



Germany: facing the Nazi past today

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Abstract

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This article gives an overview of the changing debate on National Socialism and the question of guilt in German society. Memory had a different meaning in different generations, shaping distinct phases of dealing with the past, from silence and avoidance to sceptical debate, from painful “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” to a general memory of suffering.

In present-day Germany, memory as collective personal memory has faded away. At the same time, literature has lost its role as a main medium to mass media like cinema and television. Furthermore, memory has become fragmented. Large groups of members of the German society, like immigrants, see the past from a different perspective altogether. Although the remembrance of the time of National Socialism is still a distinctive part of Germany’s political culture, it has become more generalised, with “Holocaust memory” as a globalised symbol for a fundamental “break” in Western culture.

Opsomming

Geskiedenis, herinnering en die media in na-oorlogse Duitsland

Hierdie artikel gee ’n oorsig oor die veranderende debat oor Nasionaal-Sosialisme en die kwessie van ’n skuldgevoel in die Duitse gemeenskap. Die skrywer bemark dat “onthou” verskillende betekenis vir verskillende generasies gehad het en dat dit ’n bepaalde vorm gegee het aan die verwerking van bepaalde fases van die verlede, van stilte en vermyding tot skeptiese debat, van ’n pynlike aanvaarding van die verlede tot ’n algemene herinnering aan lyding.

In die Duitsland van vandag het onthou as 'n gemeenskaplike, persoonlike herinnering verdwyn. Terselfdertyd het literatuur sy rol as hoofmedium aan die massamedia van rolprente en die televisie afgestaan. Geheue het boonop gefragmenteerd geraak. Groot groepe in die Duitse gemeenskap, byvoorbeeld immigrante, beskou die verlede uit totaal verskillende perspektiewe. Alhoewel die herinnering aan die tyd van Nasionaal-Sosialisme steeds 'n definitiewe deel van die Duitse politieke kultuur vorm, het dit veralgemeen geraak, met die "volksmoordherinnering" as 'n globale simbool vir 'n fundamentele breuk in die Westerse kultuur.

1. Memory of generations

Since the end of the Second World War, Germans have been seeing the foundation of their identity in their shared historical responsibility for the atrocities of National Socialism and the Holocaust as well as for the Second World War. Until recently, personal memories of the time of National Socialism or war had still shaped the life of every individual member of the society, in most cases either from the perspective of the perpetrator, the fellow-traveller, or the bystander, sometimes also from the perspective of the opponent or from the resistance.

Historically, National Socialism was widely seen as having its roots in Germany's flawed process of building a modern nation, its authoritarian and militaristic cultural patterns and educational values – in short, in the German *Sonderweg* (Grebing, 1986). After the war, in a new and better Germany, the common effort of all members of the society was seen as an effort to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to build a better future. Rhetorical phrases like "Never again!" could be found in every official political speech.

In the context of immediate memories, for a long time it seemed unthinkable that German armed forces would ever again fight outside German territory for example, especially in Eastern Europe. In 1999, however, during the Kosovo War in former Yugoslavia, it became clear that something had changed. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, argued that German troops should join NATO peacekeeping forces because it was their historical responsibility to prevent "another Auschwitz" (Fried, 2005). Had "the Germans", from their own point of view, turned from "perpetrators" into "liberators"? And is "another Auschwitz" imaginable, different from the historical one? More than 60 years after the end of the Second

World War, there seems to be a paradigm shift (Löffler, 2005). A new memorial pattern seems to have emerged in Germany.

Beyond political rhetoric, to the ordinary German, memory of the Nazi period and the Second World War was mainly structured by the narrative of “generations”. This “cultural pattern of interpretation” of collective historical experience has, like in the USA (Howe & Strauss, 1991), a long tradition in Germany (Weigel, 2005). Members of one generation are shaped by common experiences and consequently share a special social knowledge and social habits. They hand down their distinctive memories to their children by narrating “family stories”. In the next generation, the stories change. Sons and daughters share a different view founded in their own, different, experiences. Normally, this “communicative memory” has outlived its time three generations after a historical event, as there are no witnesses left to share their experiences. Society begins to deal with memories in a different way. As “cultural memories” they become part of the general political culture of a society. This is precisely what is presently happening in Germany (Assmann, 2007).

