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*Vergangenheitsbewältigung:
Historikerstreit and the Notion of Continued Responsibility*

Paul Rutschmann

The chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel, announced in April of 2006 during a parliamentary session that she and her fellow party members represent a younger generation which no longer has direct ties to the Third Reich. Her statement revealed a certain confidence that the National Socialist past can finally belong to the past without further continuation into the present, as well as the hope that Germans would finally be able to devote their full attention, unencumbered by the shadow of Hitler, to the future. This renewed desire to put the burdened past behind appears twenty years after the highly publicized Historians' Dispute (*Historikerstreit*) in which a more vigorous attempt had been made to free German national consciousness from the lingering influences of a negative-laden Nazi past. Despite her optimism, one still has to ask whether enough time has elapsed to absolve later generations of Germans of continued responsibility for the atrocities of Nazi Germany.

The *Historikerstreit* of 1986/7 revolved mainly around the uniqueness or non-uniqueness of Nazi history in public memory and the historian's role in reestablishing a healthy sense of national identity. While adding nothing new in the way of historical research, the dispute did reveal what is at stake for Germans in their interpretations of the past. Ostensibly, the dispute was conducted in the manner of political *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. But by politicizing the memory of Nazi war crimes, many of the conservative historians were clouding the deeper issues inherent in the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.¹ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as such expresses the manner in which Germans come to grips with or interpret their past and to what degree their interpretations of history reflect feelings of continued responsibility towards the survivors of the former victims. Does the past have to be worked out before one can legitimately attain a healthy sense of national identity, or does the act itself of continually working through the past contribute to a more gradual and subsequently healthier sense of national identity? To be sure, the sur-

¹ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, generally translated as "coming to grips with" or "mastering the past," is a concept peculiar to the Federal Republic of Germany. Leaders of the German Democratic Republic evaded this issue by proclaiming that their state was from the very beginning built upon antifascist principles by antifascists who as far back as 1933 foresaw the German catastrophe; and moreover, they considered themselves victims of the Nazis. Following the arguments of prominent SED leaders, East German historians marginalized the Jewish catastrophe; this tragedy was, they contended, West Germany's problem since West Germany's political and economic system had emerged with the help of many ex-Nazis in collaboration with their new Western allies. West Germans bore, so the argument continued, the sole responsibility for their past actions. For a discussion of East German historians' attitudes to the Jewish question, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13-40.

living former-citizens of the Third Reich could not escape the acceptance of guilt and responsibility for the atrocities committed by their former regime. But in what sense could later generations be held responsible when they were acquainted only with a constitutional state based on the rule of law? The length of time and degree of responsibility for future generations rests on how Germans interpret their place within that burdened past.

The Berlin historian Ernst Nolte argued for the comparability of the Final Solution to other genocides throughout the twentieth century and in doing so seemed to be paving the way for revisionist and apologetic history. Nolte's relativization of the Nazi genocide and its leveling effects on National Socialist history drew sharp criticism from the social philosopher Jürgen Habermas in an article published in *Die Zeit* of June 1986. In his view, a number of conservative historians, notably Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber, and Nolte, were manipulating history in a new nationalist fashion.

The notion of collective responsibility was initially grounded in the concepts of moral and metaphysical guilt as argued by the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers in the Heidelberg lectures of 1946. Assessing collective responsibility has been especially problematic for historians, particularly in determining to what degree Germany as a nation-state, a new nation built upon constitutional principles, should recognize and accept responsibility for the Nazi past. Moreover, if collective responsibility for the Third Reich should ever be recognized, the questions would remain: how many generations of Germans would be required to acknowledge and accept responsibility for Nazi crimes against humanity?

Jaspers made clear distinctions between four types of guilt. The concept of criminal guilt was palpable to Germans of the late 1940's since it assigned guilt to certain individuals whose criminal actions were demonstrable in a court of law. More difficult to internalize were the concepts of political, moral, and metaphysical guilt, which referred to the contexts of everyday life where such crimes were possible. It is these latter notions whose varied and subtle meanings excluded no one in German society, and which over time came to define and serve as the basis for public recognition and acceptance of responsibility for Nazi crimes against humanity. The necessity or non-necessity of continued responsibility is at the heart of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. An understanding of the concept is essential to understanding West Germans' perceptions of their recent history; and this fundamental concept, though unfortunately never directly discussed, was actually the obscured core of the dispute.

