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RECENT PUBLIC TRENDS IN WEST GERMANY

Since last spring West German intellectuals have been debating the meaning of the Nazi period and its use as historical example within contemporary Germany. Conservative historians are now questioning the singularity of Hitler's crimes and comparing them to those of Stalin. This trend has been decried as an attempt to justify the Nazis or at least to qualify their misdeeds. While the flow of articles shows no signs of abating, the terms of the discussion in the broader public have already changed. There is a growing willingness to see the Nazi epoch as a chapter in history which has passed, to publicly declare an end to the need for any feelings of guilt. There is a feeling that a turning point in German history has been reached. This change is the background of the debate among the intellectuals.

Helmut Kohl, the Chancellor of West Germany, whose coalition has emerged victorious from the recent national elections, embodies the tendency of part of the German public to claim aloofness from the Nazi period. This inclination is not merely welcomed but promoted by the two German conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union, which Kohl heads, and the Christian Social Union. Richard von Weizsäcker, the President of West Germany, in a speech on May 8, 1985 marking the fortieth anniversary of the capitulation of the German army, took another approach to the past. He cited a Jewish saying that called remembrance the secret of redemption. For his efforts, von Weizsäcker has come under attack by members of the two Union parties, who accuse him of impeding normality. As for the population as a whole, a poll published in April 1986 found that sixty-six percent of the population agreed with the statement, "Today, forty years after the end of the war, we should no longer talk so much about the Nazi past, but rather at last put an end to the discussion." Kohl's own formulation, "the mercy of the later birth," sums up the feeling of those who belong to the postwar generation and claim to feel little connection to and no guilt for the crimes of the Nazis.

One might think that a profession of distance from the Nazi period would be accompanied by a certain amount of objectivity

towards it. Instead the assertion of distance is accompanied by an eagerness to minimize the significance of the period and the extent of the Nazis' misdeeds. Any guilt associated with the Nazis is seen as a burden which the West Germans must cast off if they are to have a normal identity like any other nation. In this view, a normal identity includes a citizenry willing to trust in the state, to enjoy national emblems, and to sacrifice for the good of the community. Minimizing the significance of the Nazis is a means of reaching these goals.

One way to minimize the significance of the Nazis is to compare as many other things to them as possible. Hence, in an interview granted to *Newsweek*, Kohl, following his ominous declaration that "I'm not a fool," declared that the Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev and the Nazi Minister Goebbels both understood "public relations." The Soviet Union loudly protested the statement, and Kohl himself compounded his woes by claiming that he had been misquoted. Once *Newsweek* produced a copy of the tape recording of the conversation which showed that the Chancellor was not misquoted, Kohl explained that he had not intended to offend Gorbachev. What is not to be overlooked is that Kohl qualified as public relations the work of the man who oversaw the censoring of nearly every word publicly written or spoken in the Third Reich; who prepared the public for the Holocaust not only with racist films and books but with the burning of synagogues; and who brought the German public into a frenzy of hate in 1943 in preparation for "total war."

Normally, public relations means the activities an organization undertakes to promote a good relationship with the public and not an incitement to mass murder and war. Kohl dilutes the crimes of the Nazis first by calling the work of Goebbels "public relations" and then by putting the activities of Gorbachev on the same plane. While Gorbachev did not become Soviet General Secretary as a result of an interest in human rights, comparing him to Hitler's propaganda minister is simplistic.

Loose comparisons with the Nazis, which have the effect of weakening the importance of their crimes, also can be the result of shabby domestic politics. An example of this tendency is a remark concerning the Greens, the leftist environmental party, made by Franz Josef Strauss, the head of the Christian Social Union. The Greens, Strauss has said, are "not one hair better than the Nazis were in their time." If the Greens are not better than the Nazis, it suggests that the Nazis were not worse than the Greens. Members of

the Social Democratic Party are also capable of similar politics. They are not above claiming supposed parallels between actions of the Nazis and those of the two conservative parties.