Few of those who were eyewitnesses to the period of National Socialism as adults, or even as children, are still alive. Those, whose lives were shaped by the war and the post-war situation, now belong to the oldest generation. Their children, the first post-war generation, are also growing old. Their narratives are coming to an end, in the same way as the narratives of victims, of concentration camp survivors or survivors of forced labour or victims of eugenics. Nowadays school classes still flock to concentration camps which have become memorials, but few survivors are still there to narrate their ordeal. “The absence of those witnesses also cuts deeply into our own work. They are the most authentic source of information for students”, says Horst Seferns, spokesman of the Memorials of Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück (Tsorzis, 2005).

Usually generational cohorts are seen to be about 30 years apart (Mannheim, 1964), but as far as experiences of National Socialism and war were concerned, the time span could be much shorter. The ruptures between the rule of National Socialism, the “Total War”, unconditional surrender of Germany, the dire post-war situation and the emerging two new republics were drastic and affected every single person in Germany, shaping their lives forever. The last of these “war generations” is the older generation of today – those who were born during the last phase of the war or shortly thereafter – into families and into a society, where National Socialism and war were still topical since they were part of an immediate experience of their

parents and grandparents. This generation looks back to a life in a divided post-war Germany, to the Cold War and the so-called economic miracle, to a life in a society that tried to come to terms with the horrors of the past. With their children now being at the centre of public debate, an overwhelming common experience of dictatorship and war no longer exists. Instead, experiences have become fragmented.

1.1 1945: "collective guilt"

In the *Stunde Null* (hour zero), namely in 1945, confrontation with past horrors was brutal, but clear. When occupying Germany, Americans had already done extensive research on the attitude of Germans and on cultural and historical traditions in German society that may have made National Socialism possible. Against the protest of a number of prominent exiled Germans, their conclusion culminated in the *Kollektivschuldthese* (thesis of collective guilt). Germans as a people were collectively held responsible for what had happened, because Germans had, as a people, supported National Socialism. The general view was that they had uncritically followed their leaders, because as a collective they had an authoritarian, militaristic mindset. Although *Germans* were addressed as a collective, in effect the accusation targeted every single individual. In the first year after the end of the war, posters depicting piles of dead bodies from concentration camps were placed everywhere in destroyed German cities with the caption: "Das ist DEINE Schuld!" ("This is YOUR guilt!"). Allied policy involved every single citizen in the rather bureaucratic process of "denazification". The USA felt that they were on a moral mission against an "evil" that had gripped a whole nation (Agar, 1946).

Where everybody is accused, in the end, however, nobody takes responsibility. The strict Allied policy was limited in its immediate effect and did not last long. Already in 1947, a shift in the American policy took place after the break with Stalin's Soviet Union and "denazification" was dropped. A strong post-war Germany was needed in a "crusade" against the Soviet Union (Eisenhower, 1948). Nevertheless, while Germans had internalised the accusation of "collective guilt", they simultaneously tried to avoid facing it (Assmann & Frevert, 1999). This attitude would become the basic pattern of dealing with the Nazi past for a long period to come. In spite of the immediate reaction to insisting on collective innocence and looking for psychological mechanisms to relieve this seemingly unbearable

moral burden, the question of guilt became part of the self-image of the emerging new Germany (Jaspers, 1946).

1.2 The “silent generation”: literature, art and religion as “consolation”

Immediately after 1945, it was not just the Allies who acted. German writers, philosophers and journalists and members of the educated middle class also raised their voices in an intense debate (Laurien, 1992). It dominated the numerous cultural journals published under Allied occupation. These journals tried to approach the question of guilt in the intellectual categories of the old German educated middle classes, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, trying to restore the values of idealistic philosophy and cultural criticism. Germany’s tradition of classical humanism was emphatically placed against what was seen as an onslaught of “barbarism”. The authors were, in general, members of the so-called “Inner emigration”, journalists and writers who had not left the country, but had survived within Nazi Germany. These journals sold like hot cakes, although after the currency reform in 1948, when other goods were more readily available, it became clear that the majority of German readers were actually really looking for consolation.

Consolation could be found in religion, in art and music, and in literature. For many years to come, literature would be the main medium through which the past was confronted – or avoided. In the early years, meditative poetry celebrating unspoilt nature as a refuge, and novels with Christian undertones provided the consolation and guidance many Germans were looking for. It was the same kind of classicism that had already dominated German literature of the last war years (Schäfer, 1981). Readers were still familiar with the values of German classical idealism, and Goethe was often seen as moral counterpart to the “barbarism” of the Nazis, as became obvious in 1949, when Goethe’s 200th birthday was celebrated (Meincke, 1949).

