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1

The Politics of the Past in the 1950s: Rhetorics of Victimisation in East and West Germany¹

Robert G. Moeller

This chapter takes as its starting point the ‘politics of the past’² in the present and the overwhelming evidence that many Germans are seeking ways to mourn German victims of the Second World War. That is the subject of most of the contributions in this volume. In order to understand the present calls for an acknowledgment of German loss and suffering, however, we should first look back at the forms that the rhetorics of victimisation have taken since the shooting stopped in May 1945. What interests me is how the trauma of the mass death, loss and suffering of millions of Germans has entered German public memory, history and politics since the war ended and how representations of that past have changed over time.

The part of this story with which most historians of post-1945 Germany are familiar begins with the 1960s, when an era of silence about the crimes of National Socialism gave way to a public commemorative culture and historical analyses in which not German loss, but the Holocaust emerged as the defining moment of twentieth-century German history. Since the mid-1980s, many argued that this was an incomplete account. They emphasised that histories of National Socialism failed adequately to describe the suffering endured by millions of Germans during the war. But in the mid-1980s calls for Germans to remember their losses triggered vehement negative responses from those who

claimed that any attempt to tell the story of German victims would inevitably lead in the direction of apologia and the false equation of German suffering with the crimes committed by Germans. They feared a tendency toward *Aufrechnung* – a reckoning up or settling of accounts – and charged that creating such moral balance sheets allowed Germans to avoid guilt and responsibility by drawing a line below the ledger of moral accountability and laying the past to rest. When Ronald Reagan joined West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl at Bitburg to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the war's end in 1985, he honoured soldiers of the Waffen-SS buried there, 'victims of Nazism also . . . They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps'.³ But many rejected this symbolic act. And when the historian Andreas Hillgruber proposed the juxtaposition of 'Two Demises: The Destruction of the German Reich and the End of the European Jewry', he found himself in the midst of a 'Historians' Dispute' (*Historikerstreit*) and was roundly criticised for presenting tales of German suffering and the suffering caused by Germans in the same book.⁴

I will address these parts of the history of the representation of Germans as victims of the Second World War, but I will focus in greater detail on a chapter of this history that is less familiar, the first decade or so after the war's end. In these years, Germans – East and West – devoted considerable energy to assessing their losses and incorporating their victim status into public memory and politics. It is worth remembering how extensive those losses were. The bombing war left as many as 600,000 civilians dead and wounded 900,000 more. About 12 million Germans from Eastern Europe and the eastern parts of the Reich survived the flight ahead of the Red Army at the war's end or forced expulsion from their former homes after May 1945. The best data available indicate that another 500,000 were killed in the process. Estimates of rapes of German women committed by Red Army soldiers are inexact but range to as high as a million and a half. More than 5 million more Germans in uniform lost their lives before the shooting stopped, well over half of them on the eastern front. When deaths of German POWs in Soviet captivity are added to this total, the war on the eastern front accounts for almost 75 per cent of all German military casualties. At the end of the war, more than a million German women were widows.⁵

These numbers are staggering, and they can only begin to give a sense of the physical and emotional wasteland that Germans confronted in May 1945. However, the search for ways to come to terms

with these traumatic pasts did not begin in the mid-1980s or 1990s. In the 1950s, there was not silence about this past; rather, in the political arena and forms of commemoration, stories of German loss and suffering were ubiquitous. When Germans demanded the right to mourn their victims in the 1990s, many claimed to be breaking the 'taboos' that had surrounded this past of loss and suffering, but my thesis is that there is a long 'history of memory' of German victimisation. Those who have not stopped to study *this* history may, as it were, be condemned to repeat it, constantly claiming to break a silence that, I argue, has never really existed.⁶

The politics of the past in the post-war years

When the leaders of the newly created German Democratic Republic (GDR) went in search of a national anthem in 1949, they turned to the poet and prose writer Johannes R. Becher. A member of the Communist Party since 1923, Becher fled Germany for Moscow in 1933. He returned to Berlin in June 1945. A little over four years later, he was charged with finding the words for the music that would celebrate a new nation. The Germany that Becher invoked was 'arising out of the ruins, turned to the future', on a journey toward socialism that led away from the rubble of the fascist regime and a Germany devastated by Allied bombing and the extraordinarily brutal fighting that had accompanied the war's end on German soil. East Germans should look ahead, but this past of loss, devastation and suffering should be incorporated into the foundations of the future they were setting out to construct.⁷

