



Dagmar Barnouw. *The War in the Empty Air: Victims, Perpetrators, and Postwar Germans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xiv + 303 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34651-3.

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A Book in the Empty Air? Dagmar Barnouw's Critique of the Postwar Politics of Memory

This book offers a passionate and at times polemical critique of the politics of memory in postwar (West) Germany. It adds to the series of publications in recent years that have demanded due recognition for German suffering during World War II. Following W.G. Sebald's critique of the omission of the air war from the literary discourse of the postwar period; Günter Grass's novella on the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff by a Russian submarine and the ensuing death of thousands of ethnic German refugees in January 1945; and the historian Jörg Friedrich's account of the impact of Allied strategic bombing on German civilians, Dagmar Barnouw too charges that the "nearly total exclusion from historical memory of German wartime experiences, among them large scale air raids, mass deportations, and warfare involving millions of conscripts, has over the decades created a serious loss of historical reality" (p. xii). That suppression of ordinary Germans' memories resulted, according to her, from an Allied propagation of German "collective guilt" as well as from the elevation of Auschwitz to a "supra-historical status" (p. xiii) outside of history and beyond comparison with any other (especially German) forms of suffering. This enduring distortion of the memory of World War II, Barnouw argues, has been perpetuated throughout the postwar period by Jewish and non-Jewish elites in Germany as well as by an increasing "worldwide Jewish interest in an enduring uniqueness and cultural centrality of the Holocaust" (p. 193). The fact that ordinary Germans, as she claims, have been "stripped of their individual memory" of wartime suffering severely limited postwar public memory and contributed to a "fragmented and uncertain ... German historiography of the recent past" (p. 31). A righteous moral certitude regarding the German past also shaped the production and reception of postwar German literature, thus contributing to the popularity of writers like Günter Grass and Siegfried Lenz, while condemning to relative obscurity a writer such as Wolfgang Koeppen,

whose work offered a more complex message. "Censored memories" (p. 51) in postwar Germany finally also yielded problematic political consequences by legitimating U.S. bombing campaigns from Kosovo to Iraq and by endorsing Israel's "objectively destructive conduct in the Middle East" (p. 13). To counter such negative political consequences, the author pleads for a "more comprehensive historical memory of the Second World War" that would give more room to German suffering, reduce the centrality of the Holocaust and also include a "more critical comparative study of Allied warfare" (p. xviii).

As the most important evidence for her argument, Barnouw discusses primarily recent debates about National Socialism and the Holocaust. She consistently sides with protagonists who advocate a more revisionist perspective that would bring into focus German suffering and reduce the centrality of the Holocaust. Thus she supports Martin Broszat's position in his debate with Saul Friedländer over the "historicization" of National Socialism; she agrees with Martin Walser in his dispute with the then head of the Jewish community in Germany, Ignatz Bubis; and she defends Jörg Friedrich's publication on the air war against Germany against critics on both sides of the Atlantic. In recounting these and other controversies, Barnouw's narrative often shifts between an analysis of actual wartime history and contemporary memory debates. The text is also interspersed with her own recollections of the fire bombing of Dresden in February 1945, which she survived as young girl together with her mother, to whom the book is dedicated. The last chapter consists of a detailed discussion of the case of the left-liberal professor of German literature, Hans Schwerte, who, at the age of 84, revealed his true identity as the former SS-officer Hans Ernst Schneider. For Barnouw, this case again exemplifies the mechanisms of a "powerfully ritualized German collective guilt" (p. 259). Schneider/Schwerte was quickly condemned, even though he left behind, in her view, a past that was

“dangerously confused and misguided but not personally criminal” (p. 229).

