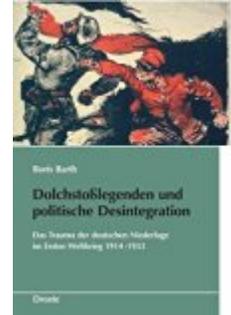


Boris Barth. *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1933.* Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2003. 624 S. EUR 49.80, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-7700-1615-0.



Reviewed by Harold Marcuse

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I agreed to review this book thinking that I would read a detailed reception history of a potent propaganda "legend" that destabilized the Weimar republic and mobilized enmity against Jews and Communists. This book is both more and less. Boris Barth's *Habilitation*, a massive tome of 560 densely printed text pages including 3,340 well-researched footnotes, draws on a wide array of primary and secondary sources to recapitulate and reassess our understanding of the transition from the *Kaiserreich* to the Weimar Republic. The stab-in-the-back legends (note the plural) of the title are used as a metaphor for the fragmentation of society into antagonistic groups blaming each other for the catastrophe of the Great War. The bulk of the book is devoted to a narrative of the deterioration of the military situation during the war, and then of the group discourses that developed from 1918 to 1921. Explicit discussions of various groups' stab-in-the-back allegations resurface periodically, with the general historical narrative serving admirably as a background foil against which readers can assess the veracity of those "legends."

My main criticisms of the book are that it is too difficult to extract important interpretative points from the dense narrative, and that the title is somewhat misleading. Aside from the book's primary scope of 1917-1921, it has little to say about *Dolchstoßlegenden*. The bulk of Barth's material about that political catchphrase is clearly taken from the secondary literature, adding little of substance to results already published in Joachim Petzold's 1961 East German dissertation or Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gärtringen's 1963 article.[1] Barth only summarily mentions the parliamentary subcommittee formed in October 1919 to investigate the reasons for the loss of the war (pp. 499-506), and mentions only in passing Hindenburg's November 19, 1919, prepared statement to that subcommittee, which was crucial for the national dissemination of the *Dolchstoß* image (p. 336f). Rather than belaboring what this book does not do, however, let me attempt summarize and assess its main interpretative points, a couple of which are truly innovative.

The first four of nine chapters examine the last two years of the war. First Barth retraces in

detail how a discursive dichotomy developed between the battle front and the homeland. He argues that the latter, which by 1918 was referred to as the *Heimatfront*, finally collapsed in the summer of 1918. This terminological dichotomy enabled army leaders to conceptualize their failure to completely harness the resources of civilian society to the war effort. Chapters 2 through 4 narrate the deterioration of the military situation; how patriotic cultural trend-setters, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, represented primarily by the professoriate and the Protestant clergy, rhetorically deluded themselves about the possibility of defeat; and how the structure of society adapted to the exigencies of war mobilization by morphing from an imperial monarchy into a populist parliamentary democracy with monarchist symbolic trappings. This material is all just prelude to what many groups later conceptualized, or misconceptualized, as stabs-in-the-back.

A brief passage in chapter three is key for those interested in the first use of the term *Dolchstoß* (pp. 144-148). Barth discusses three key sources: Friedrich Meinecke's October-November 1918 writings on the idea of a *levée en masse*;^[2] a June 11, 1922, newspaper article, in which Meinecke attempted to trace the roots of the *Dolchstoßlegende*; and a liberal *Volksversammlung* in the Munich Löwenbräu-Keller on November 2, 1918, in which Ernst Mueller-Meiningen, a member of the Progressives in the Reichstag, used the term to exhort his listeners to keep fighting: "As long as the front holds, we damn well have the duty to hold out in the homeland. We would have to be ashamed of ourselves in front of our children and grandchildren if we attacked the battlefront from the rear and gave it a dagger-stab" (p. 148). This statement was greeted by sustained, thunderous applause, in contrast to the speech by Kurt Eisner of the radical socialists, who was booed and had to leave the beer hall.

In the second half of the book Barth documents how various stab-in-the-back legends de-

veloped independently within different groups and "submilieus" during and after the November 1918 revolution. Ultimately, he argues, these legends merged into a unifying symbol for the right wing after 1925.

Chapter 5 documents the emergence of two stereotypes during the demobilization and transition in November-December 1918. On the one hand the returning troops were welcomed home with slogans about being "undefeated in the field," a notion brought to national prominence by Friedrich Ebert in his December 10, 1918 speech to the returning troops at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin: "Be welcomed wholeheartedly, fellow soliders, comrades (*Genossen*), citizens. No enemy overcame you. Only when the opponent's superiority in people and materiel became ever more oppressive did we give up the fight. And especially in the face of your heroism it was [our] duty not to demand senseless additional sacrifices from you.... With heads held high you can return" (p. 214f).