When it came to ascribing responsibility for the ruins, the East German state left no doubt that the 'Hitler gang' had started the Second World War and was guilty for whatever Germans had suffered. To be sure, the German people should have known better than to follow the 'band of criminals', but beginning almost as soon as the shooting stopped, the official position of the Communist Party and its successor, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, SED), was that Germans had been deprived of their rights, deceived and victimised by the 'Hitler clique' that had waged an aggressive war against its European neighbours and was responsible, claimed East German President Wilhelm Pieck, for the deaths of 'millions of Germans' who 'had been driven into death on the battle-grounds and on the home front' as well as the millions who had died in concentration camps.⁸

According to this version of the past, those who best understood the origins of Germany's woes were anti-fascists who had struggled against Hitler from the start, often falling victim to the regime, some remaining in Germany, others, like Becher and Pieck, surviving the Third Reich in exile in the Soviet Union. Elevated to the level of a foundational ideology of the East German state, 'anti-fascism' became a way to describe what was noblest about the German past – its socialist traditions – and also to identify what differentiated East from West where one form of fascism had allegedly succeeded another in the post-war period. Those who had died in the anti-fascist resistance struggle or in Nazi concentration camps claimed pride of place in the commemorative practice of the GDR, but the designation *Opfer des Faschismus* (victims of fascism) was interpreted far more broadly to include Jewish victims of Nazi persecution as well.⁹

In the official version of the war that circulated in the GDR, Germans could also claim victim status because of the destruction that American and British bomber pilots had dropped from the skies. Beginning in 1950 annual ceremonies commemorated the February 1945 bombing of Dresden, where the 'civilian population' had fallen victim to the 'use of weapons of mass destruction' (*Massenvernichtungswaffen*) unleashed by the 'Anglo-American gangsters in the skies'.¹⁰ In the context of the emerging Cold War, the SED equated the bombs of Western imperialists falling on Dresden in 1945 with the bombs of Western imperialists dropped on Korea in the early 1950s. Elsewhere, remembering the war meant overcoming its legacy, clearing away the rubble and constructing a different sort of Germany based on positive socialist traditions that the Nazis had sought to eliminate.¹¹

Counted among Hitler's victims in East Germany were also those who had put on uniforms to fight the war. They too had been led astray by the Nazis, the agents of 'reactionary militarism', and the 'imperialist agents' of German fascism, particularly heavy industrialists and bankers. 'Criminal leaders' had started the war, and virtually any resistance to the overwhelming power of the 'reactionary Prussian military caste or against the German monopoly capitalists' was pointless.¹² Redemption lay in an anti-fascist education, available to many in Soviet prisoner-of-war camps, where German soldiers were transformed into 'pioneers of a new Germany' whose labour rebuilding the Soviet Union had paid off some of the debt owed by Germans to their liberators. As Frank Biess has demonstrated, the process of conversion also brought with it forgiveness of all past sins,¹³ and former

soldiers emerged in popular memory not as members of a criminal organisation but as men who had learned from their mistakes.¹⁴

This past of German victimisation and anti-fascist struggle registered in public ceremonies, political speeches, history books and the socialisation of youth. New recruits to the *Jungpioniere*, the communist youth organisation, dedicated themselves to the memory of Ernst Thälmann, the communist leader who had been imprisoned by the Nazis in March 1933 and killed in Buchenwald in August 1944. The quintessential victim, or, as the historian Dorothee Wierling put it, a 'communist saint', Thälmann's sacrifice could represent the losses of all *Opfer des Faschismus*, and his example was offered as a source of inspiration to the next generation.¹⁵ East Germans of all ages could also see Thälmann's story at the movies, and films that underwrote the ideology of anti-fascism offered didactic tales in which soldiers came to understand the perfidy of National Socialism, or martyrs spilled their blood in the struggle against the Hitler regime.¹⁶

Not all forms of mourning victim fates were so carefully orchestrated by the state. In interviews with East Germans collected before and after the fall of the Wall, Wierling finds evidence of stories of loss and suffering passed along from parents to their children, which were not collapsed into the framework of official accounts and in which the Red Army did not appear as a liberator.¹⁷ And a mass gravesite for German soldiers established near the village of Halbe around 1950 expressed a sober sense of grief, not the triumphalism of the monuments constructed by the East German regime to celebrate the anti-fascist struggle or by the Soviet forces of occupation to commemorate the sacrifices of the Red Army.¹⁸ But in the restricted public sphere of the German Democratic Republic, there was little space in which to tell stories of the war's end that diverged from the accounts put in place by the state.