Before I offer a critique of this argument, let me stake out the areas where I agree with the author. I completely concur with her desire to take seriously German experiences of suffering in war and defeat, and to “explore the impact of different groups’ private and public memories of World War II on the different cultural and political ‘presents’ of the postwar period” (p. 11). It is indeed true that the consequences of total war and total defeat have not featured prominently in the historiography of the postwar period, and the integration of German wartime experience into the history of the postwar period constitutes an important historiographical task. I also share her general uneasiness regarding some manifestations of the politics of identity, which leads individual groups to claim exclusive authority over the past. Finally, I support Barnouw’s plea to integrate Allied warfare in World War II into “the larger context of ideological wars in the twentieth century” (p.63). This history should consider how civilians—including Germans—were increasingly subjected to the mechanisms of industrial warfare; this massive expansion of violence constitutes a central element of last century’s dark history that deserves comprehensive analysis.

The problem with this book, however, is that it is based on a distorted diagnosis of the postwar politics of memory, which itself results from a highly selective and often factually inaccurate reading of both the history and memory of World War II. Let me begin with the facts. Since the book focuses on German suffering, it is imperative to be precise about the extent of that suffering. Yet Barnouw’s numbers are consistently inaccurate or simply wrong. The figure of “more than 16 million Germans” (p. 53) who fled or were expelled from Eastern Europe and the alleged death tolls of 2.5 million (p. 143) are wildly exaggerated. Current estimates amount to 14 million refugees and expellees and death tolls of as low as 500,000.[1] Simply wrong is the statement: “Russia kept back about 2.5 million POWs ... of whom only about 5% survived” (p. 285, see also p. 38, p. 53). The correct numbers are about 3 million German POWs in Soviet captivity of whom about two-thirds, or 2 million, survived.[2] In light of her own inflation of the numbers, it is rather ironic that Barnouw charges—without any supporting evidence—that “the official German figures” for fatalities of the Allied air war “tend to be on the low side” (p. 125). It is difficult to understand how this book could go to press without a correction of these errors.

Besides such factual errors, the book’s argument is a

based on a series of omissions and flawed interpretations. Throughout her narrative, the author often puts forth broad claims about the attitudes of ordinary Germans during the Nazi period, who had “not voted for Hitler, had not welcomed the war, and demonstrably changed their attitude toward the Nazi regime as it changed for the worse” (p. 110-111). Yet she never engages the massive literature on the social history of the Third Reich, which, if anything, has brought into focus the Nazi regime’s considerable and increasing popularity among ordinary Germans, often up to the last minute. Along the same lines, it is highly debatable whether it is indeed a “historical fact” that “millions of [German] common soldiers had been victims of the most terrible war in Western history” (p. 65), as the author claims. The extensive literature on the Wehrmacht’s participation in genocidal warfare on the Eastern front certainly suggests a much more complicated picture. And finally, a consideration of the literature on the political generation of right-wing, academic youth in the interwar period could have done much to illuminate the case of Schneider/Schwerte and might also have led to different conclusions.[3] It is indeed true that the binary opposites of “victim” and “perpetrator” cannot capture the complex historical reality of ordinary Germans in World War II. Yet the author often reproduces precisely the mechanism she criticizes by uncritically replacing an allegedly exclusive emphasis on German perpetrators with an equally exclusive emphasis on German victimhood. The author’s argument clearly derives, at least in part, from her own family’s experience in World War II, which, like many other similar stories, deserves to be told and heard. Yet such memories also need to be placed in context by a critical historiography that incorporates yet also transcends individual experiences.

The same necessity for context also applies to the Allied air war. The genesis of strategic bombing culminating in Dresden, Tokyo and Hiroshima deserves critical analysis, yet this analysis remains insufficient without due attention to the previous German escalation of air warfare as experienced by civilians in Guernica, Warsaw, Rotterdam and Coventry. It is this kind of “historicization”—the integration of National Socialism in the longer continuities of the twentieth century—that Martin Broszat advocated, not an uncritical, one-sided emphasis on German suffering. The author also does not engage with the largely critical reception of Jörg Friedrich’s book in the H-German forum on the bombing war in November 2003.[4] She obscures important moral and political distinctions by asserting that Allied “mass destruction was similar to the scale and strategies of National Socialist persecution” (p. 139), thus echoing

Friedrich's similar deliberate usage of Holocaust terminology in describing German civilians' experience during Allied bombing raids. While the Holocaust indeed needs to be subjected to comparative analysis, such comparisons need to incorporate similarities *and* differences. Individual human suffering defies hierarchical categorization, and every individual death deserves to be mourned. But it is important to maintain that the National Socialist genocide of European Jews differed quantitatively and qualitatively—in intent, motivation, and ultimate aim—from both the Allied air war and from the “ethnic cleansing” of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe.