Germans also gloss over their past by making Hitler and a small group of his henchmen responsible for all the immoral activities perpetrated by the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945. In this view, the German people can be numbered among the "victims" of Hitler. The most internationally visible attempt to gloss over the past in this fashion came with Kohl's visit to the cemetery in Bitburg with President Reagan. German victims of Hitler buried in this cemetery were soldiers of the army and of the SS. Kohl's glossing over of the past did not end with Bitburg. He has proposed construction of a central monument in Bonn to honor victims of World War II and Nazi despotism. The victims that this monument would honor include not only the Jews, gypsies and homosexuals who were murdered by the Nazis, but also fallen German soldiers and civilians who perished in bombing raids. One proposal for the monument: a large crown of thorns suspended in the air. After noting the bitter words exchanged in the German Parliament and the talk of an attempt to mix together victims and perpetrators, one commentator in the press made the suggestion that a tall cross be constructed on which nothing more would stand than the inscription "1933-1945." That such monuments are considered suitable is a sign of the extent to which six million victims of Nazism are either forgotten or considered unimportant.

Kohl is eager to free the German nation from responsibility for the Nazi period. Alfred Dregger, chairman of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union faction in the Parliament, has taken Kohl's interpretation one step further by emphasizing the foreign share of the blame for Hitler. For Dregger, the German nation "fell" into Hitler's hands after the humiliation caused by the Versailles Treaty and the weakening of the Weimar Republic by the reparation burden. Dregger thinks that we should revere anyone who "behaved personally honorably" during the Nazi period, no matter "what people he came from or what branch of the armed forces he belonged to." Defending our right to revere German soldiers, he cites the request by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1943 for the surrender of Germany and not of Hitler. This request forced German soldiers into a dilemma whereby "they defended Hitler with Germany and sacrificed Germany with Hitler." Notwithstanding Dregger's attempt to reinterpret history, the German

nation had voted Hitler into office in 1933 and followed him obediently thereafter. It is hard to imagine how Churchill and Roosevelt might have called for the unconditional surrender of Hitler and left it at that.

In Dregger's glossing over of the past, Churchill and Roosevelt make the German nation into the hostage of Hitler. Hans Mommsen, writing in the *Merkur*, describes this sort of "Hitlerismus" as the "emergency lie." Since Hitler had obtained a monopoly of national identification, any renunciation of the Hitler cult at the time was open to interpretation as antinational. Furthermore, the moral burden of important conservative leadership groups is denied by the representation of complex domestic and foreign policy decisions "as simple derivatives of the omnipotent will of the national leader." This view of the past first gives all responsibility to Hitler and then, in Dregger's version, blames the Versailles Treaty for making Hitler possible, and Churchill and Roosevelt for confusing Germany with Hitler. But the responsibility of the German nation cannot be conjured away. From the millions who belonged to the Nazi party, to those in the civil service and other public institutions, to those in a variety of private organizations, there existed within Germany what Hannah Arendt called an "almost ubiquitous complicity" in the Nazi crimes.

As a complement to blaming everything that happened inside Germany on Hitler, another technique of dealing with the Nazi period now current in West Germany is to examine the regrettable or, better yet, culpable actions of non-Germans during this era. The discovery of Kurt Waldheim's activities as a Wehrmacht intelligence officer offered an excellent opportunity to employ this technique. It surely did not hurt that Germans and Austrians tend to be critical of one another anyway: Germans consider Austrians to be lazy inhabitants of a sleepy Alpine republic; Austrians find Germans overbearing. All the more reason to engage in a detailed exposition of the Austrian participation in the Third Reich. As the revelations about Waldheim accumulated, the *Schadenfreude*, or malicious joy, was scarcely to be missed in Germany.

Der Spiegel's cover devoted to "the Waldheim case" featured an enormous dark arm in a Nazi salute looming over the Alps. The accompanying headline was: "Austria's Quiet Fascism." The article in *Der Spiegel* improves on former Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky's comment that Waldheim built his entire life on a lie by terming Austria's relationship to its own Nazi past a similar lie. The

magazine even noted that Kreisky himself had "garnished" his administration with a half-dozen former Nazis. Such was the tone of scorn that one would have thought that denazification in Germany had been a complete success.

