



המרכז הירושלמי לענייני ציבור ומדינה  
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## Pertinent Questions for Germany's Allies

**Skyldig till skuld: En europeisk resa i Nazitysklands skugga (Guilty of Guilt: A European Voyage in the Shadow of Nazi Germany), by Henrik Arnstad, Norstedts, 2009, 200 pp. [Swedish]**

*Reviewed by Mikael Tossavainen*

In this short book, somewhere between a monograph and an essay in political history, Henrik Arnstad turns the searchlight on some of the countries that fought at Germany's side during World War II. He asks how the allies of the Nazis have handled the memories of the war, what stories they tell about their roles in the war, and in what way they fashion the past into history - or rather histories. Without ever becoming overly theoretical or abstract, Arnstad exposes the process of narrativization, where myths - sometimes even lies - mix with facts. Some facts are hidden, conveniently forgotten, whereas others are highlighted in order to fabricate a history, which gives a version of the past that is acceptable in the present.

Arnstad's book focuses on four countries: Finland, Germany, Austria, and Italy, and the various ways these countries have faced, and escaped facing, their decisions and actions during the years they fought along with Hitler.

Finland, in many ways the main focus of this book, was the only democracy that fought side-by-side with Nazi Germany during the war. "We had no choice," the Finns have claimed over the past seventy-five years, stressing that they were forced into that role because of Soviet aggression.

No one questions the Finns' need to defend themselves against the unprovoked Soviet invasion during the Winter War of 1939, when Stalin's armies tried to invade Finland and incorporate it into the Soviet Union as was done with the Baltic states at the same time. But the Finnish participation in Operation Barbarossa in 1941 is something else completely. For many years the Finns saw it as the organic continuation of the heroic Winter War; they even named it the Continuation War to stress that perspective. With time, however, and the accumulation of new research on the subject, this version of events becomes increasingly untenable.

Today many historians instead describe the Continuation War as a separate Finnish-Soviet conflict - a war of revenge and conquest for Finnish *Lebensraum*, and not merely the recovery of lost territory. Not only are the motives questioned, but the conduct of the Finnish armed forces is also increasingly criticized, not least since research shows that thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, as well as innocent Russian civilians, were sent to prison camps where they were left more or less to starve to death.

Another issue is the treatment of the Jews. The Finns have prided themselves in pointing out that they refused German requests to deport the Finnish Jews to a certain death in Auschwitz. The fact that some Jews of Soviet nationality were handed over to Germany was, however, forgotten since it did not fit the image that Finland was creating for itself in the new Europe after 1945.

To a large extent, Finland succeeded in marketing its version of the story to the world. The Finns were seen as a small, proud nation that had fought ferociously and valiantly to defend itself against Soviet aggression and in that process had no choice but to accept German aid. During the Cold War, it was in nobody's interest to challenge this myth. It was a myth nonetheless. When Arnstad seeks an explanation as to why this myth went unchallenged for so long, he points out that Finland is a small nation in the European periphery with a language understood by almost no one outside of Finland. This may explain how Gustav Mannerheim, the man who led Finland during the war, may be the only Axis leader in Europe who to this day is still honored with a

statue in the center of a European capital.

## Dealing with Guilt and Deflecting It

Germany, the second country that Arnstad analyzes, did not have the Finnish luxury of being able to deny its role in World War II. The national soul-searching in Germany has been extensive over the decades that followed the defeat, and today one can find a monument to the victims of Nazi aggression in almost every major German city. German academia and popular culture have also dealt extensively, albeit not always honestly, with the country's Nazi past.

On the individual level, however, it is a different story. Arnstad shows that there is a clear limitation of the German reckoning with its Nazi past. Even though everyone agrees that Germany as a state was at fault, many Germans were fed stories of their own family members' goodness and resistance to Nazism. No one was a Nazi, and the Nazis who cannot be denied are treated as exceptions. Arnstad uses the Himmler family as an example. For a long time, the postwar Himmlers treated Heinrich as the black sheep of the family, a monster from whom everyone distanced themselves, even when he was at the peak of his power. This myth reigned unchallenged for decades, until one family member was able to show that the Reichsführer SS had, in fact, been an integrated part of the Himmler family, and that the rest of the family had benefited greatly from its ties to the top echelons of the Nazi state.

