Moreover, framing these allohistorical fantasies (testing one’s moral fibre against the Nazis) in national meta-narratives suggests that to a large degree it was those national myths that were at stake: Britain’s “finest hour,” “heroic” American interventionism, and “ordinary” Germans. During the Cold War (1945-58), “[w]estern fears of communism kept alternate histories of Nazism to a minimum” (p. 24), just as the rediscovery of Nazi evil in the wake of Adolf Eichmann’s trial only served to reinforce Allied self-confidence. Then, a series of economic, social and international crises challenged national prestige in each country. Humiliated by the Suez Crisis of 1956, abandoning their colonies and facing recession and new social movements, the British lost their sense of moral authority, and, at the same time, they began to imagine British collaboration with a victorious Nazi Germany. For the Americans civil rights, OPEC, Vietnam and Watergate led to similar reexaminations. The inverse is the case for the vanquished Germans after they

regained their national self-confidence in and around reunification. Rosenfeld correlates shifts in alternate histories with the tides of national self-confidence that are then projected laterally, as it were, onto alternate histories of the Third Reich. (My personal favorite is the wave of allohistorical silence that took place during the Thatcher era [p. 70-1]. Rosenfeld’s deft interpretation relies not on the alternate histories written but on those *not* written: itself a form of counterfactual logic.) To be sure, Rosenfeld is able to provide concrete biographical or hermeneutic evidence that national self-confidence was a primary cause of these meta-narrative shifts only in certain cases (as on p. 81). Nonetheless, Rosenfeld convinces the reader through his comparison between these national cases—for it must be more than coincidence that the differential timing of this shift in each national case corresponded closely to the particular crisis of that nation.

Since this shift did occur in each case, however, there seems to be an overarching cause that transcends national uniqueness: Rosenfeld might have called this a postmodern fracturing of the modern subject (cf. p. 7). Facing a Nazi past remembered less for its own sake, less as a unique phenomenon, and viewed even with downright “apathy” (p. 200) for memory as such, Rosenfeld recognizes that “increased exhaustion, if not outright boredom, with moralism” (p. 392) may represent a taboo-breaking backlash, initiated by pop-cultural allohistories against the representatives of high culture, who repeatedly affirm the established orthodoxy. Nonetheless, Rosenfeld repeatedly invokes the “modern” “injunction” to remember the Nazi past lest we be doomed to repeat it (pp. 367, 375, 378). For the most part, Rosenfeld treats normalization in modern terms: as a loss of ethical clarity, a shift away from “an ethically grounded vantage point” to “a less judgmental approach to the past” (pp. 17, 60, 87, 234, 334). He tends to refer to remembrance, atonement, memory and the “profound moral implications” of the Holocaust (p. 345, 372) as proper things to which one is either “committed” or not (p. 201) as if these terms are set and things with clear “limits” (p. 368), rather than the subject of continual debate even today. Furthermore, Rosenfeld does not specify what these limits might be, nor does he historicize those limits. Similarly, Rosenfeld’s labels for these periods, as eras of “moralism” and “normalization,” imply that ours is a less moral (if not amoral or completely immoral) age (p. 23, 375). In short, his posture presumes that the modern paradigm for ethics is in fact ethical.

At other times, Rosenfeld defines normalization in

postmodern terms as an attempt to challenge the hegemony of that particular paradigm for memory (p. 342). For instance, he claims that cold war alternate histories expressed a “manifestly” moral perspective (p. 18) that held a “privileged” status (p.17; see also pp. 24, 94). This definition of normalization sometimes seems to include a notion of ethical complexity that befits the postmodern. Rosenfeld argues that the popularity of Robert Harris’s *Fatherland* (1992) reflected both a “less morally informed view” of the Third Reich in Britain as well as a more “nuanced” view (p. 87). In all of this, Rosenfeld is being true to the facts: the postwar period did hear voices insisting on both ethical postures and it did witness a shift from the one paradigm to the other, with all the contentious debate associated with the postmodern turn. Yet Rosenfeld tends towards the modernist take on remembrance. He admonishes the reader that abandoning “black-and-white” ethical judgments can lead to ignoring the ethical conundrums entirely: “The long road of normalization, thus, may well point to indifference, if not amnesia, as its ultimate destination” (p. 22). He admits that challenging hegemonic moral paradigms might lead to more accurate histories and may even represent a healthy process of democratic debate. Yet for Rosenfeld, the dangers of allohistories are too many too soon: diverting our attention from the “actual past,” confusing readers, or distorting, trivializing, even condoning the Nazi past (pp. 392-394).

