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Abstract

Historical memory, how a people remember the past, is in a state of almost eternal flux. By following the development of historical memory in post-war Germany, historians can better understand the generational and contemporary impact on popular history. German history illustrates the importance of this concept, as German history has a great deal of 20th century historical baggage.

Keywords

Germany, Nazi, Post-War, historical memory

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | German Language and Literature | History | Military History | Public History | Social History

Comments

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Germany and History in Flux

The Generational Changes in Approaching Germany's Past

Louis Gentilucci

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Recent German history is fraught with unpleasant events. Each generation of Germans since the end of World War Two has found their own way to rationalize, explain, defend, and condemn those experiences. This is a process that never ends, as no generation truly has the final word on German history. Rather, the lessons of German history are redefined every generation. This requires vigilance on the part of those who would prevent historical revisionism.

The German experience during World War Two rests at the heart of Europe's memory. Germany is the ultimate challenge to the ideas of national education and responsibility. No nation has more reason to forget and repress its past than Germany. No nation has more to gain from historical revisionism. And yet Germany has, to a large extent, left that path, and acknowledged the dark years of the world war. How can this be accounted for? What can explain a nation's willingness to wear its scarlet letter, not with pride, but with dignity? This was not always the case, and in many countries, it is still not the case. Across the world, questions of ethical national responsibility are subsumed by nationalism. Germany has had a long road to travel while coming to terms with its past. But the question remains: how did Germans come to accept both their past and their responsibility to it? And how can other nations follow?

First, Germany's relationship with the past must be defined. The specific point of contention is the period from 1933 to 1945, when Germany was helmed by the Nazis and engaged in numerous reprehensible projects, ranging from the euthanasia of those deemed 'unfit' to the systematic extermination of all Jews in Europe. There is also the brutal legacy of World War Two and occupation of most of Germany's European neighbors. Alongside these crimes against humanity is the racist ideology that spurred it onward, justifying the purging of the 'filth' from the human race.

This historical legacy is especially important in terms of the collective memory of the German nation. This memory, as an externalized source of information, has a major impact on politics and culture.¹ Collective social memory dictates how a nation views itself. These views, in turn, influence how policy is chosen and enforced. Collective memory is notorious for

¹ Aleida Assmann, "Remembrance and Memory," *Goethe Institute*, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/dos/ern/kug/en3106036.htm>

becoming clouded by nationalist fervor and the exclusion of uncomfortable truths. People prefer to associate with each other based on common positive traits, as opposed to

Germany has, in recent decades, been open and accepting of criticism of this past. Germans have fought to establish memorials to the victims of National Socialism on their own soil. Berlin is riddled with monuments and museums condemning the Nazi era. Germany officially accepts the responsibility for the Holocaust and public opinion stands behind this acceptance. Germans, to a large degree, do not neglect their dark past or attempt to mitigate the consequences. There is no shying away from the term 'genocide.' German national histories do not gloss over the Nazi era and German historians engage meaningfully with the complicated questions raised by that era, giving answers critical of German identity. And surveys have shown the general effectiveness of the German education system in teaching its children about the Holocaust and war years.² Overall, there is a serious engagement with a shameful past in Germany that distinguishes it amongst nations.

There are several ideas that are commonly thrown about in academic and popular discussions to explain this phenomenon. One theory is that the absolute defeat of Germany, its occupation, and its re-education at the hands of the Allies forced Germans to face the consequences of their actions and repent. Another theory is that the cognitive dissonance of the post-war generation eventually became too painful to be ignored by future generations. Others speculate that the Cold War served as a catalyst for change, forcing Germans to confront their dark past in exchange for maintaining their ideological integrity as part of the free world. Again, others believe that the Germans were able to psychologically distance themselves from their past,

² Harald Welzer, "Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in Germany Family Remembrance", Washington, DC, 2005. www.memory-research.de/cms/download.php?id=2

establishing a “break” with history where they could condemn the past without being a part of it. Each of these theories illuminates part of the process of Germany’s maturation. But it is by looking at them together that the development of Germany can be understood. Each of these ideas contains a piece of the puzzle to Germany’s development throughout the second half of the 20th century.

