

## Book Review

Manfred Henningsen: *Regimes of Terror and Memory: Beyond the Uniqueness of the Holocaust*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. Pp. xxv, 219.)

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Long admired for its open working through of its Nazi past, over the past few years German memory culture has become the subject of considerable controversy. Increased awareness of the country's colonial legacy in Africa due to the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the globe in 2020 and accusations that Israel has committed genocidal acts in Gaza following Hamas's terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, have challenged the centrality of the Holocaust in the German historical imaginary and the special responsibility to the Jewish people that flows from it. As a result, the previous consensus regarding both the uniqueness of the Holocaust as well as the German state's obligation to ensure Israel's security have increasingly been called into question.

The challenges posed by these issues are visible in the intellectual journey of students in my 2024 seminar on "The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe" during our unit on Germany. We started by engaging with a text by Jürgen Habermas ("A Kind of Settlement of Damages (Apologetic Tendencies)," *New German Critique* 44 [1988]: 25–39), in which he set off what has come to be known as the Historians' Dispute (*Historikerstreit*) by challenging the interpretations of conservative, revisionist historians, who argued that Germans and the German state should put their feelings of historical guilt behind them, since the Holocaust was just one atrocity among many committed during the twentieth century. After reading this piece, my students all supported Habermas's defense of the centrality of the Holocaust as a buttress against the rise of "conventional" nationalist identities in Germany (and beyond).

However, their position was immediately challenged by their reading of Masha Gessen's 2023 article on German memory ("In the Shadow of the Holocaust," *New Yorker*, December 9, 2023), whose comparison of Gaza to a "a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany" not only generated considerable backlash, but also almost led to their being denied the prestigious Hannah Arendt Prize, which honors individuals who are willing to engage in controversial public discussions. While my students still agreed with Habermas on the potential of building a more cosmopolitan, "constitutional patriotism" on the basis of such negative memories of the past, they struggled to understand why Gessen's comments were so controversial in Germany, especially given the empathy many of them felt with the plight of the Palestinian people.

I would not normally start a book review with such personal reflections. However, in this case it is warranted, given that Manfred Henningsen opens *Regimes of Terror and Memory* with a long introduction in which he reflects on his own intellectual journey as a German, who was forced to confront the difficulties posted by his own belief in the uniqueness of the Holocaust after moving to the United States and marrying a Black descendant of slaves. This experience forced him to confront the fact that globally the uniqueness of the Holocaust often supports a strategy of redirection, allowing Germans to silence other aspects of their past while simultaneously enabling other states to downplay the severity of their own historical crimes. He concludes, “The obsession with German history blinds the world, especially the West, against the constant possibility of such returns, horrors of mass killings that have already happened since 1945 and those that are happening right now and will continue to happen in the future” (173).

Following this introduction—which serves as something of an intellectual autobiography—in the remainder of the book Henningsen presents a series of short vignettes of other historical mass killings and how they are remembered, including cases drawn from South Africa, Cambodia, Japan, China, Indonesia, and Rwanda, as well as the example of slavery in the United States. Deploying this comparative approach leads Henningsen to a number of important conclusions. At the most general level, he argues that “in all democidal situations”—his preferred term for these mass killings, which is more expansive and less legalistic than “genocide”—“one must focus on the primacy of the political regime” (30–31). His central thesis is that doing otherwise by focusing on the specific cultural features of the society in question equalizes the guilt of the perpetrators with that of fellow travelers, bystanders, and victims, as the “central role of human agency ... is replaced by cultural determinism” (75).

In addition to highlighting the primacy of the political regime, going “beyond the uniqueness of the Holocaust,” to quote the book’s subtitle, also decenters the Eurocentric focus of much of the global memory discourse, which still tends to focus on the white victims of the Nazi regime. In making this point, Henningsen shows how this narrative serves as a form of redirection, both in Germany and around the world. In Germany, it stifles debates about other dark chapters in Germany’s history, including its legacy of colonialism, thus preventing Germans from truly learning the lessons of “Never Again” by blinding them to the gravity of atrocities elsewhere (in the current context, most notably in Gaza). Globally it has a similar effect, allowing the perpetrators of other democides to downplay the significance of their actions and the suffering of their victims.

Henningsen acknowledges the exceptionality of Germany’s postwar memory culture in a world where “refusing to come to terms with a society’s record of evil appears to be the rule” (76). However, he also observes, “The claims of uniqueness make no sense on the levels of killing and suffering” (172). He therefore argues that while more societies should be encouraged to engage in the kind of self-reflection demonstrated by Germany, they must

find ways to do so that do not rely on claims of uniqueness, but instead allow for the equal recognition of all victims of democide.

Over the course of this volume, Henningsen presents a number of interesting studies of how this process of redirection works in practice. For instance, in East-Central Europe it obscures the victims of the communist regime. In a particularly vivid example of this process Henningsen notes the fact that Buchenwald was used as a communist internment camp by the Soviets after the defeat of the Nazis (chap. 4). Similarly, in the United States it helps to reinforce the “American amnesia” of its own (continuing) mistreatment of the Black population (chap. 6), a point that Henningsen drives home with personal reflections on his interactions with his Black in-laws.

In light of events at the time of this writing, Henningsen’s presentation of how this dynamic works in Israel is perhaps most interesting and most controversial. During his own visit to Yad Vashem a week before the start of the ground invasion during the 2014 Gaza War, he recounts watching a group of Israeli soldiers tour the exhibition, which informed them about “the unique Nazi record of destruction” and of how the “slogan of ‘Never Again’ fit their situation” as “defenders of a Jewish state that would never succumb ... without resistance.” Rather than instilling in them the importance of protecting human rights to avoid a new democide, to Henningsen’s horror he instead witnessed how their visit “prepared them mentally for what was expected of them once they received the order to move into Gaza” (72).

*Regimes of Terror and Memory* is a powerful book that covers a lot of ground. At times, Henningsen has a tendency to rely on anecdote and his own private reflections, rather than concrete historical or social scientific evidence to back up his claims. While this is a weakness in some respects, on the whole these personal reflections also help to ground his conclusions in a way that a more standard scholarly manuscript could not. Given how much research has been conducted on all of the individual democides he covers, the personal, synthetic narrative of this volume certainly represents an important contribution to the literature.

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