

H-Net Reviews

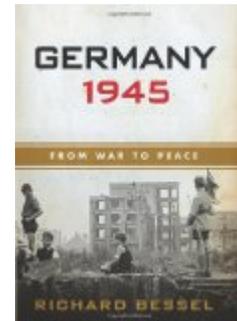
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Bessel. *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009. X, 522 S. \$28.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-054036-4.

Reviewed by Jeffry Diefendorf (University of New Hampshire)

Published on H-German (May, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing



Foundations of a Zero Hour

The Nazi government and the Wehrmacht surrendered unconditionally in May 1945. Four years later, with the founding of the Federal Republic, the Western Allies and particularly the United States were convinced that they had successfully engineered a peaceful transition to democracy for Germany. Richard Bessel provides a more nuanced context for this democratization, focusing on the last five months of the war and the first seven months of the occupation. In so doing, he questions accepted narratives about the dominant role of the occupying powers in re-educating postwar Germany. True, the German army had been completely disarmed and dismantled, and, for the most part, German police forces had been dissolved. No armed resistance appeared after the German surrender, and as soon as they were allowed to do so, Germans moved in the first postwar years to create democratic institutions, many of which have persisted to this day in the Federal Republic. In rich detail, Bessel analyzes the terrible conditions that prevailed in 1945, which, he argues, truly constituted a “zero hour,” a moment of profoundly new beginning for Germans and constructed largely by Germans. This zero hour was grounded both in real experiences and in the mental or psychological impact of those experiences, all of which “paved the way to Germany’s postwar success” (p. 390).

Bessel interweaves five themes through his story of this dreadful year. First, Germany held the dubious honor of being “the first country in modern history to achieve total defeat” (p. 385). Second, virtually all Germans acknowledged “the complete and obvious

bankruptcy of National Socialism,” an attitude that also lessened enthusiasm for nationalism (p. 390). Third, Germany experienced the harsh, punitive character of the occupation. Such actions were extreme in the Soviet zone, although the French were also harsh towards Germans in their zone. Fourth, Germans had suffered human and material losses that almost defied comprehension. And fifth, in the face of the collapse of the economy, the breakdown of the physical infrastructure, and the widespread absence of functioning social and political institutions, the Germans turned their backs on the past, perceived themselves as victims, and concentrated on the immediate challenges of finding food, shelter, employment, and some measure of security and stability. Here was the zero hour, a new foundation upon which a new Germany was built.

Bessel acknowledges that some historians have questioned the concept of a zero hour and provides examples of marked continuity with the German past, such as the rapid reactivation of the Chambers of Industry and Commerce.[1] Because he focuses on this single year, he does not address the extent of continuities in government personnel at the town, *Land*, and federal levels upon their reconstitution. He also does not mention the extent of German reconstruction planning that began during the war and continued after the defeat. Nonetheless, his argument in favor of the existence of a zero hour is compelling.

Chapters 1 through 6 cover the first five months of

1945. By that time, the outcome of the war for Germany and a foreshadowing of its aftermath was becoming increasingly clear: the German army had failed to resist the oncoming Allies, and the ensuing boundless bloodshed was matched by the physical and psychological destruction and suffering that accompanied Germany's total defeat. At the same time, millions of German civilians fled in desperation from the wrath of the Soviet armies, while the brutal and inhuman evacuation of the concentration camps continued. Similarly, after all had seemed lost, the Germans nonetheless participated in the last days of bloody and futile fighting in Berlin and other cities even while the Reich's leaders committed suicide. Acts of revenge on German military personnel and civilians were perpetrated not only by the Soviets but also the Western occupying powers. This period saw not only the normal violence of combat, but also widespread murder, rape, and looting by Germans against Germans as well as by Allied soldiers. As Bessel concludes, "Germany had become a land of death" (p. 385). It was not only a country filled with corpses, but also a nation unsure of how to cope with the huge numbers of people missing.