In the wake of World War Two, Germany was in absolute shambles. The Third Reich had fallen, the Wehrmacht had collapsed, and Germany’s cities had been bombed, decimated and occupied. The country of Germany had ceased to exist. Divided into four occupation zones, Germany was governed by the militaries of America, Britain, France and Russia. Together, the Allies conducted the Nuremberg Trials, holding the remaining Nazi hierarchy responsible for the crimes committed by the regime. In addition, they engaged in the process of de-Nazification, attempting to purge National Socialism from the national psyche of Germany.³ Regular Germans were taken from their homes and forced to bear witness to the horrors of the camps and the Holocaust.⁴

This strategy from the early post-war years seems to have failed miserably. Germans were more upset by their treatment during the occupation than they were by the images of the Holocaust.⁵ Germans were able to distance themselves from the evils committed by the Nazis by re-imagining themselves as fellow victims of the Nazis. Facing accusations of collective blame, ordinary Germans assumed collective innocence. The Nazis were, as far as possible, separated

³ Tony Judt, *Postwar: a History of Europe Since 1945*, Reprint ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 809.

⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *The Two Germanies*, (chap. 7 in Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 2004), pp. 205-249.

⁵ Alon Confino, “Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960,” *History and Memory*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 92-121.

from the German people. They became a 'foreign' element, viewed as evil occupiers rather than the popular government that they were in reality.⁶

These post-war years saw Germans frame the past around the suffering of Germans rather than the suffering caused by Germans. People did engage with their past, but they did so in a way that allowed them to neglect the more controversial areas. Germans fondly recalled the glory days of the Third Reich, referencing the early period of peace and prosperity ushered in by the rise of Hitler.⁷ They recounted the terror and death of the Allied bombing campaign to their children.⁸ And they mourned their heroic suffering during the years of reconstruction and occupation, victims of the tyrannical Nazis who lead them astray and the vindictive occupiers.⁹

The past was not abandoned or repressed due to the horrors hidden there. Rather, Germans retained their understanding of history, but contextualized it to match their own experiences. Germans found a way to distance themselves from the war crimes and the Holocaust in the same way they were able to avoid those tragedies while they were occurring: by not directly engaging them. Most Germans were bystanders to atrocities, only observing them at a distance. Little was asked of them as far as genocide was concerned. With no personal connection to the atrocities they were accused of, many Germans were able to dismiss the attacks on Germany out of hand. They viewed these events as crimes committed "in the name of Germany" and therefore not representative of Germany itself.

⁶ Alon Confino. "Remembering the Second World War, 1945-1965: Narratives of Victimhood and Genocide," *Cultural Analysis: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Folklore and Popular Culture*, Vol. 4, 2005: http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~caforum/volume4/vol4_article3.html

⁷ Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960," 92-121.

⁸ Mary Nolan, *Germans and Victims during the Second World War: Air Wars, Memory Wars*, in: *Central European History* 38.1 (2005), 7-40.

⁹ See "Goethe's Germany," Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960," 104.

The psychological need for defining German victimhood was accompanied by a physical need. Germans who had been dispossessed by the war needed the support of their fellow Germans for restitution.¹⁰ If Germans began pointing fingers at each other, there would be little hope of countering the occupation authorities and rebuilding Germany. Germans needed to unite if they wanted to have any influence over the reconstruction process. So in order to rebuild Germany, psychological and physically, Germans needed to turn the focus away from German atrocities and toward German tragedies.

Once the zeal of indignation had worn off and the Cold War had settled in, former Nazis were embraced as a resource to be employed against the Communist bloc.¹¹ Until the election of Willy Brandt as Chancellor in 1969, Germany was administered and governed by former Nazis. The end of the 1940's saw the return to business as usual in West Germany. And yet, this recovery masked the incredible sea-changes that had resulted from the Allied occupation. While the western Allies were willing to reintegrate the Nazis into the new West Germany, they did seriously compromise the power structures of the old Germany. The Junkers were eliminated by Soviet collectivization in the East and in the West the powerful trade conglomerates were disassembled and the autonomy of the military eliminated.¹² These institutions had played an important role in destabilizing the Weimar Republic and had condemned Germany's last experiment to democracy to an early grave. If it can be said that the Allied de-Nazification efforts failed to eliminate fascism from the hearts and minds of the German people, they succeeded in reorganizing West German society into a form more conducive to democracy. The

¹⁰ Michael L. Hughes, "Through No Fault of Our Own': West Germans Remember Their War Losses, *German History* Vol. 18 No. 2 *The German History Society*, 2000.