The past of National Socialism and the Second World War was also quite present across the border in the Federal Republic of Germany, and in a public sphere not so constrained by the state, an even greater range of stories of suffering and loss emerged. When the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Konrad Adenauer, addressed the West German parliament in September 1949, he too left little doubt that Germany must acknowledge what Germans had suffered during the war. The 'highest objective' of the new state, Adenauer promised, was 'to strive for social justice and the alleviation of misery'. Germany was a nation of victims. Economic recovery was the essential prerequisite to achieve the 'distribution of burdens'

(*Lastenausgleich*) among those who had suffered enormous losses and those whom fate had spared.

The legacy of the war took many forms. Adenauer alluded to families shattered by the deaths of the soldiers killed in the war when he acknowledged the women who might not find marriage prospects and youth who had been robbed of a stable family. The 'social and ethical healing' of the German people would be possible only when housing stock, levelled by the bombs, was replaced. In West Germany, where only a handful of communist parliamentarians portrayed the Red Army as liberators, the state pledged to restore the losses of those whose livelihoods and homes had been 'liberated' as Soviet forces advanced into Germany in late 1944 and early 1945. Expellees, a group missing entirely from the East German victim role call, were high on Adenauer's list. Some 8 million found themselves in the Federal Republic in 1949. According to Adenauer, millions more had died, victims of communist barbarism. Of great concern as well were the '1.5 to 2 million German prisoners-of-war' who were not accounted for, assumed to be languishing in Soviet camps.¹⁹

The post-war West German state also acknowledged that Jews and others had suffered extraordinary losses, and in a historic statement before parliament in September 1951 Adenauer announced that 'the Federal Government and with it the great majority of the German people are aware of the immeasurable suffering that was brought upon the Jews in Germany and the occupied territories during the time of National Socialism ... unspeakable crimes have been committed in the name of the German people, calling for moral and material indemnity'.²⁰ But Germans had suffered too, and it was the political and moral responsibility of the West German state to address the needs of German victims who were not Jewish and whose losses had been inflicted by Allied bombs and the Red Army.

From the perspective of most West Germans, the Allied forces of occupation had done little to alleviate the suffering of the immediate post-war years, constructing moral balance sheets according to which what Germans had suffered was just retribution for the suffering Germans had caused. Adenauer's remarks in 1949 left no doubt that his government would make up for lost time, meeting the needs of German victims. Some 18 million West Germans counted themselves among the 'war-damaged' – victims of falling bombs, expulsion from their homes by the Red Army, or a currency reform that had wiped clean the huge debt that the Nazi state had accumulated during the war, obliterating the savings of millions of Germans. The 'Law to

Aid Victims of War', passed in 1950, was only a prelude to the 'Law for the Equalisation of Burdens' of the war which followed two years later. As Michael Hughes's study of the *Lastenausgleich* demonstrates, the public discussions of this 'moral accounting for Hitler's war' tell us much about how West Germans calculated the costs of the war and processed the past.²¹

Those calling for just treatment also included returning veterans, whose organisations demanded compensation for injuries and time spent in POW camps. As Frank Biess's work demonstrates, the counterpart to the 'pioneers of a new Germany' in the East were the 'survivors of totalitarianism' in the West, representatives of a German *Kulturmutation* that had lived to tell the tales of Soviet captivity and who could serve as the source of the 'spiritual renewal' of post-war society. In political speeches, the language of social policy, and the popular press, returnees appeared as courageous men who had been victimised twice, once by Hitler, then by the Soviets. No other group had done more penance for National Socialism's defeat in war. Their redemption for past crimes became the redemption of all Germans.²² Post-war public opinion polls revealed that only a handful of those Germans questioned believed that most soldiers had done anything but their duty. By the early 1950s, the Allies agreed, and less than six years after the end of the war, they too affirmed that Hitler, not the Army, was the culprit. In the context of the Cold War, it was more important to forge an alliance against a common enemy than to revisit the complicated past of the *Wehrmacht's* involvement in criminal acts.²³

