

David F. Crew. *Bodies and Ruins: Imagining the Bombing of Germany, 1945 to the Present.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. XIV, 274 S., 45 SW-Abb. ISBN 978-0-472-12238-7.

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D. Crew: Bodies and Ruins

David F. Crew's new and insightful book on German memories of the allied bombing of German cities consists of two books in one. On the one hand, his book describes in meticulous detail the various narratives Germans told about the bombing of their cities from the late 1940s to the present by analyzing various different vectors of memory but above all the texts and images of published accounts. On the other hand, Crew's study addresses the complex issue of how best to remember the massive suffering and violence engendered either directly by Hitler's genocidal policies or as a consequence of the war he started, including, among others, the mass murder of European Jews, the starvation of Soviet POWs, the massive destruction of East European cities by the Germans, and the bombing of German cities by the allies.

The book's originality centers on providing a thick description of narratives about the bombings published in the Federal Republic of Germany in the form of both books as well as photographic evidence of the bombings and the individual bodies of those who perished. In paying close attention to images as well, Crew builds on the work of others such as Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Gazing at Ruins: German Defeat as Visual Experience*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 9 (2011), pp. 328–350. While the book includes a chapter on the German Democratic Republic (on the case of

Dresden, specifically), its central contribution to the field of modern German history lies in the five chapters on the Federal Republic. In these chapters, Crew skillfully refutes the claim made in the 1990s that Germans could not openly discuss the bombings in the public sphere until after reunification. On the contrary, Germans on the local level discussed the bombings already in the late 1940s.

In one of his book's most compelling contributions, Crew documents the establishment by the early 1950s of a local master narrative about the bombings that was advanced by the stories told about German suffering in both words and images. This master narrative included three elements, among others. First, it paid scant attention to the Nazi persecution of the Jews in general and to the participation of the local population in their persecution in particular. The local master narrative also said little about non-Germans, such as POWs and forced foreign laborers, who were living in German cities when they were bombed. In short, publications on the bombings discussed the suffering and loss caused by the war as experienced "almost exclusively by Germans who were depicted as innocent victims, who bore no obvious responsibility for the war or for the crimes of the Nazis" (p. 21).

Second, the local master narrative presented Germans as not only victims of the war but as “determined, courageous survivors” who embraced with fortitude the task of clearing the rubble and rebuilding their cities once the war had ended (p. 17). This story of German strength in the face of adversity established a “foundation myth” for the Federal Republic, since it portrayed Germans as enthusiastic supporters of the new democratic order.

And finally third, the local master narrative both reprised and evaded elements of the Nazi narrative about the bombings. While postwar narratives about the bombings did not overtly direct anger against the allies as the Nazis did, their focus on the loss and suffering caused by allied bombs bore at least an implicit affinity with the Nazi claim that the allies had “transgressed the laws of war” by not only killing tens of thousands of civilians but also by having wantonly destroyed some of Germany’s most cherished cultural and architectural monuments (pp. 36, 92). At the same time, though, postwar narratives carefully avoided confronting the antisemitic claim peddled during the war that the Jews had initiated the bombings to avenge their persecution by the Nazis. “What the authors of local narratives did not want to do,” Crew writes, “was to remind their readers that during the war many of them had believed either that the bombing was Jewish retribution for German crimes against Jews or that the ‘Jewish air terror’ justified murderous German retaliation against the Jews of occupied Europe” (p. 37).

These three basic elements of the local master narrative proved to be remarkably durable across the postwar decades in part because they were affirmed by other media such as photos of bombed cities and of individual bodies, despite the many and well-known debates about the Holocaust that began to unfold at the national level since the 1960s. As Crew notes, some local authors even presently narrate the bombing of German cities in a manner not wholly different from books pub-

lished in the early postwar decades (p. 56). Nevertheless, local narratives must now compete with many other narratives about the bombings that exist in contemporary Germany. If local publications were for decades the main vector of German memories about the bombings, their dominance came to an end in the 1990s amid the proliferation of narratives and images about the bombings in the national media of film, television, and the Internet. Moreover, the increased circulation of narratives about other aspects of the Nazi period – not least of all the Holocaust – has challenged the hegemony and authority of local narratives about German suffering and loss.

This latter point regarding the proliferation of narratives about the Nazi period more broadly raises the overarching question as to how German memories about the past interact with each other. Conventionally, scholars have tended to view narratives about German suffering and victimization as colliding with efforts to reflect critically on the crimes of the Nazi past. While Crew makes this argument occasionally in his book (pp. 13–17), he also suggests a more complex view by making, specifically, two claims. First, he argues that the plurality of narratives about suffering do not in and of themselves exclude identification with the suffering of others. As he puts it: “although [...] self-referential forms of public memory may hinder emotional identification with the suffering of others, they certainly do not ignore or deny that suffering” (p. 217). Second, he views the proliferation of debates about the past as itself salutary insofar as disagreement makes it unlikely for one single narrative to emerge as hegemonic. The intense discussion about the past that has animated German public life over the past decades has led to a kind of democratization of remembrance – a democratization through pluralization that precludes one narrative from becoming dominant over others. While it is certainly possible that some narratives might gain dominance over others, the underlying assumption to this argument is that the increased democratization of memory in the con-

temporary era makes it more difficult, at the present moment at least, for one narrative to become hegemonic or authoritative. The discursive competition over the past in the public sphere allows, in principle, other voices to be heard and this pluralization in and of itself potentially hinders one voice from dominating the conversation.

These two suggestive claims, along with the rich archival material of photos and published sources Crew presents in his book, will be of significant interest to scholars in the fields of memory studies, postwar German history, and Holocaust studies. More broadly, Crew's focus on the narratives Germans tell about their suffering affirms the central role narration has played in European culture as a reaction to the particularity of suffering and death, whether that particularity be expressed in individual or collective terms (i.e. whether a narrative refers to the suffering of an individual person or to the suffering of a particular group of people). As Paul Ricœur writes: "The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative." Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago 1990, p. 75. Narratives are therefore particular expressions of lament. Crew confirms this point, while also raising the issue of how such expressions of lament might possibly relate to each other in a manner that avoids generating competition and conflict among different groups of people. Though he does not develop this point in great detail, Crew seems interested in thinking about the ways in which conflicting memories of the past might be productively related to each other so as to mitigate the competitive dynamics that have often animated the narration and remembrance of suffering and violence in the German context. Crew limits himself to the German context. But the point of course pertains to the broader issue of thinking about the possibility of a "cosmopolitan" memory that transcends the particularism of ethno-culturally oriented narratives about the past. See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the*

Age of Decolonization, Stanford 2009; Max Pensky, *Cosmopolitan Memory*, in: Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, New York 2012, pp. 254–266.

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