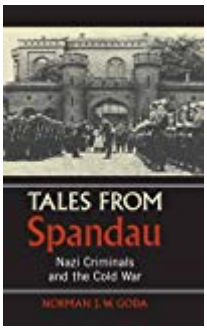
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Norman J.W. Goda. *Tales from Spandau: Nazi Criminals and the Cold War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. XIII + 390 S. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-86720-7.



Reviewed by David Yelton

Published on H-War (April, 2008)

Norman Goda, professor of history at Ohio University, weaves *Tales from Spandau* around the central touchstone of Spandau Prison, but this book is much more than simply a narrative of Berlin's most infamous lockup. The monograph provides an excellent study of the intersection of Nazi war crimes and the Nuremberg Trials with Cold War politics and the role of differing postwar memories regarding the misdeeds of the Third Reich and its leadership. Indeed, Goda's thesis is that the fates of seven major Nazi war criminals (Konstantin von Neurath, Erich Raeder, Karl Doenitz, Baldur von Schirach, Walter Funk, Albert Speer, and Rudolf Hess) imprisoned at Spandau were largely shaped by Cold War politics and the varied symbolic meaning attached to the prison and its inmates by the Soviets, Americans, British, French, and Germans (on both sides of the "Iron Curtain," although the Federal Republic gets the lion's share of attention).

Goda's work begins with a cogent discussion of the International Military Tribunal's trial of the major Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. The cultural clashes that characterized the entire Spandau experience started here as the Soviets viewed the trial as public exposure of the guilt of the defendants--and preface to their execution--while the Western powers viewed the tribunal as more a process to establish guilt before determining suitable punishment. Moreover, Goda points out the startling fact that there never was any real planning for how to manage the aftermath of the trials, specifically concerning the long incarceration of seven of the war criminals. Selection of Spandau resulted from the unanimous desire for the convicted and imprisoned war criminals to be under Four Power control. This necessitated putting them in Berlin--the only area geographically truly under joint occupation--and Spandau prison was the best available option at the time. This initial "temporary" arrangement became more and more permanent over time as varying interpretations and significance of the war criminals played themselves out over the years in interminable debates over everything from prison food to the possibility of commuting sentences.

The impasses amongst the former Allies centered upon the Western Allied belief that Span-

dau, as one of the two surviving Four Power institutions after the 1948 Berlin Blockade crisis, had to remain intact to preserve the Allied presence in Berlin. Otherwise, abrogation of this agreement might give the Soviets the notion that they could opt out of other, more important, agreements or even gain leverage to try to pry the Western Allies from Berlin. For the Soviets, Spandau provided moral high ground. The Soviets took a hard line on issues involving the war criminals, as the seven became tangible symbols of the horrors committed by the Nazi regime. Their rigid stance enabled the Soviets to present themselves as the protectors of the memory of the millions of victims of Nazi crimes while simultaneously tarring the Allies with the brush of revisionism or even rehabilitation.

The Soviet view was often reinforced by the efforts of Germans, particularly in the Federal Republic, to have the Spandau prisoners released early. Goda is pretty harsh on these Germans, but not overly so. Clearly many West Germans would have preferred simply to forget the Nazi past. Yet, Goda does not fall victim to the idea of collective guilt, and shows that the push to undo the Nuremberg verdicts was the result of individuals--even some in important positions such as Bishop Theophil Wurm (who advocated for Neurath's release) and chief of the Federal Republic's Ministry of Defense's Naval Division Karl-Adolf Zenker (who made a very public speech arguing Raeder's and Doenitz's innocence in 1956)--and not of the nation as a whole.