As the dispute grew in intensity from June of 1986 to July of 1987 over the pages of Germany's *feuilletons*, it became evident that the revisionist historians were primarily concerned with the proper means of restoring a healthy sense of national identity that seemed to be taking shape within the contours of Cold War rhetoric. The intention was to establish a "normalized" past that would solidify a form of

identity acceptable to all descendants of perpetrators and victims. Forty years after defeat, the time, so they thought, had come for Germany to become unburdened from a past that prevented its legitimate existence within the community of her NATO partners.

From the administrations of Adenauer to Kohl, Germany's political leaders had argued vehemently over the nature of German guilt. Their arguments revealed the government's indecisiveness over the determination between individual and collective responsibility. Aside from the political divide over the issue of guilt, there remained a collective memory burdened by the lingering shame within a newer generation grown accustomed to democratic principles. It was not until 1973 that the discussion of the Nazi past and its relevance to the present was taken outside the realm of academia and extended to the public. Initiated by the federal government, the Körber Institute invited German high school students to submit an essay recounting their impressions of a new democratic society built upon the ruins left behind by the Third Reich.² Public awareness of how Germans were seen in history reached a higher level in 1979 after the airing in Germany of the American television series *Holocaust*. The Historians' Dispute erupted at a time when the public had only recently become fully conscious of the necessity of public discourse. At bottom, the debates among historians represented an attempt to ameliorate the weight of a nagging collective memory encumbered with the terrible legacy of the Holocaust. Nolte, Stürmer, and Hillgruber saw a hindrance to normalization when national memory was held captive by a never-ending specter (*Schreckbild*) of Nazism (Nolte 39). With the formulation of "eine Vergangenheit, die sich geradezu als Gegenwart etabliert oder die wie ein Richtschwert über der Gegenwart aufgehängt ist," Nolte himself quite aptly summed up what can otherwise be understood as the problematic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the German collective consciousness (39). With the Historians' Dispute displayed in front of the public eye, Germans were more conscious than ever before that history indeed matters.

In "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," Nolte attempted to establish a model of the comparability of genocides that was to become not only the focal point of academic debate among historians, but also a focal point of public attention. The comparability of the Nazi genocide with other twentieth century genocides entailed a scholar's endeavor to make palpable the argument that the Final Solution was just another terrible link in a long chain of similar genocides. Nolte explicitly drew attention to the fact that the mass murder of Jews followed the mass liquidation of Kulaks and preceded the elimination of a class of peoples by Pol Pot, thereby placing the Final Solution somewhere in the middle of a timeline of genocides throughout the twentieth century. Placing himself firmly within the circle of revisionist historians, Nolte pressed for a continuation of the conservative

² Founded by Bundespräsident Gustav Heinemann and Kurt A. Körber, the Körber Institute has organized a history competition which has received 110,000 essays over the last twenty-three years.

political shift (*Tendenzwende*) that was exemplified in the words of the late Bavarian Christian Social Union leader, Franz Joseph Strauß, who during the 1987 elections stated that Germany should “emerge from the dismal Third Reich and become normal again.”³ By relativizing and thus normalizing the past, Nolte was attempting to reconcile the present image of Germany with the incessant older guilt-ridden images of the Nazi era. This desired reconciliation conformed to the aspirations of the Kohl government for a “usable past.” As the Federal Republic grew in affluence (*Wohlstandsgesellschaft*) and solidified allegiances with its Western allies, conservative historians sought to establish a bridge from the Nazi past to the present by comparing Nazi atrocities to atrocities committed by other regimes.