¹¹ Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 200.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7-10.

western Allies developed West Germany into a consumer culture, solidifying the place of the middle class and allowing intellectual life to flourish.¹³

The trope of authoritarianism in German history became a common tool in the Cold War struggle in Europe. East Germany accused West Germany of being the heir to the Nazi regime, and painted them as capitalist fascists. Simultaneously, West Germany officially mourned its totalitarian past, as well as its tragic return in the East. Cold War realities obscured the idea of responsibility for the Nazi era, but specifically on the official government level.¹⁴ Amongst civilians, the idea of a German responsibility to the past was developing, albeit slowly. Specifically, West Germany continued to have a vibrant discussion over Germany's Nazi heritage. This essay will continue by following developments in West Germany.

The 1960's saw the rise of youth protest movements in both the East and the West. The Soviet bloc was rattled by attempts at liberalization amongst its client states, while in the West student movements attacked the perceived hypocrisies of the establishment, such as racism, poverty and unpopular foreign wars. In West Germany, these protests focused especially on the relationship between the new capitalist republic and the old fascist regime.¹⁵

Since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, Nazis had been reintegrated into the power structure of Germany. Men such as Konrad Adenauer and Kurt Georg Kiesinger, the first two post-war Chancellors, were previous Nazi cadres.¹⁶ The creation of the Grand Coalition between the CDU and the SDP from 1966-1969 raised the specter of authoritarianism and one-party rule. There was no effective opposition in the government and

¹³ Ibid., 205-249.

¹⁴ Tony Judt, "The 'Problem of Evil' in Post-war Europe", in: *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 55, No. 2, February 14th 2008. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/feb/14/the-problem-of-evil-in-postwar-europe/>

¹⁵ Ibid., <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/feb/14/the-problem-of-evil-in-postwar-europe/>

¹⁶ Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 220-222.

dissent was coerced by a number of emergency acts. The alienation of the younger generation pushed them toward a more critical view of their parents. By failing to address their role in the Holocaust and the war crimes of World War Two, the postwar generation laid the groundwork for their children's criticism. This unwillingness to face their history created a generation of students seeking a separation with their hard working, conservative, unrepentant parents. Students' movements, feminist movements, anti-war movements, and counter-culture movements were fed by these troubling developments in the Federal Republic.¹⁷

In 1969, Willy Brandt and the SDP formed a coalition with the FDP and ended the Grand Coalition of the late 1960's. Willy Brandt symbolized the break with the previous generation of former Nazis and Nazi sympathizers in government. Brandt had actively resisted the Nazis and the Communists during WWII. He had stood strong as mayor of Berlin against Soviet provocations. With his election, new questions of responsibility were being asked. When Willy Brandt fell to his knees at the Polish War Memorial, he reopened the discussion of the German experience during the war.¹⁸ Did Brandt have an obligation to kneel before the memorial? What had Germany done that warranted such self-flagellation? Supported by a generation lashing out against their parents, Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* brought new life to the discussion of Germany's responsibility to the past.

But the successful redirection of German thought on the Holocaust and World War Two was short-lived. The fall of Willy Brandt from power in 1974 and the rise of extremist groups, such as the Red Army Faction in the 1970, showed the limited success of the student protest generation. Though there was widespread discussion of Germany's past, the issue became

¹⁷ Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48-52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-60.

heavily politicized. Terrorist groups like the Red Army Faction were established as a violent protest against the incorporation of former Nazis in the new 'free' capitalist Germany.¹⁹ They viewed National Socialism as the end result of capitalism and accused the government of being fascist. By exploiting the past to further their ideological agenda, they hindered the efforts of common Germans to come to terms with their history.

Such a revolt against the established order must have attracted ideological support from those in West Germany uncomfortable with the ease of transition between National Socialist utopia to free, democratic society. But the communist nature of the group may have spurred a division between those who believed that capitalism was a continuation of the Nazi regime and those who loathed both the Nazis and the Communists. Such conflict undermined the more moderate critics of Germany's collective memory. They were caught between the extremes of those repressing the past and those using the past for political gain. It would be this group, the generation raised during the student protests of the 1960's and the subsequent terror of the Red Army Faction, which would come of age in the 1980's, when Germany began to seriously explore its relationship with history.

The 1980's saw the growth of what can be seen as the contemporary approach to history in Germany. The push for official recognition of Germany's crimes against humanity gained strength with the airing of the famed Holocaust miniseries in the United States and Europe in the late 1970's. The miniseries once again rekindled the flames of German memory and posed questions of its role in German identity. It brought the discussion of Germany's national identity from the ivory tower into the living room, and gave names and faces to the victims and the

¹⁹ Laura Bowie, "The *Rote Armee Fraktion*: Memory and the Construction of Art, Film, and Literature," eSharp, Issue 20: New Horizons, (Spring 2013): 1.

perpetrators of crimes against humanity. Regular citizens watched scenes of violence and discrimination carried out in a German uniform. The serious issues broached by this popular culture phenomenon fed into the previous periods of dialogue concerning Germany's war responsibility.

