

Jeffrey K. Olick**In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949**

University of Chicago Press, 2005, 392 pp.

\$U.S. 29.00 hardcover (0-226-62638-5)

In the last 15 years the notion of deploying “transitional justice” instruments to heal societies torn by political violence has swept through Western donor agencies, foundations, UN bodies, and liberal academia. As a result, phenomena such as truth commissions, international investigations, and domestic tribunals proliferate at all levels. International actors increasingly expect that any peace deal worth its salt will be accompanied by a transitional justice component to establish an official record of abuses, compensate victims, and, occasionally, pursue transgressors. Trials of high profile leaders such as Chile’s Pinochet and Iraq’s Hussein are highly visible exemplars, but broader efforts such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission or Rwanda’s domestic equivalent are equally, if not more, important.

The debate over these efforts’ utility has just begun, and political scientists, policy analysts, lawyers and human rights activists are its chief protagonists. Sociologists, oddly enough, have largely stayed away from this debate.

Jeffrey Olick’s new book is thus a welcome and timely intervention by a prominent sociologist of collective memory. Olick’s monograph is a richly detailed study of post-World War II Germany, but he claims broader relevance for his case. Today’s fascination with post-conflict justice, Olick claims, originated with debates over Allied occupation policy in post-war Germany. As the victors experimented with war crimes tribunals, de-Nazification and re-education, Germans of all stripes responded by rejecting allegations of collective guilt. The resulting debate and policy measures helped establish post-war truth-telling as a global norm.

Olick’s main contribution to transitional justice debate is methodological, arguing that social memory is a shifting and fluid dialogue, not a static or empirically measurable fact. It is a discursive moving target, comprised of countless discussions, arguments and counter-arguments between multiple sides. When scholars examine the utterances of only one side, they risk missing a large part of the action. Thus, for example, German memories of wartime atrocities were framed, in part, in reaction to Allied accusations of collective guilt. To isolate one from the other is a grave mistake.

Consequently, the book’s first part, “The Victors,” reproduces parts of the Allied discussion during and after the war over how best to deal with Germany. Positions varied dramatically, including drastic schemes of transforming Germany into a de-industrialized rural hinterland, but most mainstream figures were more moderate. Still, eventual Allied policies included some harsher measures, including acquiescence in the expulsion of Germans from eastern Europe into a slimmed-down Germany, and half-hearted de-Nazification and re-education measures. The book’s second part, “The Vanquished,” explores German reactions to all this. Olick provides a wealth of detail, but perhaps the most important single item is his assertion, persuasively documented, that Germans of all stripes bridled at the notion of collective guilt.

Olick’s second methodological contribution is to argue that there is no single moment in history that serves as a “clean break” in a given society’s past. Many scholars begin their study of post-war German attitudes in 1949, the year the new federal state was created, but Olick disagrees, arguing

that at any given moment, collective memory is shaped by earlier discussions and debates. Collective memories are like Russian dolls, with each new version nested in an earlier variation. This is an argument for path dependency, not punctuated equilibrium, and it is methodologically important, implicitly advising today's opinion analysts to supplement their surveys with deep historical analysis.

Olick avoids clean causal arguments, preferring to focus on processes, narrative threads, and discursive flows. Individuals do not hold certain opinions "because" of their gender, class, occupation or region, but think the way they do because of where they are situated in historically-embedded conversation threads.

There is an enormous amount of information here about post-war German intellectual discourse. I was particularly intrigued to learn that in the years immediately following the war, Germans repeatedly equated themselves with the Jewish people they had just destroyed. Germans were the world's "new pariahs," in this view, set upon by everyone, misunderstood, maligned, and persecuted by the vengeance-seeking Allies. Perhaps this is a collective psychological process that helps oppressors deal with their guilt.

Another interesting finding was that Germans of all persuasions rarely empathized publicly with those on the receiving end of German atrocities, focusing instead on the suffering caused to Germans by Hitler and by the Allied occupation. The war appeared to most Germans as a disaster for Germany, rather than a disaster for Germany's neighbors. Germany's narcissism and ethnocentrism thus survived intact, albeit in a new form. Although Olick makes no reference to other cases, I could imagine a similar phenomenon among Hutus, Serbs, and Turks.

The book's richly detailed and historical focus is methodologically insightful, but it also makes for difficult and occasionally tedious reading, especially for those not well versed in the specifics of German debates. With the exception of the introduction and conclusion, the book seems aimed chiefly at students of German society and politics, especially those interested in German collective memory. The volume has relevance to other places and times, but Olick spends insufficient time tracing those connections, even though he does highlight the broader links. Readers interested in broader issues of collective memory, transitional justice and war crimes tribunals will have to stretch a bit to discover this book's general relevance.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about Germany. Individual chapters may also work well in a course dealing with the sociology of collective memory or the politics of transitional justice. I wouldn't recommend assigning the entire book to students interested in the latter, however, as only a handful could easily discern the book's general relevance from its rich offering of particulars.

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