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978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

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Wounds of Memory

German memories of the Second World War are controversial, and they are used to justify different positions on the use of military force. In this book, Maja Zehfuss studies the articulation of memories in novels in order to discuss and challenge arguments deployed in political and public debate. She explores memories that have generated considerable controversy, such as the flight and expulsion of Germans from the East, the bombing of German cities and the 'liberation' of Germany in 1945. She shows how memory retrospectively produces a past while claiming merely to invoke it, drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions within how truth, ethics, emotion, subjectivity and time are conceptualised. Zehfuss argues that the tensions and uncertainties revealed raise political questions that must be confronted, beyond the safety net of knowledge. This is a compelling book which pursues an original approach in exploring the politics of invocations of memory.

MAJA ZEHFUSS is Professor of International Politics at the University of Manchester. She is the author of *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge, 2002) and has written articles for a number of journals, including the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Millennium*, the *Review of International Studies*, *Third World Quarterly*, *International Relations* and *International Politics*.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

In Erinnerung an Gerhard Zehfuß (1942–2004)

Cambridge University Press

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Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Speaking of war and memory	1
Speaking of war and memory: political debate	4
Speaking of war: novels	13
Reading memory	20
Speaking of the Second World War (and not the Holocaust)	26
2 Forgetting to remember?	32
The significance of remembering	33
The significance of forgetting	37
How to remember (and forget)	40
Memories of the flight and expulsion from the East: Grass's <i>Im Krebsgang</i>	41
Multiple memories	55
The imperative to remember and the desire to forget	60
Forgetting to remember	63
The reframed war revisited	68
Concluding thoughts	71
3 Wounds of memory	76
Don't mention the war?	77
The year of remembrance 1995: time to mourn?	79
Air war and literature: the (im)possibility of truth in fiction	81
<i>Der Brand</i> : inappropriate sentimentality?	87
The problem of victimhood	92
Ledig: <i>Vergeltung</i>	96
Mulisch: <i>Das steinerne Brautbett</i>	101
Victims and perpetrators in one	108
Memories of strategic bombing and the Iraq war	116
Concluding thoughts	121
4 The truth of memory	126
Never again German war	127
Forgotten Wehrmacht atrocities: the exhibition	129
Recreating immediacy: Ledig's <i>Die Stalimorgel</i>	141
Impossible authenticity: Walser's <i>Ein springender Brunnen</i>	146
	vii

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	Contents	
	Representing war and the political context	151
	The truth of fiction	155
	Beyond truth? Emotion and ethics	161
	Representing war: the other political context	166
	Concluding thoughts	171
5	Times of memory	175
	Memory and temporality: between past and present?	176
	When we remember: Johnson's <i>Jahrestage</i>	182
	Different times: Vonnegut's <i>Slaughterhouse 5</i>	189
	Tensions of time	197
	Thinking time differently	208
	The future of ethics	213
	Concluding thoughts	218
6	Memory, uncertainty, responsibility	221
	Challenges of memory	221
	The spectre of horror	228
	The spectre of the Holocaust	242
	War and the spectre of its Other	251
	Speaking of war and memory: uncertainty and responsibility	259
	<i>Bibliography</i>	267
	<i>Index</i>	285

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian-Social Union)
EDC	European Defence Community
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PDS	Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (Party of Democratic Socialism)
POW	Prisoner of War
RAF	Royal Air Force
SA	Sturmabteilung
SD	Sicherheitsdienst
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SS	Schutzstaffel
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia
USA	United States of America

Cambridge University Press

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Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

When I grew up, war was bad. Unconditionally bad. What was particularly bad was Germans being involved in any war. ‘We’ had started two world wars, after all. Although Germans are still seen as profoundly biased against war, war has been able to dramatically improve its reputation. Germans still hesitate to call it that when they are involved – *Kampfeinsatz* (combat mission) being the most martial terminology thinkable – but war, in some guises, has become acceptable. And I am still struggling to understand. What is perhaps most astonishing is that the Second World War – the very reason war was so assuredly bad – came to be instrumentalised in justifying this shift, in justifying the permissibility of war.

