

Wolff-Powęska, Anna: *Memory as Burden and Liberation. Germans and their Nazi Past (1945–2010)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang/Frankfurt am Main 2015. ISBN: 978-3-631-64051-7; 419 S.

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Anna Wolff-Powęska is a well-known Polish historian who for many years has specialised in the study of Polish-German relations. In 2011, she published in Poland a monograph on the history of German memory of World War Two.¹ Now, the international publishing company Peter Lang has brought out an English translation of this engaged and engaging book.

In the opening chapter, Wolff-Powęska provides a *tour d'horizon* of the debates and issues that have lain at the heart of memory studies, exploring on the basis of a deep knowledge of secondary literature the tensions between history and memory, as well as the relationship between memory and identity, history and politics, and media and politics. Any student of memory studies will find much here to interest and enlighten them. Yet it is a pity that Wolff-Powęska does not relate the discussions of her opening chapter, discussions which remain for the most part very general, more closely to the subject of her book: Germany.

Germany certainly takes centre stage in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2, „Between the end and the beginning“, explores post-war and (mainly West) German reactions to the Nazi legacy. Wolff-Powęska is a reliable and interesting guide to the terminological disputes over which labels might best be applied to the process of coming to terms with the past, and over the actual meaning of terms such as „Vergangenheitsbewältigung“. She follows these disputes through to the „Historikerstreit“, before turning to questions of guilt and shame – or their avoidance – and the various approaches adopted to overcoming or circumnavigating them. The final sections of the chapter explore German „defensive strategies“ designed to avoid facing up to levels of complicity in Nazi perpetration, strategies that were surprisingly diverse and

wide-ranging, as Wolff-Powęska shows us with great acuity. Chapter 3 explores the divided memory in the two German postwar states. Sections of this owe much to the work of Jeffrey Herf², but Wolff-Powęska is still able to shed new light. Thus she provides interesting insights into the way the continued division of Germany had the effect of delaying discussion of what form national identity might take given the effects of rabid German nationalism under Hitler. She also provides an interesting account of the Fritz Fischer debate.

The final two chapters take us, overall, closer to the present. Chapter 4 looks at the by now quite well-known post-unification debates about Nazism, and memory of Nazism, triggered by the Wehrmacht exhibitions, the Goldhagen debate, the debate over Martin Walser's speech on receipt of the Frankfurt Book Fair Prize, and the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. Chapter 5 considers the 8 May anniversaries in Germany, another subject that is not exactly new. Wolff-Powęska nevertheless is able to provide new perspectives along the way, particularly as regards the 1995 commemorations and their international, conciliatory character. The final chapter also explores commemoration of „Reichskristallnacht“, and concludes with a fascinating section on German memory of the Nazi campaign against, occupation of and treatment of Poland. Wolff-Powęska is quite right to emphasise how continuing prejudices against Poles, especially in the climate of the Cold War, blocked empathy with Polish victims in West Germany. One would have wished, though, for more consideration of the question of how East Germany remembered the Nazi occupation of Poland and crimes against Poles.

For the most part, Wolff-Powęska provides a positive overview of the development of German memory. Her book will thus serve to counteract tendencies in today's Poland to doubt whether Germans have really endeavoured to come to terms with its past. For this reason alone, it is important. Sadly, though,

¹ Anna Wolff-Powęska, *Pamięć – brzemień i uwolnienie. Niemcy wobec nazistowskiej przeszłości (1945–2010)*, Poznań 2011.

² Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge 1997.

the weak quality of the English translation may well stand in the way of a wide reception in Western Europe and the English-speaking world generally. Poor syntax, grammatical and lexical errors, as well as misspellings abound. Metaphors which presumably work in Polish are carried over into English, without consideration of whether they work in English (thus on page 46, we are informed that „sundry lay preachers treat the past as a stretchy bag“, while on page 130, one is alarmed to read that Sebastian Haffner performed „vivisection on his own example“).

Moreover, for all that the book offers a wealth of information and many insights – Wolff-Powęska knows her subject inside out – it would have benefited from a sharper thesis and supporting argument. As suggested earlier, stronger links might have been forged between the richly theoretical opening chapter, and the following chapters which home in on Germany. While Wolff-Powęska bases her book on a wide range of important secondary literature (but not archival research), one does miss references to the work of non-German scholars who have worked on coming to terms with Nazism. Also, it would have been helpful had the author set her own ideas in contrast to pre-existing secondary literature, in order to render her own position – and its originality – clearer to the reader. This would have been particularly important given that the debates and issues she discusses are arguably far better known in Germany and in the English-speaking world – the target of the translation – than they are to the Polish public, for whom the original Polish version was intended. These caveats notwithstanding, Wolff-Powęska’s book has much to recommend it, and it is to be hoped that potential readers will not be put off by the awkward translation.

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