If the comparisons of Nazi genocide to earlier and later genocides of the twentieth century were intended to demonstrate that Nazi atrocities were in some manner actually no worse than the others, then why, as Nolte was apparently asking, should the “singularity” of these crimes persist as a central element in many historians’ thinking and in public consciousness? The Hitler biographer and co-editor of the FAZ Joachim Fest was most outspoken in his challenge to the notion of singularity. In his article, “*Die geschuldete Erinnerung*,” he pointed out that there were essentially four aspects underlying the claims to singularity. Firstly, the monstrosity of the “so-called Final Solution” (*sogenannte Endlösung*) was generally based on the observation that the executioners never asked about the innocence or guilt of their victims. Secondly, the claim to singularity rested in the administrative and mechanical means to carry out mass murder. Thirdly, numerous arguments for singularity drew upon the lasting dumbfounded response of the many people who could not comprehend that a country with a highly developed culture could sink to such barbarity. Moreover, it seemed all the more incomprehensible “daß Deutsche das Massenmorden erdacht, geplant und aus geführt haben; daß es sich vor dem Hintergrund einer jahrhundertlang gewachsenen deutsch-jüdischen Symbiose ereignete, die zu den großen” (Fest 104). The last theme of singularity focuses on Hitler’s repeated statements that the violent practices of the revolutionary leftist opponents had served him as a model and thus had given him the determination to be more radical in destroying the hated Marxist opposition. By having promoted his avowed state-sanctioned violence against Socialist and Communist opponents, Hitler had opened the door to uncontrollable and unimaginable barbarities (105).

Fest did not recognize any of these aspects as having any real claim to singularity. He noted that the Bolsheviks, like the Nazis, had not asked their victims about innocence or guilt; nor did he see that it made a substantial difference that the victims were chosen on the basis of biology or on the basis of class. Stalin’s crimes, he argued, were no less administrative or mechanical since “a shot in the nape of the neck” was qualitatively less distinguishable than death in the gas chambers. And

³ Quoted in Peter Baldwin, “The Historikerstreit in Context,” *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate*, edited by Peter Baldwin, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 28.

finally, he observed that the cultural argument is nothing more than the perpetuation of a Nazi claim according to which there are either higher or more primitive peoples.

Not content with comparing the Holocaust to other twentieth century genocides, Nolte developed a rather eccentric “causal nexus” argument. This argument was designed to demonstrate that there was a preemptive character behind the intention to exterminate a race of people in Nazi-occupied territories. In essence, the causal nexus makes the point that if the atrocities committed against a race of people are comparable to the mass murders of the Kulaks and if Hitler had knowledge of this historical example, then the policy of deportation and extermination apparently grew out of something more than blind hatred. Nolte’s argument leads to the conclusion that Hitler conceivably derived from this historical precedent a legitimate fear that the Soviets might do the same to the Germans.

That Auschwitz was also the result of Hitler reacting out of fear, is a notion Nolte had already touched on in an earlier lecture, published in 1980, “Zwischen Geschichtslegende und Revisionismus?” In this essay, Nolte had argued that Auschwitz was a “copy,” distinguishable only in its “quasi” industrial method of mass murder; and though far more irrational than the original, “Auschwitz did not, first and foremost, result as an inherited anti-Semitism. It was not merely genocide, but above all, it was specifically a reaction created by anxiety about the occurrences of annihilation (*Vernichtungsvorgänge*) perpetrated during the Russian revolution” (Nolte 32). Nolte attributes a precedent of terror, the so-called “Asiatic deeds,” to the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution for the later Nazi crimes against humanity.⁴ He offers his hypothesis of precedence in a series of rhetorical questions: “did not the National Socialists, and did not Hitler, commit an ‘Asiatic deed’ therefore because they considered themselves and those similar to them as potential or real victims of an Asiatic deed?” And “was not ‘*Archipel Gulag*’ more original (*ursprünglicher*) than Auschwitz?” Or, and more to the point, “was not the ‘class-based murder’ by Bolsheviks logically and factually prior to the ‘racially-based murder’ by National Socialists?” (Nolte 45). In his last essay on the *Historikerstreit*, Nolte reiterated the unsubstantiated claim that “*Archipel Gulag* was therefore ‘more original’ than Auschwitz because it stood as an example to the perpetrators of Auschwitz, and Auschwitz did not stand as an example to the perpetrators of the *Archipel Gulag*” (Nolte 225).

