

**The Politics of Memory:  
Nazi Crimes and Identity in West Germany, 1945-1990**

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(October 1993)

**Working Paper Series #45**



## Abstract

Memories of historical events are to a great extent dependent upon the identities of the remembering subjects, which are in turn shaped by the immediate and vicarious experiences of those persons. It may be assumed that experiences directly related to the historical events in question are especially important in the formation of memories of those events.

This paper links the widely varying memories of the Nazi concentration camps in West Germany during the past five decades to the differing historical experiences of those camps by the various groups performing memory work in the West German public sphere.

The author has found that the remembered images of the camps fall into five main types, each of which held a predominant position in the West German public sphere during specific periods. The first of these was shaped by an Allied media blitz immediately after liberation in 1945; in Germany it held sway for about a year, while abroad it has persisted largely unchanged to the present day.

After a transitory period in the late 1940s, the author argues, leaders of public opinion in West Germany made a concerted effort to establish a memory of the camps based on the Nazi propaganda image of what he calls the "clean" camp. This sanitized image was superseded during a period of historical rediscovery of systematic genocide and murderous repression from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s by a more historically accurate but still abstract image of the camps. It was not until the 1970s that this external, parallel history of the camps was reintegrated into the history of daily experience in Nazi Germany.

As more recent events such as the 1985 dual commemoration at Bergen-Belsen and Bitburg show, public memory of the Nazi camps in West Germany is bifurcated between the successors to the sanitized images of the early 1950s and the multifaceted memory of the camps as institutions of repression, exploitation, and extermination.



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Paper for Harvard Center for European Studies Study Group on Twentieth-Century German Culture, 14 Oct. 1993

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THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: NAZI CRIMES AND IDENTITY IN  
WEST GERMANY, 1945-1990

This essay reconstructs the image of Nazi concentration camps propagated by an Allied media blitz immediately after liberation in 1945, and then juxtaposes it with the *popular* images of the Nazi concentration camps that were established during the years of their operation prior to 1945. The paper then traces the evolution of those competing images through the 1950s and 60s. A brief sketch of the changes taking place since the early 1970s and continuing today leads into a concluding discussion of the ethical implications of the two presently dominant images of Nazi crimes competing with each other on the contested terrain of public memory.

I use the term memory in a collective sense to refer to an underlying picture of a past event shared by a group of individuals.<sup>1</sup> It is a more focused image of what is often termed historical consciousness. *Public* memory, on the other hand, denotes an image of the past which dominates the public sphere, whether by its use in the mass and print media, or in representative official commemorative ceremonies. Although collectively held images of the past are shaped by the interpretations available in the public sphere, the two types of memory are by no means identical.

Collective memories have their roots in the concrete lived experience of participants and observers, but they are also constructed by the dissemination and ritual reiteration of information about a historical event.<sup>2</sup> Remembering experiences and constructing memories are both selective processes, so that while experience is one determinant of memory, it is by no means the sole one. Rather, memory is also constructed according to the present agendas of

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion, cf. Yves Lequin and Jean Métral, "Auf der Suche nach dem kollektiven Gedächtnis," in: Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis: Zur Praxis der Oral History* (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1980), 339ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of the different types of memory and remembrance, cf. Jerry Samet, "The Holocaust and the Imperative to Remember," in: Roger Gottlieb (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1990), 407-433, 420f.

individuals and groups who wish to exert influence in the public sphere.

Before one can analyze the various collectively remembered and publicly propagated images of the Nazi camps, it is necessary to differentiate between the types of camps that are usually subsumed under the term "concentration camp."<sup>3</sup>

The first type I will call the *early* concentration camp, a prison or internment camp serving to discipline or neutralize certain groups through work, torture or murder.

The second type, the "systematic" extermination camp, was erected as part of the so-called "Final Solution of the Jewish question" beginning in 1941; it served solely to murder large groups of people, process their belongings, and dispose of their corpses (e.g. Treblinka II, Sobibor). These were relatively small installations without prisoners' quarters since victims were taken directly from the train platform to undressing rooms to the gas chamber.

Thirdly, after the downturn of Germany's fortunes in the war in 1942, the regime decided to exploit exterminees' labor before their murder, and a *hybrid* of the first two types was created: at camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Maidanek murder and production facilities existed side by side.

Finally, during the last six months of the war, the industrial extermination of human life was discontinued, and the camps of all three types which remained under German control became *infernos of chaos* where prisoners were left to die of starvation and disease, or were shot or burned alive in a last-ditch effort to kill them before they could be liberated.

The public memory of the National-Socialist concentration camps begins with this last image.

### **I. The Allied Image of the Concentration Camps, 1945-46**

In spite of surprisingly detailed information available abroad about the Nazi genocidal programs prior to 1945, before the first unevacuated German concentration camps were captured by the Western Allies in April 1945, there was no concrete popular conception of the conditions in the camps in the international public sphere.<sup>4</sup> The situation changed radically during the last two weeks of April 1945. On 12 April, just as the first horrifying pictures of the liberated camps were appearing in United States' and British newspapers, Allied Commander-in-Chief Eisenhower viewed the remains of Buchenwald subcamp Ohrdruf (near Gotha in Thuringia) with Generals Patton and Bradley. Eisenhower was shocked.<sup>5</sup> Soon afterward he

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Konnilyn Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 28-33.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York: Free Press, 1986). For an excellent summary discussion of the literature on the information available in Allied countries before the liberation of the camps, cf. also Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, N.H./London: University Press of New England, 1987), 157-64. The effect of the actual experience of the conditions in the camps at liberation on the Western international public sphere is well described by: Jon Bridgman, *The End of the Holocaust: The Liberation of the Camps* (Portland: Areopagitica, 1990); Bridgman makes an argument similar to mine (cf. pp. 103-9).

