

Book Review: Helmut Schmitz and Annette Seidel-Arpaci, ed., Narratives of Trauma: Discourses of German Wartime Suffering in National and International Perspective (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011)

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Helmut Schmitz and Annette Seidel-Arpaci, ed., *Narratives of Trauma: Discourses of German Wartime Suffering in National and International Perspective* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011)

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Around the turn of the millennium, the German perspective on the experience of World War II changed. During the 1990s, the remembrance of the Holocaust had been a prevalent theme in German culture, but in the early 2000s, the focus shifted to the wartime suffering of ethnically defined Germans. The reemergence of a narrative of German victimhood in best-selling literary texts, in historiographical works, and in television event movies led to a controversial debate in Germany and abroad. Much was at stake here. The shift in the memory of the World War II era was indicative of a generational change, while at the same time also touching on core aspects of the self-understanding of German society. Both critics and proponents saw an ongoing redefinition of German identity after the end of the Cold War and German reunification. For good reasons, many contemporaries were concerned about the political implications. In the late 1990s, the nation's exculpatory myth of a clear-cut difference between Nazi perpetrators and ordinary Germans had been repeatedly challenged. Shortly after, the new discourse about German wartime suffering threatened to displace the recently achieved acknowledgement of Germans' role as perpetrators by a narrative of German victimhood. Moreover, many critics were worried that this narrative of German wartime suffering implied a concept of national identity based on shared victimhood and the same ethnic categories as the Nazis' vision of a national community (*Volkgemeinschaft*)—at a time when many Germans finally came to acknowledge the role of migration in the shaping of their country.

Narratives of Trauma, a 2011 volume edited by Helmut Schmitz and Annette Seidel-Arpaci, is part of this ongoing debate, to which it added some important historical insights. The debate is still alive and moving, and thus, although the book is not fresh from the press anymore, and most of the chapters even date back to a conference held in Leeds in 2008, it is still a relevant contribution five years after its publication. As the example of the controversial national and international reception of the 2013 three-part television movie *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (Generation War) shows, the question of German victimhood remains highly virulent and fraught with emotions—especially so, when German historical narratives directly conflict with the narratives about perpetrators and victims that are pivotal for the

political identity of its Eastern European neighbors. Moreover, in the last years and months Germany (like most European countries) has seen an alarming rise in populist racism against the backdrop of the “refugee crisis.” The connections between the resurgence of an aggressive German nationalism and the ongoing redefinition of Germany’s historical identity are complex, but it seems safe to assume that both are linked by more than only Dresden.

Schmitz and Seidel-Arpaci are well aware about the contested political terrain in which the volume is situated, and their intention is to use the historical essays to make a contribution to a present-day debate. As they lay out in their brief and succinct introduction, the current debate revolves around two closely related issues: trauma and taboo. First, they argue, the scholarly discourse about German wartime suffering is based on two concepts of trauma and mourning—one derived from individual psychology and a Freudian understanding of trauma, the other focusing on collectively performed, public rituals. As they claim, these two concepts are largely incompatible, and the tension between them is at the origin of the main fault line in the current discourse. This is certainly an important point, and it boldly places the volume in a broader debate ranging from the Mitscherlichs to the present-day preoccupation with the social and cultural dimensions of historical trauma. Unfortunately, the chapters in the volume rarely return to these concepts so aptly provided in the introduction. Instead, it is Schmitz and Seidel-Arpaci’s second argument that more accurately summarizes the book’s overarching message. The shift in the discourse on German wartime suffering was habitually accompanied by the idea that a long-standing taboo on the representation of German victimhood was finally broken. The editors and the authors of several chapters in the book strongly and convincingly refute this idea of a taboo or an historical absence of a debate on Germans as victims. As numerous examples in the book and a considerable body of historical research beyond that clearly show, a taboo on the representation of German suffering never existed. What Schmitz and Seidel-Arpaci propose instead is the model of “a bifurcation in memory discourse along both the political lines of left and right and along the lines of public and private memory” (4).