One of the intriguing aspects about the debates I explored for my previous book,¹ in which I trace this shift, was that from the Gulf War onwards the Second World War and memories of it were invoked in order not only to make sense of the problem of using force today but to argue for it. In other words, *the* bad war was used to argue that war wasn’t so bad after all. At the same time, it was used, of course, to warn against war. This is intriguing, especially since – even though the Second World War was mentioned time and again – not very much was said at all about that war and Germans’ experiences in it. Although politicians, intellectuals, scholars and ‘ordinary’ Germans often seem strangely certain about what ‘Germans’ remember, I found myself wondering about what the Germans know or remember of the war – and about whether that is the right question to ask. As it happened, once I had started on the project, these questions were drowned out by a flurry of interest in the war amongst the German public: interest in Allied bombing against German cities, the flight and expulsion of Germans from the East, the rape of thousands of women at the end of the war and Stalingrad. Suddenly, the Second World War was ‘in’, and this led to heated debate, not least about how Germans may today relate to those events: does

¹ Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

remembering suffering amount to construing Germans as victims of the Second World War, to playing into the hands of the far Right? In its almost ritualistic insistence on this concern, the debate seemed similar to the invocations of Second World War memories in order to support or reject the use of military force. The two, in my view, are related, and both are stuck in an unproductive pattern. Reading them together also demonstrates that the focus on an appropriate relation to the past may translate into an unintended, and to some unwanted, programme in relation to war today.

I am of course a member of ‘Generation Golf’, the generation that, as Florian Illies observed, could not be moved by successive debates on the Third Reich because we had already seen the film material disturbing the nation in our history classes at school when we were barely teenagers, the generation that always takes into account the ‘dark side’ of history which was on the syllabus in pretty much every grade. Illies seems to think that this generation has a relation to this history which is relaxed and emotionless, which makes nervous those who still had to fight against the silence surrounding the Third Reich, and who presume this to be a sign of forgetting the past, of ignorance and worse.² Although I recognise Illies’s humorous description of the Germany of my youth, I do not share his conviction that we are ‘cool’ about our history. Yet he captures something significant. I was astonished when I first read the argument that recent German interest in civilian suffering in the Second World War meant that Germans were construing themselves as victims ‘again’. Having grown up with what Illies describes, I really did not understand the ‘again’. Although I now know what is meant, I remain surprised that this alleged return to the 1950s is so unproblematically assumed, denying the experience of those who were not around at the time, and that the ‘generation of the grandchildren’ is often represented as ignorant and in need of education in these debates. The grandchildren, of course, are hardly children any more and, following Illies, probably know quite a bit about this past.

Yet we don’t *remember*. Or do we? Politicians today, over sixty years after the war, still invoke the Germans’ memory, the horrors they have experienced. Do I, born several decades after the war, remember? I am bemused that politicians should claim my memory of a time before my birth, but I am just as astonished when I am told that I do not remember or am admonished, invariably by someone really well-meaning who happens not to be German, that I should no longer worry about it. Accordingly, this subject raises for me the question of memory. What does it mean

² Florian Illies, *Generation Golf: Eine Inspektion* (Berlin: Argon 2000), pp. 174f.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

to remember, and what does remembering tell us about how we understand the reality we live in? Memory retrospectively produces a past while claiming merely to invoke it, drawing attention to numerous complications regarding how we conceptualise truth, ethics, emotion, subjectivity and time. So whilst my argument is motivated by a concern over the ways in which memories of the Second World War have been discussed and instrumentalised, in particular – and not unrelatedly – in ways that make difficult a serious engagement with the Germans' suffering in war and that justify war today, its core is the profound uncertainty that marks our world and the significance of acknowledging this, particularly in scholarship. Although this book is an intervention in debates about Germans' memories of the Second World War, these debates will continue anyway. If there is a small contribution that I would wish to make it is to destabilise the certainty with which much is claimed – not least about what Germans do and should remember – which is always at risk of translating into a dangerous self-righteousness. Because 'we' Germans got it so dreadfully wrong in the past, because we remember, we have privileged knowledge about how we should act in the present. It is the burden of my argument that knowledge, whether or not it is possible, is actually not the point.

The shock at discovering that 'Germany's conscience',³ Günter Grass, had served in the Waffen-SS as a 17-year-old and had neglected to inform the people he had been cajoling into admitting the crimes of the Third Reich of the fact underlines the desire that we should be able to clearly distinguish Good from Bad. Grass was meant to be Good. Personally, I am cheered to know that it is more complicated. Life has a way of being so, and we need to find the courage to acknowledge, certainly when it comes to memory and to war, that we cannot opt simply for the Good, because it is not on offer. Thinking that we can is nothing but a dangerous illusion. This is not because those of us who are German ought to be anguished about being German. During the 2006 World Cup I actually found myself cycling across Munich with a German flag attached to my backpack. The flag had been given to me by Linus, who had made it himself, reflecting his enthusiasm for the tournament and, of course, Germany's successes. Linus's mother, my friend Susi, had recognised my unease at the gift and my surprise at their house being decorated with flags; but was she meant to explain the Holocaust to her 6-year-old son? Cycling off with my flag, I felt self-conscious at first, but quickly realised that anyone seeing me would have assumed nothing more than that I was supporting my country's football team: a perfectly normal thing to do. No one would have derived any view as to my political positions from seeing me with the

³ Tim Adams, 'Germany's conscience', *Observer*, 10/02/02, 25.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Preface

flag. Politics and our responsibility within it involves agonising, whatever our histories. But maybe, just occasionally, it might also help not to take ourselves too seriously.