This push did not proceed unopposed. The 1980's saw the famed Historian's Debate take center stage in dialogues about the Nazi past. Conservatives pushed for an end to the constant shaming of Germany in the name of remembering the past.²⁰ They believed that the previous years of accepting responsibility for the past had paid Germany's debts to the world and to history. Scholarship needed to move past the constant refrain of German guilt and become more critical of other national crimes. The Soviets, the British and the Americans should also be held accountable for their historical misbehavior in the 20th century. Such views were soon besieged by many scholars, who discounted this criticism as a means of shifting attention away from Germany rather than an attempt to include other nations under the critical lens Germany was subjected. The Historians Debate generated a great deal of literature on Germany suffering during the Nazi period, but ultimately failed to redirect Germany from its focus on the remembrance of their National Socialist experiment.

The German experience in national memory has been an arduous and difficult one. There have been many phases in Germany's development. There was the immediate post-war generation, which sought to highlight the suffering of common Germans and viewed the Nazi era as foreign to the true Germany. There was the generation of the 1960's, which desired a break with the Nazi past their parents had failed to face. There was the generation of the 1970's, which

²⁰ Nolan, *Germans and Victims during the Second World War: Air Wars, Memory Wars*, in: *Central European History* 38.1 (2005), 7-40.

was wracked by violent protests in light of the perceived failure of the 1960's generation to hold their parents responsible for the Nazi regime. And there was the 1980's generation, that witnessed the violence of the 1970's and knew of the complaisance of the post-war generation and rejected them both in favor of an honest discussion of Germany without the interference of the Cold War politics.

This goal became infinitely more attainable after 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. As the Germanies united under the Basic Law of the Federal Republic, the questions of national identity changed in two important ways. There was no longer the specter of Communism hanging over Europe, which created an environment more amenable to criticism of the capitalist order. Complaints could be lodged against the status quo without being bogged down in Cold War politics. And, with the uniting of the Germanies that were divided by the actions of the Third Reich, the question of German history and its importance in German society were brought to the fore once again. The unification was a historical moment, and it drew attention back toward Germany's dark past. With the end of the Cold War, the generation of the 1980's was able to continue their critique of Germany's historical selectiveness into the coming decades.

The heart of Berlin is peppered with historical memorials and ruins that stand as testimony to Germany's checkered history. And Germans have been working to supplement these sites with their own monuments to the Nazi past. In 1995, Humboldt University created a memorial to the book burning its students initiated in 1933. In the early years of the 21th century, Berlin has three separate memorials to the victims of National Socialism: the Sinti, the homosexuals, and the Jews. The site of the old *SS-Reichssicherheitshauptamt* is now an extensive museum of the bureaucratic mechanism behind the atrocities committed by the German state. Such efforts to increase the cultural memory of Germany to include uncomfortable

memories have changed the character of Germany.²¹ Germany's chancellor may speak frankly about the horrors of the Holocaust without creating a firestorm of controversy amongst Germans. Germany, having put the division of the Cold War behind them, has acknowledged their collective responsibility for their nation's past.²²

This 1980's generation set the stage for Germany's current approach to remembering its history. However, there were serious concerns over this transformation of German society. There was a nagging suspicion that the evolution of Germany at this time might only be skin-deep. The study of post-war family memories by Harald Welzer in the early 2000's confirmed such fears, revealing that, in the minds of the younger generations of Germans, they were descended from those who had resisted that Nazis.²³ Young German students would speak passionately about their grandparents' struggles against an oppressive system that gave them no choice but to comply. They described the minute ways their ancestors tried to resist the Nazis, but were ultimately unable to resist the overbearing Nazi state. In reality, their grandparents rarely resisted the Nazis in any meaningful way and in some cases still expressed sentiments that rationalized their cruel actions.²⁴ The youth at the turn of the century could not abandon their family members to the condemnation of history, so they adjusted their memories just enough to redeem them. As in the 1940's, average Germans were situating themselves and their loved ones on the right side of history. The process of coming to terms with Germany's past had doubled upon

²¹ Aleida Assmann, *Remembrance and Memory*. *Goethe Institute*, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/dos/ern/kug/en3106036.htm>

²² This is not to imply that the reunification of the country was easy or that there are not lingering tensions left over from the Cold War. This is merely to point out that the debate between communism and capitalism has deescalated with the end of the USSR. This allows for a somewhat more civil discussion over the roots of fascism in Germany and the discussion of historical responsibility. The realities of the German communism/capitalism debate would warrant its own essay.