Two aspects set the volume apart from numerous other contributions to the debate: the attempt to include many different topics and approaches and its international scope. The broad thematic range is quite visible in the first three of the book’s four sections, which explore different aspects of the discourse on German wartime suffering from the immediate postwar period to the present day. These chapters in particular tackle a broad range of dif-

ferent media and sources, including historiographical and literary texts, monuments, public commemorations, films, and public debates. In the section on “history and historiography,” Suzanne Brown-Fleming and Bas von Benda-Beckmann discuss West and East German intellectuals’ perception of German victimhood, using the examples of the American-born Cardinal Aloisius Muench and GDR historian Olaf Groehler, respectively. In the second section, four chapters look at “public memory and mourning.” Nicholas J. Steneck discusses the consequences of the German wartime experience for the postwar debate on the construction of civil defense bunkers during the Cold War. The experience of the air war is also at the center of Christian Groh’s chapter, which discusses the public commemoration of the city’s destruction in Pforzheim. Jeffrey Luppé uses a similar local approach to trace the German debate, examining postwar monuments that were erected to commemorate the expulsion of Germans at the end and after the war. In the final chapter of the section, Michael Heinlein critically examines a topic that only entered the German debate about the wartime experience in the last decade: the eye-witness accounts of the *Kriegskinder*, people who lived through the war as children and adolescents. In the book’s third section, Cathy S. Gelbin and Helmut Schmitz turn to “visual and literary representations” of German wartime suffering, with Gelbin discussing queer femininity in Holocaust films, and Schmitz tracing the foundational aspect of trauma narratives in recent German literature.

The book’s international perspective, explicitly mentioned in the title, manifests itself in different forms. Postwar German history, when taking into account both the Federal and the German Democratic Republic, can be called international to some degree. More important is certainly the participation of American, Dutch, and British scholars as authors—although the question whether their perspective from abroad significantly differs from that of their German colleagues is not broached explicitly. However, it is the three chapters constituting the fourth and last section of the book that address the issue of “international perspectives” most directly. Bill Niven’s chapter situates the discourse about German victimhood in a comparative perspective, concluding that the debate in Germany is part of a larger memory trend in contemporary Europe and in postcommunist Eastern Europe in particular. Krijn Thijs adds a perspective from the Netherlands in a chapter discussing the Dutch public’s reactions to the changing German perception of wartime suffering. Finally, in the last chapter Annette Seidel-Arpaci analyzes Eytan Fox’s 2004 film *Walk on Water*, showing how transgenerational German trauma and a gendered notion of national identity can be represented in contemporary Israeli cinema.

As this overview of the book's topics shows, its strengths and weaknesses are closely related. On the one hand, the attempt to include a broad range of aspects is certainly commendable. Many of the chapters are original and trenchant contributions to the debate. On the other hand, however, the volume does not fully succeed in developing a synthesizing perspective. The selection and availability of a sufficient number of representative and balanced case studies certainly is an inherent problem of many edited volumes like the one at hand—a problem affecting the international and comparative aspects of the book in particular. A more coherent and consequent use of the concepts and questions proposed in the introduction might have considerably strengthened the book's overall message. Unfortunately, the same is also true in terms of style: the quality of the chapters is somewhat uneven, and some of them might have gained from a more thorough revision.

Yet, despite these caveats, *Narratives of Trauma* is a noteworthy contribution to an ongoing debate of considerable political and cultural importance. Although the argument might have been presented more systematically, the book makes a clear point against the idea that there was, or is, a taboo preventing the commemoration of German suffering. At the same time, various chapters also show how Germans' self-victimization as true victims of both the Nazis and their enemies happened at the expense of competing claims to victimhood and was used to displace the memory of the victims of the Holocaust in particular. Against the backdrop of remerging German nationalism, the book provides a range of historical perspectives on its central narratives.