It should perhaps be noted that I no longer live in Germany, although I do not feel any less German for that. My questions about the politics of war in Germany certainly predate my move to the UK, but some issues were brought to my attention in a different way. Some of my thoughts on strategic bombing, for example, were prompted by a Masters seminar at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and one may certainly speculate about how far being exposed to the British way of remembering the same war, which happens to be no less idiosyncratic, has affected my thoughts on the matter. More importantly, however, as a German resident in the UK, I am neither fully inside the issues raised here nor outside, and at the same time, of course, simultaneously both. I am both at a distance and very much caught up in what is after all part of how I construe who I am. This has not made writing this any easier, but it may just have made it possible.

I still cannot believe that I have written this book. My profound thanks go to the many people who discussed with me the issues raised here and who encouraged me to carry on when I despaired at the impossible task. Above all, I would like to thank Jenny Edkins, whose contribution is impossible to acknowledge adequately: her friendship and intellectual generosity were crucial in writing this book; Susanna Rieder, whose enthusiasm and detailed comments persuaded me to carry on; Steve Smith, whose advice at crucial junctures of this project was indispensable; and Hidemi Suganami, whose favourable, if critical, comments on the first paper towards this book made me persist in what appeared to be a daunting project. I am also grateful to Jay Winter and an anonymous referee for Cambridge University Press for their critical but constructive comments on the manuscript, and to Duncan Bell and Stuart Elden for commenting on a particular chapter. I owe a debt of gratitude to Ingo Leiß and Helmut Schmitz, who both generously shared their expertise in German literature, and to Roland Bleiker, Stef Craps and Eduardo Mendieta who drew my attention to specific texts. Work towards this book was presented in a number of settings: at the invitation of the Aberystwyth PostInternational Group and the Cambridge International Studies Association, at several ISA conventions, at the Cambridge Centre of International Studies and at the 'Future of Memory' conference in Manchester. I received fruitful feedback each time. My thanks for their productive comments go in particular to Tarak Barkawi, David Campbell, James Der Derian, Aida Hozic, Naeem Inayatullah, Debbie Lisle, David Smith and Annick Wibben. I would particularly like to thank Josef Ansoorge

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17446-6 - Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany

Maja Zehfuss

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

for his searching questions and for sharing his thoughtful reflections on Germany's past. For stimulating discussions about Derrida's work my thanks go especially to Dan Bulley and Nick Vaughan-Williams. As always, I am grateful to Horst Zehfuß for keeping me in touch with the German press, but this time also for sharing his memories.

I would like to thank the University of Warwick for two terms' study leave in 2003–04 which enabled me to start this project. I am also grateful to Jackie and Graeme Smith and to Véronique Pin-Fat for their hospitality, which enabled me to finish it.

Bernhard A. Eble of the Gedenkstätte Weiße Rose at the Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München kindly assisted me in discovering the context of the plaque 'Wunden der Erinnerung' on the university's main building. The plaque, which inspired the title of this book and is briefly discussed in Chapter 3, is part of a European project by artists Beate Passow and Andreas von Weizsäcker. For a description of the project see www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/Wunden_der_Erinnerung.html.

Parts of Chapter 2 have appeared as 'Remembering to Forget/ Forgetting to Remember' in Duncan S. A. Bell (ed.), *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2006); this material is reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. Other material appearing in this book, in particular in Chapter 4, has been published as 'Writing War, against Good Conscience', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, 1 (2004), 91–121. I gratefully acknowledge permission to use this material here.

Although my wonder at how we speak about and remember war was significant, this book also has another origin. My thanks are to the participants of a memorable conversation on family histories in Larry George's kitchen, Costas Constantinou, Erin Manning and, especially, James Der Derian, who pressed me to write about my own. Although I have not done that in any direct way, his insistence set me off on what proved to be a treacherous but fascinating path.

I would not write without the support of Edith, Horst and Ulrich Zehfuß, who are there for me always: thank you. Finally, I also owe a debt of gratitude to Gerhard Zehfuß who, in his inimitable way, was and remains an inspiration to me: this book is dedicated to his memory.