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germany,
difficult **heimat**

KLAUS NEUMANN

*Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New
Germany*

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This book is largely about West Germany, whose confused sense of identity long had to defer to the sensitivities of the outside (Western) world. There is an instant discrepancy in writing a review about a book interrogating a country where for decades little beyond a 'black armband' version of history was deemed tolerable. In Australia, shifting memories have been dammed at the highest level by a refusal to countenance a 'black armband' version of our own history. Yet affinities may extend past mere architectural parallels between our new National Museum and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. They certainly reach to one of the finest novels about postwar Germany, Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001), written by a young author whose father is Australian. The subject matter of Klaus Neumann's book also has implications far beyond Germany, just as its case studies, and then its reflections on the discourses emerging from these, go far beyond a reworking of all-too-familiar territory.

For a start, *Shifting Memories* lends real historical depth to themes more often present in popularised form. The banality of evil pervades many of these studies without being reducible to such a catchphrase, and hence its presence is all the more insidious. Where Vilsmaier's film *The Comedian Harmonists* pleads for the German-ness of these celebrated musicians (who also visited Australia) on the cusp of the Nazi take-over, Neumann throughout stresses the German-ness of German Jews, then and now. While the question of how the nation of Goethe and Schiller could be capable of the Shoah can provoke a parading of aesthetic and ethical outrage, Chapter 8 grounds and thereby legitimates the

question with a superb appraisal of Weimar—the centre of Weimar classicism, of the republic whose failure led directly to the Third Reich, and of Buchenwald. But also Weimar, the European Cultural City of 1999.

Beyond the usual apparatus, a useful glossary of German terms and abbreviations enhances the book. Its one technical blemish to my mind is that cross-referencing to other chapters is sometimes awkward. It ranges across a number of German place names, combining the already demonised—Ravensbrück, Buchenwald—with others that have no particular connotations with regard to the Nazi past. But that is precisely the point, the interchangeability of case studies, their spread across a whole postwar landscape, their relevance for whole communities beyond memorial sites, law courts, and archives. And for an economical volume wisely dealing with more or less representative examples, the ground covered is impressive.

In Chapter 2, 'A *Hasenjagd* in Celle', the author reminds us of a major time lapse in memory from roughly the late 1940s to the 1980s. Elsewhere he also readjusts any notion that the 'incapacity to mourn', as the Mitscherlichs called it, set in immediately after the war (for example, the dedication of the Lappenberg memorial in Hildesheim). By this timeframe, memories were not just a product of greater immediacy, but of de-Nazification processes from outside. The author's birthplace, Hildesheim, receives a broad social history analysis. From this emerge clearer contours of the 'reception' of the Shoah, far beyond debates about the limits of representation. At the same time, some of the bolder claims reinforce the unenviable choices facing Germans

in confronting the past—damned if they do, damned if they don't. 'The physical reconstruction of pre-Nazi Germany is to deny a loss and make the past unhappen': (89) at least the second half of this assertion is hard to square with architectural fidelity outside Germany (for example, the Old Town Square of Warsaw).

The author's gaze extends beyond the Shoah to other groups often eclipsed by its historical shadow, to a range of nationals working at the Salzgitter Reichswerke, and to survivors of the camps. To balance the opening of this review, Neumann also broaches the important topic of 'The East German State and the Shoah 1955–90'. (119ff.) He further implies historical arches without overkill: he retains the German *Ruhe* for a civic orderliness, which also evokes the uppermost duty of the trusty nineteenth-century *Bürger*. But the vestige of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism in *lex sanguinis* definitions of German-ness could have evoked a far stronger sense of notions of identity still flavoured, for any outside view, by the Nazi past.

