



Jennifer M. Kapczynski. *The German Patient: Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. viii + 261 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-07052-7; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-05052-9.

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## Pathologizing Nations: How Germany Became Ill after World War II

How did post-World War II German intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers deal with a nation ravaged by war? How did they explain how Germany had turned into a moral pariah after its rapid descent into the pits of humanity? Jennifer M. Kapczynski traces the history of the many literary and artistic figures who contributed to the postwar debate about the state of the German nation. She provides an extensive description of literary and artistic productions that all speak to the theme of Germans as patients, Germany as ill, and Nazism as a disease.

Two conceptual paradigms addressed Germany's fall from grace after World War II: the discourse of guilt and the discourse of disease. Accordingly, Germans not only had to come to terms with their guilt and their past atrocities, but it was also their diseased state of mind, predisposing them to the Nazi ideology, that had to be healed. Kapczynski examines a multitude of authors who used metaphors of health and disease to discuss German society. For instance, Karl Jaspers viewed National Socialism as a bacteria, and fascism as a miasma—a deadly cloud that infiltrates the body and the mind. Wilhelm Hoffman blamed the unhealthy environment of German cities as providing fertile ground for the growth of the “germ” of fascism. Wolfgang Staudte, in his 1946 screenplay *The Murderers are Among Us*, portrayed fascism as a plague.

The post-1945 “turn” to disease and illness as a means of reflecting on National Socialism then gave way to a focus on German recovery and health during the political reconstruction of East and West Germany in the 1950s. At that time, both states' aim was to reconfigure Germans as healthy citizens, thereby turning them either into productive socialist East Germans or democratic and politically engaged West Germans.[1] Although biopolitical notions of the diseased German nation faded from dominant public discourses, they have continued to resurface in literary and cinematic treatments of the (previously

taboo) subject of the suffering of German citizens during World War II.

Kapczynski points out that ruminations about the postwar health of the German nation is not unique in the history of thought. Rather, such reflections are part of a Western tradition that has long linked deleterious health effects to societal processes, including treatises on the negative health impact of modernization, industrialization, and the two world wars. Notions of a healthy biopolitics were also part of German political thought during the Weimar Republic and National Socialism. By showing the continuity of discourses about healthy body politics, Kapczynski contributes to a strand of literature that speaks to the social, cultural, and political linkages—rather than ruptures—between the Weimar, Nazi, and postwar eras. While she does point to a long history of the use of biopolitical health metaphors to reflect on society, she does not historically situate and explain why psychological discourses and corporal metaphors turned into such dominant explanatory tools in the postwar era. Although numerous historical treatises by Ellen Herman, Carl Degler, and others have traced the post-1945 ascent of the “psy” sciences, a detailed account of the popularity of psychological accounting practices and corporal metaphors in postwar Germany still remains to be done.[2]

The book's introduction sets out a range of excellent analytical points, such as the link between politics and dominant discourses about health and disease. Kapczynski points out that both progressives and conservatives have, at different times, adopted the language of disease to reflect on societal processes. However, the causes that critics singled out as responsible for Germany's perceived malaise, whether Weimar modernism, National Socialism or the Allied occupation, revealed their politics and social location. Indeed, a German exile, such as Thomas Mann, was more likely to perceive Nazism as a

“native” German disease than those German critics who instead blamed modernity as the breeding ground for Nazi ideology. Power politics and critics’ social “situatedness” thus always co-constructed their cultural gaze and criticism.[3] Moreover, the discourse on Germany’s various ills also served to cloud the concrete social and political circumstances that enabled the murderous policies of the Nazi regime. Unfortunately, Kapczynski’s conceptual framework as laid out in the introductory chapter gets increasingly lost in the subsequent exhaustive descriptions of story lines of films and books. A tighter organizational structure of the individual chapters and the book as a whole would have helped crystallize her arguments.

Historians and social scientists may also at times wonder about Kapczynski’s reliance on primarily published sources such as books, newspaper articles, and films. How can such “official” sources provide insight into what the author writes about, the intellectual aims and intentions of intellectuals? Historians have long pointed to vast discrepancies between official and unofficial versions of history that can only be gleaned from various published, archival, and oral history sources. There are also various historically intriguing details that are only mentioned in passing that will nevertheless prick any historian’s curiosity. For instance, Kapczynski men-

tions that the Allied occupation forces were interested in using films in an attempt to cure the diseased German mind, but how, why, and to what effect the Allies implemented certain cultural policies remains unclear. Nonetheless, for readers interested in a comprehensive review of how German literature and film after World War II spoke to the ills of German society, this book will provide an invaluable resource.

#### Notes

[1]. Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger, eds., *The Self as Project: Politics and the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[2]. Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[3]. Christine Leuenberger, “From the Berlin Wall to the West Bank Barrier: How Material Objects and Psychological Theories Can Be Used to Construct Individual and Cultural Traits,” in *Tracing Cultural Divides, Specters of the Berlin Wall*, ed. Katharina Gerstenberger and Jana Braziel (Palgrave: Macmillan, forthcoming 2011).

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