Italy and Austria are treated together in one chapter, since their stories are similar. Despite the fact that Fascist Italy was an enthusiastic ally of Hitler's Germany, and Austria was an incorporated part of that state, both these countries have been able to cultivate a myth of victimhood and martyrdom after the fall of Berlin. In an attempt to divide and conquer, the Allies declared Austria to be the first victim of Germany, instead of an integral part of the Third Reich. Not surprisingly, the Austrians clung to that version of the past, casting themselves as victims of the Germans. The Italians, too, have done what they could to portray themselves not as allies but as victims of Nazi Germany. As an example, Arnstad points out that the only museum in Rome dealing with the war years is the Liberation Museum, which focuses on how Italy was liberated by the Allied forces from German occupation, which had lasted for a few months at the end of the war.

Another Italian myth Arnstad exposes is that the occupation of Greece was benevolent. In Italy, as well as in popular consciousness internationally, the Germans are seen as brutal occupiers and the Italians as goodhearted people. In fact, the Italians first failed to occupy Greece, and only when the Germans managed to do it for them did the Italians take over. When they did, they exacted revenge on the Greeks by administering a brutal and bloody rule.

## Criticisms That Rankle

Arnstad has been attacked, especially in Finland, for merely being a journalist and not a trained historian, and for not carrying out any original research or even covering all the existing research on how the Axis powers have handled their wartime myths in his book. Even though all this is true, it is somewhat beside the point and reveals more about how sensitive these issues are in Finland than anything about flaws in Arnstad's book - of which there admittedly are a few. It is true that the book does not present new research; but Arnstad never makes that claim. He merely poses some pertinent questions.

Those questions, and not the quality of Arnstad's work or his professional background, are probably the real reason that the book has attracted so much criticism in Finland. The Finnish indignation should be traced back to the fact that the nation's reckoning with its wartime actions and choices is still fresh and far from complete. The fact that so many Finns have been angered by Arnstad's questioning of Mannerheim, and his statue in Helsinki, indicates the importance of this book.

With all that said, there are still some valid criticisms to raise against this book. First of all, and on this point his Finnish critics are right, it is problematic that Arnstad does not read Finnish or Italian and relies solely on Swedish, English, and a few German sources. This forces him to rely on secondary sources and seriously hampers his ability to say anything authoritative and truly original about these two countries. He is saved by the fact that the reckoning with its wartime past is all but virgin ground in Finland, but with regard to the other countries, this reliance on external sources is inadequate.

Second, the German and Austrian sections are noticeably thinner than the Finnish and Italian ones. The German one is also on a completely different level, since it focuses on the individual and not the national

context, which makes it stand out infelicitously. Perhaps it would have been better to forgo the chapter on Germany, where the soul-searching regarding World War II is so much more advanced than in the other countries. In its place Arnstad could have included another country such as Romania, Croatia, or Slovakia, which also were allies of the Nazis. That would have made the book more consistently critical.

The book's main theme is the psychological, cultural, and political wish to be a victim rather than an aggressor. The title is derived from Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries*, where the protagonist is found "guilty of guilt" in a Kafkaesque scene. In this context, Germany is "guilty of guilt," thereby absolving all the other Axis countries of their own, taking all their sin upon itself. Arnstad notes that the German confrontation with guilt and responsibility has thus far been counterproductive for its erstwhile allies, enabling them to keep spinning their myths of alleged victimhood. Now, more than sixty years after the war, the process of reexamining such myths has become all the more painful.

Arnstad is aware of the pitfalls of moralism, and he is careful not to pass judgment in his analysis. He demonstrates how certain political and cultural processes have given the Finns, Italians, and Austrians the opportunity to place all the moral guilt on Germany. He does not conclude from this, however, that they are worse than the Germans, or any better or worse than anyone else. This is probably what most countries would have done under similar circumstances, and the book's purpose is to describe a fascinating piece of twentieth-century cultural history. The fact that some feel attacked should be seen a sign of this book's considerable importance.

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