If even the best alternate histories are “flawed” (p. 361), then Rosenfeld’s reader is left unsure how precisely allohistorians should deal with the Nazi past. A good number of the authors Rosenfeld examines were committed to “good-vs.-evil” narratives not because they wish to ignore the dangers of fascism but precisely because they were convinced, and wished to convince others, that fascism (and not communism) represented the real threat to humanity. At the same time, Rosenfeld provides examples of how one can use allohistory to confound ethical categories in order to think more seriously about the ethical challenges of the Nazi past.[2] Reading his extensive survey, one is impressed by the vast array of narratives that have served to exculpate or repress Nazi crimes: the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, the explicitly or the implicitly ethical, the personal and the impersonal, humanizing and abstracting, black-and-white and nuanced. I certainly believe that there are good reasons for lucidly analyzing ethical complexity, paying close attention to the lives of the perpetrators and even universalizing Hitler: one could use them to help fight fascism (cf. pp. 269-270, 372). The real lesson here is that there is no

one correct formula for combining form, narrative and epistemology to write good (that is, antifascist) allohistory.

Allohistories are particularly well suited for raising these ethical dilemmas when they pose the question what if “It Happened Here?” (the title of a book by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo [1964]; pp. 56-8). Yet the desire to ignore these ethical dilemmas began long before 1945. Perhaps sensing this issue, Rosenfeld begins his survey in the years just prior to the war, when some British and Americans hypothesized as to the consequences of continued appeasement and non-intervention. These are some of the most fascinating parts of Rosenfeld’s story because they suggest that alternate histories were already polemical—and thus helped shape Nazi history in the first place. It is common knowledge that the Nazi regime used counterfactual histories of all sorts to mobilize support for the regime, the war effort and the genocide. Indeed, some historians would argue that this tradition of alternate history began with the Hohenzollerns and Habsburgs. Rosenfeld’s study thus raises the possibility of the presence of a longer allohistoriography of modern Germany—including literature and criticism (fictional and factual) since the late nineteenth century—that demonstrates the longitudinal continuities between normalization efforts in response to the Third Reich and the cultures of normalcy that produced it in the first place.

Let me mention just two more compelling reasons to read Rosenfeld’s pathbreaking survey of postwar alternate histories of the Third Reich. Some of the sources scrutinized by Rosenfeld are counterfactual essays by academically trained historians. Rosenfeld entices the reader when he alludes to the fact that allohistorians struggled with the same theoretical questions as historians. Either out of convenience or conviction, the former seemed to presume that individuals make history, so that they can easily alter its course for the purposes of speculation by killing off Hitler, for instance, or enabling him to live. Yet some explored the possibility that underlying structures might have preserved true historical outcomes nonetheless: such as German national character. The fascinating interplay of intentionalism and structuralism in postwar allohistories is enough to make any German historian take notice (pp. 272-329). Rosenfeld also alludes to the possibility that formal qualities in allohistory might in themselves encourage us to think in new ways: by raising questions that contradict “reality” as it happened, as we have been wont to remember it, or as historians have constructed it (pp. 244, 396-397). By

dint of alternate history's very position on the margins of our discipline, then, Rosenfeld's allohistoriography offers new insight into the epistemological foundations of modern (and postmodern) history.

Notes

[1]. Rod Sterling, *The Twilight Zone*, 1963.

[2]. Such as Madeline Bunting, *The Model Occupation: The Channel Islands under German Rule* (New York: Harpercollins, 1995); Adrian Gilbert, *Britain Invaded: Hitler's Plans for Britain: A Documentary Reconstruction* (London: Century, 1990).

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