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Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. vii, 259. ISBN 978-1-107-67495-0.

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History must serve many masters, from governments with vested interests in a particular view of the past to peoples seeking a deeper connection with their heritage. In *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II*, Thomas Berger (Boston Univ.) attempts to formulate a viable theoretical framework for understanding how three societies wove the terrible events of the Second World War into their history.

Since this is a work of political science and postwar international relations, historians approaching it should be prepared for a heavy dose of theory. The author provides three compelling case studies—of Germany, Austria, and Japan—using a “historical realist” framework to elucidate the creation of national histories. Historical realism combines elements of three perspectives: determinist, instrumentalist, and cultural—each, in Berger’s view, inadequate in itself. Historical determinism neglects the agency of individuals in history. Instrumentalism focuses too exclusively on elite power brokers in a top-down conception of a nation’s history. And cultural history does not take account of the state’s need to shape the memory and construction of its past. Historical realism takes something from each to gain a more holistic understanding of how a people’s history develops.

Each of the selected states had to deal with the political and personal effects of losing the Second World War. Besides recovering from the physical destruction of the conflict, each had to install a new political structure. The resulting governments had distinct imperatives in interpreting the war. Despite their differences, Berger identifies enough similarities to allow him to formulate certain overarching principles about creating historical narratives.

Initially, only Germany among the three target nations openly showed remorse over its role in the war. The state’s leaders participated in public displays of penitence, including war crimes tribunals. But the populace itself was not content with the official penitential narrative. Germans felt just as victimized as other peoples who suffered during the war; nor were they inclined to continually pay for the crimes of leaders no longer in power in Germany. With the coming of the Cold War, however, citizens of both West and East Germany had to placate their geopolitical benefactors—respectively, the western allies and the USSR—by admitting their role in instigating the war instead of seeking sympathy for their own suffering. Later, as the war generation aged, younger Germans, who had not directly experienced the carnage of the war, were more willing, quite apart from external pressures, to make public displays of remorse over Germany’s role. Then, after the Cold War, a still younger generation of a reunited Germany saw the advantages of taking a repentant line about the Second World War in writing their new nation’s history.

The postwar Austrian political elite did not see their state as an instigator of the conflict and portrayed themselves rather as the Third Reich’s first victims, undeserving of the international opprobrium Germany so richly merited. Although Austria did agree to pay restitutions to its Jewish victims, it was decades before either the state or its people began to admit their part in World War II. By focusing attention on the impact of the war’s destruction on their country, Austrians exonerated themselves of blame for complicity in German war crimes. This unwillingness to take responsibility continued in the absence of international pressure.

Although Austria did not initially face much pressure to apologize for its role in Nazi atrocities, outside pressures eventually forced some Austrian leaders, especially after the Cold War, to assume a more contrite posture than had their predecessors. This required them to convince their people that it was worthwhile to challenge and change the traditional narrative of victimhood that Austria had embraced in the immediate postwar period.

From the perspective of Berger's historical realism, outside forces can significantly alter a nation's historical self-conception. This is true even when the political elite recognizes that the international consensus runs counter to the domestically preferred and established national narrative. Berger's model effectively accounts for both internal and external influences on the evolution of a historical viewpoint espoused by a state and its population.

Japan felt less need to confront its culpability for wartime offenses in the same manner as Austria or Germany. Although Japanese oppression of its neighbors had been abhorrently brutal, it fit the colonial paradigm of the early twentieth century, unlike National Socialism, which offered no easy comparison. Also, because Japan was important for East Asian regional security, there was not, to begin with, as much momentum for the country to come to terms with its wartime past. With the end of the Cold War, however, came pressure from the world community for Japan to atone for or at least acknowledge its past.

Of the three nations discussed, Germany, Berger's main focus, had the most disturbing past to address in a relevant historical narrative acceptable both to German national pride and the demands of the international community for honest contrition.

Is it more plausible to argue that the Federal Republic's highly public display of remorse is a carefully calculated ploy designed to serve German national interests—as a cynical proponent of the Instrumentalist position would be likely to argue? Such an interpretation would be consistent with the Historical Determinism proposition that the magnitude of the atrocities committed by a country in the past should translate into powerful pressures for their acknowledgement. Or, as the Historical Realist position maintains, is it a combination of these factors unfolding over time that determines both the official narrative and its impact on politics in general? (37)

The paragraph's last question is, of course, rhetorical.

While Berger's comprehensive methodology—historical realism—yields an astute explanation of the formulation of national narratives, historians will find his book much stronger on political theory and international relations than on detailed historical analysis.¹ They will nevertheless benefit from his case studies of Germany, Austria, and Japan as each struggled to define its role, for better or worse, in the Second World War.

1. For which, see, e.g., Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (NY: Norton, 2000), and Geoffrey Robertson, *Crimes against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice*, 4th ed. (NY: New Pr, 2013).