Know Your Enemy

The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945

This book analyzes the intellectual side of the American war effort against Nazi Germany. It shows how conflicting interpretations of "the German problem" shaped American warfare and postwar planning. The story of how Americans understood National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s provides a counterexample to the usual tale of enemy images. The level of German popular support for the Nazi regime, the nature of Nazi war aims, and the postwar prospects of German democratization stood at the center of public and governmental debates. American public perceptions of the Third Reich – based in part on ethnic identification with the Germans – were often forgiving but also ill informed. This conflicted with the Roosevelt administration's need to create a compelling enemy image. The tension between popular and expert views generated complex and fruitful discussions among America's political and cultural elites and produced insightful, yet contradictory interpretations of Nazism.

Michaela Hoenicke Moore is assistant professor of history at the University of Iowa. She has taught at the Kennedy Institute of the Free University in Berlin, at the University of North Carolina, and at York University in Toronto and has worked as a Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin. She is the coeditor (with Bernard May) of *The Uncertain Superpower: Domestic Dimensions of U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, and her articles have appeared in journals including *Diplomatic History* and *Amerikastudien*.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

Edited by Hartmut Berghoff
with the assistance of David Lazar

The German Historical Institute is a center for advanced study and research whose purpose is to provide a permanent basis for scholarly cooperation among historians from the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States. The Institute conducts, promotes, and supports research into both American and German political, social, economic, and cultural history; into transatlantic migration, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and into the history of international relations, with special emphasis on the roles played by the United States and Germany.

Recent books in the series:

Matthias Shulz and Thomas A. Schwartz, editors, *The Strained Alliance: U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter*

Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*

Manfred Berg and Bern Schaefer, editors, *Historical Justice in International Perspective: How Societies Are Trying to Right the Wrongs of the Past*

Carole Fink and Bernd Schaefer, editors, *Ostpolitik, 1969–1974: European and Global Responses*

Nathan Stoltzfus and Henry Friedlander, editors, *Nazi Crimes and the Law*

Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power*

Andreas W. Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*

Jonathan R. Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany*

Peter Becker and Richard F. Wetzell, editors, *Criminals and Their Scientists: The History of Criminology in International Perspective*

Michelle Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918–1945*

Know Your Enemy

The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945

MICHAELA HOENICKE MOORE
University of Iowa

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521829694

First published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Hönicke Moore, Michaela.
Know your enemy : the American debate on Nazism, 1933–1945 / Michaela Hoenicke Moore.
p. cm. – (Publications of the German Historical Institute)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-82969-4 (hardback)
1. United States – Relations – Germany. 2. Germany – Relations – United States.
3. Germany. – Foreign public opinion, American – History – 20th century. 4. United States –
Foreign relations – 1933–1945. 5. Hitler, Adolf, 1889–1945 – Public opinion. 6. National
socialism – Public opinion. 7. United States – Intellectual life – 20th century. 8. Public
opinion – United States – History – 20th century. I. Title. II. Series.
E183.8.G3H66 2009
327.73043090′43–dc22 2009028058

ISBN 978-0-521-82969-4 Hardback

Contents

Acknowledgments

It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge the manifold and generous support I received while working on this book, which originated as a dissertation at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. For two decades Gerhard L. Weinberg has been an unfailing source of personal and scholarly inspiration. I greatly benefited from his guidance and confidence in me – and from an extended Fulbright Fellowship that first provided me with the opportunity to work under his direction. Several of my former teachers and fellow students at UNC decisively shaped this project and my understanding and practice of historical inquiry. Michael H. Hunt provided substantial help through criticism, encouragement, and being a model historian in my field. I could not have wished for more supportive and insightful readers than Konrad H. Jarausch, Lloyd Kramer, and William E. Leuchtenburg. Arne Odd Westad helped with critical suggestions during the formative stage of this work. On both sides of the Atlantic, Doris Bergen, Daniel S. Mattern, Mason Barnett-Schnalke, Mita Choudhury, Anneke de Rudder, Sibylle Engstrom, Cornelis A. van Minnen, Axel Schäfer, Christopher Wild, and Selig Kainer commented at different stages on large sections of this work and provided wise counsel and astute comments. Joachim Nawrocki and Susanne Rohr sustained me through highs and lows in Berlin and helped me in more ways than I can list here. Over the course of a decade I had the luxury of DAD grants from my father whenever financial crises threatened to disrupt my scholarly pursuits. Over these past years, my gentle scholar-husband provided daily support and much-needed inspiration through his own brand of American leadership-by-example.