Clearing away 'marriage rubble' left by the war was also key to reconstruction. Families at risk – robbed of a 'provider' by the war or strained by the exigencies of long separations and post-war shortages – were classified by contemporary observers among the 'unknown victims of the great tragedy of our people'.²⁴ There was a broad political consensus supported by a substantial sociological literature that the war had placed particularly great strains on the family. Falling bombs and the war's end on German soil had completely dissolved the boundary between front and homefront, and in ranking the war's victims, some commentators claimed that 'more than any other societal institution, the family had fallen into the whirlpool created by the collapse', making the family 'the central problem of the post-war era'.²⁵ Solving that problem involved measures to ensure the construction of new housing that would replace the temporary hovels still occupied by many West Germans, instituting policies that would encourage women to bear the children who would fill the gaping demographic

hole left by the war, and addressing the problems of young people, robbed of their youth and 'morally endangered' by families at risk.²⁶

Rhetorics of victimisation were central parts of the civic culture of the early Federal Republic. The annual meetings of the *Landsmannschaften*, the regional organisations of expellees, became occasions to mourn the 'lost *Heimat* in the German East', and special monuments were constructed in 'memory of those who died in the *Heimat*'.²⁷ The legacy of falling bombs became part of local histories and of school atlases which carefully documented the extent of destruction, and monuments memorialised those whom the bombs had killed.²⁸ The losses of bombing victims were also the stuff of annual ceremonies, and when in August 1952 the president of the West German parliament, Hermann Ehlers, dedicated a memorial to those killed in the bombing of Hamburg, he acknowledged that 'all regions of Germany have their share of the wounds that the air war inflicted on the property and blood of our entire nation'.²⁹ A decade after the war, Dresden had also been added to the calendar of commemorative events in the Federal Republic, and the *Kassler Post* reflected on a destructive history that was 'worse than Hiroshima . . . one of the biggest destructive undertakings of history'.³⁰

The 'People's Day of Mourning' (*Volkstrauertag*), first introduced in the 1920s and converted to the 'Hero's Day of Commemoration' under the Nazis, once again belonged to people, not heroes, when it was reintroduced in the Federal Republic in 1950. On a Sunday in November, hundreds of thousands of West Germans participated in ceremonies that affirmed that 'when a people in one of the greatest and most horrible wars in history has fought for its life for six long years, when millions of soldiers fell on all fronts, millions of women and children at home and on the flight from the East – then it is spiritually impossible for this people to go right back to everyday work and pleasure as if nothing of importance has happened'.³¹ Remembering what had happened was also the job of community organisations that constructed war memorials and took on responsibility for maintaining the gravesites of those who had fallen in the war. Memorials typically bore Christian religious motifs that emphasised suffering and the senselessness of war, associating all the dead – whether in concentration camps, from bombing raids or in battle – and identifying them as victims of a general period of wartime destruction and terror. This pattern of commemoration paralleled the general post-war emphasis on West Germany's membership in the 'Christian occident', implicitly marking off the Federal Republic from the 'godless East'. Unlike the

monuments to the anti-fascist struggle in the GDR, they offered little explicit political gloss on the death of the 'victims of fascism', and the most common message was a general exhortation to ensure that war would never come again.³²

A shared past of loss and suffering also figured prominently in the pages of illustrated magazines and on movie screens. 'Rubble films' of the early post-war years – featuring the levelled urban landscape – were superseded by movies that allowed West Germans to relive the 'flight from the East', the reunion of parents and children divided by the chaos of war, the struggles of POWs held somewhere 'behind the Urals', and the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The past of German victims – who in most tellings survived to overcome adversity and contribute to post-war reconstruction – sold papers, provided grist for the mills of pulp fiction authors, and made for good box-office well into the latter part of the 1950s.³³

