Mapping and understanding the impact of genocide and mass atrocities on politics remains an area of paramount importance and one that is fraught with immense difficulty. How do faraway nations debate ongoing mass atrocities? How do they weigh actions such as intervention, immigration, and solidarity? To a degree this is a dynamic that has played out throughout modernity. Though not intrinsically and logically connected, as humanity has become more interconnected through communications technology, travel, and migration, it has also become more savage. Debates about mass atrocities and genocide became part of twentieth- and twenty-first-century normality. And after the Holocaust, that genocide of genocides became the prism for many societies to discuss and understand mass atrocities close and far. In post-World War II Germany, this posed specific problems and created specific dynamics.

Andrew I. Port, in his new book *Never Again: Germans and Genocide after the Holocaust*, examines German discussions and political reactions to mass crime and genocide in the decades since World War II. His book focuses especially on the German debates about Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, reaching all the way to the current war in Ukraine in his epilogue. In a way, the book is, to paraphrase a Social Democrat politician talking about Germany’s role in peace-keeping efforts in Bosnia, about the “correct answer” to German history from within Germany itself. Often, this played out in discussions where one side argued “Never again Auschwitz” and the other, “Never again war.”

The task Port has set for himself is a gargantuan one. While it took some time for German society to begin the process of “coming to terms with the past,” at some point in its postwar history German society began constantly talking about the Third Reich and the Holocaust. To mention but two examples from the 1990s: the publication of Ian Kershaw’s two-volume Hitler biography and the autobiography of literary critic and Holocaust survivor Marcel Reich-Ranicki were major societal events, enveloping German society from high schools to retirement homes.[1] Or, to go back in time: in Germany, the 1968 student movement, too, had been to a large degree about confronting the legacies of the Third Reich and trying to make sense through that prism of what was unfolding in Vietnam. How, then, to distill postwar Germany into a meaningful set for academic analysis when it comes to discussions about genocide and mass atrocity?

Port chose to zoom in very closely, perhaps too closely at times, on the debates on Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda and how they played out in German politics and the media. What the book
constitutes, at the very least, is a carefully executed archeology of discourse. It offers a wonderfully diverse summary narrative of the influence of the Nazi past on Germany’s engagement with contemporary genocide and mass atrocity. It is only through such a careful examination that Port can show how the major media event of the German screening of the US mini-series Holocaust (1979) directly influenced the discourses about Pol Pot.

Port is a specialist in GDR history and the East German state is part of the analysis and the narrative. This bi-German approach helps the book stand out from similar books focused usually exclusively on the West German state. And it is indeed quite fascinating to see how the GDR discussed the topic of Cambodian violence. However, the GDR did not have an open, mass media society and had various ideological limitations in place. Thus, the kind of analysis that works well with the West German case would produce neither similar results nor similar meaning for East Germany. Port is acutely aware of this and accordingly does not venture too deep into the GDR side of things but enough to show how much was known and how this interacted with the GDR’s policies of coming to terms with the past.

Throughout these German debates, the reader will encounter the claim by German politicians and commentators that the Germany of their time was not that of World War I or even World War II. One aspect of this discourse logic refers to immigration, and Port shows just how interwoven these debates, from Cambodia until today, are with the question of immigration. From the so-called boat people to Bosnian refugees, almost every case of mass atrocity immediately raised questions that were connected to Germany’s status as a (rather reluctant) country of immigration.

The strength of the book is to show just how complicated and often contradictory responses to atrocity could be in Germany, being informed by the experiences of the Holocaust, World War II, and the ongoing process of facing the past. The debates in the German parliament and the press surrounding German participation in UN missions regarding Bosnia are but one example. Port lays bare the contradictions and the various strands of Holocaust-informed discourse.

The epilogue about the war in Ukraine is very timely and shows how the book contributes to understanding current events and debates. Port is right to point out that the seeds for the German response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine were sown especially during the war in Bosnia. Germany’s readiness to commit to European security and to show solidarity with Ukraine with more than just warm phrases did not fall from the blue but was prepared by the debates that Port’s book charts.

In a way, Port’s Never Again is a parallel effort to Samantha Power’s book A Problem From Hell (2002). Port, however, makes it clear from the beginning that he will remain more detached and not offer a normative analysis—post-World War II Germany simply is nothing like the United States in the long twentieth century. This approach then accounts for a major strength and perhaps what can be seen as a weakness of the text. The detached approach leads to instances where the author often lets the discussions and the summaries of these discussions stand by themselves without clearly signaling what is fact and what is just summarized commentary from the debates. On the other hand, the detached style—the polar opposite of Power’s Problem from Hell—is also one of the main strengths of the book: at the very least, his documentation and analysis will make great foundational texts for further research and for classroom discussions. Indeed, altogether, this excavation and documentation of these German debates and this aspect of coming to terms with the past will probably be a main, if not the main text for some time to come. It is this aspect that indeed warrants the publisher’s blurb that “Never Again is a story with deep resonance for any country confronting a dark past.” But the question the
reader is left with is: How much can we singularly deduct from these cases in order to get a glimpse of the postwar German state of mind when it comes to genocide and mass atrocity? And what can we really learn from the German case as discussed by Port other than “It’s complicated?”

Note


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