For much of this book the style is not unlike Peter Weiss's inexorable masterpiece of short prose, *Meine Ortschaft [My Place]*, in which the author documents the outer reality of the site of Auschwitz, twenty years after war's end, as someone destined to end there himself, but whose appointment with destiny had failed to materialise. Without in any sense succumbing to national (self-)loathing, Neumann is unsparing. But just as Weiss's autobiographical narrator is ultimately unable to separate his subject matter from outer emotion, with a rumination on the total senselessness of it all, Neumann is strongly affected by the case of the twenty children of

Bullenhuser Damm, his apt choice for attempting to 'remember and mourn those murdered in the genocides of Jews, Sinti, and Roma' (137) via representative figures, rather than through unfathomable statistics. This is the real focus of Neumann's approach to his own process of documentation, the underpinning of memories that may shift, but must not be allowed to reduce to a faceless abstraction. His earlier tone, often outwardly dispassionate, is forsaken totally as he bares his own emotions, and his simultaneous distrust of them, when he first visits the site of the children's murder. His whole enterprise, realised so successfully in this book, is conveyed in a mix of defiance and respect: 'Those remembering the children today foil the intention of the SS. Every occasion when their names are recited contradicts their murderers' scheme.' (155)

As the book progresses, the author abstracts more discourses from his welter of materials, while also drawing together the threads of his own discourse of moralising, in a still-respectable sense. The in-built historical freshness of memorials is their ongoing reception; the layers of response they accrue, an archaeology of identity politics. The more theoretical issues opened up by this book hold for related areas like museum studies. Compare Dipesh Chakrabarty's description of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, the once 'mixed' neighbourhood that was 'whitened' in apartheid days: 'Started in 1994, the museum developed into a site for communal memory, not a nostalgic monument to a dead past but a living memory that is part of the struggle against racism in post-Apartheid South Africa.'¹ Elsewhere in the same article the claim

is made that 'a disciplinary unease exists between the field of memory and academic history'.² *Shifting Memories* is not conventional academic history, and yet it is to be hoped that it will have a regenerative influence on academic history.

Going beyond the book's chosen frame are issues that would lend those treated here still further contours: memorialisation as an institution in Germany, extending to the celebratory pathos of the Wilhelminian era; the place of memorialisation in other European countries, particularly those which have faced their past less than Germany has; further contextualisation of these discourses among others in everyday life in Germany of the 1990s and the new millennium; different aspects of 'The Nazi Past in the New Germany' such as Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag; the effect of greater European integration on the national elements of such discourses; and perhaps the treatment of these shifting memories in the arts (Verhoeven's film *The Nasty Girl*, plus Marcel Ophüls' *Hotel Terminus*, for a start).

In the closing pages the author lifts the veil a little on his own identity, beyond the snippets that have slipped out along the way. 'I have written this book as somebody who for many years has lived outside Germany but grew up as a non-Jewish German'. (259) This formulation alone is typical of the book's understated incivility, the tacit reminder by inversion of a stage of history when to be Jewish was deemed to be non-German. The back cover completes the picture: 'Klaus Neumann ... has lived for most of his adult life in Australia, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand', which frames his ideal perspective for the complex subject matter,

as insider and outsider to German society, again implying the spectrum through which Jewish self-identification must have hurtled across the decade or two of the Nazi millennium. Neumann gives a number of suggestions for future directions his impulses might take, but leaves no illusions about the difficulty of the terrain:

By retreating into an indifferent silence (or by keeping up a chatter about the crimes of Nazi Germany), by making heroes out of members of the antifascist German resistance (or by vilifying them on account of their political beliefs), by not listening to survivors (or by listening to them only in order to hear one's own heartbeat), and by designing elaborate tombstones (or by neglecting to look after existing cemeteries), Germans have attempted to bury 'Auschwitz.' They may have thereby hoped to escape from responsibility. (261–62)

Klaus Neumann's book appears in the wide-ranging series 'Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany'. It is, however, mandatory reading far beyond this cluster of disciplines. A couple of months ago there was a single entry in the 'In Memory' column of the *Canberra Times*, and no doubt in many papers around the world. Black-bordered, the two non-English words in bold, it read: 'YIZKOR/ (REMEMBER)/ KRISTALLNACHT/ 9–10 Nov 1938/ NEVER AGAIN'. This book does a remarkable job in tracking the historically shifting memories of what, as a historical necessity, must remain both in collective and personal memory.

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1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Museums in Late Democracies', *Humanities Research* vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, p. 10.
 2. Chakrabarty, p. 8.