Those seeking more objective versions of the past needed to turn only to the massive documentation projects undertaken by the West German state to provide detailed accounts of the 'expulsion of Germans from the East', the POW experience, the effects of the bombing war, and the history of the 'Law to Equalise the Burdens'. Rich compilations of individual testimonies, ministerial records and newspaper accounts, these volumes filled bookshelves. Although it is impossible to know how many people actually read them, their production was a clear indication of the ways in which the West German state sought to incorporate a past of loss and destruction into the 'contemporary history' of post-war Germany.³⁴

Not everyone accepted accounts of the war in which Germans appeared primarily as victims. Writing in 1946, for example, the philosopher Karl Jaspers acknowledged that 'virtually everyone has lost close relatives and friends, but how he lost them – in front-line combat, in bombings, in concentration camps or in the mass murders of the regime – results in greatly divergent inner attitudes'. Jaspers insisted that 'suffering differs in kind', and he was concerned that 'most people have a sense only for their own kind'. 'It is unjust', Jaspers lectured his readers, 'to call all equally innocent. On the whole, the fact remains that we Germans – however much we may now have come into the greatest distress among the nations – also bear the greatest responsibility for the course of events until 1945. Therefore we, as individuals, should not be so quick to feel innocent, should not pity ourselves as victims of an evil fate, should not expect to be praised for suffering.'³⁵ Communists, only a marginal presence in West Germany,

and German Jews who had survived in hiding or returned to Germany after the war were also not inclined to equate the suffering of all the war's victims.³⁶ But such critical voices were in a distinct minority, not silenced, but certainly heard infrequently in a political environment in which victims who were neither Communists nor Jews received the most attention.

The list of those claiming victim status in the early history of the Federal Republic diverged from that outlined in East Germany in important ways that reflected how the Cold War structured public memory of the war's consequences. The same Red Army that 'liberated' East Germans prosecuted a brutal war against West Germans. The victim of rape by the Red Army soldier was absent from the account of the war's end promoted by the SED in which Soviets were liberators, not perpetrators.³⁷ 'Resettlers' in the East were 'expellees' in the West, and responsible for their fate was not Hitler's war but the Soviet Union and a post-war boundary settlement that the Western Allies had sanctioned.³⁸ The POWs who were the beneficiaries of an enlightened anti-fascist education in the East were the survivors of communist brutality in the West. For the West German state, war widows and waiting wives deserved compensation, while the East German regime sought to mobilise women for the labour force and paid little attention to the needs of women left 'standing alone' by the war.³⁹

But there were also images of the past that East and West shared. In both states, there was a clear distinction between a small group of Nazi leaders who were responsible for Germany's woes and the mass of good Germans who had been betrayed and were ready to learn from the past. East and West German victims alike established their identities as survivors, and survivors became the shapers of their own destinies, able to return Germany to the proper path – whether that path pointed toward a 'Christian occident' and the 'social market economy' or towards communism. On both sides of the Cold War divide success was measured in reconstructed cities, economic recovery, the provision of adequate housing, and a sense of security. The East German 'resurrection from the ruins' found its counterpart in the West German 'emergence out of nothing' (*Aufstieg aus dem Nichts*), the title of a large-format, richly illustrated book published in 1954 that began with devastation and ended with renewal.⁴⁰ Clearing away the rubble did not mean forgetting; recovery and reconstruction were measures of how successfully Germans, East and West, had overcome the misery of the war.

In both German states, the past was also remembered selectively. At least on an official level, the Federal Republic acknowledged that crimes against Jews had been committed ‘in the name of the German people’, but criminals remained largely faceless, and the focus on the consequences for Germans of ‘Hitler’s war’ meant that what had brought Hitler to power and allowed the Nazi state to prepare for war received relatively little attention. In East Germany, Jews persecuted by the Nazi regime found a place only with difficulty in an undifferentiated mass of the ‘victims of fascism’. And in both Germanies other victims of Nazi persecution, so-called ‘asocials,’ Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and foreign workers forced to labour in Germany during the war were denied victim status altogether. In West Germany, this list of exclusions also included communists, who were charged with maintaining their allegiance to a totalitarian regime.⁴¹