Goda's approach is to recount each individual war criminal's incarceration separately, and although this could have become repetitious, the author adroitly avoids that by using each individual (with the exception of Baldur von Schirach or Walter Funk whose cases lacked postwar significance) to illustrate a case in point about the broader context of the Spandau situation. Goda does an excellent job of presenting the myth of the honorable Wehrmacht through admirals Erich Raeder and Karl Doenitz, although the excellent work on the myth by Wolfram Wette, ***Die Wehrmacht--Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden*** (2002) does not appear in the bibliography. Konstantin von Neurath's situation highlights the efforts of Germany's traditional conservative elite to exercise their former special privileges in order to have one of their own exculpated, and thereby distance themselves from the Nazi regime. Albert Speer is shown as a hypocritical conniver, presenting a public case of feigned contrition all the while repenting nothing in private, trying to distance himself from his fellow inmates when convenient, hoping to influence public and historical opinion with his writings, and seeking to find fortune from his experiences upon release. Speer's story--while little here is entirely new or surprising--succinctly shows that he represents the amoral opportunist wing of the Nazi Party. Lastly, there is the strange case of Rudolf Hess, who often feigned mental illness (though he certainly did not feign eccentricity). Hess comes off as the true believer who remained convinced of the righteousness of the Nazi cause and actions. Indeed, here Goda makes a new documentary revelation by comparing Hess's typewritten Nuremberg closing argument (never fully delivered) and Hess's seventeen -page last testament, written in the 1980s at Spandau, which conclusively proves that Hess's sentiments remained thoroughly unchanged.

As suggested by uncovering Hess's final testament, Goda's work is based on an impressive amount of primary research. He has consulted archival holdings in Britain, France, the United States, and multiple German archives; there is also a substantial array of contemporary newspapers and magazines from each of those nations, as well as Russia. It should be noted that former Soviet sources do not appear extensively, although former East German sources were utilized. Overall, however, the research base is extremely solid and thorough.

The monograph, in spite of its basic strengths and impressiveness, contains some minor flaws. Goda occasionally indulges in stylistic hyperbole. For example, he refers to Basil Liddell Hart's book ***The Other Side of the Hill*** as "an unusually stupid book sanitizing the German side of the war (p. 102)." While perhaps guilty of the latter, the "unusually stupid" label seems a bit harsh. Other small mistakes include the contradictory statement, "French high commissioner Andre Francois-Poncet (1944 [sic]-1955) ... was interned by the Germans for the last two years of the war" (p. 100). A more significant factual error occurs when Goda states that "petitions for Hess's freedom were also assembled in 1970 and 1971 in such dubious places as Juan Peron's Argentina and Francisco Franco's Spain, both of which had been allied to Nazi Germany" (p. 248). Neither country had an alliance with Nazi Germany, even if both leaders and nations showed a high degree of sympathy and support for Hitler's regime. Indeed Peron was not head of state until 1946, and Argentina declared war on Nazi Germany, even if it waited to do so until March 27, 1945. Finally, Peron was in exile from Argentina until 1973.

These errors notwithstanding, ***Tales from Spandau*** is an excellent book that delivers what it promises--an understanding of the world's effort to punish the highest-ranking Nazi war criminals. Moreover, Goda shows us that the noble effort to bring war criminals to justice was fraught with complexity and unforeseen consequences, not the least of which is that punishing war criminals is an inherently political process that can be manipulated by the defendant (or the convicted), particularly as time passes, memories fade, and issues assume new symbolic meaning. In untangling this historical issue, Goda provides us with a cautionary tale as he concludes with a caveat on war crimes and crimes against humanity. While heinous deeds demand justice, the trial and punishment of the perpetrators (given their political status) runs the risk of creating sympathy or even martyr status for the criminal at the hands of an apparently vindictive and politically motivated victor. Thus, by implication, Goda suggests that unless both trial and punishment are planned and conducted with the utmost care, trying individuals for crimes against humanity can be counterproductive in that the criminal's reputation may end up refurbished (at least in the eyes of some) while the magnitude and horror of the crime is proportionately diminished. ***Tales from Spandau*** is therefore not only an important contribution to our understanding of the Nazis convicted of war crimes and how the world has viewed those crimes in the light of changing contexts in the postwar era, but also a prescient warning for the future. By examining a specific episode with an eye toward discerning a broader truth, Goda has fulfilled about all that one could expect of a historian in a single monograph.

Citation: David Yelton. Review of Goda, Norman J.W. *Tales from Spandau: Nazi Criminals and the Cold War.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14396