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## ***The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, by Wolfgang Schivelbusch**

***Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 6 (June 2004)**

Reviewed by [Daniel Moran](#)

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*The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. By Wolfgang Schivelbusch. Translated by Jefferson Chase. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Metropolitan Books, 2003. ISBN 0-8050-4421-3. Notes. Index. Pp 403. \$27.50.

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Victory, Clausewitz tells us, is never final. This is because defeat is basically a psychological fact. Armies and nations do not give in because they have been utterly destroyed: it is not unusual for the armed forces of a nation at the moment of its surrender to exceed those it possessed at the outset of the war. If it nevertheless abandons its cause it is because its people and their leaders have lost confidence and cohesion: the "will to fight." All the death and destruction of war have no purpose but to cause the enemy to change his mind. Yet a mind once changed can be changed again. Defeat, conventionally, is something that is "accepted"; but not for long.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch's interesting and unusual book is a meditation on the ways in which modern societies renegotiate the meaning of defeat. He examines three cases—the South after the American Civil War, France after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and Germany after World War I—which he judges to have exemplified the transition from the culturally circumscribed cabinet wars of the pre-industrial past to the "unsparing and unlimited warfare of the twentieth century" (35). It is modernity, he proposes, that has made adaptation to defeat into a cultural, as opposed to a merely political, process. The extraordinary capacity of modern states to mobilize ever greater human and material resources for war insures that the psychological burden of defeat will be spread throughout society. Its collective response, enshrouded in myth and encumbered by rationalization, elaborated and revised over years and even decades, will go a long way toward determining what, if anything, the victors may have won by their efforts. Like anyone who proposes to comment upon the communal consciousness of nations, Schivelbusch is open to the objection that he is seeking to summarize what cannot be summarized, at least not without benefit of some explicit social-scientific methodology, which is entirely lacking here. It is a fair point, but one that most readers will probably set to one side. This is not a work of model building, but of historically informed cultural criticism. Its value is entirely dependent on the perspicacity of its author, and for the most part he has a sharp eye.

Clausewitz's observation about the transience of victory was a warning against strategic complacency. One of the surest ways for those on top to find themselves back at the bottom, he knew, was to underestimate the resourcefulness of a once-beaten foe. The tendency of Fortune's wheel to keep on turning looms large in Schivelbusch's discussion too, but less as a perpetually

renewed call to arms than as a source of consolation. The most seminal myths of Western civilization are rich in images of pride before the fall, of heroic defeat and ultimate vindication. The legendary founder of Rome, Schivelbusch reminds us, was the Trojan refugee Aeneas; whereas the paladin of the Greek victors, Odysseus, was fated to wander the world in peril, just trying to find his way home.

In cultural terms, the object of post-war recovery is not to husband resources in order to fight another day. Among Schivelbusch's examples, only Germany regains the strength and confidence necessary to resume the fight against its original opponents. The French recovery after 1870 was, in military terms, less complete. By the turn of the twentieth century France was once again a power of the first rank, "willing and able to wage war" (162). Yet the principal arena in which its armed forces were employed was now overseas. One reason the First World War began in the Balkans and not on the Rhine was that the French had long since transformed their (manifestly unrealistic) longing for *revanche* into "a pose of cultural superiority" (145) whose chief political expression was the flourishing of French imperialism. As for the Confederacy, there was never the slightest possibility that it would rise again. The governing cultural conceit of the post-war South was thus of the "Lost Cause," by which the bleak realities of the slave market and the ante-bellum plantation were re-imagined as venues of Arcadian gentility.

The culture of defeat is thus not about revenge. It is about making defeat feel like victory. What all defeated nations share, Schivelbusch argues, is a determination to affirm their moral superiority over the victor. This is not easy, because the sources of defeat in modern war can rarely be confined to the realm of strategic error. In the examples discussed here, victor and vanquished alike regarded the battlefield as nothing more than a stage upon which a vast drama of Darwinian social confrontation was played out. Scapegoats there must be, of course, though the selection will normally be dictated less by wartime performance than by the exigencies of post-war politics. The obvious choice for the defunct Confederacy, for instance, was Robert E. Lee, whose military reputation during the Civil War was not exceptional compared to other senior Confederate generals, and who was widely held to have been personally responsible for the defeat at Gettysburg. Once the fog of war had cleared, however, the onus settled on Lee's subordinate, James Longstreet, who had the poor judgment to involve himself in the bitterly contested politics of Reconstruction, whereas Lee lapsed into a dignified silence that corresponded more closely to antebellum ideals of chivalric nobility. Appomattox became a scene not of surrender but of "sacrifice," with Lee in the role of martyred saint (66).