The acknowledgment of German ‘crimes against humanity’ was also sometimes paralleled by claims that German victims had endured no less than what Germans had inflicted on others. When an East German account of the bombing of Dresden published in 1955 referred to Germans immolated in that city’s fiery ‘hell’, it established the equivalence of the crimes of the Allies and the crimes of the Nazis.⁴² In public commemorative events that lumped together all *Opfer des Faschismus* (victims of fascism), the East German regime also erased distinctions between victim fates. Such tendencies were even more pronounced in the Federal Republic. In early public opinion surveys of the US occupation forces, at least some of the returning POWs interviewed about their responses to Allied films depicting concentration camps voiced the opinion ‘that all the dead bodies “were all killed by Anglo-American bombs and anti-aircraft shells”’, and ‘conditions in concentration camps were no worse than those imposed on refugees from the east’.⁴³ A former officer, denied his claims to a pension by the Allied forces of occupation, compared his fate to that of the Jews. Indeed, if anything, he was worse off, because ‘the Jews had been able to count on the support of world-wide Jewry’, while no one cared about the woes of former officers. Thirteen years later in 1961, in a popular movie about POWs who remained in the Soviet Union long after the war’s end, the German protagonist told the camp’s Jewish translator – an Austrian in service of the Soviets – the same thing: ‘Yes, you were under arrest, but all over the world people were fighting for you; that was right, I know, but what of us?’⁴⁴ In their testimonies, at least some expellees also settled on the same powerful analogy to describe their fate: the war’s end confronted Germans

in Eastern Europe with circumstances comparable to those in Nazi concentration camps.⁴⁵

Comparisons of German and Jewish suffering were by no means the exclusive preserve of the political right, and when the Social Democrat Carlo Schmid called for the release of the last remaining POWs in the Soviet Union, he charged that the Soviets had turned German POWs into 'modern slaves', subjecting them and civilians hauled eastward to 'inhumane treatment that deserves its own Nuremberg'.⁴⁶ And in 1950, addressing parliament on the occasion of West Germany's first 'People's Day of Mourning', Konrad Adenauer recalled POWs and others deported and forced to work in the Soviet Union after the war and asked whether 'ever before in history millions of people have been sentenced with such chilling heartlessness to misery and misfortune?' The point of reference in Adenauer's comparison could remain implicit.⁴⁷ Comparisons of different victim fates were not all the same. In some cases, mentioning Jews and Germans in one breath reinforced interpretative frameworks according to which a war and a reign of terror unleashed by Hitler had claimed many victims, some German, some Jewish. In others, there were clear overtones of a negative response to a victors' justice imposed by the Allies, whose crimes were deemed no less serious than those committed by Germans. And in still others, German suffering became a form of atonement and collective penance, an acknowledgment of what Germans had done that became the basis for simultaneously making amends and demanding that others recognise what had been done to Germans.

Public memories that emphasised tales of overcoming adversity and moving beyond the past to create a new future left little room in the West for the psychologically disturbed veteran who continued to relive the trauma of a war of mass death, the disabled soldier whose family bore the burden of rehabilitative services not adequately covered by the state, or the expellee who by the late 1950s was still living in substandard housing.⁴⁸ In the East, the complete exclusion from public discourse of expellees and those POWs not converted by their anti-fascist education left them only private spaces in which to attempt to heal their physical and mental wounds. Germans, East and West, also drew selectively on the past in ways that reflected the geopolitical alliances in which they were enmeshed. The memory of the war and its legacy was instrumentalised to explain and justify the Cold War that had followed; for the West, the Soviet Union was the enemy before and after 1945; and for the East, the imperialists who had bombed Dresden now threatened Korea.

