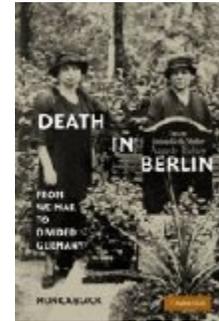


Monica Black. *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 324 S. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-11851-4.

Reviewed by Annika Frieberg (Colorado State University)

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## Mourning and Loss in Twentieth-Century Berlin

This is a book written from a unique perspective, which nevertheless manages to yield a wealth of information about not only Berlin but also German culture. In barely three hundred pages, Monica Black's *Death in Berlin* is able to give an in-depth analysis of Berlin, Germany, and the Germans spanning the fields of war memory, popular culture, sociocultural history, psychology, and political history. The central focus of the book is memory, mourning, and loss in war as well as peace time within the city of Berlin. While earlier work, such as Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural Memory* (1998) focused on exceptional memories of death in modern wars, Black's narrative embeds those memories in a larger cultural framework of attitudes toward death. The continuity between war and peace, despite multiple state upheavals, is what sets her work apart. Black's focus is "to tell an alternative history of the great metropolis Berlin" (p. 4), but her insights go beyond the German capital's limits to include life under four German twentieth-century states: The Weimar Republic, The Third Reich, the German Democratic Republic, and the Federal Republic of Germany. Having done research in state, local, city, and church archives, she painstakingly creates a mosaic of the continuities and discontinuities in the culture before and after the two wars in the twentieth century. At times, *Death in Berlin* is so rich in detail that it resembles an old-fashioned curiosity cabinet.

Black argues that the consequence of the massive and unprecedented losses during WWI and WWII was a cult

of the dead and an intense concern with the treatment of their remains. *Death in Berlin* consists of six chapters. The first chapter treats attitudes toward death and dying in Berlin during the Weimar era. In the Weimar era, a mythology of a return of the war victims proliferated as a psychological response to the premature loss of beloved family members, and to the harsh reality of thousands of missing bodies on the eastern and western fronts. This cult of the dead also became politically useful and central to the Nazi ideology, covered by chapters 2, 3, and 4. While chapter 2 discusses how the Nazi ideology used the memory of the soldiers' death during WWI for political purposes, chapters 3 and 4 describe the Berlin population's experience of WWII losses, and particularly of the civilian deaths in air raids toward the end of the war. As a result of the loss of family members in fires and disappearance of bodies in the rubble, survivors in Berlin became intensely preoccupied with the importance of recovering the bodies of their dead.

Black also suggests that the Berliners channeled emerging knowledge about the Holocaust, its gas chambers, and mass graves into the wish to recover bodies and grant their family members a personal and dignified funeral. These concerns are part of the two final chapters, 5 and 6, discussing the immediate postwar era in East and West Berlin. During this time, the myth circulated of thousands of Berliners dying in a great flood in the S-bahn system during the final battle. (In reality, only forty-three bodies were recovered [p. 53].) The legacy of WWII also created controversies over the treatment and

particularly the removal of cemeteries from Berlin's inner city during the postwar era. Finally, it was reflected in the division of the city in 1961. The wall separated not only living families but also the Berliners from their families' graves.

The continuities and discontinuities in funeral rites and caring for the dead are important culturally and politically to the postwar era, as they tap into the question of the division of Germany after 1945. The rites connected to funerals were long left surprisingly intact by war and political change throughout the 1950s. *Death in Berlin* emphasizes that Berliners resisted the efforts of the Nazis and East German city authorities to dissociate funerals and the passing of family members from religious tradition or to impose an ideological framework onto them. They also resisted West German efforts to remove some of the traces of war and destruction from the city landscape, particularly by moving the centrally located cemetery in Eichkamp to the margins of the city. Ultimately, the generational shift and the increasing distance to the war experiences' transformed the Berliners perspectives on death, and created distinct East and West German cultures .

In dealing with the cultural notions of death and dying, Black simultaneously challenges and expands on Philippe Ariés's work in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981). She bridges the earlier anthropological studies of European attitudes toward death with the scholarship on unprecedented mass death of the First and Second World Wars. In addition, her research on Berlin challenges Ariés's thesis that modernity—"secularization and medicalization" (p. 6)—alienated the Europeans from their dead. By contrast, Berliners became increasingly concerned with their dead. Black states, about the 1950s, that

"West Berliners maintained an at times arduous connection to their dead, perhaps especially to the war dead" (p. 230).

*Death in Berlin* is not directly concerned with the urban landscape. However, the concern with appropriate burial grounds left traces on, and was interwoven with debates over, the cityscape in both the East and the West of the city. The construction and design of cemeteries also became an important question in the Nazi state, which favored uniform minimalistic burial places reflecting the nature of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Since the postwar era, a particularly sensitive question to the Germans was the placement and the relocation of cemeteries in and outside of the city. After 1945, both East and West Berlin authorities also worked, sometimes controversially and frequently successfully, to remove cemeteries, and thus overt war memories, from the inner city. In this sense, social and progressive reform was also similar in East and West Berlin during the time period of this inquiry.

While wide reaching, Black's project inspires further research into the private experiences of war and state upheavals. As Black remarks in the introduction: "There were things I learned from conversations with Berliners ... that I would never have learned sitting in the archives" (p. 13). To draw a parallel to another fascinating project, Catherine Merridale's *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (2001), a work that included extensive oral history, there is surely space for further oral history on this subject, and for parallel studies on other German communities, rural as well as urban. Overall, Black's *Death in Berlin* makes a fascinating and important contribution to twentieth-century German cultural history.

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