Is the tide of German memory turning?

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The debate in Germany on National Socialism, initially imposed on a reluctant German public by the Allies, was brought by the radical ‘68 generation into the mainstream. Now, there are signs that a new empathy has been discovered for the generation of "soldier fathers"; it has now become possible to acknowledge the German victims of World War II. This is not historical revisionism, but a movement to subsume the memory of National Socialism under the general memory of crimes against humanity committed in the twentieth century. A look at the forces at work behind a shifting debate.

The closer we got to 8 May, the anniversary of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender to the Allies, the higher rose the tide of publications on the end of the Third Reich. Der Untergang [The Downfall], a film depicting Hitler’s last days as Chancellor of the , became a media event and a box office hit. As portrayed by the Swiss actor Bruno Ganz, Hitler’s character is stripped of any historical context; what we see is a study in pathological behaviour. The whole spectacle is vastly entertaining, though not particularly enlightening and, like so many other products in the run-up to 8 May, appears to follow the maxim: “Hitler sells”.

But this year’s anniversary is not just about the usual commonplace media re-appraisals. This could be the last anniversary at which the generation who actually lived through the Nazi regime and its catastrophe, whether as perpetrators, victims or onlookers, is present in any numbers. With the deaths of the last witnesses, the direct oral tradition between generations – “communicative memory” as the historian Aleide Assman puts it – is coming to an end, to be replaced by the secondhand memory of textbooks and documents. Memory is about to enter its “cultural phase”.

To understand the significance of oral tradition, one has to bear in mind the consequences of the silence on the war between the generations; between fathers who fought in the war and their children, the generation of ‘68.

The question was raised in countless family dramas across the country: why do you
conceal your life under the Nazis from us your children? In Germany, this conflict of the
generations became the driving force behind what became known as – “coming to terms
with the past”. It gave rise to the social movement that furthered the initially scientific
and legal, and later political preoccupation with the Nazi legacy. Today, the generation of
’68 are grandparents themselves. How has its self-image evolved? Can it retain the old
critical outlook that provoked its confrontation with its parents and hand it down to the
next generation? Public opinion is divided on the matter. Critical voices, like that of the
historian Norbert Frei, say that many of the ageing rebels have turned from being critical
of their parents’ generation to finding a form of empathy for them; that stories within the
family have been largely depoliticised; and that for many, the Nazi regime and the mass
loyalty it inspired is no longer as disturbing as it used to be.

We have to remember that the generation debate on the Nazi era was initiated from
outside; forced on a reluctant German public by the victorious Allies. In West Germany,
the first two decades after 1945, right up to the watershed of the Auschwitz trials in
Frankfurt in the 1960s, were largely about protecting and rehabilitating the old Nazis.
Financial compensation for the victims was highly selective and largely driven by
Germany’s concern for its reputation in the West. In East Germany, on the other hand,
though state-prescribed anti-fascism paid little attention to the behaviour of ordinary
citizens in the process of creating a new world through socialism, it at least ensured that
virtually no former Nazis could return to power. This was particularly so given that new
definitions of “fascism” limited its meaning to “the most reactionary section of high
finance”. As a result, the focus was not on the “ordinary fascism” of the German masses.

In general, Germany’s self-critical preoccupation with the past has evolved through
confrontation from something imposed by the outside world to a publicly accepted
mission. President von Weizsäcker’s speech marking the fortieth anniversary of 8 May
formulated what was by now the majority view: the nature of the Nazi crimes was unique
and the population had a “duty to remember”. The famous 1980s “dispute of the
historians”, in which efforts to rewrite history by portraying Nazism purely as a reaction
to communism in the USSR were thwarted, took place in much the same spirit.

[compensation], as we have seen, was driven by economic considerations, in particular
the pursuit of foreign markets. The same motivation was still obvious in the late-1990s
when German businesses set about compensating the WWII victims of forced labour with
amounts between DM 5000 and DM 15 000 (between US$ 3500 and US$ 10 000). At the
same time, the enormous public pressure on business to raise the necessary funds
indicated that the demands for compensation were popular with large sections of the
population, and that “coming to terms with the past” was not entirely driven by balancing
potential commercial profit and loss.

However, in the run up to this year’s anniversary, a growing number of voices have been
calling for attention to be shifted from “getting over the past” toward a “normalising”
discourse. After German unification, say these people, there is a desire to draw a line
under the past and its baggage, and let bygones be bygones; the wish to live in a normal
state is gaining the upper hand.

But what is “normality” when dealing with the Nazi past? The formula that has gained
acceptance in German over past decades goes something like this: the post-1945
generations are not guilty, but are, nevertheless, burdened with an historical responsibility.

The first part presents no problems since guilt, in an ethical sense, cannot be inherited. The second part, however, is problematic: almost as difficult to argue rationally as it is to put into practice. How can collective responsibility be built into a society that, for decades, has gone through a powerful process of individuation, in which “responsibility” is confined purely to responsibility for one’s own deeds. Is there really such a thing as a “duty to remember”?