In 1983, at a conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi seizure of power, Hermann Lübke argued that in the post-war era West Germans had of necessity maintained a 'certain silence' (*gewisse Stille*) around memories of National Socialism. For Lübke, keeping silent about the past was essential for permitting West Germans to construct a functioning civil society after 1945, a virtue, not a vice.⁴⁹ Without much effort, it would be possible to extend this thesis of a necessary post-war silence to include East Germany as well. There, far more attention was devoted to the anti-fascist resistance than to fascist criminals, and those fascists who were identified were located in the other Germany. This brief review of the representations of the war's end in the first decade or so after the end of fighting suggests that maintaining the 'certain silence' around Nazi crimes was, however, a noisy business. Germans, East and West, were able to say relatively little about their responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism, at least in part because they talked so loudly about their own status as victims. On both sides of the border, Germans made the transition from the racially defined 'community of the people' of the Third Reich to the community of victims of a war for which they accepted no responsibility, to the community of survivors that gradually emerged from the ruins, ready to preserve and rebuild what remained of the 'good' Germany. In 1997, the novelist W. G. Sebald, referring to the victims of the bombing war, described 'the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state'.⁵⁰ A look back at the record of social policy, the construction of public memory and the emergence of forms of public commemoration in East and West suggests that the dead helped to define the bases of both post-war German states in ways that were anything but secret.

In neither East nor West was there evidence that rhetorics of victimisation fueled a politics of resentment similar to that promoted by many Germans after defeat in the First World War. There was no 'Stalingrad syndrome', no lost war for which Germans must seek revenge. The public commemoration of mass death, loss and suffering was accompanied by the exhortation to avoid all future wars, not to redeem loss at the end of a gun, as the Nazis had proposed after 1918.⁵¹ The German word *Opfer* can denote both passive victimisation and sacrifice or suffering in service of a higher cause. The pre-1945 emphasis on the latter meaning of the term, celebrated by the Nazis, gave way in the late 1940s and 1950s to the former. Death yielded no answers, and the primary lesson it offered was that future wars should be avoided. In official pronouncements and public commemorations,

the past enabled Germans to admonish, not threaten. Indeed, seen from the perspective of the 1920s and 1930s, the success of both German states at confronting the past of the Second World War – and moving beyond it – was remarkable.⁵² The war stories post-war Germans told were incomplete, but they did define usable pasts, outlining paths that allowed both German states to move from war to post-war and from post-war to a Cold War in which East and West sought ‘peaceful coexistence’.

‘The post-war years are over’: the shifting contours of the past, 1960s–1980s

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Germans, East and West, knew that they were moving into a new phase of post-war history. When Adenauer’s Christian Democratic successor Ludwig Erhard announced in 1965 that ‘the postwar years are at an end’, he expressed widely held sentiments that it was time to focus on the future. The proclamation by Walter Ulbricht to the Socialist Unity Party congress two years earlier that the ‘new era, the era of socialism has begun in Germany’⁵³ made clear that in the East, too, the time had come to outline a future that was less directly shaped by the past. As they set out to enter the ‘era of socialism’, East German leaders continued to offer the vision of the past that had emerged clearly in the 1950s. Official accounts emphasised that the conditions that had brought about fascism in 1933 still flourished across the border in the West, but these were variations on established themes, not a new version of the politics of the past.

In the West, however, the end of the post-war years opened a space in which a more critical examination of National Socialism was possible. In the process, a focus on German crimes eclipsed discussions of German victimisation. The literature on the emergence of this critical confrontation with the past in the Federal Republic is vast and constantly growing. Here, I will suggest only some of the highlights of the developments that shaped the complication of public memory in West Germany.⁵⁴

By the late 1950s, the West German state began systematically to collect evidence that could be used in prosecuting German citizens who had carried out acts of murder and violence in German uniforms, a clear departure from the ‘amnesty lobby’ that had prevailed in the early 1950s. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 received extensive coverage in the Federal Republic and was followed by the 1963 prosecutions of 20 Auschwitz personnel in Frankfurt. And

throughout the 1960s, when a majority of the legislators in the West German parliament voted to extend the statute of limitations for murder, they were particularly concerned with murders of a very specific sort – those committed by Nazis in the service of the Third Reich.