A number of institutions generously supported my research: the Office for International Programs and the History Department at the University of North Carolina funded preliminary archival trips through a Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant and two George Mowry Research Awards, respectively. A Dissertation Fellowship by the German Historical Institute in Washington, a Beeke-Levy Research Fellowship from the Roosevelt Institute at Hyde Park, an award from the International Federation of University Women, and a grant from the German Marshall Fund of the United States supported my archival research. There is no way of telling what I would have missed without the astounding knowledge of the archivists and librarians at the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, the Library of Congress, Syracuse University, Columbia University, the International Institute for Social History (Amsterdam), the National Archives,

and the Federal Record Center. My writing profited from a year as a research Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies program of the Brookings Institution.

I gratefully acknowledge the permission granted by Berghahn Books, the University of Nebraska Press, and Edinburgh University Press to use material from my articles "'Know Your Enemy': American Wartime Images of Germany, 1942/43" in: *Enemy Images in American History*, eds. Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Ursula Lehmkuhl (Providence: Berghahn, 1997), 231–78; "American Interpretations of National Socialism" in: *The Impact of Nazism: New Perspectives on the Third Reich and Its Legacy*, eds. Daniel Rogers and Alan E. Steinweis (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2003), 1–18; and "Prevent World War III: An Historiographical Appraisal of Morgenthau's Programme for Germany" in: *The Roosevelt Years: New Perspectives on American History, 1933–1945*, eds. Robert A. Garson and Stuart S. Kidd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 155–72. In 1999–2000 the Jameson Fellowship of the American Historical Association and the Library of Congress afforded me an opportunity to take time off from a demanding new job for a first round of revisions. These were completed on the basis of critical advice offered by three anonymous reviewers and with the expert editorial care of David Lazar at the German Historical Institute. All mistakes and shortcomings of this work remain my own.

Prologue: Thomas Wolfe and the Third Reich

Thomas Wolfe loved Germany. The novelist's affection for Germany was rooted in his admiration for its high culture, for Goethe and Beethoven, and for a people that had produced and cherished these geniuses. Germany was a spiritual homeland for the novelist.[1] He had visited the country several times since 1926, and his books had been enthusiastically received there. But when he returned in 1936, he noticed

> things were different. Germany had changed. Ever since 1933, when the change occurred, [he] had read, first with amazement, shock, and doubt, then with despair and a leaden sinking of the heart, all the newspaper accounts of what was going on in Germany. He found it hard to believe some of the reports. Of course, there were irresponsible extremists in Germany as elsewhere, and in times of crisis no doubt they got out of hand, but he thought he knew Germany and the German people, and on the whole he was inclined to feel that the true state of affairs had been exaggerated and that things simply could not be as they were pictured.[2]

In a striking illustration of literature prefiguring political and historical analysis, Wolfe's two prewar novels offer a catalog of the central themes that characterized the American debate on the Third Reich: *disbelief* in the face of news from the Third Reich; the depiction of National Socialism as a *disease*; the characterization of the German people and their culture as *Janus-faced*, comprising two antagonistic traits; the *universal meaning* of the German problem; and, finally, the appeal to *truthfulness* in describing contemporary Germany. Wolfe, who died before Germany invaded Poland, had closely relied on his own

[1] Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (Garden City: Sun Dial Press, 1942), 703, cf. also 631, 650, 666, 727; Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (Garden City: Sun Dial Press, 1940), 650. Klaus Lanzinger, *Jason's Voyage: The Search for the Old World in American Literature. A Study of Melville, Hawthorne, Henry James, and Thomas Wolfe* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 164, 167, 180ff. Wolfe's father and ancestors had come from Germany, which contributed to Wolfe's notion of Germany as "a kind of second homeland of his spirit."

