

The Perversion of Holocaust Memory: Writing and Rewriting the Past after 1989

By Judith M. Hughes. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 160. Hardcover \$115.00. ISBN: 978-1350281875.

Michael Rothberg

University of California, Los Angeles

Judith M. Hughes considers developments in four European countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall and seeks to tell a story of rise and fall. The first two chapters narrate a welcome consolidation of memory culture and historical responsibility for the Holocaust in Germany and France—that is, in the land of the perpetrators and in a country that was occupied by Nazi Germany but also collaborated extensively in Germany’s genocidal policies. The final three chapters trace what Hughes sees as the unraveling or “perversion” of that memorial consensus, with dangerous developments in Germany itself, in post-communist Eastern Europe, and, indeed, in the writings of some prominent historians as well. Framed with very short introductory and concluding chapters, *The Perversion of Holocaust Memory* addresses some crucial questions of memory culture and historical consciousness, but its account remains too selective and foreshortened to support its large-scale thesis about the precipitous decline of Holocaust memory.

The first half of Hughes’s book is focused on what she sees as successful versions of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (working through the past). She begins in France, although the logic of starting there is not made explicit. The focus of this chapter is primarily on trials. She gives a short account of the case of Klaus Barbie, whose trial in 1987 attracted worldwide attention and led to Marcel Ophüls’s brilliant film *Hotel Terminus*. Hughes seems sanguine about the outcome of the Barbie trial because—in contrast to Nuremberg—it put Jewish victims at the center and thus brought the Holocaust itself into the center of legal attention. Yet the Barbie trial has often itself been seen as an example of the “perversion” of Holocaust memory, not least because of Jacques Vergès’s controversial “Third-Worldist” defense of Barbie. Hughes, however, does not take up this dimension of the trial in her short exposé. She continues on to the trial of Paul Touvier, the chief of the intelligence service of the Milice, “Vichy’s brutal paramilitary force,” which proves more ambivalent in contrast (9). She then focuses much of the chapter on Maurice Papon, the police prefect responsible both for the deportation of Jews from the Bordeaux region and for the violent suppression of peacefully demonstrating Algerians in Paris in October 1961, among other colonial-era crimes. Papon, who was ultimately convicted a half-century later for his role in the Holocaust, could not be prosecuted for colonial massacres, which fell under amnesty laws, but his trial did provide an opportunity for the story of October 1961 to emerge forcefully into the public sphere. I agree with Hughes that the increasing attention given to the October 1961 massacre is a welcome development (even if one that remains unfinished), as is the recognition from French presidents of active French collaboration in the Shoah.

Hughes’s second chapter turns to Germany and focuses primarily on two developments of the 1990s: the reception of Daniel Goldhagen’s best-selling *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1995) and the controversy surrounding the *Wehrmacht* exhibit, a high-profile traveling exhibition that exposed the Germany Army’s complicity in the Holocaust to a broad public for the first time. As Hughes recounts, Goldhagen’s book was first subjected to harsh critique in the intellectual press by leading German historians and political scientists, but when the book finally appeared in German in August 1996, it met with a rapturous reception. Goldhagen’s thesis that Germans—up to the Nazi period—had been afflicted with a particularly virulent form

of “eliminationist antisemitism” proved surprisingly attractive to the German public, which filled large venues in Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Munich and treated the young Jewish-American scholar as a celebrity and hero. Although Hughes recognizes that there are flaws in Goldhagen’s scholarship, she values the way his “attention on the moral issue” of perpetrator responsibility “stirred the conscience of a newly unified Germany” (36). The story of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research’s exhibition, *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1944* (1995, 2001), is a complicated one that Hughes narrates effectively. Ultimately, the point Hughes makes is the one that has solidified itself in scholarly consensus: because of the impact of the two versions of the Hamburg Institute’s traveling exhibit, “[d]enial of war crimes, including involvement in the Holocaust, had now become a revisionist position” beyond the bounds of acceptable opinion (43).

