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Review of The culture of defeat: on national trauma, mourning, and recovery

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Schivelbusch has produced an anthology of failure not unlike Barbara Tuchman’s 1984 The March of Folly. Both books attempt to analyze national military disasters in light of national and personal psychological factors. But, whereas Tuchman’s book looks at military disaster as the result of twisted thinking, The Culture of Defeat uses defeat as a starting point in the transformation of the losers of three historic conflicts: the American South after the Civil War, France following its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and Germany following its loss in World War I.

According to the author, nations cope with colossal military failure by creating myths about themselves and their cultures and by re-casting their defeat as a kind of vindication of their cultural superiority. In positing this analysis, Schivelbusch, without explicitly referring to it, evokes Freud’s repetition-compulsion as a mechanism nations use to metamorphose their military losses into moral victories.

Schivelbusch also asserts that for the victor in each of these conflicts, winning was not always winning: the victor’s attitudes and ways of doing things tended to become assimilated into the culture of its foe, leading to the dissipation and even death of the winner’s own culture.

This is an interesting and readable account of national character in military defeat and is recommended for academic libraries.

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