Kühne on Goltermann, 'The War in Their Minds: German Soldiers and Their Violent Pasts in West Germany'

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Trauma and Resilience: Soldiers’ Violent Pasts in Post-Nazi Germany

The German project of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coping with the Nazi past) or Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (working through the past) has been debated for decades, and no end is in sight. While most recent students of European colonialism have sought to overcome Germans’ allegedly obsessive focus on the Holocaust and instead also remember their country’s dark past in Africa, the debate for a long time zeroed in on the obfuscation of German guilt about and responsibility for the mass crimes of the Nazi regime, including the murder of six million Jews. Most prominently, Theodor W. Adorno and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich bemoaned around 1960 Germans’ inability to self-critically work through their own entanglement in the Nazi state, its führer cult, and its crimes.[1] In the same fashion, critics castigated Germans’ refusal to honor the victims of Nazi persecution, questioned Germans’ self-perception as victims rather than perpetrators or beneficiaries of a genocidal dictatorship, and warned of the dire consequences of all the denial and obfuscation for West Germany’s new democracy. Old Nazi ideas and ideologies would bide their time and await the opportunity to topple the republic. And no doubt they tried, but they never prevailed. Over seven decades of increasingly stable democratic rule have produced a positive, if not to say complacent, perspective on the overall successful containment of former Nazis and Nazi sympathizers. That German society was able to quickly align with the “normal” path of Western democracies has been the mainstream narrative for quite a while. Since the 1990s, Germany has also acknowledged the broad societal consensus with the Nazi regime that had enabled the Holocaust and thus has earned an international reputation for masterly investigating, discussing, and representing its own past evils.[2]

The War in Their Minds challenges this success story of German Vergangenheitsbewältigung. In particular, Svenja Goltermann takes aim at the idea that German soldiers effortlessly coped with or repressed the traumatic experience of mass violence that they had committed, supported, or suffered from. Goltermann has discovered in the Bodelschwinghsche Anstalten Bethel in northwest Germany a type of source that was rarely used by Germanists before: the psychiatric records of former servicemen, in this case some 450 files on men born between 1897 and 1929. For some time after the
war, these veterans found themselves unable to repress their war traumas and to simply move on as most Germans did; instead, they sought the therapeutic support of medical professionals in whom they confided their stories. Often these stories were cryptic and erratic. Yet, as the author claims, taken together they constitute a rare repository of otherwise unknown private and subjective reverberations of the Nazi war of annihilation, even if we do not hear the authentic voices of the former soldiers but only the way their counselors recorded them. What stories do they tell? Not surprisingly for historians of war, including the genocidal one Germans fought from 1939 to 1945, two closely related themes pervade soldiers’ narratives, namely, fear and remorse. Fear of enemies, of death, of losing life or limbs or comrades, of not seeing again loved ones at home, and of an uncertain future. After the war survivors were also haunted by the fear of retribution for German war crimes, especially in the East.

After 1945, if not already during the war, Germans established a powerful discourse that distracted from their guilt. It allowed them to see themselves not as perpetrators of criminal violence but rather as victims—as victims of a terrorist dictatorship, of a terrible war, of the enemies’ bombing of German cities, and of years of captivity in the Soviet Union. This knowledge about the Holocaust and other mass crimes resurfaces again and again in the soldiers’ haunting recollections and even dreams. Rolf S., for instance, was haunted in his dreams by “the cries of those who were being tortured and executed” and subsequently by fantasies of being prosecuted as a “war criminal,” with Harry S. Truman and Joseph Stalin watching over the trial (p. 36). Such nightmares echoed either his own guilt or “the Allies’ public shaming of Germans” (p. 37).

