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Jeffrey K. Olick. *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 380 S. $29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-62638-3.

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How to Handle a Toxic Past: Model Germany

Jeffrey Olick's impressive synthesis brings together an in-depth discussion of Anglo-American political and intellectual approaches to Nazi Germany (part 1: "The Victors") with an equally thorough (indeed much longer) study of German elite responses to Allied policies and charges of guilt (part 2: "The Vanquished"). His title indicates his main focus on the German side of things. What it was like to live in the house of the hangman: of what was it possible to speak, of what not? (p. 326). The image draws on a remark made by Theodor Adorno expressing his frustration with Germans who insisted on seeing themselves as victims after the end of the war and indignantly rejected discussions of guilt and responsibility: "But in the house of the hangman one should not mention the noose, one might be suspected of harboring resentment" (p. 325). Yet Olick's subtitle is misleading, especially in view of the recent scholarly and popular attention to "German suffering." The sociologist uses "agony" in the original Greek sense to mean "struggle" (p. 21). But putting the word "agonies" in the context of "German defeat" and keeping genocide–in other words the agony of Germany's victims, primarily the Jewish people–in the background, strangely imitates the German practice that Olick so vigorously exposes in his book.

The author explores the origins of a West German "politics of memory." For that purpose he casts his net wide and pursues the topic of German memory-formation by reading "across institutional fields and discursive contexts" (p. 327). This achievement is impressive in itself. Putting the American wartime deliberations and German postwar reflections on the meaning of National Socialism in one context and thus in dialogue with each other is probably the most significant contribution of Olick's study. What emerges most clearly from this dual perspective is the extent to which, in this foundational phase, German intellectuals and politicians responded less to the reality of the Third Reich and instead more energetically to what they perceived as Allied (especially American) indictments. Indeed, the author shows throughout his book that "collective guilt was rejected by Germans much more vigorously than it was ever posited by their occupiers" (p. 13). A direct confrontation with the legacy of German policies and actions–called for by some Germans–was thus eclipsed by defensive responses to Allied policies and émigré queries and judgments.

The early period Olick investigates is indeed a foundational one for Germans struggling less to master their past than to deal with the charges arising out of this past (pp. 7-10). Subsequently, the meaning of war and genocide was contested in a series of scholarly and public conflicts in the 1950s. Debates over German rearmament and the reinstatement of Nazis were followed by the Auschwitz trials and the "Fischer controversy" in the 1960s. The controversy deepened with the *Sonderweg* debate in the 1970s, the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s and the "Goldhagen éclat" or the conflict over the Wehrmacht exhibition of the 1990s. All of these and several other important debates have been thoroughly examined individually and diachronically in order to better understand German "mastering" of the Nazi past and the evolution of West German political culture. Olick refers to studies by Norbert Frei, Jan Werner Mueller, Jeffrey Herf, Edgar Wolfrum and Robert Moeller among many others, but (perhaps due to his different disciplinary orientation) there is little contextualization of his interpretations with the important work that historians have done in this field.

Olick begins his study with an analysis of the motives and intentions underlying the wartime planning for Allied occupation policy. Here, as in the case of the German discourse–which is limited to representative intellectuals and politicians–the scope is actually more focused on American and to a lesser extent British plans and discussions. For the evolution of these policies, Olick reviews the demand for unconditional surrender, the wartime de-

bates on German national character (including Lord Vansittart's remarks) and the controversy over the so-called Morgenthau Plan. For the postwar period, Olick continues his discussion with the Nuremberg trials and the denazification program. Olick makes an important contribution to the ongoing effort to set the record straight on Henry Morgenthau's plans to deal with defeated Nazi Germany (pp. 75-94).[1] The sociologist clarifies that the Treasury "proposals were not nearly as extreme and outside of the discourse as [Secretary of War Henry] Stimson and others painted them" (p. 33) and that they did not express sentiments of revenge or hatred, but rather a widely shared, urgently felt need to fundamentally reorient German society. In general, Olick explicates well the underlying motivation for specific policies (unconditional surrender, for example) and shows how even "'hard peace' advocates were usually motivated by a constructive urge" (p. 58).