Equally flawed and unpersuasive as her rendition of the history of the Second World War is the author's interpretation of the postwar politics of memory. Throughout her study, she asserts that U.S. occupation authorities imposed the concept of “collective guilt” on postwar Germans. Except for references to her own previous publications, she again does not provide any evidence whatsoever for this thesis. It is highly debatable whether an assumption of “collective guilt” ever became part of official U.S. occupation policies, since those aimed precisely at detecting individual guilt and responsibility through denazification and war crime trials. Instead, as Norbert Frei has argued, the notion of “collective guilt” may well have been a German invention rather than an Allied construct.[5] Likewise, it is simply not true that, as the author asserts, “in the last half century, there have been very few accounts, whether documentary or fictional, of the war experience of common soldiers, of civilian experiences of air raids and deportations from the East, of large scale destruction and chaos” (p. 27). A now sizeable literature on postwar memory has persuasively demonstrated that concepts of German victimization were at the very center of postwar commemorative culture. As Robert Moeller's work in particular makes clear, the collective experience of German POWs and expellees was told in multi-volume publications sponsored by the West German government, and it was the subject of countless popular novels and movies in the postwar period.[6] The experience of the Allied war, it is true, has been less present (albeit never completely absent) in public memories—at least in the West, though not in East Germany.[7] Here, W.G. Sebald did indeed have a point. Yet the reasons for this relative silence are complex and cannot be reduced to an alleged Allied or German (self)-censorship of memory. The (mostly female) experience of being bombed was more difficult to incorporate into public memory because it did not lend itself to redemptive resolution as heroic survival, as was the case, for example, with the experience of (mostly male)

returning POWs.[8] Moreover, postwar Germans themselves often exhibited a deep reluctance to acknowledge their wartime losses, which may also have resulted from the fact that such acknowledgments would have raised all too uncomfortable questions about the causal chains leading up to these losses.

Postwar German memory was indeed “selective and exclusive” (p. 66), but in a very different sense than the author suggests. Stories of German victimization were central to postwar memory in the 1950s, and, given the numerous publications and TV broadcasts on German POWs, expellees and air raid victims in recent years—they seem to be gaining popularity, notwithstanding the alleged “censorship” of memory.[9] Some political activists in the 1960s, it is true, engaged in a collective condemnation of their parents as the “generation of Auschwitz” (the phrase is Gudrun Ensslin's).[10] Yet it does not help to replace this verdict with the author's equally problematic collective celebration of that “generation of women” as having “risked and sacrificed more for their children than any other generation in Western history” (p. 193). In contrast to German suffering, the recognition of Jewish victimhood emerged only gradually throughout the postwar period. The current centrality of the Holocaust in German and European memories of the Second World War does not remove it from history but rather testifies, as Tony Judt has recently argued, to a post-totalitarian commitment to basic human rights as the foundation of European civilization.[11] It is also, in my view, the moral and historiographical starting point for any discussion of German suffering in World War II.

Finally, the book includes some personal characterizations that warrant commentary. It is misleading to portray the historian Saul Friedländer as a proponent of the “ahistorical immediacy of Auschwitz” (p. 33), when his work has perhaps done more than any other to integrate the contrasting experiences of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans into a shared narrative of the Third Reich.[12] I am also puzzled by the labeling of the Berlin historian Wolfgang Benz as a proponent of an “authoritarian anti-anti-Semitism” (p. 85), of the Frankfurt pedagogy professor Micha Brumlik as a “Jewish historian” (p. 81) (rather than as Jewish-German, a label that the author explicitly rejects), or the British journalist Christopher Hitchens as “part of the culturally influential New York Jewish intellectual scene” (p. 131). Moreover, some of the author's analysis results in a rather awkward allocation of empathy. For example, she defends the former CDU parliamentary deputy Martin Hohmann (who was expelled from the party due to a speech that revived the old antisemitic stereotype of a close Jewish affinity to Bolshe-