Academic research on National Socialism also existed, but was confined within the boundaries of academia and did not reach a wider public, perhaps with the exception of Eugen Kogon’s analysis of the concentration camps as a perverted rational system (Kogon, 1946). Popularised historiography, however, became increasingly en vogue. In the early 1950s, memoirs of Nazi officers, air pilots and other war heroes were thrown on the book market in high numbers. Probably the readership consisted mainly of returned soldiers who did not have other categories than “heroism” and “sacrifice” for the

“fatherland” to push aside their guilt feelings and traumatic experiences.

In the West, part of the old elites continued to remain in power in the New Federal Republic, although politicians were mainly recruited from the older, pre-Nazi generation of the Weimar Republic. Few of those who had been forced to exile by Nazi rule returned to West Germany (Merz, 1985), and survivors and victims who still lived in Germany were few and did rarely raise their voice – and few people listened. Public debate in the emerging Federal Republic was mainly the debate of those who had experienced National Socialism as Nazis, fellow travellers or bystanders – Germans who had resisted were often suspiciously looked at. The majority of Germans did not really want to hear about the past, but compensated guilt feelings and trauma with hard work. When the new Republic was founded, the war generation had turned into the *Wiederaufbaugeneration* (generation of reconstruction). The young generation shied away from politics but soon laid the foundation, with American assistance, to the *Wirtschaftswunder* (German economic miracle). The term *silent generation*, although originally coined in the United States, received its own meaning in Germany. As historian Hermann Lübke observed, there was virtually no public debate on the Nazi past in the 1950s (Lübke, 1983). Rather, the period between 1933 and 1945 was approached with mystifying terms like “the dark time”, “the time of evil”, as if the Nazis had fallen unto the German people like some demons from hell and inflicted disaster and chaos (Haug, 1967). At the same time, German mass media like cinema and TV responded to other emotional needs. The so-called *Heimatfilm* became extremely popular, portraying sentimental stories of love and faithfulness set in peaceful old-fashioned villages in the Alps. In hindsight, the seeming harmlessness of the media culture of the 1950s and early 1960s is striking, but it is a fake harmlessness, a sugary coat on events that were too horrible to be touched.

1.3 The “sceptical generation”: literature and critical debate

There were some, however, who refused to be part of this culture of silence. Already in 1946 a small group of intellectuals and former soldiers calling themselves the “young generation” (although most of them were already in their forties), had launched a radical cultural journal called *Der Ruf*. When its editors lost their publishing licence because of being too critical towards the Allied military government, they gathered journalists and writers around them and in 1947 founded, the so-called *Gruppe 47* (Group 47). Strongly influenced by

French existentialism and identifying with the American “lost generation” of the 1930s, their main idea was that National Socialism had destroyed European civilisation and that there was no way back. Destruction had reached as deep as the very language that we speak. The only way to go forward was to start from “point zero”. *Kahlschlag* (clear cutting) became the keyword. Poetry was no longer seen as solemn and consoling whispering of priest-like poets – it had to be sober, radical and painful.

This radical concept was soon challenged as new and less rigid writers joined the group. Gradually but continuously, the group expanded and became the most influential literary circle in Germany. Around 1960, it had the reputation of embracing everybody who was an aspiring or already successful writer and intellectual in the Federal Republic. It dominated intellectual life in Germany with its liberal-leftist leanings. The group, however, never included all poets and writers of the time, and as Ernestine Schlant has argued, the horrors of the concentration camps were rarely articulated (Schlant, 1999).

This is not surprising. Concentration camps and their horrors were not part of the immediate memories of the majority of Germans, even not of those who saw themselves as members of a radical critical left. The concentration camp was generally seen as an experience that was beyond imagination, let alone description. Writers and intellectuals who did experience the unspeakable, like the few remaining German-Jewish intellectuals, did not become an integral part of Germany’s emerging post-war culture of memory (Amery, 1966). Poets like Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer and Nelly Sachs may have been highly appreciated in certain circles, but did not become part of a wider literary culture. So, who was there to tell the story of the past?

