

West German Industry and the Challenge of the Nazi Past, 1945–1955. *By S. Jonathan Wiesen.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 2001. xviii + 330 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-807-82634-0.

Reviewed by Jonathan Steinberg

Business history, together with legal and military history, occupies a shadowy region on the margins of most history departments. Since most historians have never been businessmen, lawyers, or soldiers, they have neither a feel for, nor an inclination to study, such topics. Business history plays an important role in the business schools, but often for its usefulness in supplying prepacked case studies on which to sharpen the wits of future fund managers at Goldman Sachs.

S. Jonathan Wiesen's study of the decade 1945–55 stakes a claim to be business history in context. He writes about how several West German firms attempted to clean the brown slime left by National Socialism off their brand names. In the case of companies like Krupp, Thyssen, or Siemens, the stains were large and the cleansing effort correspondingly energetic. Directors, too, not only had to wash their pasts but to answer to courts and denazification panels. The firms needed entry to what had been "enemy markets" if they were to survive. Werner Carp, a financier and board member of many iron and steel firms in the Ruhr, had to be carried from his house in his pajamas, in October 1945, by British soldiers because he refused to believe that he could be guilty of anything. In 1947, Thyssen directors and managers demanded back pay for the time they spent in jail. One of the most dispiriting aspects of this book is the picture of moral obtuseness and insensitivity on display in the boardrooms of West German companies after the war. Somehow somebody else had employed the slave labor, had seized and exploited former Jewish firms, had taken over competitors in countries overrun by the *Wehrmacht*, and had made huge profits in the Nazi war on humanity. The fact that the great German and Austrian firms have been forced in the two last years to pay some modest pittance to the fourteen million slaves employed by the Reich is an aspect of globalization that its critics neglect. Deutsche Bank or Siemens have to do business in their biggest market, the United States, and simply cannot afford to be confronted with class-action suits, rapacious lawyers, and small groups of frail, elderly survivors outside their gleaming towers. In 1945, the same firms made a concerted effort to get away with their crimes, and on the whole they succeeded.

Jonathan Wiesen, like some of the most interesting, younger business historians, knows the literature of general historiography, and he uses a conceptual framework, based on the theory of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, that memory, rather than a product of the psyche,

belongs among the active features of the mind. Individuals and groups “construct” their past. Wiesen uses this model with flair to argue that public relations acted in the German business world to do just that, to provide a new “memory” for the compromised individuals and firms. It is an interesting idea but could only be truly convincing if Wiesen could show us that what were clearly lies were believed—that is, were part of a “constructed memory.” He has used much internal and private correspondence that supports the theory, but I can recall a conversation with the late Wolfgang von Tirpitz, who had been a senior executive at I. G. Farben until he was recalled to naval service in 1941. He told me unequivocally that anybody from his social class who claimed not to know what was going on under the Nazis was simply lying. Even internal memoranda, therefore, are almost certainly products of self-censorship, a habit developed under the totalitarian state and applied later under Allied occupation. The truth would have been conveyed with a nod, wink, or raised eyebrow but never put on paper. The most important realities in the past are rarely found in the documents.

I have another quibble. Wiesen omits the successful negotiations between the Adenauer government and Israel in 1951–52 to pay restitution to Jewish victims on a huge scale. Adenauer understood what Mr. Wiesen’s protagonists simply failed to grasp: Germany was a pariah state. Without a gesture of contrition and some tangible sign of it, no public relations by Krupp or Siemens could have made a difference. This was after all the period when buying a Volkswagon “beetle” in the United States was a shocking act of insensitivity. Wiesen sees the Allied framework clearly and also the importance of the European Coal and Steel Community as a way back into the civilized world for his German managers, but he neglects the most important and most controversial diplomatic initiative of those years.

With these two reservations, I recommend this elegant and thought-provoking monograph. It tells a nasty story of business duplicity and moral obtuseness but does it with subtlety and a skillful use of theoretical paradigms. It is a good read, and that is high praise in these days of polysyllables and jargon. In the post-Enron world, there are, perhaps, a few lessons on business ethics to be found in this book that might even make it into classes at our better business schools.

Jonathan Steinberg is Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Modern European History at the University of Pennsylvania. He the author of The Deutsche Bank and Its Gold Transactions in the Second World War (1999).