Chapters 7 through 12 cover the rest of the year and the first months of the occupation. One of the many contributions of this book is that Bessel strives to present the experiences in 1945 of Germans in all parts of the country, including not just the four zones of occupation, but also territories that became Polish or Czech. The occupation forces requisitioned undamaged buildings and foodstuffs for themselves. They purged local institutions of Nazis, even if at times they also accepted a pragmatic need to keep some former Nazis in place in order to retain at least part of the political and social infrastructure. The occupying forces arrested and interned a quarter million Nazis, and millions of German soldiers were taken prisoner and held under varying degrees of atrocious conditions. In all four occupation zones, the Allies dismantled large industrial plants, with the French and Soviets also busily extracting machinery, raw materials, and some finished goods as reparations.

Millions of German civilians were on the move. Most were part of the flood forced out of formerly German land turned over to Poland or out of the Sudetenland. Germans who had been evacuated from the bombed cities to the countryside now sought to return to their homes. Then, there were the 7.7 million displaced persons to contend with (over six million in the Western zones), most of whom were foreign laborers who had been forced to work in Nazi Germany. Also among the displaced were Jewish survivors of the concentration camps, as well as

eastern European Jews who had spent the war in the Soviet Union. Finding no homes to which to return, this group migrated west in the hope of getting to Palestine. Despite this chaos, the majority of displaced persons were repatriated by the end of the year. The uprooted Germans then turned their entire attention to survival, no easy task with the multiple problems created and exacerbated by the war: increased criminality—within German populations, but also between occupation soldiers and Germans; an overwhelming shortage of housing in the bombed cities; the dissolution of families; the failure of social services; a currency losing its value; and, in the winter of 1945-1946, drastic shortages of food and fuel.

The conditions for recovery were at best bleak. To be sure, political leaders emerged who were acceptable to the Allies: Social Democrats, Communists, former leaders of the Catholic Center Party, and spokesmen for the Catholic and Protestant churches. Supervised by the watchful Allies, these groups sought to revitalize old political parties or create new ones, formulating agendas that sometimes matched but sometimes conflicted with those of the Allies. Meanwhile the economy was at a standstill and the population suffered. The Germany of the Second Empire, Weimar, and the Third Reich had disappeared.

Yet as we know, there was "Life after Death" (the subtitle of the concluding chapter). A new Germany sprang to life after 1945, created by Germans for whom that year of extraordinary death, chaos, and suffering formed a profound and lasting break with the past. Bessel does not excuse the Germans' general failure to acknowledge that German actions had not only caused comparable suffering in surrounding countries, but also were the origin of Germans' own plight. Nor does he suggest that it was fair or just that Germans saw themselves as victims rather than victimizers. Yet, while Bessel rejects attempts to defend Germans for seeing themselves in this light, he argues that this same mentality helped Germans to start over.

The book is based primarily upon a wide reading of secondary literature, augmented by material from the military history section of the German federal archives. Readers will find the five maps and sixteen pages of photographs helpful; however, the brief "select bibliography" does not do justice to the ninety-two pages of endnotes, so that anyone wishing to access much of the scholarship he cites will find that objective daunting.

Many different audiences will benefit from reading this well-written and well-argued book. Beyond spe-

cialists of modern German and European history, politicians and military leaders will find Bessel's analysis of one postwar period instructive as a framework for policymaking during and after wars. It is to be hoped that anyone interested in the aftermath of wars— whether in historical or contemporary contexts—the nature of failed states, and the difficult road to state-building, will profit from Bessel's analysis.

Note

[1]. See the ongoing discussion of this issue in Hans Braun, Uta Gerhardt, and Everhard Holtmann, eds., *Die lange Stunde Null: Gelenkter sozialer Wandel in Westdeutschland nach 1945* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2007).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jeffry Diefendorf. Review of Bessel, Richard, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29935>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.