Nolte introduced another example to augment the argument that the Jews

⁴ See Richard Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989). Evans notes that the term, “Asiatic” deed was apparently first used by Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter’s biographer Paul Leverkuehn. In 1915, Scheubner-Richter, the German Consular in Erzerum, had witnessed the Armenian massacre; later he was to become one of Hitler’s closest collaborators. Evans wrote that there is no evidence that Hitler was familiar with this term or its implications; nor is there any evidence that he was familiar with Scheubner-Richter’s biography, which was not published until 1938.

posed a probable threat in Hitler's mind. He references a statement made in 1939 by the president of the Jewish Agency, Chaim Weizmann, who had declared that all the Jews of the world would side with England during the war. Nolte assumes that Hitler must have been familiar with this statement since it had been reprinted the same year in *Archiv der Gegenwart*. Weizmann's statement, if taken at face value, would lead to the far-reaching consequence, as Nolte goes on to argue, "that Hitler was able to treat the German Jews as prisoners of war, that is, to intern (*internieren*) them" (Nolte 226).

Nolte still insisted on the permissibility of introducing such rhetorical questions for the sake of historical completeness. He complained that the attacks on his arguments were in violation of open and honest historical inquiry. Any and all questions are in some way of historical necessity and therefore should not be considered taboo by his opponents. Nolte considered these questions, even if rhetorical and in violation of taboo, for the sake of historical completeness (Nolte 226). They were in conformity with the prerequisites in the science of history (*Geschichtswissenschaft*). Moreover, as he later offhandedly remarked, the causal nexus was as apparent (*wahrscheinlich*) to him as it should be for anyone.

The Erlangen historian Michael Stürmer, who at the time was serving as one of Kohl's political advisors, observed a fascination within the public with the rediscovery of history and attributed this to a renewal of "historical consciousness, a return to cultural heritage, and to a promise of normalcy" (Stürmer 36). It followed that whoever accepts the "loss of orientation" (*Orientierungsverlust*) and the "search for identity" (*Identitätssuche*) as concepts not having an "effect on politics and the future," ignores "that whoever wins the future in a land without history supplies memory, coins the terms, and interprets the past" (36). The rehabilitation of German history is important insofar as the Federal Republic carried political and economical responsibility; therefore, the search for a lost history "is morally legitimate and politically necessary" (Stürmer 38). In his contribution to the *Römerberg-Gespräche*, an annual colloquium held in Frankfurt under the topic heading from which Nolte borrowed his title, *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*, Stürmer lamented Germans' "obsession with guilt" and lack of national identity. The time had come, so Stürmer argued, to "endow history with meaning (*Sinnstiftung*)." The German past, according to Stürmer, should not become an endless source of permanent guilt.

On the basis of endowing history with meaning, Germans can build a viable sense of nationhood. At the colloquium he indicated how this might be achieved when he drew a parallel between "the deadly idiocies of the victors of 1918 and the peace settlement of 1945."⁵ Hitler's rise to power was attributed to the Germans' loss of orientation and inability to deal with the crisis of modernity. Richard Evans, in his analysis of the *Historikerstreit*, saw in this statement Stürmer's suggestion that

⁵ Quoted in Evans (103–4).

the collapse of the Weimar Republic was in fact the result of having been “under the heavy burden of guilt laid on it by the Treaty of Versailles, clearly implying that the same is, or could be, happening to the Federal Republic.” Evans argues that Stürmer’s “use of the phrase ‘as Stalin’s men sat in judgment at Nuremberg’ seems to suggest that German guilt after 1945 was the product of a Communist plot” (104)

Discussions of endowing history with meaning, identifying with perpetrators as well as victims, and relativizing Nazi genocide struck Habermas as a dangerous form of revisionism and ideology planning. He viewed Stürmer, Hillgruber, and Nolte as “ideology planners” who were attempting to resurrect a consensus over national consciousness, which in essence was to resurrect a conventional sense of nationalism that called for anti-communist reactions.

