

Svenja Goltermann, Opfer. Die Wahrnehmung von Krieg und Gewalt in der Moderne, Frankfurt a. M. (S. Fischer) 2017, 333 S., ISBN 978-3-10-397225-2, EUR 23,00.

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We are living in the age of the victim. There was a time when violence tended to be examined and defined from the perspective of the violent protagonist. Today, however, war and violence tend to be viewed from the perspective of the victim. As Svenja Goltermann observes in the introduction to her latest book, descriptions of victimhood have spread to remarkable extent in recent decades. Although she rejects the exaggerated claim of Daniele Gligioni, that »the victim is the hero of our time«, there can be little doubt that victimhood now stands at the centre of discussions about violence and that victims are expected to be treated with sympathy and empathy. How this has come about is the subject of this book.

Until the middle of the 19th century it was not at all common for people to be described as victims of violence or other catastrophes. In order to explain the change in our mentalities, Goltermann looks to developments from the late 18th century through to the present, and sees the answer in »die Geschichte einer Wahrnehmungsverschiebung« (»the history of a shift in perception«). A central thesis of the book is that the present-day attention given to victims of violence, and to the ways they describe themselves as victims, is to be found in the production, spread and acceptance of knowledge – in particular of legal and medical knowledge. The result is an important and thought-provoking study that grapples with a central cultural phenomenon of our time – and that is well written.

The book is organised around four thematic chapters, forming roughly a chronological framework, each examining aspects of how understandings of war and violence have changed over the past two centuries. The first deals with the registering, documenting and identifying of war victims from the end of the 18th century to the First World War, and the introduction of payments by the state to surviving family members and war invalids. The second focuses on efforts to »civilise« war and to establish norms for legitimate and illegitimate violence in war, a process that began during the second half of the 19th century, and the consequent establishment during the 20th century of the concept of »war crimes« (whereby those on the receiving end increasingly were understood to be »victims« of war), which should and could be prosecuted.

The third describes the expansion of social welfare that set in with the First World War and the importance of the medical profession in assessing the damage done to victims of warfare and other misfortunes. And the fourth discusses the effects of the concept of »trauma« from the second half of the 20th century. This last chapter – which explores developments that have altered perceptions of what violence means and what it encompasses – presents medical and psychiatric discourses about



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the experience of violence, and builds on the author's previous work on the »Gesellschaft der Überlebenden«¹ after the Second World War.

The story the Goltermann tells is essentially a European (and, in the last chapter, an American) story – and a largely western European story at that. Rather less attention is paid to Asia (where the 19th century's bloodiest conflicts occurred), to Africa (except with regard to the behaviour of European colonial powers and African soldiers who served under them, and to post-Apartheid South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission), or to eastern Europe (the USSR and the socialist bloc do not feature prominently). So, »die Wahrnehmung von Krieg und Gewalt in der Moderne« appears largely a matter of (western) European perceptions and their spread; »modernity« is understood essentially as a phenomenon developed in the West and exported to the world.

Goltermann's account contains much fascinating detail – for example, about the concern during the 19th century of Britain to undertake statistical analysis of the mortality and morbidity of her military personnel, which revealed the extent of »unnecessary« deaths in war. Much space is given to the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross to document the fate of war prisoners and to introduce standards of legitimate and »civilised« practices in war. Here we can see the spread of western perspectives, practices and mentalities, due in part to a desire to be considered a »civilised« nation – for example, in giving dead soldiers an honourable, decent burial.

Goltermann focuses particularly on the growth of the state (in terms of both the gathering information about its subjects and the increasing obligations it is expected to have for the welfare of its subjects), the evolution of international law with regard to war and organised violence, and the development of medical knowledge. Rather less attention is paid to economic development. How has increasing, and increasingly broad, prosperity affected the development of victim mentality and sensitivity towards war and violence? Has the fact that so many people (in the developed West) have more to lose fuelled a sense of victimhood when they experience material loss? Economic growth occurred in parallel with the growth of the state and of the reach of modern medicine, but it remains in the background here.

Psychology and psychiatry, on the other hand, figure prominently. Goltermann stresses the importance of investigations about the concept of psychic trauma, which has altered perceptions of suffering since the 1970s. Descriptions of victimhood multiplied alongside the increasing talk of »trauma« that set in first in the United States and then in Europe during the 1980s. The idea of victimhood was given a new dimension since the last third of the 20th century, as long-term psychological aspects, often coalescing round the concept of »post-traumatic stress disorder« (PTSD) particularly in the wake of America's Vietnam War, gained acceptance (and huge amounts of resource were directed towards those believed to be suffering from it). Concern became focused not only on the physical damage caused to human beings by war and violence, but also on the psychological damage. As Goltermann stresses, this has

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¹ Svenja Goltermann, Die Gesellschaft der Überlebenden. Deutsche Kriegsheimkehrer und ihre Gewalterfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg, Munich 2009, cf. the review by Fabien Théofilakis in [Francia Recensio 2012/3](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2012/3).

altered and broadened the understanding in the Europe and in the United States of what violence is and the effects it has on people's lives. This is not without its dangers, however: »Those who project the concept of trauma backwards onto the past are using a seductive shortcut that simplifies the past and blocks out more complex histories.«

The history of the development of victimhood is complex, and we need to view contemporary understandings of the »innocent victim« in context, one that owes much to the recent establishment of the concept of »post-traumatic stress disorder«. No longer are those on the receiving end of violence considered to be, as some posited a century ago, »born victims« due to their weakness and hardly meriting support. In recent decades, public money increasingly has been used to compensate the victims of violence.

The question remains: How is this to be explained? What caused this change to occur in the last third of the 20th century? Is this fundamental shift essentially a product of a developed, economically prosperous society, of societies in which relatively few people have experienced war or military service? Does this suggest that when people do not have to worry much about their physical survival or even their material comfort that questions of becoming a »victim«, and in particular an innocent victim, arise? These questions, however, do not stand at the centre of Goltermann's study, which focuses more on state intervention and legal and medical discourse than on social and economic context.

The obsession with victimhood that Goltermann describes is both understandable and potentially dangerous: understandable, since it is inspired by a growing desire for empathy (and few want to empathise with perpetrators of violence – it is much easier and more acceptable to empathise with victims); dangerous, since it can fuel anger and desire for revenge. Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that an obsession with victimhood is responsible for the divisive politics and culture wars in so many countries in recent years, it does amplify the anger that people who regard themselves as victims – now a substantial proportion of the population – feel and express. The heightened focus on victims and victimhood appears to have contributed to a poisoning of the public sphere, which increasingly is populated by people who regard themselves (and are encouraged to regard themselves) as innocent victims of unfairness and injustice. Nevertheless, Goltermann points out in conclusion, the appellation of »victim«, with its association of powerlessness and passivity, may be giving way to that of »survivor«, and discussions of PTSD have begun to be modified by a focus on resilience. The story is not over.



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