

# The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery

Wolfgang Schivelbusch

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A fascinating look at history's losers-the myths they create to cope with defeat and the steps they take never to be vanquished again

History may be written by the victors, Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues in his brilliant and provocative new book, but the losers often have the final word. Focusing on three seminal cases of modern warfare-the South after the Civil War, France in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, and Germany following World War I-Schivelbusch reveals the complex psychological and cultural reactions of vanquished nations to the experience of military defeat.

Drawing on responses from every level of society, Schivelbusch shows how conquered societies question the foundations of their identities and strive to emulate the victors: the South to become a "better North," the French to militarize their schools on the Prussian model, the Germans to adopt all things American. He charts the losers' paradoxical equation of military failure with cultural superiority as they generate myths to glorify their pasts and explain their losses: the nostalgic "plantation legend" after the fall of the Confederacy; the cult of Joan of Arc in vanquished France; the fiction of the stab in the back by "foreign" elements in postwar Germany. From cathartic epidemics of "dance madness" to the revolutions that so often follow battlefield humiliation, Schivelbusch finds remarkable similarities across cultures.

Eloquently and vibrantly told, *The Culture of Defeat* is a tour de force that opens new territory for historical inquiry.



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