Although its major focus is upon the re-emergence of memories of wartime suffering in Germany, Dagmar Barnouw’s latest book makes vital reading for any Americanist with an interest in identity politics, multiculturalism, public memory or the war in Iraq. Barnouw’s previous work has established her as a subtle, patient and perceptive historian and literary critic, deploying a nuanced understanding of cultural and intellectual history to cut through received pieties and challenge lazy orthodoxies. (Her previous books concern photography, German history, Weimar intellectuals, Hannah Arendt and V. S. Naipaul, *inter alia*.) In the present volume she argues that the American public memory of the Second World War has constructed a “clean, good, just” war, shrinking the war into a part of the Holocaust, demonizing all Germans through the concept of collective guilt and instructing them to forget what had happened to them and to remember only the victims of the regime. The almost complete exclusion from historical memory of wartime German experiences has separated both Germans and Americans from an awareness of historical reality. As a result, the war has been used over six decades to justify American military conduct, most recently in Bush’s visit to Auschwitz in May 2003 after the “fall” of Baghdad, where he invoked the memory of the six million in order to legitimate his attack on the “axis of evil.” Barnouw notes that the cultural centrality of Holocaust remembrance (and the tabooing of any critique of such centrality) has reinforced political discourses of identity based on the authority of remembered persecution and suffering, discourses which harness the power of identity to speak for the dead. As she argues, it is getting harder for the dead to talk back to the living, except on behalf of the causes of the living. The process has also contributed to political re-religionization, a Manichaean scenario of absolute right and wrong, a politics of suspicion in which the evils of the past are exhumed and checked for usability, an addiction to demonstrations of remorse and public apologies, and a keen awareness on the part of different groups of the strategic presentation of victimhood. Relative innocence and relative guilt have no place in this cultural economy. The politics of identity prefers the certainty of culturally pre-authorized moral claims over the uncertain negotiations of political, social and economic conflicts of interest. As a result, with the best democratic, moral and compassionate intentions, America has become a culture of hindsight judgement and self-righteousness, just as, in Western culture, temporal discrimination is the only legitimate discrimination, making us less inclined to bring to the past patient and soberly critical questions regarding its particularities and ambiguities. Private memories that do not fit the public discourse are not merely silenced; the fact of their silencing is also tabooed. Any discussion of German suffering is censored lest it appear to challenge the facts of the Holocaust, or expose the writer to accusations of anti-Semitism. When, for example, the *New Yorker* published W. G. Sebald’s “A Natural History of Destruction” in 2002, readers complained that any sympathy for German wartime experiences was immoral; the German experience of war should remain erased. In this book,
decisively (and with great sensitivity) Barnouw establishes a case for creating a more complete historical remembrance for postwar generations.

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JUDIE NEWMAN


First published in German in 2000, this important study provides a history of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and particularly its campaign for the right to vote. Arguably the most important and (soon to celebrate a hundred years in existence) the longest-surviving black civil rights organization, the NAACP was often overshadowed during the 1960s by groups committed to more dramatic direct action. Regarded as an old-fashioned, conservative, and even “Uncle Tom” organization by some of those activists (and by some historians), nonetheless the NAACP provided leadership and support at national and local levels in the long struggle for race equality in America.

Berg’s book draws upon an impressive range of archive-based sources and secondary works listed in a useful bibliography. In tracing the development of the NAACP from its origins in 1909 through to the mid-1990s, he argues that the association’s often conservative aims have to be seen in the context of particular moments in time and the nature of the leadership itself. Its aims were always full equality and inclusion within the American political system achieved by legislative measures and using the courts to ensure enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Berg argues convincingly that with little real electoral influence, the NAACP had no choice but to follow this legalistic approach. However, in doing so it helped to strip away the legitimacy of the Jim Crow system. In establishing branches throughout the South, assisting African American defendants facing the death penalty (for example in Moore v. Dempsey in 1923 as well as the much better-known later case of the Scottsboro Boys), winning small victories firstly in fighting against white primaries and later larger triumphs in education, the organization established important precedents and helped develop black group consciousness both locally and nationally. Its often overlooked work in increasing black voter registration between the end of World War II and the 1960s before other groups such as the SNCC appeared was also of considerable significance. While the author admits that the vote by itself did not prove to be the hoped-for “ticket to freedom,” and the pragmatic realism of the NAACP often limited its aspirations, he provides a history of a vital and consistent struggle against racism that provided the basis for many later more radical campaigns.

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