

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

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Review

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Schivelbusch, Wolfgang *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. Metropolitan Books, \$27.50 ISBN 805044213

Fascination with Failure

Lost wars inform collective memory

Why is defeat often more interesting than victory? Why is tragedy sometimes more compelling to the historical imagination than success by arms or economic prowess? Why or how does failed heroism, when fashioned into the right kind of narrative, fascinate us? And does failed evil fascinate us even more? Are loss and defeat what ultimately link the great modern themes of war and memory in history, literature, and commemoration? Indeed, is it on the dark side of the human story where military and cultural history meet in a dance of the dead?

The popular German historian, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, has written an ambitious comparative study of the psychological and cultural fallout of three great defeats during half century in which modern warfare overtook the world: the American South in the Civil War; the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71; and the Germans in World War I. Schivelbusch is very much interested in mass psychology, collective memory, and the controlling power of myths as the foundational stories of nations. For those not prepared to accept the real existence and function of symbols, or the idea of collective trauma, this book may be exasperating in its generalizations about national psychologies and cultural tendencies that sometimes speed across the page with an ease reminiscent of the old myth and symbol school of American Studies. But for those ready to accept a study of the myths that drive a psychology of defeat this book is rewarding and stimulating.

American readers are relatively familiar with the story of the Confederacy losing on the battlefields of Virginia and Georgia in 1864-65, but with time

winning a kind of cultural victory in the struggle to determine the meaning and memory of the Civil War. Why and how such a turn-about occurred, and its costs in American race relations, however, have not been as popular a theme in American historiography or in popular historical tastes as soldierly sacrifice and the drama of wartime defeat and victory. Schivelbusch's approach is, therefore, especially useful to readers on this, the less comparative and more insular side of the Atlantic.

The short, but very bloody, Franco Prussian War erupted in July, 1870, when Emperor Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. At the pivotal battle of Sedan, September 2, 1870, Napoleon III was himself captured and the French surrendered in humiliation. During the conflict, including the Prussian siege of Paris, October, 1870-January, 1871, 80,000 Frenchmen died. After a French provisional government, declaring the Third Republic and resurrecting memories of the first French Revolution, accepted Prussian terms, including the loss of the province of Alsace-Lorraine, the Paris Commune exploded in the streets between March and May, 1871. Another 30,000 Frenchmen, roughly one of every thirty Parisians, died in this urban and class civil war. For the next generation and more, as Schivelbusch demonstrates, the French engaged in a wrenching debate over how to forge moral victories out of military defeats, how best to achieve *La Revanche* (revenge or redress) against the Germans and against their own humiliation. The modern French nation seemed to emerge out of a mythology of necessary defeat, of glorious, educative failure rooted in both fantasy and ideology.

The German defeat in the Great War is, of course, so often linked to the eventual rise of Nazism, the Third Reich, Hitler's obsession with destroying the Jews as the scapegoat for the German national humiliation of 1918, the inflationary economy of the early 1920s, and the massive depression of the early 1930s. These familiar threads are visible in Schivelbusch's tapestry of the Weimar period. But his primary concern is not the rise of Hitler; rather, he charts a path through the mass psychology of defeat among the Wilhelminian generation (German leadership born between 1853 and 1865) and cultural borrowings from America. Those expecting to find the story of the rise of Hitler's jack-booted Gestapo in the aftermath of the German capitulation in World War I will find instead a theory of the collective nervous breakdown on the part of German leadership, and the eventual influence of the Americans Frederick Taylor (prophet of Taylorism, or efficiency in production and management) and Henry Ford (prophet of mass production, order, and consumer

wish-fulfillment). Schivelbusch's Weimar is a society that lost its ballast, wandering with vertigo, dancing away its despair, and still mired in national mythologies of a proud military that could only have laid down its arms so far inside enemy territory because of a stab in the back from traitors in the rear.

This is in the end a book about how defeated peoples re-imagine their loss as injustice, how actual losers can, by their own self-fashioning, become moral winners. This is where Schivelbusch finds mythology essential. Southerners, he contends, were conditioned to forge a Lost Cause culture because they interpreted their history through the knightly romanticism of so many Sir Walter Scott novels. France processed its defeats in a narrative drawn from the epic, *The Song of Roland*, the story of knightly martyrdom, the hero or heroine (Joan of Arc) dead but undefeated. And the Germans above all, according to Schivelbusch, were a people never quite un-tethered from the *Nibelungenlied* after Richard Wagner had reinvented the story of Siegfried, the bright German hero murdered by a dark (Semitic) conspiracy and Hagen's treacherous spear. Wagner's *Ring* did have enormous sway over the German imagination, as it still does for lovers of grand opera, or for that matter, lovers of operatic versions of history. But when Schivelbusch renders his comparative story in formulaic types, the work begs for more explanation and less cultural determinism. Labels are not explanation. Schivelbusch is surely on to an important element in the cultures of defeat in these three countries, but the South as Walter Scotland, France, as Rolandland, and Germany as Nibelungenland need more in the way of deep research to really work as persuasive explications of Lost Cause mentalities.

The **Culture of Defeat** loses focus at times under the burden of its own generalizations. Schivelbusch delivers a rather simplistic view of the end of Reconstruction in America, and his understanding of how a southern version of the Civil War became a national, or northern, trophy needs to be placed in a richer context of the racial ideology at the root of the Lost Cause. The myth of the loyal slave may have been just as important as any number of Scott's knights in forging a cultural reunion between white northerners and southerners. But the value of this book rests in its suggestiveness and its provocative claims about how national mythologies are forged in and reinforced by wars won and lost. It is an admirable cautionary tale of how tragically divided nations will retreat into culture, rather than military or even political power initially, to find consolation for their defeats. In loss and defeat we find the lethal power of memory as both the cause and effect of modern war. And in bold comparative history, Americans may find a healthy corrective for the innocence and mythology at the root of

their own nation's master narrative of glory and progress.

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