Perhaps the cheapest shot at the Austrians was found in the magazine *Der Stern*, which devoted an article to Waldheim's campaign stop in Braunau, Adolf Hitler's birthplace. Observing that many of the people in the crowd who greeted Waldheim had "personally experienced" the "celebrated-notorious son of their city" Adolf Hitler, the magazine adds that these people did not understand why "their Kurti" should be besmirched only because he, like everyone else back then, had cooperated "a little bit." Making Waldheim's visit to the village where Hitler was born the focus of an article reveals much about the way Germans used the Waldheim affair. As a Swiss friend of mine summarized, "The Austrians only say, 'Anschluss, Anschluss, we are victims too,' and the Germans, 'Hitler wasn't German, you know'."

Austria was certainly more than an innocent victim of the Anschluss, or annexation, by Germany in 1938. Austro-fascism existed prior to and then apart from Nazism; Austria welcomed the Anschluss with jubilation in the streets of Vienna; and many Austrians made a career by serving the Third Reich. Quite a number of Austrians helped carry out the Final Solution. But the coverage of the Waldheim affair in West Germany reflects a pathetic, half-buried desire to make the whole Nazi saga into an Austrian invention foisted on the German nation.

At the end of an interview with a German magazine given during the Austrian election campaign last April, Waldheim advised that no one sitting in a glass house should throw stones. But apart from an eagerness to blame Austria for this gruesome chapter of their shared past, Germans do not want to throw stones. They want to put an end to the discussion. In intellectual circles in Germany, a parallel development has been the comparison of the crimes of Hitler with those of Stalin.

The intellectual furor started with an essay by the historian Ernst Nolte in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in June of 1986. Nolte was careful to make an admission of the singularity of the Nazi crimes in his article. He remarks that "despite all comparability," the Nazis' misdeeds were "qualitatively different" from the social destruction that the Bolsheviks undertook. Nolte goes on to argue, however, that one should not concentrate solely on the crimes of the

Nazis, the more so since a connection with the crimes of the Soviets is probable. He draws attention to Hitler's awareness of "Asiatic" policies of mass murder and, in particular, to Hitler's knowledge of the Soviet use of a "rat cage," which Nolte claims is the same as the device that waited for Winston Smith in Room 101 at the end of George Orwell's *1984*. Nolte probably pursued this weak connection in an attempt to associate Hitler with the anticommunism of George Orwell.

Nolte goes on to pose a series of hypothetical questions. He asks, ". . . the following questions must appear as allowable, even unavoidable: did the Nazis, did Hitler perform an 'Asiatic' deed perhaps only to that end, because they regarded themselves and their kind as potential or actual victims of an 'Asiatic' deed? Was not the 'Archipel Gulag' prior (*ursprünglicher*) to Auschwitz? Was not the 'class murder' of the Bolsheviki the logical and effective precedent of the 'race murder' of the national socialists? Are Hitler's most secret actions not, thereby, to be explained in that he had *not* forgotten the 'rat cage'?" Nolte drops any hypothetical questions or semi-qualifications to state that the destruction of Jews during the Third Reich "was a reaction or a distorted copy, but not a first action or an original." Nolte finds the sole innovation of the Nazis to be their use of poison gas to kill large numbers of people.

In July, Jürgen Habermas published the first of two articles on this theme. Habermas, the most prominent contemporary German philosopher, took to task not only Nolte, but what he saw as a general apologetic tendency on the part of a number of historians in West Germany. The historian Andreas Hillgruber's discussion of the Allied battle for Germany, for example, shows a conscious identification with the Wehrmacht troops fighting on the Eastern front and makes no mention that their resistance allowed the death camps to remain in operation. Habermas considers these historians to have opted for "endowment of meaning" (*Sinnstiftung*) at the cost of their science: "The ideology planners want to provide a revival of the national consciousness; at the same time, they must also banish the picture of the traditional archenemy of the nation from the domain of NATO." Nolte's theory serves this purpose—the crimes of the Nazis lose their singularity in being made understandable as an answer to the Bolshevik menace. Auschwitz and the other death camps are reduced to a technical development—their use of gas chambers—and they can be explained by a foe who is still present.