The *Gruppe 47* may not have represented everybody in society, but it articulated a distinct approach of a “sceptical generation” (Schelsky, 1963) towards the past. The group rejected everything sounding like ideology and believed firmly that critical dispute itself could lead to a better and more democratic political culture. In this regard, the group did contribute to the emergence of a culture of debate in post-war Germany. The media also complied: The yearly group meetings became *the* intellectual media event in Germany, and gradually, together with the growing dominance of the leftist-liberal print media like *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, a change in the political climate of the Republic could be observed. Critical literature written by *Gruppe 47* members was hotly disputed. Two novels, *The tin drum*

by Grass (1959), a bitter grotesque of the German petite bourgeoisie corrupted by National Socialism, and Böll's *Views of a clown* (1963), a melancholic criticism of the hypocrisy of the Bonn Republic, became bestsellers. Both authors later received the Nobel Prize.

The debate on fiction was soon flanked by more real events. In the early 1960s, Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem, with Hannah Arendt writing her famous essay in the United States (Arendt, 1963), while court cases against Nazi perpetrators also took place in Germany. The *Auschwitz-Prozess* in Frankfurt was documented and reflected by writers like Peter Weiss and Alexander Kluge. It is no coincidence that both did not use their imagination, but tried to speak about the unspeakable by merely arranging court proceedings and documents. Still, there was the widespread feeling that there was no language ever that could express "Auschwitz".

1.4 The generation of "1968": rational analysis and emotions

This all was only a prelude to a deeply rooted shift in German post-war society. In 1967, a new generation of intellectuals invaded a meeting of *Gruppe 47* and declared that the time for literature had run out; the time had come for direct political confrontation. The rebellion at German universities, strongly influenced by the American protest against the Vietnam war, soon focused on one main topic: How to deal with the Nazi past. The youngest generation, the "children of the war" and those born immediately after the war, were now adults and no longer ready to accept their parents' silence (Gassert, 2006). This was the first generation which had not experienced the Nazi period itself, and also had only faint memories of the war and the post-war years. They saw themselves as enlightened rationalists; literature was no longer their medium of expression. Rather, it was intellectual analysis and social psychology. They were motivated by books like *The fatherless society* and *The inability to mourn* written by social psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967) or by the socio-psychological analyses put forward by Adorno (1950) or Reich (1971).

The heritage they left is one of moral rigidity and a firm belief in the power of critical rational analysis. Academic books on social and historical analyses of National Socialism now flooded the book market. There was a strong confidence in enlightenment by reason: if the Nazi past was approached with the right analytical instruments and critical terms, then one day it would be possible to fully explain what happened and why, and explanation would lead to understanding. Learning to understand – as a painful and troublesome

process – would protect Germans from repeating the past. The German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) reflects this thinking: through hard work and self reflection, as in psychoanalytical therapy, the preoccupation with the past could be “overcome”, and then the way into the future would be free. The typical representative of the 68er generation was not a writer, but an academic or a teacher, perhaps a journalist or a politician. He/she tried to substitute the immediate experience which was no longer accessible by analysis.

In the 1970s German society was deeply divided along generational lines. Government had changed from conservative dominance to a charismatic Social Democratic chancellor. Willy Brandt, who himself had been exiled as a resistance fighter against National Socialism, fell onto his knees at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970, a symbolic gesture that set the tone for the whole younger generation. They had finally forced their parents to talk; and when they left the universities, they carried the debate into society. Many of them became teachers, and pupils were now exposed to a curriculum where National Socialism featured prominently. Sometimes it even became too much. “Between standard 3 and standard 10”, wrote author Florian Illies (born in 1971),

we had National Socialism at least eight times on our schedule, (...) saw the films about the horrors of the concentration camps, Hitler’s demagogic speeches, the Eastern Front and the liberation in 1945 about eighteen times, not only in History, but also in Religion and German (Illies, 2000:174).

German academic historians now also came to the fore. Many of them had left the conservative nationalism of their discipline behind. Now they saw historiography as a strict analytical social science. All emotional and moral elements should be eliminated from research in order to go beyond mystification and provide a reliable and sober structural and functional analysis. This was, in their view, the only way to explain the social and economic factors that had led to the system of National Socialism, and only a clear rational understanding of the underlying structures could prevent repetition. While painful and guilt-loaded memories had to be respected, they could only distort analysis. There were, however, others, mainly Jewish historians who insisted on the memory of pain and humiliation as the basis of their work. A controversy between Martin Broszat, the then director of the Institute for Contemporary History, and the Jewish historian Saul Friedländer focused on this question. Broszat claimed that Friedländer mixes experience and analysis in his research, thus

shaping a new myth rather than presenting a sober approach to historical and social reality, while Friedländer, on his part, claimed that historical analysis cannot exist without the dimension of morality and memory (Broszat & Friedländer, 1988). Thus historiography and memory clashed.