Especially during the war, Americans agreed on the need for re-education, yet also recognized the inherent dilemma and challenges of such an enterprise. Olick illustrates repeatedly the clash between American and German objectives and sensitivities–for example, in his discussion of the "psycho-cultural" approach exemplified in the 1944 conference sponsored by the State Department on postwar Germany. The plan to transform an entire society by applying social scientific insights was precisely what "so many Germans found offensive insofar as they found this optimistic interventionism comprehensible at all" (p. 63). Olick's review of the American debate also serves as a reminder of how often experts on the German collective psyche correctly predicted German post-defeat responses of "shirking responsibility" and "blaming others for their own suffering" (p. 64), later confirmed in Hannah Arendt's "Report from Germany" (p. 101). But it is Eugen Kogon's analysis that reminds us that victorious occupation powers cannot force the responses they deem most adequate and useful: "The policy of 'shock' awakened not the powers of the German conscience, but the powers of resistance against the accusations of complete co-responsibility for the shameful misdeeds of the National Socialists" (p. 102). To insist on confronting the German population with evidence of mass murder and other crimes made political and moral sense, but was not always effective.

Olick's exploration of German "struggles" over the legacy and memory of the Third Reich is at first organized around the topics of exiles and emigrants versus those who stayed; the proper place of Nazism in German, and indeed, Western history; and the controversy of individual versus collective guilt, particularly German attitudes towards denazification. The author deepens his analysis of these themes by reviewing the positions of the Protestant (Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, Stuttgarter Declaration) and Catholic church as well as prominent political leaders (Kurt Schumacher, Konrad Adenauer, Theodor Heuss). He concludes the second part of his book by revisiting Karl Jaspers's famous contribution to the "guilt question," reading it against fervent repudiations of the "guilt discourse" which, even though emanating from the sidelines, articulated by such figures as Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, were central to the indigenous German postwar identity.

As Olick notes, "German public identity in this period was in many ways profoundly up for grabs" (p. 140). The author shows how German postwar national discourse "remained committed to a sense of Germany's special path" as a cultural nation (p. 165). On the one hand, this conceptualization allowed for a "proud rather than a repentant German identity" (p. 19). On the other hand, because even in those versions where the special path had led directly to the Third Reich, some German intellectuals (including Jaspers) argued that "as a result of its unique experiences, Germany might eventually once again even assume a position of moral leadership" (p. 172). A closer analysis of the relationship between the "proud" version of a special path and the inverted Anglo-American argument of a century-old particularly German deviation culminating in Hitler would have been interesting, but is not of great importance to Olick's argument. Similarly, there are other parallels between German self-perceptions and American views of Nazi Germany not further pursued in this study. These points of comparison include the German idea "that National Socialism was something that happened *to* the German people, who were its first victims" (p. 163). Wartime public opinion polls–to FDR's chagrin–show that a majority of Americans shared this interpretation. As an alternative defense strategy arguing against Anglo-American conceptualizations of Nazism that centered on German history and culture, "many German intellectuals and politicians located the causes of National Socialism in generalized forces of Western history at large–including nihilism, secularization, and 'massification"' (p. 96). This position was possibly the strongest argument against the *Sonderweg* thesis: not only were Nazi crimes deeply embedded in Western civilization, they were not even genuinely German crimes because the Third Reich really had been, as in Friedrich Meinecke's words, for example, "'a period of inner foreign rule' that preceded 'the postwar period of external foreign rule"' (p. 162).

Throughout the second part of his book, Olick fol-

lows a theme of great and disturbing significance, that of equating Germans with Jews in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. This "remarkable effort to understand Germans as the new Jews, a pariah people serving as the scapegoats for the sins of civilization" culminates in Jaspers's lectures on the "guilt question" but is not limited to him (pp. 175). While Olick is indebted for the point about Jaspers's text to Anson Rabinbach's *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, he finds evidence in many other contexts of this striking analogy. And he offers several compelling and mutually supportive explanations. The equation is possible only in a context in which the origin, nature and scope of the murder of the Jews is either not understood, or ignored or denied. The "Germans-are-like-Jews" analogy was occasionally supported by another widespread comparison, namely that of equating Allied crimes with Nazi crimes (p. 178). This trend becomes most disturbing in Carl Schmitt's formulations, whereby the roles of Jews and Germans are reversed (p. 309). What underlay such rhetorical strategies was the impulse to unburden, exculpate and "normalize" the German nation. The unexpected linkage between Jews and Germans preceded the German postwar discourse Olick considers and can be found in the Anglo-American wartime debate, where it carried a different meaning. Both Stimson in his offensive and unjustified charges against Morgenthau's motives as well as English and American critics of the "Vansittartist" position compared any alleged, wholesale indictment of the German people to murderous Nazi antisemitism.