Although critical of the work of the apologetic historians,

Habermas welcomes the open discussion of this period of German history. Acknowledging that a "pluralism of readings" of history "mirrors the structure of an open society," he argues that this pluralism creates "the chance to make clear the ambivalence of individual identity-building traditions." The freedom that pluralism can bring is contrasted with a "closed history picture entirely decreed by governmental historians." Habermas proceeds to warn against a "German national monotone NATO philosophy." He states, "The sole patriotism that does not alienate us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. A binding to universal constitutional principles, anchored in conviction, could only first form itself, unfortunately, in the culture nation of the Germans after—and by means of—Auschwitz." Those individuals who wish to call the Germans to a conventional form of national identity will, according to Habermas, destroy the only real dependable basis of the German allegiance to the West—"constitutional patriotism."

There is nothing in itself wrong with a comparison of Nazi and Soviet behavior. The danger is not in historical comparisons, provided that they are intelligent. Yet this condition cannot be taken for granted, because all kinds of comparisons of all sorts of things are possible. Even when comparisons are apt, there is a danger in the measures for which they will provide a foundation. In fact, the communist menace as pretext surfaced quickly in postwar Germany. In America in the 1950s, the communist menace paved the way for Senator McCarthy's domestic activities. In West Germany during this time, the communist menace provided an opportunity for absolution—not only by giving Germans the chance to remit their sins by participation in the struggle against the Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc allies, but also by creating an emergency-like atmosphere in which denazification could be called off. Nolte breaks new ground for the 1980s by providing a pretext for those who want to end the discussion of the Nazi period. After all, he says, the destruction of Jews was just a reaction, not a first action.

Use of the communist menace as a pretext in Germany even predates the 1950s. Hitler himself was ready to justify all sorts of misdeeds, including his destruction of the Weimar republic, by the threat of communism. When Max Planck visited Hitler to plead on behalf of Jewish scientists, Hitler assured him that communists, not Jews, were the enemy. Nolte takes Hitler at his word and begins, at least to some extent, to accept his estimation of the threat to Germany at that time and what means were acceptable to combat it.

There are no end to useful statements made by Hitler for those who wish to make him out to be little more than an ardent anti-communist. For that matter, shortly before he killed himself Hitler expressed regret that he had been so kind.

Nolte sees Hitler's "most secret actions" as a reaction to the communist menace of the day. He argues that it is important that the Gulag Archipelago was "prior" to Auschwitz. These ideas exhibit a strange sense of causality. His train of thought runs something like this: Lenin and Stalin committed mass murders; Hitler knew of this horror and therefore committed his own mass murders. There is a lot that one can say about this logic; at the least, one must point out that it seems to suggest that the murder of millions of Jews was either performed as a deterrent to Stalin or as the unintentional result of their somehow having been in the way.

Habermas's criticism of the apologetic tendency among some West German historians deserves high praise for its acuteness and civil courage. His advocacy of constitutional patriotism ties the debate among the historians to the broad discussion regarding national identity. If Kohl and other conservative politicians wish to minimize the significance of the Nazis in order to reestablish a traditional national consciousness, Habermas and others propose a patriotic allegiance to the Grundgesetz, the Basic Law of West Germany promulgated in 1949. This constitutional document irrevocably establishes: fundamental rights for every citizen; a social state based on the rule of law as the form of government; and a right of resistance against anyone who undertakes to abolish the order the Basic Law creates. The Basic Law marks a decisive, radical democratic improvement over any other previous German constitution.

Some observers, such as Hans-Jochen Vogel of the Social Democratic Party, worry that the constitution will be overburdened if it is called upon to achieve what a national feeling does for other people. But "constitutional patriotism" need not be a substitute for a national consciousness. Germans can be proud of the achievements of their Federal Republic, national soccer team, and young tennis stars. The most solid cornerstone for a national feeling, however, is the democratic order constructed by the Basic Laws.