It is interesting to note that literature remained an important aspect of public debate. Some members of the 1968 generation carried the confrontation with the parent generation from the family table into literature. A new genre, the so-called *Väter-Literatur*, emerged (Vogt, 1998). Others, however, broke away altogether to embrace an extreme moral rigidity that ended in the left-wing terrorism of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) with the result that the republic was shaken by a nightmarish phase of terror and hate on the one hand and harsh reactions, perhaps over-reactions on the other hand within a democratic state that was not yet sure of its stability (Wirth, 2001).

As in schools and academia, it became clear in the public domain as well that in all attempts to deal with the past analytically, something was missing. In 1979, the American series *Holocaust* was broadcasted in Germany, finally providing an opportunity for all Germans to identify emotionally with the victims and their odyssey through Nazi concentration camps (Märtzsheimer & Frenzel, 1979; Markovits & Hayden, 1980). Different from literature, the media did not shy away from visualising the unspeakable (Friedländer, 1992). Intellectuals may have dismissed this series as sentimental, but it gave a face to the victims, and it showed emotions as a legitimate means to deal with the past. Until then, Germans had no way to express their often conflicting and diffused emotions of guilt and shame on the one hand and their traumatic memories of war, bombardments and the loss of loved ones on the other hand. These emotions had simply never been part of public debate, as the accusation of guilt and the attempt to avoid facing it were still too powerful. Now that viewers of the Holocaust series could identify with victims, other emotions were allowed to emerge to the surface as well.

1.5 The 1980s: “normalisation”?

After the demise of left-wing terrorism, the atmosphere in German society changed again. In the first economic crisis after the war and because of the oil crisis, Germans feared the loss of affluence and stability that had been achieved, which of course they were keen to keep. From the early 1980s, German society experienced a conservative backlash. *Normalisation* was the keyword since there was

a widespread feeling that an end should be put to all these debates on the past.

After 1982 chancellor Helmut Kohl, a conservative and a historian by training, tried to bring the discussion on guilt and redemption to an end. Born in 1930, he saw himself as the first representative of a generation that no longer had to bear the burden of collective guilt personally. His phrase of “Gnade der späten Geburt”, the “grace” or “benign fate” of having been born too late to be made responsible for National Socialism (Koepke, 2004), became controversial, as was his attempt to “historicise” National Socialism. Some intellectuals agreed and began to comment critically on what they perceived as a concession towards a culture of left-liberal “political correctness” (Walser, 1998). Kohl himself had a somewhat clumsy way to deal with what he believed to be political symbolism: When US president Reagan visited Germany in 1985, Kohl arranged for a symbolic meeting of the two leaders at a war cemetery in Bitburg to shake hands over the graves of American as well as of German World War II soldiers. This symbolic gesture proved to be embarrassing in that some of the German soldiers buried in Bitburg were actually members of the SS, Hitler’s ruthless elite corps that was in charge of the concentration camps – even if not all of its members might have been involved in the administration of KZs in person. Was reconciliation over the graves of members of this terror organisation really possible? (Hallet, 2005).

The then president of the Republic, Richard von Weizsäcker, was more successful in dealing with symbolism when in the same year in his speech commemorating the end of the war he made it very clear that 1945 had not been the year of the “defeat” of Germany, but of the “liberation” from the most horrible dictatorship in memory. With this, he placed the Federal Republic in the tradition of the “other” Germany, that is a Germany that had suffered under National Socialism (Weizsäcker, 1985). A year later, in 1986, academic historians fought bitterly over the question if “Auschwitz” was unique in history or comparable to other events such as the horrors of Stalin’s Gulag, as the conservative historian Ernst Nolte had suggested. For historians the answer was basically clear: there can be nothing outside history unless something like a metaphysical sphere is acknowledged, and nobody wanted to go back to the metaphorical language of the Nazis as demons of evil that came upon the German people after 1933. However, to compare horrors with each other still seemed to be out of place (Augstein & Bracher, 1987).