Since comparison of the Nazi genocide of Jews to genocides found throughout other parts of the world relativized the nature of Germany’s guilt and responsibility to the rest of the world, a further and more serious consequence might be, as Habermas feared, that conservative revisionist attempts such as Nolte’s would lead to a form of nationalism all too familiarly associated with the nationalism of the Wilhelmine and Nazi eras. As an alternative to Stürmer’s search to regain a “lost history” and Nolte’s quest for historical completeness, Habermas argued, following Enlightenment principles, for adherence to “constitutional patriotism” (*Verfassungspatriotismus*):

The only patriotism that does not alienate us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. A bond anchored in conviction to universalistic principles of constitutionalism, was unfortunately not established in the cultural nation of the Germans until – and through – Auschwitz. Whoever wants to cast out the blushing redness of shame with such slogans as “obsession with guilt” about this fact, and whoever wants to summon the Germans back to a conventional form of their national identity, destroys our only reliable basis for our ties to the West. (75–6)

Habermas, a social philosopher, is equally at home in history and sociology. The breadth of his writings reflects his indebtedness to the Frankfurt School of Marxist social scientists. But unlike many of the Marxist scholars of this school, in particular Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Habermas does not reject the traditions and philosophies of the Enlightenment. Charles Maier notes that Habermas’ views of history were largely “honed” in a decade-long debate with the conservative philosopher of hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Gadamer, like Nolte, had been a student of Martin Heidegger; and, Gadamer, as Maier notes:

insisted that historical interpretation rested upon ‘understanding’ (*Verstehen*), the historian’s effort to penetrate his subject’s value system and to perceive it, so to speak, from the inside out. This is the tradition to which Hillgruber appeals when trying to justify the Wehrmacht’s combat in the winter of 1945. (42)

Maier is referencing a small, controversial book that was equally disturbing to Habermas. *Zweierlei Untergang* (Berlin: Corso bei Siedler, 1986) comprised two essays that had appeared one year prior to the Dispute. The main point of Hillgruber’s argument was that the *Wehrmacht* did nothing more than carry out its terrible mission in its defense against the advancing Red Army after the defeat at Stalingrad. And these German soldiers were as much victims of Hitler’s military incompetence as the Jews were victims of his murderous designs. Especially disturbing for Habermas was the fact that Hillgruber had treated the sufferings of the Wehrmacht soldiers, written from the soldier perspective, as equivalent to the sufferings of the main victims of the Holocaust.

Habermas was suspicious of the “hermeneutical excess” that seemed to be a logical outcome of Gadamer’s thinking. According to Maier, Habermas feared:

Gadamer’s emphasis on deriving meaning from the text on the basis of shared ‘tradition’ [which] amounted to surrendering unreflectively to the prejudices of the protagonist. It recapitulated the historicist sin of acknowledging only those values inherent in the object of historical study and abnegating any possibility of critical perspective. (42–3)

Accordingly, the earlier debates suggested that Habermas essentially feared the abuse of a hermeneutical search for identity, for it leaned too heavily on a form of *Historismus* that demanded “*Verstehen* and empathy.” *Historismus* in this sense promotes the assumption that understanding is achieved by an empathetic identification with its subject. For the critics, especially Habermas, Hillgruber had gone too far in an uncritical empathy for the German troops. Maier noted that for Habermas, this emphasis on *Verstehen* and empathy “had to be suspect, especially after justifying German power politics for over a century” (43). Habermas criticized those conservative revisionist historians for the attempt to restore a national identity by appeal to a tradition that resembled too closely a disputed tradition which in the first place had played such a major role in contributing to the rise of National Socialism.