vism) as merely “clumsy and awkward,” and as eventually falling victim to the “current minefield of German-Jewish sensitivities” (p.80).[13] Likewise, she sympathizes some with former FDP politician Jürgen Möllemann by portraying his deliberate use of antisemitism to increase the electoral fortunes of his party as a rather innocent attempt to “openly criticize Jews [in Germany and Israel] for their conduct” (p. 88). Contrary to the author’s insinuation, there was also nothing “mysterious” (ibid.) about Möllemann’s suicide, and it is not clear what purpose its obfuscation is supposed to serve in this context. Conversely, the author advocates a more circumspect reading of the narratives of Holocaust survivors and criticizes the reception of Victor Klemperer’s diary as a “holy text in Germany” (p. 116). Along the same lines, the book is riddled with critical but unsupported references to Israel, which may reflect her own personal views but do not do justice to the complex situation in the Middle East. Interestingly, her critique of Israel is also based on a strict victim/perpetrator dichotomy, which the author so adamantly rejects when it comes to postwar Germans.

This book should be read as another provocative contribution to the memory debates in contemporary Germany. It forcefully argues for a new politics of memory that would give more room to German suffering and reduce the centrality of the Holocaust. Yet the book’s diagnosis of an allegedly deficient German memory is based on both factual errors as well as on a flawed reading of the history of postwar memory. As such, the book ultimately fails to offer a conceptual agenda for a more complex and comprehensive history of the Second World War and its aftermath. Finally, some of the author’s rhetorical transgressions also detract from the substance of her argument. Barnouw begins her book with the observation that “since the end of the Second World War, the politics of memory has been fraught with fears of being misunderstood” (p .ix). I have tried to avoid this danger of misunderstanding in this review and to do justice to the author’s argument. But I cannot help but feel that parts of this book may lend themselves to “misunderstandings” of a most pernicious kind, which, I suspect, the author neither intended nor wanted, but nevertheless could have done more to avoid.

Notes

[1]. Rüdiger Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), pp. 298-300; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Vierter Band: Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zu der Gründung beider deutscher Staaten*

(Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003). Wehler cites an older figure of 1.7 million deaths resulting from flight and expulsion.

[2]. Andreas Hilger, *Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der Sowjetunion Kriegsgefangenenpolitik, Lageralltag und Erinnerung* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2000); Overmans, pp. 288-289.

[3]. See, for example, Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903-1989* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1996).

[4]. See http://www.h-net.org/german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWII-bombingindex.htm#rev_iewes (last accessed 12 February 2006).

[5]. See Norbert Frei, “Von deutscher Erfindungskraft. Die Kollektivschuldthese in der Nachkriegszeit,” *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 17 (1997), pp. 621-634. Barnouw does acknowledge that the Allies tried to make distinctions “between political leaders and followers in terms of punishment,” yet still insists that the “question of German guilt was indeed imposed in general, comprehensive, collective terms” (p. 180).

[6]. Robert G. Moeller, “‘Germans as Victims?’ Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of the Second World War,” *History and Memory* 17 (2005), pp. 147-194; Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[7]. Gilad Margalit, “Der Luftangriff auf Dresden: Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen,” in *Narrative der Shoah: Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst und Politik*, ed. Susanne Düwell and Matthias Schmidt (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002), pp. 189-208; idem, “Dresden und die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR,” *historicum.net* (January 25, 2004), <http://www.bombenkrieg.historicum.net/themen/ddr.html> (last accessed on February 13, 2006).

[8]. On this argument, see my forthcoming book, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[9]. See especially the many publications by Guido Knopp regarding this issue, which are based on TV series that focus on the same issues.

[10]. On the politics of memory of the 1960s, see now especially Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism. Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[11]. On this argument, see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), pp. 803-831.

[12]. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Vol. 1, The Years of Persecution, 1933-39* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

[13]. For the text of the Hohmann speech, see <http://www.fpp.co.uk/online/03/11/Hohmann011103.html> (last accessed 12 February 2006).

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