Three years later, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin wall fell. Not only communist East Germany, but consequently, also the old West German state ceased to exist, even though West German institutions remained intact, while East German institutions disappeared. Thereby the post-war era came to an end. The new united “Berlin Republic” now had its own immediate past – divided post-war Germany. Slowly, the focus of public debate shifted. Memory now concentrated on the question if debates of the past had been satisfactory, instead of debating the Nazi past itself. Germans, like other Europeans, tended to identify with the victims now and saw themselves on the side of those who had to be liberated from the Nazis. The *Sonderweg* had come to an end, but as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas observed “Auschwitz” had become the signature of a whole era, of post-war Germany (Habermas, 1987).

In the Soviet zone and later in the East German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the regime had had a different approach to the guilt question than the Western allies. They had declared the new society in total to be the heir of the “other Germany”, the Germany of resistance against the Nazi regime, with communist resistance fighters as their main heroes. Consequently, in the new state that came about in 1949 and claimed to represent a new historical stage on its way to a communist society, the question of individual guilt simply did not occur. Although it soon became obvious that this was an ideological fabrication, this position remained official GDR state ideology until the fall of the wall in 1989.

East German writers from the GDR, however, had turned their attention to the Nazi past in the same way as their Western German counterparts, but the debate had a somewhat broader foundation. A number of resistance writers (including Bertolt Brecht) had returned from exile and made East Germany their home, giving their distinct perspective, while Jewish writers like Jurek Becker wrote from the perspective of a victim. Their books, of course, had also been widely read in the West.

Consequently, after unification it seemed at first as if the debate on National Socialism would intensify again in the medium of literature (Garbe, 2002), but as time went by, a shift in public attention could not be overlooked. Literature now only reached a much smaller circle of interested intellectuals than some decades ago; in public debate National Socialism simply did not matter anymore as it had long been overtaken by the media and popular culture, made in Hollywood. With Kassovitz’ *Jacob the liar* (1999, based on a novel by Jurek Becker) and mainly Steven Spielbergs *Schindler’s list*

(1993), it became clear that the Holocaust had become a topic of international media events. Inviting identification with the victims, it expanded the “question of guilt” from a German problem into a general debate on morals and responsibility. Now, anybody could identify with Schindler (Levy & Sznajder, 2000:173), and with him a new character appeared on the Hollywood screen: the “good German” (*The good German*, 2007; *Valkyrie*, 2009).

2. From the question of guilt to the memory of suffering

This development, however, did not take the burden of guilt away from the Germans. In 1996, the American historian David Goldhagen returned to the post-war *Kollektivschuldthese* and the construct of the “bad German” in his book *Hitler’s willing executioners* (Finkelstein & Birn, 1998; Ely, 2000). During his reading tour in Germany, he attracted large crowds, as did the exhibition entitled *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, on the war of annihilation and the crimes of the German *Wehrmacht* organised by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. It was first shown in 1994 and then, after a controversial debate (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 1999) in a different version, in 2004. From the point of view of an historian, neither would lead to really new insights. Historians had already repeatedly published the facts, and in academic debates the role of the *Wehrmacht* in the atrocities of World War II was well known, but only in academia. Memory politics is something different, and only now the emotional implications of guilt seemed to trickle through to the kitchen table (Steinbacher & Frei, 2001).

It is true that in the 1990s, some new and interesting literary works dealing with the Nazi past were published and discussed. Some of them perhaps were more popular abroad than in Germany, as for example Bernhard Schlink’s novel *Der Vorleser* (The reader) of 1995, which was recommended in Oprah Winfrey’s book club and was recently turned into an Oscar-winning Hollywood film (*The reader*, 2009). Some literary works were authored by German writers of the older generation, like Sebald’s (1997) works, or the autobiographical novels by the two “grand old men of literature” Grass and Walser. Some authors of the “68er generation” were still successful with books about portraying National Socialism as family history, like Timm (2003), Bruns (2004) and Delius (2006). Biographies such as the one on the architect of the Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler (Longenrich, 2008), tried to connect the emotional element, a life, to the by now well researched structural system.

