

Germans as Victims

By Anne Applebaum

Wednesday, October 15, 2003; Page A23

Enter any of Frankfurt's grand hotels on any evening during Frankfurt's annual book fair and a scene worthy of a German Woody Allen -- if that isn't a complete contradiction in terms -- spreads out before you in the lobby. Sipping away at glasses of chardonnay last week were men in horn-rimmed glasses and black turtlenecks, women in heavy eyeliner and pointy shoes -- a vast army of literary agents, publishers, booksellers, intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals discussing Death, Freud and (enviously) who had bought the international rights to the latest hack-celebrity biography. At the fair itself, brightly colored cookbooks vied for attention with white-jacketed philosophical tomes, while Russian performance artists wrapped themselves in cellophane tape. It was hard to know what to look at next.

It was also hard not to notice how much the chatter about books in Germany reveals nowadays about the mood in Germany. As in the United States, many of the books that have recently found their way to the top of German bestseller lists concern Sept. 11, 2001. Unlike those in the United States, many of them also argue that the Bush administration was responsible for Sept. 11. One book, by a former German government minister, argues that the planes that hit the World Trade Center may have been secretly steered from the ground. Another -- translated from the French and titled "The Appalling Lie" -- says that the Pentagon was never hit by a plane at all but was instead deliberately blown up with a bomb. Germany's establishment press has studiously debunked these theories, to little avail: Recently, an opinion poll showed that one in five Germans believe them.

Free E-mail Newsletters

- **Today's Headlines & Columnists**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)
- **Breaking News Alerts**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

But if German bestseller lists reveal a German reassessment of the United States, they have also in recent years revealed an even more vigorous German reassessment of Germany. Not one but two books have become popular through their descriptions of the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945, which resulted in fires that caused tens of thousands of deaths. One of the authors used the word "crematoria" to describe the burning buildings, described the Allied bomber pilots as the equivalents of Nazi police units that murdered Jews and concluded by wondering whether Winston Churchill, who ordered the bombings, ought to have been condemned as a war criminal.

These books have also been effective: According to another opinion poll, more than a third of the Germans now think of themselves as "victims" of the Second World War -- just like the Jews. Nor has this new interpretation of history remained limited to books. Lately momentum has gathered behind a movement to build a new museum in Berlin dedicated to Germans expelled from their homes at the end of the war -- just like the Holocaust museum. It's not wrong for Germans to remember their relatives who suffered, but the tone of the campaigners is disturbing, because they seem, at times, almost to forget why the war started in the first place. Their leader, for example, is the daughter of a *Wehrmacht* officer, and was born in occupied Poland. Tragically, she was expelled from her childhood home when German troops were defeated -- the adverb "tragically" representing a certain point of view here, not an objective observation.

That point of view, always popular on the far right of the German political spectrum, has spread rapidly leftward in recent years, attracting supporters among Social Democrats, bank presidents and others. Not everybody agrees by any means, but the subject is shockingly raw, even difficult to discuss politely. As I can attest, there are German politicians who will shout down other guests at dinner parties if their right to victimhood is questioned too harshly. It is my guess that these things are related: It cannot be an accident that a wave of unusually virulent, even irrational anti-Americanism has peaked just as Germans have begun, for the first time since the war, to talk about their past in a new way. Germany is reassessing its place in Europe, its role in the world, its postwar subordination to the United States. Some of the recalcitrance we've seen in Germany during the past year has been genuine opposition to the war in Iraq and genuine dislike of President Bush and what he is thought to stand for. But some reflects a deeper change. Germans, or at least some of them, no longer want to apologize for the 20th century. Germans, or at least some of them, no longer want to accept the political leadership of the United States. Just look at the bestseller lists for proof.

applebaumann@washpost.com