

WERNER SOLLORS, *The Temptation of Despair: Tales of the 1940s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014), 400pp.

Distance may distort our view on history. In the case of the post-World War II era, the success story of German economic recovery and democratic reeducation has come to dominate our understanding of the emergence of the postwar order. We focus on the outcome, a prosperous Federal Republic of Germany re-integrated into Western Europe, rather than being aware of the utterly vanquished country staggering out of the catastrophe of the war and its atrocities. In taking us back to the general atmosphere and the common experiences of ordinary people (Germans, Americans, Europeans, survivors of the Holocaust, soldiers, refugees, etc.) living in occupied Germany in the years from 1945 to 1948, Sollors recaptures a past that is by now unfamiliar to most of us, especially the younger generation. His *Tales of the 1940s* draw on a wide variety of sources, including published and unpublished personal documents such as letters, (revised) diaries and (*post festum* edited) autobiographies; various media, such as newspaper articles, photographs, cartoons; official data, such as the famous denazification questionnaire, government statistics and reports; as well as fictional narratives in the form of novels, short stories, and movies. Instead of expressing relief of having survived devastation, all these contemporary voices convey a deep sense of suffering either experienced or witnessed, and, consequently, they disseminate a mood of profound anguish. The tales they tell are deeply upsetting. As Sollors explains, the expression ‘the temptation of despair’ occurs in Georges Bernanos’s 1926 novel *Sous le soleil de Satan*. Grappling with the Christian deadly sin of losing hope, it obviously hit the nerve of the postwar decade, so that the German translation *Die Sonne Satans*—published in a rororo paperback edition in 1950—instantly became a bestseller (7).

*The Temptation of Despair* is far from being yet another history of postwar Germany. Each of the six chapters focuses on significant everyday-life experiences—liberation, life in ruins, confrontation with the notion of collective guilt, denazification, black market, etc.—as each chapter takes its departure from a specific date that in turn is connected to a particular source. Chapter two, for example, is entitled “May 7, 1945,” a date that refers not

only to the capitulation of Germany but also to the publication of *Life* magazine’s cover story on “The German People,” which contained an iconic photograph by the English documentary photographer George Rodger with the caption “A small boy strolls down a road lined with dead bodies near camp at Belsen.” In the context of the documentation of liberated concentration camps, the image was primarily read allegorically: the boy was taken to represent the German people in that he averted his gaze instead of confronting the horrors (cf. 64). This interpretation remained prevalent even after the boy’s identity had been revealed in the 1990s: Sieg Maandag was a Dutch Jewish boy, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen!

Sollors proceeds by accumulating a great number of heterogeneous testimonies, documents, and literary and visual representations that provide different viewpoints, thus ever more widening our horizon by looking both backward and forward in time. Yet the most interesting aspect of the author’s method is that he approaches the collected material like an ethnographer in the tradition of Clifford Geertz. In trying to understand the Other, who in this case does not belong to a foreign culture but to familiar culture groups that are only removed from us by time, Sollors creates a ‘thick description’ that aims at making accessible the perceptions and dispositions of the numerous uprooted people whose paths cross in postwar Germany. *The Temptation of Despair* is a fundamental rewriting of the customary version of German-American postwar relations that focuses on the liberators’ gifts to a grateful population. And since this version is one of the cherished cornerstones of American Studies in Germany, Sollors’s eye-opening exploration is an essential publication for German Americanists.

In the course of each chapter the description increases in thickness so that it becomes more and more complex. The growing complexity does not primarily derive from clashing political positions or worldviews (except for Chapter four, which in a fascinating juxtaposition characterizes the diverging careers and opposing views of the constitutional theorists Karl Loewenstein and Carl Schmitt) but from displaying the intricate moral problematic inherent in the respective themes and the controversies they have prompted. While the author is obviously responsible for selecting the testimonies that generate such complex

narratives, he refrains from judging the assembled voices and instead limits himself to posing very poignant, haunting questions. As a consequence, the reader is confronted with the challenge of coming to terms with serious moral issues that he or she is likely to see in a new light as the allegedly clear boundaries between right and wrong become blurred.

This makes for an engaging reading process that in turn is enhanced by an autobiographical level interwoven into the narrative. After all, Sollors, born in 1944, was part of the trek of refugees from Silesia. Later he was one of the many German children enjoying African American soldiers' gifts of chocolate and friendly smiles (cf. 201). However, Sollors very carefully keeps his explorations into postwar German culture separate from the occasional glimpses at his family's personal story: what he calls "parenthetical insertions" (47) are both bracketed and set in italics. Yet, having thus established formal distance, Sollors does not refrain from expressing his anguish at some of these painful memories. And again, while he himself stays in the background of the historical stage, he vicariously foregrounds the children's lot in this disrupting and distressing environment

of the immediate postwar years, be it in the story of Sieg Mandaag, in photographs of children dancing ring-a-ring-a-roses in the ruins of Frankfurt am Main, or in the story of Elfie, daughter of an African American G.I. and a German woman, turned into the movie *Toxi* in 1952. In his subtle analyses, the author confronts us with an emotionally and morally charged atmosphere typical both of the historical sources and the cultural work produced at the time. With infallible tact he shares with us the rich sense of (most often black) humor that he found in abundance in the works of contemporary commentators, writers, photographers, and filmmakers. Most likely, readers will answer Sollors's last question whether "black humor [could] be an effective secular way of fending off the devils of despair or make them at least hide under the bed for a while?" (287) in the affirmative. I would add that Sollors's own sense of humor, which allows him, for instance, to highlight the absurdities inherent in some of the horrific, heartrending tales, offers comic relief that makes us overcome the temptation of despair.

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