In his last two chapters, Olick offers a penetrating analysis of the opposing positions on German guilt by Jaspers, on the one hand, and Heidegger, Schmitt and Ernst Jünger, on the other. He frames his interpretation through Ruth Benedict's distinction between "shame" and "guilt"-cultures, originally developed for the context of postwar Japan. After reviewing later critiques of Benedict's argument, Olick reviews the range of German postwar narratives in a manner that confirms Benedict's "implication that guilt is more advanced–and morally superior to–shame" (p. 319). Guilt requires admission, recognition of a reality and then change. Some Germans experienced such transformation as destructive of personal as well as national identity. There is much evidence in the postwar formulations of the generation born before 1900 for the prevalence of a "shame culture" that "interprets all acknowledgment and confession as a betrayal of self" (p. 299) and, conversely, systematically rejects the validity of any "outside" judgment, be it that of a German emigrant, Jewish refugee or Allied victor. In Olick's interpretation, even Jaspers does not escape some criticism for an un-political national self-absorption. Heinrich Blücher wrote about his wife's former professor and friend: "Jaspers' whole ethical purification babble" in the end served "for the vanquished as a way to continue occupying themselves exclusively with themselves" (p. 319). Finally, Olick draws on Dirk van Laak's argument that Carl Schmitt's fundamental critique of important tenets in West Germany's new political culture took place "in der Sicherheit des Schweigens" (pp. 306). One would have to add that this evasion was true not only or Schmitt, but for several of the post-45 "intellectual resisters"–Heidegger, Jünger and Margret Boveri, among others–who had happily cooperated with the Nazi regime, but found collaboration with the new American and then West German authorities too distasteful. Their self-styled heroism and martyrdom took place in the "safety of non-persecution," which the previous regime had not afforded to any of its critics.

My only critical comments arise from a view across disciplines. Olick makes some claims that a historian would have to demonstrate with supporting evidence: for example, that Heidegger's response is representative of a more widespread rejection of the "guilt" discourse (p. 295, 301). Olick's focus on "intellectuals, politicians and other leaders" (p. 16f)–all of them representatives of the West German debate–leaves the study in the somewhat rarified realm of elite members addressing each other. There is little contextualization with actual political or cultural developments of the time or with other sources (such as Saul K. Padover's interviews) that would have yielded insights into the attitudes of broader segments of German society. A reference to the 1950 study by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research showing a significant degree of "nazification" of German society (confirmed by recent historical scholarship) is not sufficient to demonstrate the "relation between elite and popular culture" as "an empirical rather than presuppositional issue" (p. 323).

The language of the introduction laying out the methodological assumptions (p. 19ff) proved a bit of a challenge for me. Once focused on the actual subject matter, Olick's prose is engaging and highly readable. His critique of the "sterile opposition between episodic and emergentist accounts" (p. 9) of German public memory formation has been surpassed by current scholarship. This is noteworthy because of Olick's achievement in overcoming another "sterile dichotomy" prevalent in his own discipline, the "traditionalist/essentialist" versus "presentist approach" to memory and its impact on national identity and politics in favor of a more dynamic or "dialogical" perspective has also been paralleled by a

younger generation of historians (p. 333). There are, finally, some minor historical inaccuracies such "Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee" (p. 30); the "junior senator from Wisconsin" would not have headed a House committee.

As is often the case with insightful studies, Olick's book gives rise to further questions. An interesting topic that he raises in the beginning turns out not to be his central concern: the significance of dealing with the legacies of Nazism for Germany's transition to democracy (p. xii). Among a host of studies that tackle this question more directly, two should be mentioned for their different approaches and significant insights. The political scientist Gesine Schwan, whom Olick briefly cites (*Politik und Schuld: Die zerstörerische Macht des Schweigens*) offered a normative argument in favor of confronting difficult, even destructive pasts as a prerequisite for establishing a democratic political culture. The historian Konrad Jarausch (*Die Umkehr: Deutsche Wandlungen, 1945-95*) recently described and evaluated the multifaceted transformation of a society implicated in "a break with civilization" to a successful and stable Western-style democracy. Jarausch paints a picture of a complex process that indeed required outside intervention and impositions, but which was grounded more importantly in individual and collective "learning processes" taking place throughout German society and across several generations, in the context of the Cold War and a divided country. In Jarausch's account this transformation involved (in addition to the different conceptualizations and rejections of Nazi legacies that lie at the heart of Olick's interpretation) economic, social and cultural reorientations and reaffirmations of Western, liberal and free market ideas and practices.