Ebert's unknowingly loaded use of "we" and "you" was duly noted in the newspaper reports--a crucial fact for which Barth surprisingly relies on the secondary literature. On top of Ebert's unintentional self-inculcation, some members of the radical Left, most notably Emil Barth of the USPD, claimed hyperbolically that their long-standing opposition to the war and systematic preparation of revolution had caused the fall of what we would today call the military-industrial complex. Emil Barth's claim resurfaced prominently in the 1925 Munich Stab-in-the-Back Trial (p. 223), in which the editor of the bourgeois-nationalist *Süd-deutsche Monatshefte* successfully sued an SPD newspaper editor who had called him a history-falsifier because the *Monatshefte* blamed the SPD for the loss of the Great War (pp. 510-517). In addition to Emil Barth's proud claim of responsibility for bringing the imperial system down, another variant of the legend propagated by the far Left

blamed the SPD for having betrayed the working class by supporting the war.

The preceding paragraph's information density reflects a characteristic of Barth's book: It reveals in detail to the point of obfuscation. A key event such as the 1925 Munich Stab-in-the-Back Trial is casually mentioned in chapter 5, but not explained until 300 pages later. Similarly, the book features a huge cast of characters, sprinkled throughout with abandon, but rarely characterized or reintroduced.

Chapter 6 convincingly presents several important new interpretations, which, however, are only tangentially related to the *Dolchstoß* concept. Barth's overarching argument is that various stab-in-the-back legends developed independently in the army officer corps, among Free Corps in the 1920 Ruhr battles and among Free Corps trying to hold the Baltic region for Germany. The officer corps "had no mental categories" with which to understand why their troops simply went home once the demobilization trains crossed the border, so they attributed this behavior to the corrosive influence of the revolutionary *Heimat* (p. 231). Barth notably reinterprets the Ruhr war following the January 1920 Kapp-Putsch as resistance not by revolutionary workers, but by fed-up combat veterans against their former military establishment attempting to return to power (pp. 279-283).

The striking brutality of the Baltic *Landwehren*, who felt back-stabbed when the Ebert government cut off their supplies and ordered them to withdraw under the Versailles terms, prefigured the ferocity with which Jews in the region were hunted two decades later. An April 1919 order by the *Landwehr* commander in Riga stated that: any red "bandit" could be killed by anyone; a 100 ruble reward would be paid for each killing or for information leading to capture; and anyone failing to report any information about such "riff-raff" would be executed (p. 260, ill. p. 296). Over 3,000 men were killed in Riga in a matter of weeks, with massacres of 500 and 200

documented in other towns (p. 265f). Once back in the Reich, many of these troops exhibited "nihilistic" and politically "autistic" behavior, in spite of Defense Minister Noske's generous efforts to reintegrate them (p. 273).

Chapter 7 offers an intellectual history of early 1920s right-wing *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (my term) among conservative monarchists, army generals, Protestant clergy and *völkisch* and pan-German groups. Barth concludes that the latter two submilieus autistically (one of his favorite adjectives) adopted the justifications of the former three multipliers. Thus in the stable phase of the republic they espoused a nihilism directed against the new social order, without offering any vision to supplant it.

Chapter 8 continues in this vein by looking more closely at the educated bourgeoisie, primarily professors in various disciplines, showing how revanchist stab-in-the-back ideas gained traction, especially among student activists, while liberal voices remained ineffectual. By the late 1920s, Barth argues, professors who had served at the front came into conflict with frustrated students who saw themselves as warriors. Such students bought into the stab-in-the-back rhetoric of the older university establishment, which had not experienced war, but only dissolution in the *Heimat*.

