



Fairfield University
DigitalCommons@Fairfield

History Faculty Publications

History Department

2-2003

Review of "Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich" by Bill Niven

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld
Fairfield University, grosenfeld@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs>

Copyright 2003 Gavriel Rosenfeld.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel D., "Review of "Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich" by Bill Niven" (2003). *History Faculty Publications*. 47.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/47>

Published Citation

Rosenfeld, G. (2003) Review of "Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich" by Bill Niven in: *German Studies Review*, February, 2003, pp. 237-39.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

debates about immigration policy and racist violence.

The strengths of this book include the fact that it is written by somebody looking at Germany from outside who attempts to apply mostly non-German (Canadian, British, American) approaches to the specific German situation (recognizing that such applications are not always feasible) and the wide variety of considered materials and sources, along with multidisciplinary approaches to them. Equally informative are an insightful critique of the vicissitudes of the discourse on nationhood and a thorough account of major aspects of unification, right-wing radicalism, and immigration questions that might be especially useful for the uninitiated. Among the weaker spots are its overly rigid structure (with sometimes repetitive introductions, previews, conclusions, that are more often than not straight recapitulations), at times sketchy and inconclusive discussions (e.g., on dual citizenship), and a somewhat contradictory and confusing account of the role of business in creating a postnational community that is morally and not economically motivated.

PAWEL LUTOMSKI, *Stanford University*

Bill Niven. *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich*. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. 266. \$10.95.

Among the many books that have recently appeared on the subject of the Germans' postwar struggle to "come to terms" with the Nazi past, Bill Niven's new study merits special acclaim for its comprehensive focus on the controversies of the last decade. Niven reaches conclusions that not all scholars will agree with, but in providing a wide-ranging and richly textured survey of post-unification debates on the Nazi legacy, he provides a much-needed, up-to-the-minute perspective on the Federal Republic's current understanding of its recent history.

Facing the Nazi Past examines a wide range of familiar controversies in an effort to draw larger conclusions about the current place of the Third Reich in German memory. Beginning with debates over representing the Nazi era in concentration camps such as Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, he discusses controversies over "the double past" of communism and Nazism, the German resistance, the marking of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the Wehrmacht exhibition, the bestselling works of Daniel Goldhagen and Victor Klemperer, the Walser-Bubis debate, and the ongoing discussion about Germany's central Holocaust memorial. In each of these separate chapters, Niven draws upon press accounts and other sources to cogently reconstruct and sum up the competing views of Germans across the political spectrum. The resulting narrative is highly readable and more than appropriate to assign to undergraduates. At the same time, its nicely condensed synopsis of recent controversies makes

it a useful work for specialists as well.

As far as Niven's broader conclusions are concerned, *Facing the Nazi Past* is largely upbeat in identifying a broader tendency towards an increasing "inclusiveness" in post-unification memory. In the last decade, Germans have expanded what were once quite narrow views of the Nazi past, both with respect to victims and perpetrators. Thus, various concentration camp exhibits and memorials reveal that Germans (especially in the west) have become more willing to include communists among the ranks of the German resistance, as well as homosexuals and Sinti and Roma among the victims of Nazism, while the Goldhagen and Wehrmacht controversies demonstrate that they have also recognized that "ordinary Germans" (not merely the SS) were perpetrators who committed atrocities against Jews and Soviets. In explaining this increasing inclusiveness, Niven correctly points to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, arguing that with it, West and East Germany lost one of the main impediments to a more forthright confrontation with the Nazi experience, the ability to shift responsibility for it onto each other. As a result, the elisions and omissions of the pre-1989 era have slowly been made good in the last decade.

The end of the Cold War provides a crucial starting point for understanding the last decade's broader mnemonic trends, but Niven could go still further in thematizing other factors that have also no doubt been at work. The emergence of the "generation of 1989" is alluded to, but not really singled out as an all-encompassing factor by Niven, although his many references to young people welcoming the conclusions of Goldhagen and turning up at the Wehrmacht exhibition clearly demonstrate its importance. It is worth considering to what degree this generation's emergence at the same time as the wall's collapse has obscured the causal significance of each in explaining recent trends in German memory. Had unification been delayed a decade, one could muse, this "judicious" generation might have brought about a similar inclusive trend anyway, by virtue of its distance from the Nazi era. By the same token, had Germany never been divided at all, it still would have witnessed the same generational conflicts in interpreting the war that have been visible in places like France.

Finally, scholars will have much to debate about Niven's conclusion that continuing rightwing criticisms of the attempt to come to terms with the Nazi past will do little to prevent "German national identity ... [from being] based on an inclusive model of memory." Niven provides considerable evidence attesting to the ongoing attempts of German conservatives to challenge the centrality of the Nazi past in contemporary German consciousness—so much, in fact, that his concept of "inclusiveness" seems somewhat euphemistic and potentially minimizes the ongoing desire to normalize and relativize the past. German democracy is plenty strong to withstand rightwing challenges to the state's moral-historical foundations, but at a time in which the renewed political exploitation of anti-Semitism and the yearning for normalcy continue to assume ugly forms

(most recently with the controversies over Jürgen Möllemann and, yet again, Martin Walser), it would seem unwise to view conservative views as merely one set of many in an inclusive German spectrum. This being said, Niven's book is an impressively comprehensive, insightful, and thought-provoking study that deserves a wide audience.

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD, *Fairfield University*

Peter Thaler. *The Ambivalence of Identity: The Austrian Experience of Nation-Building in a Modern Society* (Central European Studies). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001. Pp. xii, 228. Cloth \$42.95.

Peter Thaler asserts that "contemporary Austria contains two German-speaking populations of different national persuasions" (185). His persuasively documented argument is that while Austrian political elites since 1945 have successfully convinced a large majority of their countrymen to subjectively reject traditional feelings of German affiliation, a small but substantial segment of the population has not rejected Germanness. This "ambivalence of identity," manifested conspicuously on the popular level during the Waldheim controversy of the 1980s and at the academic level in a continuing Austrian *Historikerstreit*, is what makes Austria a perfect test-case for an exploration of the role of elites in the formation of national identity in particular and of the conceptual foundations of nationhood in general.

But despite the theoretical discussion of concepts of nation-building in the book's introduction, Thaler's work is really a cogently argued essay against Austrianism, the assertion of the unique, non-German identity of Austrians. He reviews the determined, persistent, continuing, and often paranoid efforts of Austrian political elites and historians to rewrite Austria's traditional affiliations with and attachment to Germany. Both within the text and in extensive endnotes, Thaler demolishes Austrianists' denials of Austria's historically German allegiances. Immediately after World War II, the Austrian government denied its Germanness to escape Allied wrath against Nazism. Many prominent Austrian historians still deny their state's historical Germanness out of dread that Germanness is directly and inevitably related to Nazism, past and present.

Thaler's most persuasive chapters are "The Writing of History and National Imagery" and "The Institutional Instruments of Nation-Building." He takes on Austrianists who conveniently forget that a provisional national assembly in November 1918 proclaimed a "Republic of German-Austria," that "the dominant feature of any comparison between Austrians and their contemporaries from Germany proper [during their service in the Wehrmacht] is similarity, not difference" (88), and that it was communists and Austro-fascists rather than