Olick shows how Allied (US) policies provided an important framework for German responses. More importantly, he demonstrates that the authors of these early German positions on the meaning of Nazism sought on the one hand to stave off the victors' accusations, but also on the other to forge new narratives that would allow for a continued and meaningful national existence. Early formulations of West German official memory thus were dialogical in the sense that they responded to Allied policies, to each other and to older German traditions of nationhood (pp. 18, 21, 322). This three-dimensional "dialogical" enterprise, which Olick superbly analyzes, reveals at the same time the missing fourth dimension: the *reality* of the Third Reich–which is so noticeably absent from German reflections and hence from the author's study. The sociologist is mainly concerned with "the memory of memory"–a formulation meant to "capture the on-going and reflexive qualities of the discourse" (p. 322). He only ventures as far as finding it "conceivable that many merely used the problems of Allied policy as an opportunity for avoiding such self-inquiry" (p. 335). That is undoubtedly true.

But this judgment leaves two important aspects of German postwar reality underexposed. Given Olick's detailed study of German discursive strategies aimed at avoiding and falsifying reality and redirecting the gaze from the actual Third Reich to some other object (Allied war crimes, an honorable German past) one would have hoped for a more succinct conclusion as to why this obfuscation happened. Olick finds that a consistent "goal ... was to contain the toxic portion of German history so that it could be more easily disposed or handled without contaminating the healthy main body of German identity" (p. 328). We should probe further here. Why did some Germans not only find it possible, but insisted on it being necessary to keep the gaze focused on the inequities of Allied policies rather than looking at the devastation and crimes that their own nation had wrought? Why was the immediate reality so eclipsed? Such questions involve a foray into the field of psychology, which historians, too (studiously and for good reasons) avoid. But the question is too important to remain unexplored, especially since there were important exceptions to this rule of evasion and substitution. As Olick's book suggests, we can hardly study this transition from dictatorship, war and mass murder to the habit of peaceful democracy without applying–at least at some critical junctures–a normative perspective. From a moral point of view, the German discourse in the first postwar years is often muddled, repressive, defensive and occasionally dishonest. Yet it is at the same time highly instructive.

The second undeveloped line of inquiry pertains to the exact relationship between the external (foreign) framework of Allied policy and national German responses and initiatives. Further investigation into this topic should pay close attention to differences along generational lines which play no role in this sociological study. In addition to the strategies of those German intellectuals who rejected, resisted and defied American/Allied policies, we can discern at least two further types of German reactions. Among those who not only recognized, but insisted on the need for critical self-inquiry and purification, some joined the patriotic front of denying any meaningful "foreign" role in this enterprise (Eugen Kogon, according to Olick). Others, however, accepted that "liberation" would take the form of national defeat; they welcomed it and were ready to make use of Allied guidelines and support in order to

implement a homegrown, genuinely German program of fundamental societal transformation (for example, Dolf Sternberger, earlier Helmuth von Moltke). A third alternative was opportunistic "conversion" and outward adaptation. This type of widespread transitioning from dictatorship to Allied-supported democracy raises the question of authenticity. But as Norbert Frei formulated in response to Kogon's complaint about the West German functionaries of the 1950s (that they were rationally conforming, but emotionally still Nazis), perhaps a conforming brain would over time begin to conquer the old, defiant feelings. Perhaps there is in these specific circumstances a truly positive effect in "opportunism"–an act of external adaptation that might lead to internal reformation.[2]

It is a tribute to the important accomplishments of this fine study that it raises questions that lead beyond its boundaries.

Notes

[1]. Michaela Hönicke, "'Prevent World War III': An Historiographical Appraisal of Morgenthau's Programme for Germany," in *The Roosevelt Years. New Perspectives on American History, 1933-1945*, ed. Robert A. Garson and Stuart S. Kidd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 155-172.

[2]. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1996), p. 99.

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