There is no question that the generation born after 1989 is also affected, their emotions stirred by the depiction of Nazi crimes. However, such “strategies to overwhelm” – the overwhelming of rational discourse by powerful emotion – have a price. They depend heavily on identifying with hero figures such as Oskar Schindler or Sophie Scholl. This process of identification leaves no place for a narrative that explores the historical circumstances of Nazism. It neither explains the attitudes of those involved nor depicts the social context of their actions.

The memory of Nazi crimes has recently been brought back into the collective consciousness by contemporary genocides and atrocities, and there are two sides to this coin also. On one hand, the memory of Nazism becomes part of a general memory of crimes against humanity in the twentieth century: it is universalised and loses its particular or specific quality. This goes along with committed support for policies with a strong human-rights element and support for international institutions, such as the UN and the International Criminal Court, that militate against the indiscriminate slaughter of peoples.

On the other hand, universalising the memory of Nazi crimes in this way can be abused. This was exemplified by the use of the saying “Auschwitz: never again” as the cover for Nato’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 – an action that was contrary to all that the UN stands for.

The current desire to rewrite history focuses on two specific episodes: the Allied bombing campaign against Germany and the expulsion of Germans from the former German east and Czechoslovakia. Jürg Friedrich’s bestseller Der Brand [The Blaze] is an attempt to draw emotional parallels between the bombardment of innocent German civilians at the end of WWII and the Nazi’s crimes. The meticulous depiction of horror and despair is central to his work. The problem of a military rationale for these aerial attacks is predetermined in Friedrich: according to him, there is none. While the book does not withhold the fact that it was Nazi Germany that started the bombardments of civilians, it does largely concentrate on Germans as victims.

The Association of Displaced Persons, the umbrella organisation of refugees and expellees from the former German Eastern territories, attempts in a similar way to imprint a picture of Germans as victims into the cultural memory of the nation. While its Centre Against Expulsions does not deny that Nazi aggression was the cause of the later expulsions, it seeks to avoid the criticism of being solely preoccupied with Germans as victims by tying their fate to the history of expulsion worldwide in the twentieth century. The association cannot be accused of trying to offset the suffering of the Nazis’ victims against the suffering of the expelled Germans but, despite attempts to internationalise, concentration on the fate of its own people leads to a “competition of victims”, the phrase
coined by the Belgian historian Jean Michel Chaumont.

He who sees himself as a victim tends to see his own fate as unique and to cut himself off from experiences that might offer a different perspective. This tendency is all the more acute as the various regional sections within the association have so far failed to subject the activities of many of their leading representatives under the Nazis to any sort of critical examination.

A central element in this rhetoric asserts that the post-war taboo surrounding the fate of the victims of bombing and expulsion needs to be shattered. The truth is that such a taboo never existed. The association also asserts that while the German Left was in solidarity with all other national liberation movements around the globe, it dismissed the German expellees’ “right to the homeland”. This blurs the outlines of the post-war conflicts: the core of the dispute actually lay in the recognition of the eastern borders. While the majority of the Left agreed with the borders, the Right and the expellees were largely opposed.

Seeing the suffering of one’s own victims as unique, and neglecting or losing sight of any historical context of a time “before” will readily create a “victim myth”. German history is full of obsessive legends: of the “ancestral enmity” with France; of the “humiliation of Versailles”; and of the stranglehold exercised on “Germaness” by the “Jewish-Bolshevik global conspiracy”. The fear of such threats was prevalent in the conservative milieu in post-Nazi times as well. Given the inability and unwillingness of the authorities to solve the problems encountered in the process of capitalist modernisation, such fears mutated into powerful historical myths. They had no roots in any historical background but were entirely a manufactured commodity.

Shall we witness the birth of yet another German myth of victimisation on 8 May this year? There is, undoubtedly, a tendency among certain sectors of the population to twin historical revisionism with the victim mentality. While such attitudes are by no means restricted to the far-Right fringe, they do not have the support of the Red-Green coalition. Even Chancellor Schröder, who has come dangerously close to the “discourse of normalisation” in the past, has made it quite clear that he will not support a political line that equates aggressors and their victims, slave-drivers and slaves simply for the sake of creating a “joint victim”.

The demonstrations marking the sixtieth anniversary of the bombing of Dresden in February this year were an illuminating test of public opinion. They showed that the democratic forces holding onto the old consensus of “coming to terms with the past” were clearly shaping the day’s events. Eighth May was known colloquially as [collapse]. “Liberation” was a difficult word. First, there were many people, by no means only Nazis, who did not feel any need to be “liberated”. Second, “liberation” was associated with the odium of the language regulations of the Allies, particularly in the Soviet-occupied zone. Today, these barriers, both subjective and objective, have disappeared. Liberation: yes or no? The sixtieth anniversary will usher in another test of historical consciousness.

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