In the early 1960s, Adenauer's cabinet – dotted with a number of high-ranking officials whose Nazi pasts delivered evidence to support East German charges that Adenauer's Germany was tied to Hitler's – became a political liability for the aging Chancellor and led to the resignation of a cabinet minister. The emergence in 1964 of the National Democratic Party, a right-wing organisation that contained explicit neo-Nazi tendencies, was further cause for concern and provided additional grounds for intensified efforts to analyse why Germans had followed Nazi leaders in such large numbers. By the late 1960s, a majority in the parliament was ready to elect as Chancellor the Social Democrat Willy Brandt, who had spent the war fighting Germans in the Norwegian resistance. In May 1970, as the West German parliament commemorated the end of the Second World War for the first time, Brandt called officially for a sober confrontation with the past, not only for those who had experienced National Socialism, but also for those born since the end of the war because 'no one is free from the history that they have inherited', a history of German crimes, not crimes against Germans.⁵⁵

A cohort of historians and political scientists more likely to have experienced Nazism as adolescents than as young adults added to this mix, seeking to write a 'contemporary history' of Germany that focused far less on the Second World War's consequences for Germans who had met the racial, religious, sexual and political criteria of the Third Reich, and far more on its causes and consequences for German Jews and other Europeans.⁵⁶ By the late 1960s their message found a receptive public among radical students, children of the rubble who had been raised on tales of a suffering Germany. They charged that the failure of their parents' generation to resist National Socialism was tantamount to complicity. By the 1980s this intensified scrutiny of a past of Nazi crimes led to the acknowledgment of more and more victims, particularly homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses and 'asocials', and to historical analyses of why this 'mosaic of victims' had been denied victim status in the past.⁵⁷

The new version of the German past began to make its way into the politics of public commemoration, foreign relations with Germany's East European neighbours and Israel, and history books. Television also did its part to influence public opinion, and the 1979 broadcast in

the Federal Republic of the American mini-series *Holocaust* had an enormous impact. Of West Germans aged over 14, nearly half saw at least part of the series.⁵⁸ Comparisons of German victims and victims of Germans did not vanish from public discourse, but on the left-liberal side of the political spectrum, it was widely accepted that what Germany had lost was the price Germans had to pay for the crimes of National Socialism. A critical perspective relegated to the margins in the 1950s was by now widely held by a broad spectrum of politicians, religious leaders, intellectuals and journalists. Addressing the parliament on 8 May 1985, Richard von Weizsäcker, the president of the Federal Republic insisted that German ‘crimes against humanity’, particularly the ‘breach of civilisation’ (*Zivilisationsbruch*) of the Holocaust, must remain at the centre of public memory and commemoration in West Germany. They have.⁵⁹

By now, we have arrived in the 1990s, the point at which many of the other contributions to this volume begin, reflecting on the calls for a unified Germany to make a place for other memories of the war. The ‘silence of victims’, however, has never been complete, and as Bitburg and the ‘Historians’ Dispute’ made clear, patterns of public memory put in place in the first post-war decade have continued to circulate with variations for over 40 years. In both East and West, rhetorics of victimisation laid the groundwork for analyses of the past in which victims could not be guilty, and the only real perpetrators were a handful of fanatics. Part of the problem lay – and continues to lie – in the very categories of analysis. Victims and perpetrators appear as mutually exclusive categories. In the 1950s Germans were innocent victims of fanatical Nazis in both Germanies, and of the Red Army in the West and imperialist bombs in the East. The story of the German past that emerged in the Federal Republic in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was one in which ‘no one was free from history’, and if not collectively guilty, Germans were certainly collectively accountable for their past. For many on the left-liberal side of the political spectrum, acknowledging the horror of what Germans had done closed off the space in which it was possible to discuss the expulsion, bombed cities or other forms of German loss.

In an article about the memory of the bombing war in the 1950s, Thomas Neumann asks what it would have required to tell a story of loss and destruction in which it was possible to ‘process one’s own guilt’ while accounting for the ‘terror of war that one had suffered’. In the 1950s no one had an answer.⁶⁰ Fifty years later the question remains the same, and many of the other essays in this volume explore

how successful Germans have been in providing answers since unification. As we revisit the past of German suffering at the war's end, we should remember, however, that this is precisely what we are doing – *revisiting* a history that has been discussed endlessly since 1945. Studying this history – the history of how German victimisation has been represented – can help us to understand why in some moral and political environments it was possible for historians to ask some questions and not others; how memory can block historical understanding and impede an open discussion of the past; and why over 60 years after the Second World War, calls for Germans to mourn their dead do not involve 'breaking the silence', but do possibly offer new perspectives from which we might begin to write a history of National Socialism in which some Germans were victims, some Germans were perpetrators, and some Germans were both.

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