Around the turn of the century, the literary debate was fading out. Even the publication of Grass' autobiography (2006), in which he admitted that for a short period he had been, at the age of fifteen and in the last phase of the war, a member of the SS, had only a relatively faint echo in the German public. There was some due indignation, but not as much as there would have been some twenty years before. In general, the end of the narrative of generations and the end of public debates in the medium of literature coincided. Younger writers were beginning to take over the German book market with no obvious interest in the Nazi past as the dialogue of generations, and concentrated, with exceptions (Hacker, 2003), on other issues. It was also the end of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the social-psychological sense (Trommler, 2003). Now the argument changed: while it had been stressed before that hard work and painful self-exploration were necessary to "overcome" guilt feelings and shame, the focus was now put on the need to remember the past. The "Never again!" became an "Always remember!" Only remembrance could prevent a society to fall back into the "break of civilization" (Uhl, 2003) for which the Holocaust as symbol now became ubiquitous.

2.1 Loosening of taboos

The focus on memory of suffering in general instead of on special responsibility and guilt of the German people made it possible to loosen the taboo that still overshadowed the memories of most Germans. Now, it became finally possible to talk about war and destruction, of bombardments and mass rape, of the forced migration of thousands of ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe immediately after the war, and other traumatic experiences on the side of the Germans. It started, for one more time, with literature, but the German mass media soon took over. In 1997 Sebald, clearly influenced by a debate in Britain, caused a heated controversy by his claim that the horrors of the bombardment of German cities had not been sufficiently dealt with in literature; one year later, Grass broke the ice with *Im Krebsgang* (2002), based on the sinking of the ship "Wilhelm Gustloff" by Soviet warships in the Baltic sea. It had caused the death of about ten thousand German refugees in the last phase of the war. The book market was quick to introduce some best-selling, but controversial book on the bombardments (Friedrich, 2002), and public TV broadcasted a soap called *Dresden* where, among the horrors of the bombardment of the city by British aircrafts, a young attractive German woman saves the life of a British bomber pilot. Of course, she falls in love with him, carrying his child

when the war ends, into a future of political correctness. The problem of mass rape of German women by Soviet soldiers has also recently been turned into a film (*Eine Frau in Berlin*, 2008) based on an autobiographic narrative. The German film *Der Untergang* (The Downfall, 2006) belongs in this category too, showing the frenzy and obsession of the inner core of Nazi followers around an increasingly insane Hitler in his bunker during the final bombardment of Berlin.

The character of public debate itself is thus changing. In the media, news and “infotainment” clips flash up and disappear; arguments have a tendency to shrink to slogans and analytical terms to mere symbols. History can be a media event that offers identification and identity, rather than analysis and reflection. By the turn of the millennium, literature had lost the leading role that it used to play in public debate, while academic historians do not reach out far enough in a society which is largely dominated by popular media culture.

Furthermore, in a society where concrete experiences and memories of individuals become more and more remote and diversified, the concept of *generation* can no longer serve as a valuable cultural pattern of interpretation. Equally, *memory* becomes more abstract, as it needs special memorial spaces and public representations (Assmann, 2007). When Berlin was re-invented as the old-new German metropolis, it was also seen as a space of remembrance, an *Erinnerungsort* (Schulze & Francois, 2001). With the reconstruction of Berlin, the debate on history, memory, and policy shifted to architecture, and the most controversial of numerous debates was the one on the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which now sticks out like a sore thumb with its dark grey concrete slabs between the historical and posh modern buildings of Berlin city centre (Stavginski, 2002; Kirsch, 2003).

2.2 Diversified memories

Whatever the result of these debates may be, memory in Germany has changed forever. The widening of the perspective also means that in Germany, too, we have to deal now with divided, even competing memories (Diner, 2007). Today, memory is not just about victims and perpetrators. The paradigm shift that Germany presently experiences is also a result of the changing cultural and geographical roots of Germans today. According to official statistics, today almost 20% of all people living in Germany have a migration background. In some of the large cities in Germany’s Western parts, the number of inhabitants with migration background is as high as

30% and 40%; in the foreseeable future half of the inhabitants of Berlin, Frankfurt or Stuttgart will have parents or grandparents who were not born in Germany. This has far-reaching consequences, also for cultural memory. In one of five German families, there are no grandparents or other relatives who experienced the Nazi time and the war in Germany except perhaps they experienced it in occupied territories during World War II. Family stories at the kitchen table have different tales to tell. No longer is it possible to lead school classes to concentration camp memorials and explain to them that this was the responsibility of their own parents or grandparents, and that therefore, they, as Germans, are shouldering a special responsibility too. Students whose families immigrated from Turkey, Russia, the former Yugoslavia, Greece or Italy identify in different ways. Recently, the Memorial of the Wannsee Conference ran a special programme for young people of Arabic origin living in Berlin-Neukölln. They emphatically identified with Palestine and did not feel sympathy for the Jews in which they could only see Israel.

