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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Monica Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder  
Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany*

by Daniel Cowling

*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*  
Vol. XLIII, No. 2 (Nov. 2021), 120–124

ISSN 0269-8552

MONICA BLACK, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 352 pp. ISBN 978 1 250 22567 2. \$29.99

On 27 May 1947, Edna Wearmouth wrote a letter home from the British Zone of occupied Germany. That day, she had visited Hanover for the first time and could not quite believe her eyes at the scale of destruction: 'just the skeletons of fine and beautiful buildings remain and everywhere these huge piles of rubble. Like a great dead city full of ghosts.'<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, a figure of speech, but as Monica Black's latest work *A Demon-Haunted Land* shows, in the aftermath of an annihilationist war, genocide, and racial dictatorship, Germany was indeed haunted by spectres of the recent past. *A Demon-Haunted Land* offers readers an engaging, eye-opening picture of life under the surface of German society in the aftermath of the Second World War. For some, Black argues, only the logic of witchcraft, mystical healing, and apparitions of catastrophe could make sense of the destruction that lay before them.

The study adds to our understanding of how individuals, institutions, and society as a whole came to terms with the events of 1933–1945. The pioneering work of Norbert Frei (amongst others) exposed Konrad Adenauer's *Vergangenheitspolitik*, which saw the Federal Republic seeking amnesties and integration for many of those associated with the Nazi regime.<sup>2</sup> It has also been convincingly shown how Germany and Europe experienced something of a 'memory freeze' in the immediate post-war period.<sup>3</sup> This was, in broad terms, a time when forgetting the atrocities and crimes of the war, skirting the tricky questions of guilt and complicity, allowed fractured communities to function. But the lived experiences of this process, especially amongst non-elites, are much more elusive. For victims, perpetrators, and bystanders alike, traumatic memories could not simply be erased. So how exactly did individuals come to terms with the past in a society focused

<sup>1</sup> Edna Wearmouth to her father, 17 May 1947, Herford, Private Papers of Miss E. Wearmouth, Documents 5413, Imperial War Museum Archive.

<sup>2</sup> Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> István Deák, Jan Gross, and Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton, 2000).

so emphatically on the future? In *A Demon-Haunted Land*, Monica Black sheds light on this subject thanks to an unexpected focus of enquiry: paranormal prognostications, witches, and wonder doctors.

In early 1949, as the four-power occupation was coming to an end, 'a wave of urgent, new rumors of cosmic violence and earthly calamity' emerged across western Germany (p. 35). In newspapers and by word of mouth, whispers of catastrophe and existential danger spread through society. It was widely predicted, we learn, that the world would end on 17 March. But while such apocalyptic prognostications never came to pass, March 1949 was indeed consequential, at least in the context of Black's study. In the Westphalian town of Herford, a young boy named Dieter Hülsmann who was bedridden and unable to stand on his own received a visit from a curious stranger. Within an hour, young Dieter had regained feeling in his legs and the next day emerged from his bed, hesitantly taking his first steps in months. Over the following fortnight, his condition improved yet further. The boy's interlocutor was Bruno Gröning, soon to be known as the 'Messiah of Herford' or simply the *Wunderdokter*.

News of the 'Miracle of Herford', and of a mysterious healer, spread far and wide. It was not long before the Hülsmann villa, where Gröning had taken up residence, was inundated with pilgrims from not only the surrounding area, but right across the country. That summer, thousands of cure-seekers came to Herford in the hope that the *Wunderdokter* might relieve them of their own maladies and misfortunes. He would address large crowds from a balcony, handing out pictures of himself and balls of tinfoil containing his hair or nail clippings. These peculiar relics were said to emit mystical curative energies. The story took West Germany by storm and was covered in the national press: in July, *Der Spiegel* even featured Gröning on its front cover, looking ponderously into the distance surrounded by images of grief-stricken Germans.

In the first six chapters we follow the travails of the *Wunderdokter*, from his run-in with the British occupation authorities in Herford and subsequent move to Munich, to the growing assortment of hangers-on that helped craft this spectacle of supernatural healing. Black interrogates the potential root causes of the assorted illnesses and injuries afflicting the many thousands who sought the assistance of the *Wunderdokter*, which in many instances he seems to have cured. These

individual maladies were, Black argues, physical embodiments of psychological trauma linked in some way to anxieties over the past—to guilt and fear of damnation. These conclusions remain somewhat speculative, but the book is more convincing in its account of the Bruno Gröning phenomenon and his emergence as a public figure in West Germany. The mass hysteria that surrounded the *Wunderdoktor* and his mystical healing is interpreted, with some justification, as a symptom of individual and collective attempts to come to terms with the past.