Goltermann’s goal, however, is not to prove yet again how widespread Germans' awareness of mass murder in the East was. While often denied by public memory and even scholars in the past, these crimes are now common knowledge. Instead, The War in Their Minds argues that the discourse on Germans’ own suffering should not make us forget that many Germans actually did suffer, not only during the war but also long after. In this spirit, the first of the three parts of the book interprets the psychiatric records, all of which date from the early postwar period of the late 1940s, as “a counter-narrative to public memory” (p. 231). The second part of the book examines the therapies that psychiatrists applied in the 1950s and 1960s when treating former soldiers who claimed to suffer from mental health issues. The psychiatric profession was convinced that these had endogenous but not exogenous causes. Not the war trauma but individual predispositions were held responsible for the symptoms. The resilience of the “normal” majority of former soldiers seemed to prove that humans possessed an almost unlimited capacity to cope with even the most terrible emotional and physical stress. In a similar fashion, already during and after the First World War doctors had believed that “shell-shocked” soldiers either faked or were just “hysterical” (pp. 109-10). Conveniently, the same diagnosis allowed psychiatrists in West Germany to deny a broad range of disability claims. As the third part of the book shows, it was not the medical profession that initiated a slow change of this view but the media. Remarkably, this change was not inspired by the suffering of German war returnees and did not work on their behalf. Moreover, it began only in the 1960s. The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and then the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial raised public awareness of the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust. The media rather than psychiatrists therefore broke fresh ground in understanding the detrimental contribution of “exogenous” factors to the long-term mental damage from the Nazi terror and in acknowledging compensation claims of Jews and other, mostly non-German, victims.
The War in Their Minds adds several interesting facets to the history of psychiatry in Germany, to our knowledge about the struggles of German war victims for material compensation and symbolic recognition, and to the body of research on the aftereffects of the Nazi war and the Holocaust on Germany. But at the end of the day the argument about German ex-servicemen’s suffering is left up in the air. The first section of the book shows intriguingly how early postwar fictional accounts, such as Wolfgang Staudte’s movie The Murderers Are among Us (1946) and Wolfgang Borchert’s drama The Man Outside (1947), reflected the traumatic war experience of German soldiers and thus paralleled the psychiatric records of that time. Unfortunately, such efforts to relate the findings drawn from these records to the larger societal context of public and private war stories, war grievance, and war remembrance remain marginal throughout the book. The mental damage documented in these records is not as surprising as Goltermann assumes when she claims that “little is known” about “the hidden underside” of the allegedly quick normalization of West German society after the war (p. 6). Instead, a large body of research on public as well as private war memories of rather different types has shown that neither the public nor the private sphere simply suppressed those traumatic experiences. Related studies include examinations of popular newspaper and newsmagazine reports, inquiries into a plethora of war veterans’ associations and their ways of coping with war trauma, and manifold oral histories conducted with former soldiers in the 1980s and later.[3] Mass media, veterans’ associations (including the enormously influential Verband der Heimkehrer), and private memories may not have dealt with war traumas in the spirit of professional psychiatry but were often covered by a language of heroism and victimhood and in the rhetoric of humans’ and especially soldiers’ ability to overcome even the worst traumas. Collective war remembrance has operated in this way throughout modern history, not only in Germany. Yet beneath the master narrative of resilience, war traumas were omnipresent in the German media just as in private or semiprivate circles, even if addressed only indirectly. Regrettably, relevant studies, most of which appeared long before the publication of the German original of The War in Their Minds in 2009, are not used in this book to locate the psychiatric discourse in German postwar society’s multifold societal engagements with its violent past.[4] (The book under review here is the paperback edition of an originally 2017 published English translation, neither of which has been revised or takes account of literature that has appeared since 2009.[5])

Such a contextualization would have been necessary, however, to test the argument of the book, which challenges the “whig history” of Germany’s quick and easy recovery from total war and Nazi destruction. After all, the subjects of this book are a particular minority: those relatively few men who sought medical help to cope with their war-related mental health issues. Goltermann has examined some 450 cases; “within the larger population of returnees treated by a doctor, these who saw psychiatrists represented,” she claims, “only the tip of the iceberg” (p. 12). In this somewhat nebulous fashion, the invocation of an ominous iceberg may not be entirely unreasonable. But even then, how big was the iceberg? Did it include a few thousand, tens of thousands of men seeing mental health counselors? Even if it was hundreds of thousands (which is unlikely), it would still be a small fraction of those men who survived the war and moved on with their lives, whatever the burden they continued to carry may have been. More importantly, those 450 psychiatric records all date from the immediate postwar years up to 1950. What do they tell us about how Germans coped with war traumas afterward, in the 1950s and 1960s, which is the time that—unlike the early postwar era—is usually considered the period of “normalization” and integration. What happened to even only those 450 men in the 1950s and 1960s? Did they continue to struggle, or did they join those many Germans
who tried to move on and succeeded?

Goltermann starts her book with a telling story about Hans H., a police officer and SS soldier who lost a leg in 1944, survived the war without being imprisoned but was initially barred from continuing his career with the police, thus struggled financially, and then requested and received psychiatric help while his denazification proceedings dragged on. The point of this story, contrary to the argument of the book, is actually not the temporary mental disturbance but its happy end, a happy end of sorts. After a short while, the denazification court exonerated Hans H. and opened the door to his reentry in the police force. And, surprise, surprise, “his mood was now transformed,” as his doctor recorded. “There was a ‘colossal upswing’” and no indication anymore of the “‘slightest psychiatric abnormality’” (p. 4). To be sure, not all were as lucky as Mr. H. But as Goltermann’s inquiries are limited to the minds of a very small minority of German war returnees and into the professional and public attention they draw, her counternarrative eventually confirms rather than challenges the dominant narrative: most Germans, including former soldiers, did move on and managed, enthusiastically, traumatized or not, to rebuild their lives and to transition to democracy. The minority of psychiatric patients did not block this “normalization.” Instead, they provided one of the many undercurrents of the myth of German victimhood that enabled it.

Notes


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