In German society, there is no longer a common collective memory, telling Germans where they came from and consequently, where they are heading. The old founding myth of a democratic nation, rising from the ruins of the most horrifying systematic mass extermination in human remembrance, and a nation struggling with guilt and responsibility, has to be negotiated and diversified. It will have to include other memories. Civil war refugees from within and outside Europe live in Germany today. They also have their stories to tell, and they have their contribution to make. The keyword describing German society has increasingly become “diversity”, and the main question to be asked is: Which memories will, in future, bind society together? The memory of National Socialism will, however, always be there. Its presence in the media is rather increasing than decreasing. It is a sting in the flesh that cannot simply be pushed aside – not in Germany and not elsewhere in the world.

3. The future: *Holocaust* as a globalised icon?

Although prominently situated in Germany’s capital, the Holocaust Memorial does no longer provide a purely German memorial space, but is part of a larger memorial culture. With the centre of the debate shifting to the United States, “Holocaust memory” has been globalised (Mintz, 2001). The time for a special German cultural memory seems to have run out. The debate has shifted from “Auschwitz” as a historical event to “Holocaust” as a moral category, as an icon of memory worldwide (Weiss, 2002).

In the new millennium, “Holocaust” is no longer seen as a Jewish catastrophe with German perpetrators, but as a universal break of Western civilisation. Worldwide, groups of victims set their own suffering in analogy to the Holocaust, thus confirming its uniqueness in comparing it. The attitude towards the Kosovo conflict was a decisive step in this direction, as Germany this time saw itself on the side of the “liberators” (Levy & Sznajder, 2000:194 ff.). This gammatization of the local and the global, of universalism and particularism seems to be typical for what the sociologist Ulrich Beck calls “second modernity” (Beck, 1986), or as others put it, “postmodernity”. “Auschwitz” and “Holocaust” are now seen as transnational memory spaces, as isolated icons or metaphors without a concrete historical context. Memory becomes, as Levy and Sznajder put it, “fluid” as “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy & Sznajder, 2000). “Holocaust” is thus seen as a problem of identity rather than as a concrete historical memory (MacDonald, 2008).

Some see this as a thoroughly positive development. In a time of “delocalisation” of politics and culture, they claim, “Holocaust” as a memory icon will be able to provide a new foundation for the differentiation between “good” and “evil” in general (Levy & Sznajder, 2000:15). The difference between “good victims” and “bad perpetrators” becomes as universal as the definition of the “bystander” and the “hero” who, in the name of the “good victims” is able to fight against the “bad perpetrators”. The necessity of reconciliation – after the “good” order has been restored – between the collectives of the victims and the collectives of the perpetrators could provide the basis for new global regimes (Levy & Sznajder, 2000:160). But the division of the world into “the good” and “the bad” is perhaps too simple to provide the basis of a new world order. It is no coincidence that Levy and Sznajder welcome the fact that the mass media, especially Hollywood, now transport the main patterns of identification: “In a World that is increasingly individualized, memory can only be transported by mass communication, because only mass communication can overcome the narrow boundaries of states” (Levy & Sznajder, 2001:160). It has to be added that only the simple icons and messages of mass communication can reach individuals in a globalised, albeit diversified world.

Critics dismiss this concept as an ideology that legitimises Western hegemony, with the United States as the “good hero” acting in the name of the victims against an “axis of evil”. Traverso (2007) argues that today, the new danger does not lie in oblivion, but in a tendency to neutralise the critical potential of the Holocaust by generalising

and thus misusing it. Western memory politics, he argues, has the tendency to use the Holocaust as a “kind of secular theodizee”, as an almost sacred topos of memory. Convinced that rationality and enlightenment have outlived their time, it establishes “Holocaust memory” as a quasi-religion, as the absolute evil in order to convince the world that the Western system is the absolute good (Traverso, 2007:71). Diner remarks that “Holocaust” as a metaphor for “evil” could only be truly globalised if non-Western societies, for example Islamic societies, can also understand it as the paradigmatic “break of civilisation” (Diner, 2007:104 ff.). He sees the Holocaust as far from becoming a global metaphor, because if the West talks of the suffering of the Jews, it cannot be silent about colonialism and slavery.

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Holocaust-herinnering
na-oorlogse geslagte

