

## **A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany**

**By Monica Black. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020. Pp. 332. Cloth \$29.99. ISBN 978-1250225672.**

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Monica Black's new book points to the silence about "the most recent past" that pervaded West German life following the Second World War, arguing that the apocalyptic predictions, miracle cures, Marian visions, and witch accusations, which became a surprisingly common feature of postwar life, resulted from the unresolved social and moral tensions that lurked beneath the shiny veneer of the economic miracle. These manifestations of the unspeakable Nazi past, what Black calls "hauntings" (14), are read for what they reveal about how West Germans came to terms with the feelings of complicity and victimhood elicited by the collapse of the Third Reich, the Allied occupation, and denazification.

In the book's first chapter, Black states that in 1949, just as signs of reconstruction were becoming evident, persistent rumors of the end of days began to circulate in the new Federal Republic. While contemporaries who took a scholarly interest in such rumors interpreted them as a crisis of nerves or mass psychosis, and certainly not the result of German guilt over the war and the Holocaust, they ignored the way in which these apocalyptic predictions all pointed to ideas of judgement and punishment, blame and guilt, by stressing that only sinners would be impacted and the innocent would survive. In subsequent chapters, Black shows how guilt, even its rejection, found its way into many dimensions of postwar life in sublimated forms, including West Germans' fascination with the wonder doctor Bruno Gröning and witch accusations in Schleswig-Holstein that culminated in a series of defamation trials during the 1950s.

Black outlines the career of Bruno Gröning, whose successful treatment of a young bed-ridden boy in Herford in 1949 made him West Germany's first celebrity. Publicity about his healing powers quickly led to large groups descending on Herford and any other location in which Gröning subsequently appeared, causing anxiety on the part of the authorities about both public nuisance and harm. While some sought to prohibit and prosecute Gröning's practices for their apparent contravention of the ban on lay healing, others remained open not only to the idea that his cures might be real, but that his approach to healing might have something to offer more broadly. In the press and among medical professionals, for example, there were some suggestions that Gröning's holistic approach to West Germans' psychosomatic afflictions might prove therapeutic for German medicine, which required redemption itself in the public's eyes. The reasons for this loss of trust were never explicitly stated but were implied to be the abuses perpetrated by Nazi medicine.

The story of Gröning's rise and fall, which culminated in a trial for negligent homicide in 1957, is important, Black suggests, less for what it reveals about the putative healer and more for what it reveals about the cure seekers who flocked to him. Gröning's pilgrims were often in search not just of the alleviation of suffering caused by physical disease and injury, but of some form of redemption that might free them from internal disquiet and damage that tended to manifest in a range of inexplicable and hard-to-cure illnesses. With his ostensible ability to discern good people from evil ones, Gröning's decisions about who he would and would not treat, were also declarations about who was redeemable and to whom the burden of guilt and judgement might continue to adhere—in the mind of the wonder doctor and many of his followers, these evil people were not just sinners, but witches.

Belief in witches as the ultimate cause of many illnesses and misfortunes, even in the face of clear proximate causes, was alive and well in parts of West Germany in the middle of the twentieth century. The tradition and language of witch accusations was available in some regions more than others and appears to have been particularly prevalent in Schleswig-Holstein, where there had been both an influx of postwar refugees and very high Nazi party membership during the Third Reich. Contemporaries tended to link these accusations and the trials that sometimes resulted as evidence of antiquated rural superstition, but in rare cases cited social anxieties and resentments caused by the resettlement of refugees. Black, however, supplies compelling evidence in her analysis of the 1954 trial of Waldemar Eberling, a healer accused of contravening the ban on lay healing and defaming others in his community as witches, that witch accusations in this period were more likely the playing out of unresolved grievances, fears of exposure, and suppressed hostilities related to the Nazi era and denazification.

Black's volume is scholarly in its extensive use of archival and primary source materials as well as its immersion in the relevant historiography, but this academic apparatus, which is largely confined to the endnotes, does not get in the way of the book's accessibility to a much broader audience interested in the moral and psychic impact of the Third Reich's disintegration on ordinary Germans. Ranging across social, cultural, and medical history and tying together a series of phenomena that might otherwise appear to be isolated manifestations of local backwardness or superstition, Black's book provides a narrative and interpretative framework that is compelling enough to excite both a popular and an academic audience. It provides an exemplar of how historians can successfully read silences in order to understand what societies in crisis or in transition might feel but may not be able to admit even to themselves.

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## German Angst: Fear and Democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany

**By Frank Biess. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xx + 432. Cloth \$90.00. ISBN 978-0198714187.**

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This book is an ambitious and rich contribution to the interdisciplinary field of emotion studies, and an original intervention in postwar West German historiography. First published in German as *Republik der Angst. Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Rowohlt, 2019), Frank Biess's book clearly hit a nerve with its German readership, provoking discussions in the press and on talk shows, reaching first place on the non-fiction bestseller list, and receiving a nomination for the non-fiction prize at the Leipzig Book Fair. The German subtitle frames the book as an "alternative history" in contrast to hegemonic narratives of West German history seen as a teleological journey towards German normalcy by way of Western democracy. Complementing existing historical narratives, *German Angst* exposes the complex fragility of West Germany's democratization, which, at times, was anything but self-evident.

The popular postwar diagnoses of the German collective as "pathological" are refuted in careful empirical reconstructions of the changing objects, protagonists, and experiences of