In a Heideggerian sense, Gadamer sees an approach to textual interpretations with fore-meanings that make up fore-understanding.⁶ This implies that mean-

⁶ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, 3. erw. Ausgabe, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972). Fundamental to Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach, or what he calls the “hermeneutical situation,” is that our existence implies its being situated

ings are not to be understood in an arbitrary way, for meanings can also represent a multiplicity of possibilities presented by agreement in language and vocabulary. The agreement in language and vocabulary has its roots in tradition. However, Gadamer does not intend for the multiplicity of possibility to be exaggerated. There can be no justification, in his view, for submitting to an anything-goes type of relativism. Not all possible meanings are actually possible. Human understanding is not merely subjective, but is a type of historical understanding that proceeds from commonality rooted in tradition. In any given society where individuals share common habits, culture, and language, the interpretations will reflect the tradition from which they emerge. By commonality there is a shared sense of historically understood values. This represents a type of *Historismus* that Habermas feared, for it leaves the door open for an interpreter to identify with any tradition, including new nationalist traditions as Nolte and Stürmer had apparently done.

In his second major essay, Habermas sought not only to strengthen what he already had written, but also to show that public memory was heading in a wrong direction. He cites some disturbing examples of how public memory in Germany was manifesting itself. The chairman of the CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag Alfred Dregger, for instance, had remarked that an elementary patriotism was as necessary to Germany as it was self-evident to other countries. Of considerable consternation for Habermas was Dregger's remark that "though necessary at one time, whoever abuses the so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in order to render our people unfit for the future must reckon with our objection" (244). Habermas cites another example with the report of an expert witness whose testimony in a trial regarding the Nazi practice of euthanasia had been dismissed because his views were regarded as potentially prejudiced due to his Jewish ancestry (244). The instance of racism in the court and a politician's desire to see an end to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* occurred within one week of each other, leading Habermas to wonder whether these two occurrences of relativizing the Nazi past were indicative of an emerging spiritual climate that was more than just an accident. It was bad enough, as he sarcastically remarked, that Kohl "with his fine sense of history was drawing parallels between Goebbels and Gorbachev" (Habermas 245). Habermas continued by reminding readers of the handshake of World War II veterans for President Reagan's benefit at Bitburg, which symbolized not only a negation of the singularity of Nazi war crimes, but was also "a confirmation that we in the battle against Bolshevism had always stood on the right side" (245).⁷

within tradition (*Überlieferung*), which means being subject to prejudices (*Vorurteile*) in the sense of inherited prejudgments that qualify all human existence in various ways. This eliminates the idea of absolute reason since it does not square with historical humanity. Reason is only concrete in historical terms, that is, it is concrete only in the period of time in which it was valid under that period's circumstances. Reason itself is subject to constant change due to the passage of time.

⁷ See Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*. Maier once designated the *Historikerstreit* as "Bitburg history." As the earlier Bitburg affair had demonstrated, attempts were made to "draw a line under" the Nazi era

Habermas acknowledged that with enough temporal distance between the events themselves and their treatment through historical assessments, broad reaching perspectives would necessarily transcend the hitherto reserved realms of taboo. The unspeakable had become speakable. Times had changed and with it the writing of history. And now, with intellectual sobriety, topics that were once confined to beer hall discussions and right-extremists' pamphlets were receiving recognition and legitimacy through the writings of Nolte. And Hillgruber created a problem with identification by encouraging empathy for the experiences of fighting Wehrmacht soldiers and the sufferings of German civilians.

Habermas did not believe that the forms of guilt as outlined by Jaspers should necessarily apply to successive generations, but a reminder of them was perhaps necessary, for they served as a basis for collective responsibility. This reminder lent the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* its viability for succeeding generations of Germans. For Habermas, the more general yet vexing question should persist as to how succeeding generations should bear continued responsibility for the generation of parents or grandparents who experienced Nazism, including those who stood by and did nothing. Habermas made it clear that the later generations of Germans should continue to keep alive the memory of Auschwitz and should appropriate the history of Nazi crimes against humanity for the continuance of nationally shared responsibility to the victims' descendents.

