

Cohen-Pfister, Laurel and Dagmar Wienroeder-Skinner, eds. *Victims and Perpetrators: 1933-1945. (Re)Presenting the Past in Post-Unification Culture.* Berlin/ New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006.

This edited volume focuses on Germany's continuing efforts to come to terms with its past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Rooted in an interdisciplinary approach that was in part presented at the 2005 Conference of the German Studies Association, several contributing authors "survey how the historical constellation of victim and perpetrator is revisited in the culture of the post-unification period" (10). This allows each scholar to approach this intriguing topic from a different angle in an attempt to conceptualize why, "in Germany, the past is alive as seldom before" (3).

The volume itself is structured thematically. Beginning with an in-depth introduction, five sections discuss "Transgenerational Memory," "Air War and German Literature," "Jewish Victimization," "Transnational Reconciliation," and "Historical Consciousness." Each individual part provides a unique analysis, helps the reader to understand Germany's recent attempts to deal with its past, and often connects to other essays in this volume.

Literary scholars clearly dominate. Volker Hage, for instance, discusses the portrayal of the air war in German literature while Valentia Glajar explores representations of victims and perpetrators visible in texts by Peter Härtling, Pavel Kohout, and Jörg Bernig. Others focus on different novels which illustrate the editor's claim that "literature is one place where redefinitions of the past are most actively being contested" (10). In short, this volume is the attempt by cultural or literary scholars to understand Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Yet the editors and contributors also discuss other aspects of the post-unification period. Essays on transgenerational memory or generational identity provide a fascinating scrutiny on an ever-present dilemma: "how to reconcile acknowledging German responsibility and guilt for wartime atrocities with their own suffering as victims of the air war" (11). In this section, bold and thought-provoking theoretical concepts appear. For example, Harald Welzer's essay "The Collateral Damage of Enlightenment: How Grandchildren Understand the History of National Socialist Crimes and Their Grandfather's Past" nicely analyzes the separation between institutionalized commemoration and private remembering. It is here where this volume connects to a recent growth within this discourse that can be seen, for instance, in the edited volume *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (2008).

To provide a coherent conclusion when including so many different voices is complicated. Nonetheless, the editors are able to find an over-arching argument. According to them, "the potential for grasping the complete experience of the Second World War and its aftermath" lies "in the space created by acknowledging Ger-

man victimhood without relativizing the atrocities perpetrated by the Germans” (23). This argument adequately frames the volume without limiting its potential for deepening still vibrant discussions.

Overall, *Victims and Perpetrators* provides a solid but high-priced overview of recent debates within post-unification Germany. Although the difficulties of adequately introducing this field are evident even in the introduction, it is the over-emphasis on literary scholarship that could be seen as limiting. Some might find it a helpful avenue, others might hope for a more in-depth discussion surrounding static commemoration and its links to the media or education system. The latter could have helped question and possibly re-evaluate the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as a whole, consequently constraining an ever-present impatience to conclude this process. Or is it really desirable for Germany to return to a still undefined “normality”?

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