The first article by Habermas brought forth a flood of commentary. Historians to whom he made reference claimed to have been misquoted or quoted out of context. In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Joachim Fest, a biographer of Hitler, contributed an article which would have been remarkable if only for its persistent whining

tone. Nolte had reduced the singularity of the concentration camps to their technical innovation of the use of gas. Fest questioned the idea that the concentration camps were singular either because of their technical form or administrative nature. While the monstrous figure of the bureaucratic executioner should disturb us, can one really believe that "the genocide of Stalin was achieved in an essentially other, less administrative manner"? We have seen the photos of the small mountains of shoes, glasses, suitcases and other belongings left by the victims of the Nazi camps. Fest continues, "Still what justifies us to think that there was not the same in the death factories of the Stalin era?" Why has the world, and particularly the Germans, forgotten the victims of the Gulag and of Pol Pot?

Fest issues the usual disclaimer: "No foreign offense diminishes one's own and no murder can ever exculpate itself by reference to another." What he expects, rather, is that new reflections and insights will take "the talked-to-pieces, frequently still wholly ritually debated issue" and lead to a new, moral accessibility. His idea of new, moral accessibility is the insight that although Hitler's will to destroy was not predominantly inspired by the menace of destruction offered by the Russian Revolution, the reports that reached Munich from Russia in the spring of 1919, reports of deportation, murder and extermination of entire population groups, gave a "real background" to Hitler's "extermination complexes."

Whereas Nolte would make Hitler into an anticommunist reacting to mass murder with mass murder, Fest believes that too much attention is paid to the Nazis in comparison to other practitioners of genocide and argues that Hitler's "extermination complexes" were given support by the Bolshevik terror. Yet even if Fest's analysis allows some psychological insight into the workings of Hitler's mind, it is of less help in explaining why so many millions of people were willing to make his will to destroy a reality. As for Fest's resentment towards the exclusivity of the world's disdain for the Nazis, he seems to be complaining that the Nazis have gotten an unduly bad press in the hope that someone will provide a fairer rating for the mass murderers of our century. Whether such a rating is at all necessary bears asking.

Fest's point that there is, allegedly, no strong world consciousness of all the various genocides of the century was picked up by Christian Meier, the chairman of the "Association of Historians of Germany." Writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Meier felt

compelled to offer what amounts to the professional historian's perspective. He observes how difficult it is to "orient" oneself to "the role of mass murder in history generally." For the benefit of Ph.D. candidates in search of a topic, he brightly notes, "Here lies an obvious research desiderata." After discussing various reasons why the Nazi past is always held up to the Germans, he concludes, "And then it is much better, to take it for once tactically, when we know and say how it is than when we always must let it be said to us." According to Meier, if research is to be done and reproaches made, it might as well be accomplished by Germans.

Reference to two other articles in the German press will give a sense of the variety of voices raised in this debate. In *Die Neue Gesellschaft*, a magazine associated with the Social Democratic Party, Jürgen Kocka decried the growing number of "Alltagshistoriker," or "everyday historians" of the Nazi period. The work of these writers takes the form of collections of oral histories or studies of particular regions or groups of individuals. Often the authors make no attempt to tie the individual experience to the broader issues of the period or the wisdom that the passage of time has granted. The result can be a banalization or even a distortion of history. As part of the trend of Nazi nostalgia, there is the development of "Adolph and Eva tourism" with, for example, Berchtesgaden, the site of Hitler's mountain retreat, drawing numbers of visitors. Although Sunday trips by the family to Hitler's home are not likely to improve the historical consciousness of the nation, everyday histories need not inevitably be exercises in nostalgia. Like archeologists, we can use evidence of the experience of institutions or regions or individuals to help us reconstruct the past. What we must do, however, is use these scattered bits of evidence with historical perspective. It is all well to take note of the determined resistance of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front and the terror of the civilians in those areas of the German Reich overrun by the Red Army. The death camps functioning in their midst are also worth mentioning.