[2] Wolfe, *Home*, 621.The novel was completed in 1938 and posthumously published in 1940. Long passages of the chapter on Germany, "The Dark Messiah," can be found in an unpublished letter Wolfe wrote in 1938; see Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves, eds., *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe*, vol. II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 905–14. For notes on his own experience at the Munich Octoberfest in 1928, which became the basis of his fictional treatment discussed later, see *Notebooks*, vol. I, 197ff. and his letter of 4 October 1928 to his friend Aline Bernstein in Suzanne Stutman, ed., *My Other Loneliness: Letters of Thomas Wolfe and Aline Bernstein* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 221–7.

experiences and had worked his personal reflections into both novels dealing with that country.

The novelist was a privileged witness to events in Nazi Germany. Like the subjects of this study, he was an American responding to the Third Reich. He was privileged in that he knew Germany well, demonstrated great sensitivity and perceptiveness in observing both his own and Nazi society, and possessed literary talent to express his insights compellingly. Wolfe's understanding of Nazism was not unique; rather, it was representative of the American discourse on Nazi Germany. His prescience and precision, however, were extraordinary.

The disbelief with which George Webber, Thomas Wolfe's alter ego in *You Can't Go Home Again*, reacts to reports of the new Germany exemplifies the response of many Americans familiar with that country. The novelist captured well the early skepticism evoked by news from Nazi Germany that was only overcome – in this novel – by firsthand experience and observations during a visit to the Third Reich. George arrives in Berlin at the time of the Olympic Games, and he allows himself for a while to be convinced that "there was no longer any confusion or chaos in politics and government, and no longer any fear among the people.... This was what George wanted desperately to believe."

He is duly impressed by the organizing genius behind the games, although he senses something "ominous" behind this collective effort, too:

> [The games] became, day after day, an orderly and overwhelming demonstration in which the whole of Germany had been schooled and disciplined. It was as if the games had been chosen as a symbol of the new collective might, a means of showing to the world in concrete terms what this new power had come to be.[3]

The novelist begins to hear "some ugly things." References are made to the Roehm putsch (a series of murders Hitler ordered to consolidate his power), to concentration camps, and to deportations. The American sees uniforms everywhere in Berlin – brown, black, and olive green, complete with boots, brass, fifes, and iron helmets.[4] He can no longer ignore the ever-present fear among his friends and acquaintances or the absurd, harassing state regulations that affect their private lives. He is warned against inviting certain people to parties or talking to others.

In a long conversation with an old German friend, George notices a "cynicism and indifference" that he finds hard to accept and comes to understand as part of the German problem. His friend tries to convince him not to provoke the Nazis – tries to convince him of the superiority of art over "a little politics."[5] A deep-seated German juxtaposition of low and contemptible politics versus profound and noble art – which American elite thinking had identified as part of the German problem as early as the nineteenth century – shines through

[3] Wolfe, *Home*, 625f.
[4] Ibid., 628f., 630, 728.
[5] Ibid., 649, 652.

his friend's speech and partly explains the helplessness with which the German people had fallen prey to the new regime.[6]

By the time George leaves the country, he has reached a deeper understanding of what was happening in Germany and what has happened to the Germans. In the shelter of the night, "behind thick walls and bolted doors and shuttered windows," people had begun to tell the American about their "unspeakable" fear and despair, the disappearance of friends and relatives, the persecution and humiliation of Jewish citizens, and the terror of the secret police, the Gestapo. Wolfe's alter ego witnesses "a desperate need to talk" on the part of the Germans, a "full flood . . . in confessions."[7]

> What George began to see was a picture of a great people who had been psychically wounded and were now desperately ill with some dread malady of the soul. . . . The pressures of a constant and infamous compulsion had silenced this whole people into a sweltering and malignant secrecy until they had become spiritually septic with the distillations of their own self-poisons, for which now there was no medicine or release.[8]

