

4-15-2003

Review of The culture of defeat : on national trauma, mourning, and recovery

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Recommended Citation

The Culture of Defeat (Book). By: Russo, Michael F., *Library Journal*, 03630277, 4/15/2003, Vol. 128, Issue 7

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LJ Review Cover Sheet and Survey

Your name: Michael F. Russo

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Title of the book: *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*

Author or editor of the book: Wolfgang Schivelbusch

Translated by Jefferson Chase

This book is recommended for: academic libraries

Comments for your editor:

Review

Author: Wolfgang Schivelbusch

Title: *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*

Publisher: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company

Release date: April 16, 2003

Number of pages: 448 pages.

Features: Annotated

Format: Hard cover

ISBN: 0-8050-4421-3

Price: \$27.50

Schivelbusch has produced an anthology of failure not unlike Barbara Tuchman's 1984 *The March of Folly*. Both books attempt to analyze national military disasters in light of national and personal psychological factors. But, whereas Tuchman's book looks at military disaster as the result of twisted thinking, *The Culture of Defeat* uses defeat as a starting point in the transformation of the losers of three historic conflicts: the American South after the Civil War, France following its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and Germany following its loss in World War I.

According to the author, nations cope with colossal military failure by creating myths about themselves and their cultures and by re-casting their defeat as a kind of vindication of their cultural superiority. In positing this analysis, Schivelbusch, without explicitly referring to it, evokes Freud's repetition-compulsion as a mechanism nations use to metamorphose their military losses into moral victories.

Schivelbusch also asserts that for the victor in each of these conflicts, winning was not always winning: the victor's attitudes and ways of doing things tended to become assimilated into the culture of its foe, leading to the dissipation and even death of the winner's own culture.

This is an interesting and readable account of national character in military defeat and is recommended for academic libraries.

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