Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil by Susan Neiman (review)

Manfred Berg

Journal of Southern History, Volume 86, Number 3, August 2020, pp. 762-763 (Review)

Published by The Southern Historical Association
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2020.0231*

Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil. By Susan Neiman. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. Pp. [x], 415. $30.00, ISBN 978-0-374-18446-9.)

Can Americans learn from the Germans how to come to terms with their own history of racism? Susan Neiman, an American philosopher and currently the director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, passionately argues that Germany's twisted history of "working-off" the Nazi past may offer guidance to other nations—not because the Germans did everything right but, to the contrary, because "the failures of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* [working-off or coming to terms with the past] . . . should give hope to other nations facing similar problems" (p. 26). The author emphasizes that no particular national history provides simple lessons. And yet, by critically contrasting the German and American experiences with confronting the evils of the past, Neiman hopes "to encourage a discussion of guilt and responsibility as serious as the German one" (p. 38).

Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil is not primarily a comparative history of memory cultures or a systematic inquiry into the moral and legal problems of atoning for historical injustice. Instead, the book is informed by manifold personal experiences and perspectives, which the author collected in interviews she conducted on both sides of the Atlantic. Neiman's story is also deeply personal. She grew up as a Jewish American in the segregated South and later moved to Berlin to study German philosophy. After teaching at Yale and Tel Aviv Universities, she returned to Berlin, where she has lived for most of her adult life. Thus, the author often reflects on why she decided to make the former capital of the Nazi empire her home. Her short answer is that, by facing up to Germany's horrible past and developing a critical self-perception, Germans have transformed themselves and made their country a better place for everyone. In Neiman's view, the admission of one million refugees in the fall of 2015 can be seen as a direct consequence of these efforts. Although anti-Semitism and racism remain ugly facts of life in Germany, the author argues that the reactions of both the authorities and the general public compare favorably to how Americans deal with such incidents.

The book begins by probing the record of how the two post–World War II German states dealt with the Nazi legacy before Germany's reunification in 1990. Neiman's argument is straightforward and provocative: "East Germany did a better job of working off the Nazi past than West Germany" (p. 81). Supposedly, East Germany not only dealt resolutely and harshly with Nazi criminals, but also instilled a genuine spirit of antifascism into its citizens, whereas West Germany was dominated by former Nazis. Although Neiman raises a few caveats about East German antifascism as a state ideology, her account comes close to validating East Germany's official self-image as the better German state. Ironically, Neiman, who sharply criticizes the endurance of Lost Cause mythology in the United States South, seems to subscribe to an East German Lost Cause narrative, according to which East Germany would have deserved a second chance as a reformed socialist country had it not been ruthlessly taken over by neoliberal West German carpetbaggers.

Reckoning with Nazi history did not come naturally to the Germans. In the immediate postwar years, a majority saw themselves as victims rather than as people who were responsible for Nazism. However, remembering the Nazi period as a Lost Cause would have been impossible. Total military defeat, unprecedented national shame, and universal international contempt left the Germans with no alternative to a long and conflicted process of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*. In contrast, during her field work in Mississippi, Neiman found that the Lost Cause mythology continues to shape historical consciousness and inform the politics of many white people, while African Americans struggle to put their memories on the map. In the American South, countless monuments revere the defenders of slavery, whereas in Germany, memorials honor the victims and opponents of Nazism. Furthermore, Germany has paid substantial reparations to both the state of Israel and to individual victims of the Holocaust, but most white Americans reject the very idea that the United States owes a debt to the descendants of slaves. Not surprisingly, black activists who demand material redress and symbolic recognition for slavery and segregation often praise Germany as model.

During his interview with Neiman, civil rights veteran James Meredith wondered what lessons the German case might entail for American activists. *Learning from the Germans* offers no clear-cut answers beyond the message that working off a shameful history is possible and benefits everyone. Whether Americans, for whom defeating the Nazis perhaps marks the finest hour of their history, can be persuaded to emulate the Germans remains to be seen.

Heidelberg University MANFRED BERG

Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century. By Nicole Maurantonio. CultureAmerica. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. Pp. xxiv, 236. $32.50, ISBN 978-0-7006-2869-8.)

As monuments to the Lost Cause of the defeated Confederacy have come under increasing criticism, it is easy to think of them as antiquated—out of time and out of place. Crafted in stone and bronze, topped by mythological figures, and bedecked with opaque symbols, the monuments perhaps conveyed their meanings more readily to nineteenth-century Americans schooled in the classics. In *Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century*, however, Nicole Maurantonio reveals that the Lost Cause is far from obsolete. Not only do its defenders work to preserve the memorials constructed by their forebears, but also they have rebranded the Lost Cause for the new millennium.

In order to understand how fundamentally inaccurate interpretations of Confederate history have gained widespread acceptance, Maurantonio examines the appeal of "Confederate exceptionalism"—a melding of the Lost Cause memory of the Civil War and the ideology of American exceptionalism (p. 2). By employing this framework, Maurantonio argues, neo-Confederates have normalized the Confederacy and invited others to empathize with its history. By adopting a neoliberal posture of race-blindness and refusing to acknowledge the inherent racism of the Confederacy, they depict themselves as the inheritors