



The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan

By Ian Buruma

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In this now classic book, internationally famed journalist Ian Buruma examines how Germany and Japan have attempted to come to terms with their conduct during World War II—a war that they aggressively began and humiliatingly lost, and in the course of which they committed monstrous war crimes. As he travels through both countries, to Berlin and Tokyo, Hiroshima and Auschwitz, he encounters people who are remarkably honest in confronting the past and others who astonish by their evasions of responsibility, some who wish to forget the past and others who wish to use it as a warning against the resurgence of militarism.

Buruma explores these contrasting responses to the war and the two countries' very different ways of memorializing its atrocities, as well as the ways in which political movements, government policies, literature, and art have been shaped by its shadow. Today, seventy years after the end of the war, he finds that while the Germans have for the most part coped with the darkest period of their history, the Japanese remain haunted by historical controversies that should have been resolved long ago. Sensitive yet unsparing, complex and unsettling, this is a profound study of how people face up to or deny terrible legacies of guilt and shame.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This thought-provoking inquiry has a powerful theme: people must be held accountable for the society in which they live. To learn why the collective German memory of WW II is so different from the Japanese, Buruma (*Playing the Game*) traveled extensively in Europe and Asia, visiting war museums, viewing films about the war and interviewing citizens from all walks of life. He discovered that most Japanese soldiers believed slaughtering "inferior races" such as the Chinese and Koreans not only accorded with the emperor's will but demonstrated loyalty. The Christian mayor of Nagasaki made the stunning observation to the author that because his compatriots worship nature only, the question of individual responsibility rarely arises in Japan. As for the Germans, it is Buruma's perception that they need to unburden their wartime guilt and receive forgiveness, whereas the Japanese prefer to remain silent and are puzzled by German preoccupation with the war. If the former Axis partners have anything in common, according to Buruma, it is the fear of their own resurgent militarism.

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From Library Journal

Buruma, a native of Holland, established his credentials on the subject of Japan in *Behind the Mask* (1983). In this work, he examines how Japan and Germany have handled their collective memories of World War II. While Gordon Craig (The Germans, LJ 2/1/82) examined the ethnopsychology of the Germans with more scholarship, Buruma provides a timely comparative study of the Axis partners. Given the current fear of a reunified Germany full of skinheads in the streets, Buruma may surprise some with his conclusion that Germany is coming to grips with the past while Japan tries to ignore it. As a journalist, Buruma is prone to journalism's sins: sweeping generalizations and the absence of footnotes. Still, this insightful look at two major nations in the new world order will make a valuable addition to any library. Highly recommended.

--Randall L. Schroeder, Augustana Coll. Lib., Rock Island, Ill.

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From Kirkus Reviews

As in God's Dust (1989), Buruma takes a psychological and cultural voyage into nationalism, guilt, and self-delusion--in this case, of two of WW II's defeated Axis powers. Exploring the clich, that Germany is a culture of guilt and Japan a culture of shame, the author indeed finds that whereas Germany has engaged in a protracted collective mourning over its war crimes, Japan has no war monuments at all except to its own dead. Yet these two societies' chauvinism in this century has been similar, with Japan imitating German racial nationalism just as it imitated German education and industry. In both countries, contemporary pacifism and antiwar rhetoric have a strong anti- American flavor--a case, he thinks, of a failure to come to terms with the past. ``Pacifism," Buruma notes, ``turns national guilt into a virtue." The book ranges wide and deep in its search for disparate voices in both societies: editors, intellectuals, writers, artists, activists. Buruma's easy familiarity with Japan enables him to dig under the skin of national attitudes in a way that is rare for a Western commentator. When interviewing the Liberal Democratic Party politician Kamei Shizuka, for example, he uncovers typically Japanese phobias about the Jewish ``domination" of American public life and the equally common resentment that Americans do not consult Japan before making policy decisions. At the end of the book he compares two towns: Passau, a picturesque town in which Hitler spent his childhood, where surviving Nazi sympathies sometimes lead bakers to make bread in the shape of swastikas; and Hanoaka, a similarly tranquil Japanese place where Chinese slave workers were lynched in 1945. In both places he finds ``public indifference to painful truths." All in all, a thoughtful, patiently assembled book that

probes carefully and with moral toughness into precisely those painful truths. -- *Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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