Nevertheless, the enormity of modern defeat requires something more than the assignment of blame to a few luckless individuals. Even mythologies of far-reaching and systematic betrayal—exemplified by the "stab-in-the-back" legend that gained currency on the German Right after 1918—will rarely prove sufficient to explain why, for instance, a German army numbering in the millions could have capitulated while still fighting entirely on enemy soil. What is needed in such circumstances is a form of argument that can explain, in general terms, why the better nation gave in, and why it is still better despite having done so. Schivelbusch is at his best in disentangling the rhetorical strategies by which this need is invariably met. Perhaps the most common recourse is simply to the idea that the loser has been denied a fair fight because of the other side's overwhelming economic, technological, or demographic advantages. In the eyes of the defeated, modern victory is an industrial commodity, which is purchased at the price of the victors' souls. The defeated get to keep their souls, and that is where the real victory lies.

Such ideas, one might speculate, may be more directly available to pre-industrial or colonized peoples than they are to the advanced Western nations that Schivelbusch studies—though the Confederacy might well be considered to have been on the margins of the industrialized world at the time of its defeat, in contrast to the much stronger and more economically diversified North. As between France and Germany, however, there was little to choose between them in material terms in 1870; while Germans before 1914 regarded their country, not without reason, as the most sophisticated industrial society in Europe. Even in defeat, such societies seek to learn from

experience, a process that necessarily entails recognition that the practices of the enemy must in some respects have been superior. One recurring institutional response to defeat, as Schivelbusch demonstrates, is educational reform, often featuring the foundation of new universities modeled upon those of the winning side. At the same time, however, one sees concerted efforts to interpret the enemy's superior ideas as having in fact been acquired from the loser. Thus the French were quick to conclude that Prussia's military superiority in the 1870 was the result of its having more fully grasped the principles of Napoleonic warfare, while the French, although naturally preeminent in the art of war, had grown soft and complacent from resting on their laurels. Losers readily conclude that they have lately lost their way, only to decide that the attitudes and practices of a more remote and imperfectly remembered past would have stood them in better stead.

The culture of defeat is thus above all a culture of inversion and recapitulation, masquerading as one of self-scrutiny and historical criticism. The defeated believe that they must learn from the past. It is what they want to do. It is what they think they are doing. Yet the real past is too appalling to contemplate, and can only be remembered after it has been twisted into a shape that appeals to their sense of honor, and affords some hope for the future; which hope is in turn rooted in the values and images that were held most dear before the war began (and which may, of course, have contributed to bringing the war about). The meaningless suffering and pointless cruelty that are so much a part of the real history of war are the first things people forget—despite repeated vows never to do so—not just because the facts are so painful, but because they cast such a disillusioning light on the pretensions of the antebellum social order.

This presumably explains why memories of suffering and cruelty have so little place in Schivelbusch's account. His American publisher evidently felt it wise to insert the word "mourning" into the book's subtitle, but it does not appear in the German original, and it scarcely figures in the analysis. Mourning is a means of coming to terms with irretrievable loss. The scale of death in modern war has given rise to a range of practices intended to generalize mourning and make it public—official cemeteries and war memorials, national days of remembrance, televised entertainments in which the stars donate their time to charity, and so on—but Schivelbusch pays little attention to such things, no doubt because their cultural inauthenticity is so apparent. The idea that the suffering of war is the common property of the entire nation is so commonplace that its obvious absurdity is routinely overlooked. For those among the defeated (and, indeed, among the victors) who must bear the death of a spouse, a sibling, a parent, or a child—a minority even in the cataclysmic conflicts studied here—one suspects the consolations of cultural renewal will have limited significance. For the rest, well, defeat is not death. They move on, having learned far less than they imagine.