²³ Welzer, "Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in Germany Family Remembrance", Washington, DC, 2005. www.memory-research.de/cms/download.php?id=2

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

itself. This victimization of Germany created an uproar amongst Germans whose fears of a superficial German transformation had been realized. Their great success slowly turning to ash, Germans once again plunged into the wellspring of their memories.

The challenges revealed by Welzer's study were the limitations of education and the adaptability of human beings. It illustrated the fact that the work of memory does not end and that the path of history is more convoluted than many realize. For example, in academic circles there was a simultaneous shifting of focus. Several scholars published books focusing on the suffering of Germans, such as Jorg Friedrich's study of the air war against German cities.²⁵ These texts challenged the notion that Germany had truly embraced the past, contending that German suffering had been neglected and now was the time to embrace this 'repressed' past. German memory was once again in flux, reminiscent of the Historians Debate decades earlier. New arguments were being developed about the nature of the Nazi era, and

The challenges to Germany's study of history are not solely nationalistic ones. There is also the nature of Europe itself to consider. Memory is not simply divided between the dominated victims and the perpetrators. Memory of the Second World War in Europe is international in its scope and therefore subject to international scrutiny. Germany cannot expect to maintain cordial relationships with its neighbors if it insisted on denying its responsibility for the atrocities of the Second World War.²⁶ Poland and France are unlikely to tolerate Germany whitewashing the occupation of their countries. This shapes the Germany national memory while being beyond the control of Germans. A healthy approach to a dark past is critical to maintaining

²⁵ Nolan, *Germans and Victims during the Second World War: Air Wars, Memory Wars*, in: *Central European History* 38.1 (2005), 7-40.

²⁶ Judt, *Postwar: a History of Europe Since 1945*, Reprint ed., 806-810.

such relationships, and ensures that there is always a voice of opposition toward any whitewashing trends.

Germans at all level of society continued to grapple with their national legacy in new and unprecedented ways. But, when compared to most nations, Germany is in a league of its own. Japan is currently locked in a struggle with almost every one of its immediate neighbors over the accountability of Japan during the Second World War. Turkey flat-out denies the Armenian genocide, to the point of losing any chance at EU membership. And the United States grapples with the legacy of frontier settlers and dispossessed natives. There are many other examples than those few listed here. But these stand in sharp contrast to Germany today. Where most nations will equivocate on where their ancestor's actions fall morally, Germany has been willing to place itself on the wrong side of history. To be clear, there are idiosyncrasies to be considered when discussing an entire nation. There are neo-Nazis and hardline nationalists. There are those who resent the discussion of Germany's past sins and those who try to mitigate the scope of the atrocities or the complicity of normal Germans in them. And there are those who are simple ignorant of their heritage. But by and large, the majority of Germans and Germany the nation have acknowledged their place in history while not being bound by it.

The cycle of history is complicated. It cannot be measure like a science, where all variables but one can be controlled. It must be assess in real-time, as it happens. Guesswork is a greater part of historical study than most scholars are comfortable admitting. Yet important revelations can be retrieved from the muddle of evolving historiography. Germany can be viewed as the greatest success in modern historical honesty. Today, their historical narrative, in academic as well as popular circles, focuses heavily on tragic periods and emphasizes responsibility and the suffering of others as opposed to a self-serving nationalist tract. Germany's

relationship with the past is not perfect, as demonstrated by Wertzel, but it is significantly more honest than most other countries. But this relationship has not remained consistent over time, with each generation approaching it in successively unique ways. It is this reactive generational debate, where each successive generation of Germans brings forth new ideas, arguments, and views, that keeps the discussion of Germany's Nazi history vibrant and dynamic.

Speculation can be made about the longevity of such an approach to history. This could be another phase in Germany's evolving relationship with their history. Perhaps there will be a strong pivot toward the Soviet era in response to the heavy focus on the Nazi era. Perhaps there will be a decline in the number of Germans actively engaged in studying their own history now that there is the perception that Germany has paid its historical debts. Or perhaps there will be a backlash against the obsession with the past and a new national pride will become the watchword of Germany in the 21st century. But it should always be remembered that the issue of collective memory is never settled. Believing they are the final word on the subject is the mistake every postwar generation has made. Germany's relationship to its past is unique, but it is in trying to understand that path, and its consequences, that the historian work finds meaning.

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