Chapter 9 begins to take the narrative into the later 1920s. It begins with the argument that there were no consensual symbols to memorialize the war, drawing cursorily on a curious mix of primary materials from the Bundesarchiv and the already rich secondary literature on the topic. The next section, on the "judicial fights about memory," covers some of the most crucial events that undergird Barth's central thesis about how allegations of blame for defeat led to the political fragmentation of society. In comparison to the lavish detail of earlier chapters, the narrative here is tantalizingly brief, but the interpretations quite explicit. The third section covers the evolving relationships to stab-in-the-back legends by organi-

zations such as the Stahlhelm, Reichsbanner and Jungdeutscher Orden, as well as in the war literature generally and by various writers such as Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, Stefan Zweig and Bertolt Brecht. A separate section is devoted to Hitler and the Nationals Socialists' use of *Dolchstoß* vocabulary, first to justify "cleaning up" internal German dissent, then to vilify specific groups such as Bolsheviks and Jews.[3]

Barth did a prodigious amount of primary research in the papers of organizations, political and intellectual figures and periodical literature, as well as in published primary and secondary material. While his inclusion of even tangential examples in the main text gives the book great evidentiary weight, Barth is not especially successful in drawing out the broader implications of his research. For instance, although he explicitly disavows the thesis of a Weimar democracy doomed to failure from the start (p. 4), seen through this book's lens of inexorably blossoming stab-in-the-back legends, there is no indication of how the republic might have withstood the agitation from both right and left. The book would also have benefited from a more explicit discussion of the extent to which the stab-in-the-back myth was a crucial link between Germany's defeat in the Great War and its pursuit of another European war. Hitler was undoubtedly personally shaped by the one-two punch of Germany's defeat and revolution, but he was also driven by positive visions that went well beyond trying to overcome the trauma of defeat in the Great War.

This point about links between the two World Wars leads me to the first of two unusual lapses in this otherwise exhaustively researched work. First, in spite of the obvious importance of German war aims for the war guilt/responsibility discussion, there is nary a mention of Fritz Fischer, his students or the debate Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* triggered after its publication in 1961. This omission is especially striking in Barth's discussion of the War Guilt Department (p. 499ff). I

am at a loss to explain it, especially in light of the fact that the foundational secondary works on the *Dolchstoßlegende* were both published in 1963 during the Fischer debate.[4] Second, as Patrick Krassnitzer pointed out in his review of the volume for H-Soz-u-Kult, in spite of Barth's emphasis on the symbolic importance of the *Dolchstoß*, Barth makes no mention of the gendered aspect of its symbolism.[5]

In sum, this extremely erudite work is of far greater importance to historians of the 1917-1921 transitional period in German history, than to those with a more focused interest in the various incarnations of the *Dolchstoßlegende*. Shorter essays, such as Gerd Krumeich's "Die Dolchstoß-Legende" (2000),[6] offer far more information and interpretative points about the stab-in-the-back myth, including a discussion of Bernd Seiler's seminal 1966 analysis of the virtually exclusive use of the epithet "legend" today.[7] In contrast to "lie" or "fairy tale," terms both used in the 1920s, "legend" leaves open the possibility of a kernel of explanatory, albeit undocumented, truth. Indeed, after reading this exhaustive study, it is easy to understand why contemporaries conceived of the widespread fragmentation of their society since 1917 as a series of back-stabs, even while the historical record makes clear that the core stab-in-the-back, that between home and battle fronts, was a bold and utter lie. The question begged by Barth's thesis is to what extent stab-in-the-back reproaches helped to effect the disintegration of Weimar society, as he argues, instead of merely reflecting existing fractures.

Notes

[1]. Joachim Petzold, *Die Dolchstoßlegende: Eine Geschichtsfälschung im Dienste des deutschen Imperialismus und Militarismus* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963); Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gärtringen, "'Dolchstoß'-Diskussion und 'Dolchstoßlegende' im Wandel von vier Jahrzehnten," in *Geschichte und Gegenwartsbewußtsein: Festschrift fuer Hans Rothfels zum 70.*

Geburtstag, ed. Waldemar Besson and F. Frhr. Hiller v. Gärtringen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), pp. 122-160.

[2]. On the proposed *levée en masse*, see Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levee en Masse* in October 1918," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): pp. 459-527.

[3]. Indicative of Barth's reliance on secondary materials about the *Dolchstoß* itself is his discussion of *Mein Kampf*. On pp. 543f, notes 343 and 344, Barth misunderstands Petzold, who actually argues that Siegfried Kaehler's 1946 claims about *Mein Kampf* are utter distortions.

[4]. Namely the works cited in note 1.

[5]. Patrick Krassnitzer, Rezension zu: Barth, Boris: *Dolchstosslegenden und politische Desintegration*, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 14.05.2004, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2004-2-105>>.

[6]. Gerd Krumeich, "Die Dolchstoß-Legende," in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 1, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), pp. 585-599.

[7]. Bernd Seiler, "'Dolchstoß' und 'Dolchstoßlegende'," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Sprache* 22 (1966): pp. 1-20.

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