

Central and Eastern European Review

Neil Gregor, *Haunted City. Nuremberg and the Nazi Past*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008. ISBN978-0-300-10107-2. Pp. xvi + 390.

The subject matter of this book is, in a number of ways, surprising. A study that takes Nuremberg as its focus might be expected to discuss party rallies and the trials of major war criminals. Neil Gregor's interests lie elsewhere, however. As he puts it, he is examining 'the formation and working of an urban memory culture' in so far as it contributes to 'the wider post-war social history of the community' (8). He argues that in the wake of the Second World War, civic memory was not driven solely, perhaps not even chiefly, by the desire to suppress difficult truths about the past, but also by the clear need of individuals to interpret and find meaning in their own experiences of suffering, not to say the multiple dislocations they faced. Gregor maintains that the way these stories of the past were forged did not so much reflect the remains of a social consensus rooted in what was left of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, but reflected efforts by community leaders to re-gain a cohesion largely lost as a result of different experiences of war, defeat and subsequent chaos. In this context, a shared sense of victimhood 'became the means by which a shattered, divided, conflict-ridden society re-established itself as a functioning community with a renewed sense of civic identity' (13).

The argument is pursued in a four-phase structure which is largely chronological. The first section examines how ideas of victimhood permeated popular thought during the period of occupation until the early years of reconstruction. Then discussion turns to the emergence of memory cultures in the 1950s and the way these bridged post-war social cleavages to create a functioning community. Thirdly Gregor reveals how greater self-criticism entered the public arena in the late 1950s, although the study ends by exploring some of the failures to deal properly with the true enormity of what Germany's government achieved during the war itself.

The book displays graphically the manifold hardships, sufferings and complexities of German society after 1945. In Nuremberg, for instance, 50% of the housing stock was either destroyed or badly damaged during 40 war-time air raids, while refugees (ethnic Germans from the East and other nationalities fleeing Stalin's troops) flooded into the ruins (38-9). As if this were not enough, of course 30-40,000 former soldiers returned to the city until they numbered 10% of its inhabitants (63). The latter particular, we learn, carried within them stories which were radically different to the dominant community narratives of conflict as involving adventure,

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heroism and sacrifice (70–1). Meanwhile, by 1947, 15,000 former inhabitants of Nuremberg were still listed as unreturned POWs or else were officially ‘missing’ (83). Further complexity was added to society by the de-nazification process, marginalising those who had participated in the Third Reich, not to say the residence in the city of thousands of former foreign workers drafted to Germany and now unwilling to return to homelands dominated by Communist regimes. Rather fewer Jews, in fact just 40, survived in Nuremberg by virtue of living in mixed marriages, while only about 100 Jews returned from camps in the East. We learn that these people largely kept themselves to themselves in the post-war world (109).

Early public statements commemorating the past dealt with national mourning and then the destruction of the city. It was a challenge for the mayor, who was a Social Democrat, to achieve a narrative that satisfied most of the groups inhabiting Nuremberg, even if his efforts did ignore the Jews (198). Time and again it was emphasised that the city as a whole had become a victim of the war (205), even if this amounted to a ‘victim discourse’ for a community of former perpetrators. This trend proved hard to challenge so that, for instance, the community showed a lack of interest in trials of concentration camp guards and the local press published very little about prosecution of *Einsatzgruppen* members, even when the trials were happening locally (251). A significant change in attitude did not occur until the 1960s when paintings were displayed in the city by a survivor of Auschwitz (271)—although even then it was accompanied by a speech explaining that those responsible for the Final Solution had been criminals and murderers (271).

In other words, this is an interesting book. It shows graphically how suffering can blind you to the difficulties faced by other. At 400 pages, though, it is too long. Tighter editing would have increased its power. Also there is a sense that it says too much about institutions and not enough about individuals. The reader cannot help but feel that some of the mayors mentioned here would have merited more detailed analysis. But, nonetheless, this is a good book full of ideas well worth discussing.

Martyn Housden

University of Bradford.