In the next two chapters, *A Demon-Haunted Land* turns its attention to a more general phenomenon: that of ghostly apparitions and witch trials. There was a significant uptick in the number of witchcraft accusations in West Germany during the 1950s, something that—like the superstition surrounding Gröning—Black suggests was tied to re-cremations about the country's past and ultimately an expression of a wounded society. In support of this argument, much of the focus is on Schleswig-Holstein, an area that not only played host to an exceptional number of such witchcraft trials in the post-war period, but had also been a hotbed of Nazism and a site of mass relocation during the refugee crisis of the late 1940s. Through a number of case studies, Black shows how accusations of witchcraft were often a means of settling scores with former political enemies or suspect personages. The result was various defamation and fraud trials brought against supposed *Hexenbanner*, or witch banishers. It is a compelling narrative, given the disruption to the social fabric that had taken place in the previous decade: even as West German society was choosing to look forwards, in small towns and villages across this 'demon-haunted land' memories of interpersonal guilt and victimhood remained.

The penultimate chapter of the book looks at the story of Johann Kruse, who in the 1950s became a prominent campaigner against witchcraft. In chronicling his efforts to counter the tide of accusations and mystical practices, Black sets the groundwork for the final chapter, in which we return to the story of Bruno Gröning and specifically his 1957 trial. The 'Messiah of Herford' was charged with violating a ban on lay healers and with negligent homicide following the death of a 17-year-old suffering from tuberculosis who had dispensed with medical treatment in favour of a miracle cure. Gröning was acquitted of the more serious charge and within two years had himself died of stomach

cancer. It was, according to Black, the end of an era: 'one of the most prominent manifestations of the post-war era – of the agony of defeat, of social turmoil and spiritual sickness – was gone'.

It is a shame that the second part of Black's study is so curtailed; the story of Bruno Gröning takes up almost two-thirds of the book, leaving little room for a detailed interrogation of witchcraft in West Germany. This is on the one hand understandable, given that the story of the *Wunderdoktor* is so unique and, at this point, relatively unexplored in an academic context. It is also likely a reflection of the challenges facing any historian while studying these sorts of phenomena. As Black writes, 'most of the sources we have available to study these matters are limited in various ways. They are often fragmentary, diffuse, and episodic. There is no archive for fears of spiritual punishment the way there are archives of social movements or political parties or government bureaucracies' (p. 149). Yet the asymmetry of *A Demon-Haunted Land's* focus does leave the reader wondering quite how conclusive this study can claim to be.

There is also a more fundamental question raised by Black's attempt to frame the history of lay healing and witchcraft within the context of West Germany's culture of remembrance. This approach is only partly persuasive, as one wonders if these events might also be fruitfully considered in relation to the political and economic power dynamics of post-war German society. For example, were some accusations of witchcraft purely for monetary reward or to settle petty grievances? Did some lay healers, including Gröning himself, hope to establish positions of cultural influence? We may wonder too whether, for some, dedication to the supernatural was less about the past and more a response to the upheaval and alienation that resulted from occupation and the 'economic miracle'. Was it perhaps a sense of active participation in a movement and a share in the power of 'knowing the truth' that made the supernatural so appealing? These questions go largely unanswered in *A Demon-Haunted Land*, which would have benefited from a more thorough interrogation of the individual motivations of those who felt the appeal of mysticism and superstition.

Finally, and not unrelatedly, there is the question of why these events began in 1949 and, notably, not 1945. One wonders whether this was a quirk of historical timing. Or did the military occupation act as

some sort of psychic block on society, leaving no space for witch doctors and lay healers to emerge until later? In Black's reading, the 'Allied-superintended confrontation with mass murder' was a vital constituent in creating the disjunctures of society that preceded the emergence of mysticism (p. 16). Yet the details here remain relatively opaque. If, as Black suggests, the iniquities of denazification were part of why the recent past was so troublesome, it might have been profitable to assess how this varied across the four zones of occupation, given that French, British, American, and Soviet approaches were all so different. One also wonders whether it was more than simply coincidence that the two major sites of interest in Black's study—Herford and Schleswig-Holstein—both came under British control at the end of the war.

But these queries do not entirely erase the book's achievements. There is no doubt that *A Demon-Haunted Land* makes a novel contribution to the historiography of post-war Germany. Its original base of source material, while not without its flaws, reveals new insights about 'coming to terms with the past'. For many thousands of Germans in the late 1940s, it does seem as if mysticism and superstition were indeed an important means of making sense of the trauma of recent events. This conclusion prompts avenues of further study. We must wonder whether similar phenomena have been witnessed in other post-conflict societies—in Germany itself after the First World War perhaps, or in the former Yugoslavia following the conflicts of the 1990s. While societies have their own specific cultures of remembrance, there is cause for speculating whether there may be a more general trend to explore here.

DANIEL COWLING is an independent researcher and author. He completed his Ph.D. thesis on the British occupation of Germany at the University of Cambridge in 2018. He is currently writing his first book, *Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans*, which will be published by Head of Zeus.