Wolfe pictured National Socialism and its effects on the people as "a plague of the spirit" – an illness. His protagonist experiences the effects of National Socialism as something "more sinister and deep and evil than politics" – "a kind of creeping paralysis which twisted and blighted all human relations."[9] The disease metaphor for National Socialism contained a crucial implication with respect to the German people. They did not seem to bear full responsibility for what had happened: "George wondered if anyone could be so base as to exult at this great tragedy, or to feel hatred for the once-mighty people who were the victims of it."[10] This was a far-reaching consequence of the idea widely used in American wartime analyses that an illness had befallen the German society: Germans were characterized as victims.

Prior to the outbreak of the metaphorical disease described in *You Can't Go Home Again*, the novelist characterized Germany as an inscrutable, Janus-faced nation:

> I think this country interests me more than any in Europe – can you explain this enigma? – here is this brutal, beer swilling people, and yet I doubt if there is as much that is spiritually grand in any other people in Europe as in this one. This beer swilling people produced Beethoven and Goethe, the greatest spirit of modern time.[11]

[6] On the historic German habit to value culture over politics see, Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 9–26.

[7] Wolfe, *Home*, 728.

[8] Ibid., 631.

[9] Ibid., 630f. and 633, cf. also the passage on 674 on "poisonous constrictions of incurable hatreds" and "cancer of these cureless hates" being contrasted with a positive image of his native country, the United States; 729 "the spiritual disease which was poisoning unto death a noble and a mighty people."

[10] Ibid., 631.

[11] *Loneliness*, 212: No. 75 Wolfe to Bernstein, 1–7 September 1928. The Janus-faced character of the German nation was to become an important topos in the Anglo-American debate on Nazi Germany, see chap. 2 with references to Sebastian Haffner and Emil Ludwig. Horst Möller, "Exilpublizistik in Grossbritannien. Sebastian Haffner und *Die Zeitung*" in: *Rivalität und Partnerschaft: Studien zu den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*

Wolfe expanded this theme of contrasts a decade later in the "Oktoberfest" chapter of *The Web and the Rock*. Here, the double nature takes the shape of something terrible, sinister, and threatening lurking beneath an appealing, pleasant surface. Wolfe describes a visit to the famous Munich October fair. His protagonist is filled with anticipation and believes that "at last he was to come close to the heart of this people – as if, after a voyage through the old barbaric forest, he would come suddenly upon them at their altars in a cleared ring."[12] Wolfe invariably evoked images of an atavistic resurgence of barbarism and primitivism, of "hairy Teutons," of blood-sacrifices, and of "strange, barbaric forests" when he spoke of the dark side of the German character.[13]

At the fair, Wolfe's hero is enjoying the food, the dark and heavy October beer, and the merriment of the people around him, when suddenly the scene and his perception begin to tilt and he experiences a dream-like sequence. The beer-drinking and singing crowd assumes a deeply threatening character.

> [I]t seemed to [him] that nothing on earth could resist them – that they must smash whatever they came against. He understood now why other nations feared them so; suddenly he was himself seized with a terrible and deadly fear of them that froze his heart. He felt as if he had dreamed and awakened in a strange, barbaric forest to find a ring of savage, barbaric faces bent down above him: blond-braided, blond-mustached, they leaned upon their mighty spear staves, rested on their shields of toughened hide, as they looked down. And he was surrounded by them, there was no escape. He thought of all that was familiar to him and it seemed far away, not only in another world but in another time.[14]

As suddenly as these images arose they disappeared upon the touch of a young woman who invites the American to link arms and join the others in singing – "warmth," "friendship," and "affection" returned.[15]

Wolfe captured in dramatic literary scenes an ambivalence toward the Germans that juxtaposed high culture and spirituality with gluttony and greed, but he also revealed, underneath an apparently good-natured and cozy folk culture, a savage and primitive streak that was beyond understanding and beyond human pleading, and terribly, frighteningly alien.