After those opening chapters, Hughes’s book takes a turn. In considering Germany, Hungary, and Poland, Hughes reveals that the seeming consensus emerging in the 1990s has become troubled by the persistent investment in narratives of national victimization and by the rise of right-wing populism. In Germany, she notes Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s renovation of the *Neue Wache* and the renewed attention to the Allied bombing of German cities that followed especially from the publication of Jörg Friedrich’s sensationalist book *Der Brand* (*The Fire*, 2002), all of which took place even as the massive Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was being planned and constructed in the center of Berlin. While most scholars see the Berlin memorial as the consolidation of German Holocaust memory and responsibility, Hughes draws attention to ongoing attempts to shift attention away from the specificity of Jewish victimhood in post-reunification Germany. The provocative fourth chapter juxtaposes a famous controversy of the 1980s—the *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Debate)—in which conservative historians such as Ernst Nolte attempted to relativize German responsibility for the Holocaust with reference to Stalinist crimes—with Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (2012), a book that tells the story of the Holocaust and Stalinist persecution in parallel. Although Snyder’s work has been controversial, I find Hughes’s attempt to make him a latter-day Nolte one-sided. Indeed, Hughes’s own narration of the *Holodomor*—the deliberate starvation of millions of Ukrainians by Stalin—is so vivid that it does not seem wrong to consider how it might be integrated into a larger history of political violence, as Snyder attempts. The final chapter turns to concerning developments in Hungary and Poland, where right-wing nationalist governments are heavy-handedly “purifying” the history of World War II to eliminate any acknowledgment of local complicity in the Holocaust. In museums such as Budapest’s House of Terror and in laws such as Poland’s 2018 bill concerning Polish complicity in Nazi genocide, Hughes correctly finds a concerning backlash against the previous consensus that, as Tony Judt once put it, Holocaust remembrance “stood as the ‘entry ticket’ into contemporary Europe” (Hughes, 1, quoting Judt).

The populist turn in memory politics—not just in Europe but also in the United States and elsewhere—is certainly concerning, but does it amount to a generalized “perversion of Holocaust memory”? To mount a convincing case for such a strong claim would require a broader and deeper engagement with the contemporary scene than Hughes can offer in this slim volume. While the examples Hughes offers are well narrated and draw on standard historiographical works, much in the way of research and public contestation over memory remains outside the frame of her book. In the past two decades, numerous scholars of memory studies and Holocaust studies have interrogated the “globalization” of Holocaust memory in the post-Cold War period and have provided a mixed account of what it means for European states and global civil society to adopt the Holocaust as a paradigm for human rights violations around the world.

The last few years have also seen the development in Germany of what has been termed the *Historikerstreit 2.0*. Although this debate, which includes international interlocutors, probably emerged after Hughes had finished her book, it nevertheless suggests that there may be another story to tell about what ails Holocaust memory in the present. Some of the

participants in this new debate, including the author of this review, have raised the question of whether the very consolidation of Holocaust memory, which Hughes celebrates in the first half of her book, might itself have led to certain “perverse” effects. At stake in that debate are the uses of Holocaust memory in the struggle over Israel/Palestine, the relation of anti-semitism to colonial and postcolonial forms of racism, and the status of memory in a multicultural, migration society. While I share Hughes’s distress about how conspiratorial and often frankly racist currents are eroding “an understanding of the past that was hard won and once widely shared” (106), I am also concerned that that hard-won understanding has itself come to produce illiberal effects.

The Perversion of Holocaust Memory offers illuminating capsule summaries of some central moments in the development of memory culture in the last thirty years, and it reminds us to keep important ethical and political questions about collective remembrance on the scholarly agenda. More research is now needed to fill out the picture and capture the contradictory complexity of our current moment.

doi:10.1017/S0008938923000754

Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum

By Katrin Sieg. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 316. Paperback \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0472055104.

Katrin Bahr

Centre College

If one looks at Katrin Sieg’s research interest in theater and performance, the reader might wonder how the research links to her current monograph. However, if one approaches the art of museum curation under the premise of performance, the book offers interesting insights into how state museums orchestrate their exhibitions to engage the audience in critical discussions about nationhood, memory, power dynamics, continuities, and the need for change.

In her book, Sieg takes a closer look at the role of European museums in the context of coming to terms with their colonial past(s). While many museums in the last two decades have focused on decolonization, critique in recent years also has addressed ownership as part of the colonial power dynamics in relation to the Global South and the continuities of such. The debate about the repatriation of human remains and the acknowledgement of the extermination of the Herero and the Nama in Namibia as a genocide is just one of those examples. Activists, such as the NoHumboldt21! campaign have also criticized museums of performative actions, claiming decolonization cannot just be part of the curatorial changes of an exhibition but also needs to be reflected within the institutional structures of a museum in terms of ethnic and racial diversity and in collaboration with scholarly expertise from the Global South.

For her survey, Sieg examined museums in Germany, France, and Belgium, among which the German History Museum (GHM) in Berlin and the House of European History (HEH) in Brussels take up most of the analysis. While she focuses primarily on the German discourse, the book offers a comparative study, which engages the reader with the various politics(s), activism(s), and cultural production(s) of other European museums and their exhibitions