Jaspers had made the distinction between the individual guilt of those directly involved and the collective guilt of those indirectly involved with the carrying out of Nazi terror. His argument for moral and metaphysical guilt is based on the given of human solidarity within a civilized community. Human solidarity is an a priori condition of morality in human life, and it "makes each and every human being responsible for any unjust act and all injustice of the world, especially for crimes that occur in our presence or with our knowledge."⁸ Metaphysical guilt is a form of survivors' guilt and, according to Jaspers, arises through a willful negligence of solidarity:

There is but a consciousness of guilt in us which has a different source. Metaphysical guilt is the lack of solidarity with human beings as a human being. It still remains an indelible claim where the morally meaningful

(*Schlussstrich*). By invitation of *Bundeskanzler* Helmut Kohl, President Ronald Reagan had placed a wreath at the military cemetery in Bitburg – where among some two hundred soldiers over twenty *Waffen SS* were also buried – “in a spirit of reconciliation, in a spirit of forty years of peace, in a spirit of economic and military compatibility.” See also Evans in which he quoted further from Reagan’s speech that “those young men are victims of Nazism also [...] They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps” (16).

⁸ The “morally meaningful obligation” is Jaspers’ mode of expression to indicate his acceptance of Kant’s categorical imperative. Elsewhere in his writings, Jaspers made it clear that he took Kant’s categorical imperative to be a valid first principle of morals (Jaspers 17).

obligation has already ceased to be. This solidarity is injured if I am present where injustice and crimes occur. It does not suffice that with caution I risk my life in order to prevent it. If it happens and I am present, and if I survive where the other is killed, then there is a voice in me by which I know: that I still live is my guilt. (Jaspers 18)

For Jaspers, the acceptance of collective responsibility is rooted in the awareness of both moral and metaphysical guilt. And responsibility begins with the recognition “that we Germans are, or that every German is in some sense guilty; of that there can be no doubt if our actions are not completely without basis” (18). That Nazi crimes were not without basis is evident in a state-sanctioned decision making process. They had a basis in a state apparatus whose Final Solution was pressed forward with dogmatic calculation and brutal implementation. Eberhard Jäckel argued that the singularity of the annihilation of the Jews (*Judenvernichtung*) should remain a focal point in subsequent modern German historiographical perspectives since “never before had a state proclaimed and decided with the authority of its responsible leader to kill, with few possible exceptions, a selected group of humans, including the elderly, women, children, and babies; and then to carry out this decision with all the possible means at the disposal of the state” (Jäckel 118).

As barbarous as Stalin’s methods were in coercing collectivization, even if the number of deaths exceeded those of the Jews, the singularity of Nazi crimes should remain in the forefront because, as Maier noted, “nowhere else but in German-occupied Europe from 1941 to 1945 was there an apparatus so single-mindedly established to carry out mass murder as a process in its own right” (82). There was nothing arbitrary in the decision to eliminate a race of a people even if it was for no other ends than an end in itself. The ignominious disrespect of the Nazis towards humanity was not to be trumped: Stalin never had the gold teeth of his victims extracted and deposited in a Swiss bank.

In one form or another, German citizens of the immediate postwar years would be held accountable for the heinous war crimes of the defeated Third Reich; and to smooth out potential disputes within the German community over individual or collective culpability, Jaspers made clear that there was a valid moral underpinning for a German acceptance of collective responsibility:

Within our population there were many who were incensed, and many who were deeply stirred by the horror of an impending disaster. But many more still continued their activities without disturbance, continuing their social gatherings and pleasures as though nothing had happened. That is moral guilt. (Jaspers 17)

The meaning of guilt as defined by Jaspers could not be transferred to a generation of Germans who were born after the Third Reich; but Habermas saw a necessity for later generations to be reminded of a continued collective responsibility.