In his article, Fest had expressed doubt as to the singularity of the administrative murder of the Nazis. Eberhard Jäckel, writing in *Die Zeit*, found a different ground on which to maintain that the Nazis were unique. He writes, "never before had a state with the authority of its responsible leader decided and announced the complete murder of a group of people, including the old, the women, the children and the babies, and translated into action, in point of fact, this decision with all possible governmental means of power." Jäckel

distinguishes between the Soviet Communists' intention to exterminate the bourgeoisie as a class, which did not include the intention to kill every bourgeois, and the Nazis' intention to kill every single Jew. Whatever the abstract validity of this distinction, it would surely be of little comfort to a bourgeois slated for execution. Also, this differentiation suggests that the evil of the Nazis rests in their being more consistent and thorough-minded than the Soviets.

In the midst of this controversy, Habermas published a second piece in *Die Zeit*. Rather than debating the originality of Auschwitz, Habermas went to the heart of the matter: the "inner connection" between "our own life and the context of life that made Auschwitz possible." He explains, "Our form of life is bound with the form of life of our parents and grandparents through a difficult to unravel net of family, local, political and also intellectual traditions—hence, through a historical milieu which has made us into what and who we are today."

Habermas raises the issue of the consequences to be drawn from the existential connections of traditions and forms of life poisoned by unspeakable crimes. A narcissistic question, he admits: how should the Germans place themselves in relation to their own heritage? "Can one continue the tradition of German culture without assuring the historical liability for the form of life in which Auschwitz was possible? His conclusion is that the German liability for these crimes can only be answered for "by the united memory of the irreparable and by a reflexive, scrutinizing attitude towards one's own founding tradition." Habermas argues that the public settling of liability by Nolte and Fest does not serve to enlighten and that the rationalization they offer will only hurt Germany. He states: "They affect the political morale of a community that—after a liberation by allied troops without any action on its own part—was established in the spirit of the Western understanding of freedom, responsibility and self-determination."

This essay by Habermas is the most important reflection on the "guilt question" for the post-war generation now inheriting power in West Germany. The "inner connection" that Habermas sees binding the Germans to their past is everywhere to be found. The German language itself bears the scars of the Nazi period. Certain terms, like *Säuberungsaktion* (cleansing operation, used to mean the extermination of humans); *ausrotten* (to root out, used to mean the extermination of a race of people); and *Endlösung* (final solution) are contaminated beyond cure. All too alive is the characteristic of Ger-

mans to believe in and not question authority, a mentality described in the figure of *der Untertan* (a person submissive to authority). This cultural tendency of pliable obedience preceded the Nazis, but attained its poisonous flowering under their cultivation.

The desire to reduce the importance of the Nazi period, to stop the discussion, to end the guilt, is an insult to groups and nations who suffered at the hands of the Nazis. The tastelessness that this attempt to forget can reach is illustrated by Franz Josef Strauss's recent remark that the era of self-humiliation is over, that the Germans no longer want to be "permanent sojourners at the Wailing Wall." The desire to end the discussion is also an insult to the German nation. The meaning of twelve disastrous years is to be minimized so that the conservative parties can get back to business as usual. A public balancing of accounts, with Hitler's crimes toted up against Stalin's in some kind of cosmic calculation, is made as a public exorcism of responsibility.

In Wolfgang Borchert's play *Outside Before the Door* (1946), a German soldier returns in shock and rags from the Eastern front. The war is long past, everyone tells him, but the soldier, Beckmann, wants to know who is responsible for all the murder and misery he has witnessed. He says, "Responsibility is not only a word, a chemical formula, by which bright human flesh is transformed into dark earth. . . . The dead—don't answer. God—doesn't answer. But the living, they ask." It has taken forty years, but Beckmann has his answer, one offered with a straight face for public consumption—it was the fault of the Versailles Treaty, it was the fault of Churchill and Roosevelt, it was the fault of Stalin.