The construct of Germany's double character would become an important means of integrating a positive American image of long standing with a newly emerging or, considering World War I, reemerging fear and dread of that country. In the spring of 1945, when the horror of German warfare and extermination campaigns became fully apparent to the victors, the U.S. War Department ordered a final training film for its personnel stationed in defeated Germany: *This Is Germany*. The producers created powerful cinematic scenes reminiscent of Wolfe's literary descriptions of sudden reversal. Only this time, at the end of the war, the purpose was no longer to convey ambivalence. The military

(Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999), 267–84. An earlier literary version of the dual character theory is Madame de Staël's *De L'Allemagne* of 1810.

[12] Wolfe, *Web*, 662.

[13] Wolfe, *Home*, 705; *Web*, 662, 664, 668f.

[14] Wolfe, *Web*, 669.

[15] Ibid., 670f.

propaganda film started out with footage showing friendly, smiling Germans, similar to the "folks back home," singing and dancing in local costumes, a German symphony orchestra performing classical music – a highly cultured, industrious, and attractive people. Yet through sharp cuts all of these images were followed by photos of piles of dead, emaciated bodies, walking skeletons, burned corpses, crying women and children in front of destroyed villages – evidence of the destruction and devastation the Germans had wrought. This time the message was: do not be fooled by the pleasant, quaint, and familiar facade; a terrible, inhuman force is hiding underneath.[16]

On his way out of Germany, Wolfe's protagonist witnesses the arrest of a fellow traveler, a German Jew trying to leave the country. He sees the man's "mortal anguish" and realizes his own entanglement. The American bystander is no longer an innocent onlooker. Unwittingly he has become part of an injustice. Watching the man being led away, George understands that this is a "farewell, not to a man, but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger . . . but to mankind."[17]

Wolfe understood the evil he described, when describing the German dictatorship, as part of human nature. In both novels, the protagonist recognizes in himself traits he despises in the Germans around him.[18] The final passage in *You Can't Go Home Again*, in which the hero, a successful writer like the author himself, reflects on his experiences of his last summer in Nazi Germany, opens with a restatement of Wolfe's belief that "Hitlerism . . . was a recrudescence of an old barbarism." The following characterization of Nazism included what many Americans came to abhor about the Third Reich: "its racial nonsense and cruelty, its naked worship of brute force, its suppression of truth . . . its ruthless contempt for the individual." Yet the observation went on: "this spirit was not confined to Germany. It belonged to no one race. It was a terrible part of the universal heritage of man."[19]

In a letter to his friend and publisher, Wolfe's alter ego discusses the significance of these German events for America. In returning home, the novelist recognized signs of the same sickness that had befallen Germany in his own country. He described them as social injustice – as the suffering of the poor and as the conspiracies of the rich and powerful.[20] In discussing Nazi Germany as a warning example for his own country, Wolfe is exemplary of a significant group of American commentators who described and condemned the Third Reich but admonished the American people against complacency and self-righteousness: "it can happen here" was their message.

Finally, Wolfe insisted on truthfulness in assessing the new Germany.

> And about Hitler's Germany he felt that one must be very true. And the reason one needed to be very true was that the thing in it which every decent person must be against was false. You could not turn the other cheek to wrong, but also, it seemed to him, you

[16] For a detailed discussion of *This Is Germany*, see Chapter 9.
[17] Wolfe, *Home*, 699.
[18] Worfe, *Home*, 706; *Web*, 661.
[19] Wolfe, *Home*, 705.
[20] Ibid., 705f. and 729f.

could not be wrong about wrong. You had to be right about it. You could not meet lies and trickery with lies and trickery, although there were some people who argued that you should.[21]

Thus, the novelist, who died a year before Nazi Germany started the war, not only captured in stirring images Germany's "spiritual disease" and its dual character, he also urgently pleaded for accuracy and integrity in characterizing Nazi Germany. One might argue that this was a luxury the novelist could afford because he had not witnessed the worst. But, as I hope this book demonstrates, truthfulness – the attempt to understand rather than to denounce this enemy – was to become a distinct and conscious impulse in American wartime analyses of Nazi Germany.

[21] Ibid., 632.