The themes of denial through relativization in the Historians' Dispute, themes similar to those in Jaspers' Heidelberger lectures, were manifesting themselves in a different form. Stürmer's search for a lost history, or Nolte's relativization offered a version of a distorted *Wirkungsgeschichte*. A motif for the distortion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is found in "the battle to regain burdened traditions" (Habermas

250). For Habermas, however, this attempt to regain such traditions is contingent:

As long as the enquiring view is directed towards ambivalences revealed to later generations from knowledge acquired throughout the course of historical process that are beyond their influence, the exemplary cannot be held free from the retroactive violence of a corrupted *Wirkungsgeschichte*. (250)

Habermas uses the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in much the same way as Gadamer to refer to the ongoing process of working out the effects of history which we automatically inherit and in which we are irrevocably involved. The effects of history, according to Habermas, cannot be simply worked out and dispensed with by denying its effects through relativization. The effects of a burdened history, as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, present themselves inescapably as a filter:

The NS-period will present itself all the more insignificant as an obstacle the more relaxed we consider it a filter through which the cultural substance has to pass, inasmuch as this is to be assumed with willingness and consciousness. Dregger and his like-minded colleagues oppose this continuity as something self-evident to the Federal Republic. (Habermas 249)

Another reason Habermas offers for insisting on continued responsibility is the capacity for solidarity in keeping alive and working through the memory of Nazi crimes. "Can one proceed to be the legal heir of the German Reich, can one continue the traditions of German culture without accepting the historical responsibility for the context of life (*Lebensform*) in which Auschwitz was possible?" (Habermas 251). The context of life in which the capacity for war crimes evolved is not an abstract and it has, for Habermas, the potential to reemerge at any time. One has the responsibility to critically reflect on the context of life from which barbarism has emerged and can reemerge. By critical reflection and the responsibility of keeping alive memories of the Holocaust, Germans can conceivably establish a post-conventional identity according to universalistic principles of constitutional-

ism. One such feature of this identity is the capacity of solidarity:

Can one be liable for the context in which such crimes arose and with which one's own existence is interwoven in any way other than through the solidarity of the memory of that which cannot be made good, in any way other than through a reflective and scrutinizing attitude towards one's own identity-creating traditions? (251)

Habermas does not offer a framework of time in which the past becomes the past. But it is clear through his criticisms of the conservative revisionists that the past still has to be worked through and cannot simply be controverted by relativization:

For the time being, there is the obligation that we in Germany – even if no one else assumes to take this upon themselves – have to keep alive without distortion, and not just in the mind, the memory of those murdered by German hands. These victims have a proper claim to a weak, anamnestic power of solidarity which descendants still can only exercise within the medium of a perpetually renewed, often despairing, and, at all events, drifting memory. (251)

At what point in time do painful memories fade away? While there is no definitive philosophical answer, it is clear that the painfulness associated with terrible memories will diminish with time; but through the appropriation of history, memories will not simply die out; nor can they be argued away. The further removed in time for the victims' descendants, the smaller the claims for compensation and responsibility. Charles Maier phrased it quite aptly when he wrote that "like the half life of radioactive material, there is no point at which responsibility goes away," and that there may be differences "between maintaining a quotient of collective memory and being obsessed by it" (Maier 15).

Once the intensity and acrimony of the Historians' Dispute had subsided, many liberally minded historians believed that Habermas may have come out ahead as the victor in arguing for a tempering of the renewed nationalist fervor of the conservative historians, but there was also a consensus among them that in the long run, Nolte, in having favored a normalized past, would eventually emerge as the victor. It should not after all come as too much of a surprise that in post-unification Germany the Germans are actively keeping alive the memory of the crimes of Nazism and are thus, more than ever before, actively coming to terms with their past. Though Angela Merkel had stated, perhaps with some legitimacy, that she and her generation no longer had direct ties to the Nazi past, her observation should not be understood as simply a justification to push ahead into the future while leaving be-

hind the memories of the burdensome past. That the past will inevitably become the past, that is without any overlaying of the present, is in some sense true, but there must also be reminders that the even later generations of Germans are not, or should not be, absolved of their responsibilities to the victims of Nazism. After the *Wende*, the Germans have demonstrated their willingness to accept responsibility for their past by not only establishing public memorials to the victims of National Socialism, but also by what appears to be a genuine effort to understand their burdened past as evidenced by the rise in number of the German production of literature and films that deal with the subject of Nazism.

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