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New

ordered every nearby unit which was not engaged in active combat to tour the camp, and he called for visits by delegations of US Congresspersons, British members of Parliament, and top representatives of the US news media.<sup>6</sup> The groups were hastily assembled and arrived on 24, 21, and 25 April, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Especially the reports by and about the group of publishers and editors contributed to the establishment of the popular image of the concentration camps as festering sites of torture and mass death; these men were directly connected to an estimated 1/3 of all US newspapers and 1/4 of all magazines, and some of their reports were serialized by the wire services.<sup>8</sup>

The publicity about "the" German atrocities, i.e. about those which the Allies discovered at the end of the war, was not limited to Allied countries, but was also directed at the German populace. The most direct method was to force civilians in nearby towns to view and bury the dead found in the camps. At literally dozens of camps where prisoners were liberated, local residents were rounded up for such tours.<sup>9</sup> Soon afterwards, a more systematic program utilizing the mass media in Germany was implemented in order to reach the rest of the German population. Newspapers,<sup>10</sup> posters,<sup>11</sup> picture exhibitions,<sup>12</sup> pamphlets,<sup>13</sup> radio,<sup>14</sup> and film<sup>15</sup>

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York/Oxford: Oxford, 1985), 27-30 gives a vivid description of the generals' visit to Ohrdruf based on the testimony of several eyewitnesses. See also Bridgman, *End of the Holocaust*, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alfred Chandler (ed.), *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower: The War Years*, (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1970) vol. iv, 2623.

<sup>7</sup> The British report was published as: "Buchenwald Camp: the Report of a Parliamentary Delegation," Command Paper 6626 (London, April 1945); the final report of the US congressional delegation was presented before a joint session on 15 May 1945, cf. "Atrocities and Other Conditions in Concentration Camps in Germany," 79th Congress, 1st session, Senate document no. 47 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945).

<sup>8</sup> Norbert Frei, "'Wir waren blind, ungläubig und langsam': Buchenwald, Dachau und die amerikanischen Medien im Frühjahr 1945," in: *VJZ* 35(1987), 385-401, 398. The delegation included representatives of the newspapers *New York Times*, *Washington Star*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, *Chicago Sun*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Kansas City Star*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, as well as of the newspaper chains *Hearst* and *Scripps-Howard*. The magazines *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *This Week Magazine*, *American Magazine* and *Reader's Digest* also sent reporters. Frei offers an excellent portrayal and analysis of the tour and subsequent efforts to publicize the German atrocities in the US. He draws most of his information from the collection of the delegations' reports, articles, diaries and speeches in Box 98 of the Joseph Pulitzer II Papers held by the Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup> Without systematically searching for examples, I have been able to document 24 cases. Cf. Harold Marcuse, *Nazi Crimes and Identity in West Germany: Collective Memories of the Dachau Concentration Camp, 1945-1990* (Ann Arbor, Mi.: University Microfilms, 1992)[order #9308392], 99n125. For a selection of some of the more prominent examples, see Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, 33-9, 68ff, 78, 82f, and US Office of War Information, *KZ: Bildbericht aus fünf Konzentrationslagern* (n.p.p., 1945)[cf. note 13, below].

<sup>10</sup> For an example of a didactic series about the liberated camps, see *Hamburger Nachrichten-Blatt*, issues from 14-24 May 1945. For a brief summary of German press reports on the atrocities, see Elisabeth Matz, *Die Zeitungen der US-Armee für die deutsche Bevölkerung, 1944-1946* (Münster: Fahle, 1969), 53f.

<sup>11</sup> See Barbro Eberan, *Luther? Friedrich "der Große"? Wagner? Nietzsche? ...? Wer war an Hitler schuld? Die Debatte um die Schuldfrage 1945-1949* (Munich: Minerva, 1983, rev. ed., 1985), 22. The most common poster in the early weeks of occupation showed pictures of the concentration camps and carried in large letters the text "Das ist eure Schuld."

<sup>12</sup> See Rainer Schulze (ed.), *Unruhige Zeiten: Erlebnisberichte aus dem Landkreis Celle 1945-1949* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990), 261 (Hermannsburg), and Gordon Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), illustration opposite p. 115 (Linz).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. especially *KZ: Bildbericht aus fünf Konzentrationslagern*, a 54 page illustrated brochure produced by the US Office of War Information in late April 1945 for distribution in Germany.

<sup>14</sup> According to Morris Janowitz, "German Reactions to Nazi Atrocities," in: *American Journal of Sociology* 52(1946), 141-6, 143, Radio Luxembourg and the BBC were the main sources of information on the camps in Germany in May. Radio London repeatedly broadcast reports about German concentration camps in mid-May

were used to inform the Germans about the atrocities. Former inmates who had remained silent under Nazi rule and inmates returning home also disseminated information about the camps.<sup>16</sup> In June, an Allied intelligence officer summarized the effects of this publicity campaign:<sup>17</sup>

"Within four weeks after V-E Day, almost every German had had direct and repeated contact with our campaign to present the facts [about the atrocities]."

The campaign to establish this particular image of the "death camps" (as they were generally called in the US) in German popular consciousness continued with the reporting on the Nuremberg trials and mass screenings of a German version of the film *Death Mills* in 1946.<sup>18</sup> Thus the dominant image of the Nazi camps abroad and in the German public sphere (i.e. especially the mass media) from the end of the war until the end of the Nuremberg trials was one of piles upon piles of emaciated, diseased, and brutally mistreated corpses. The victims were, as we are told in *Death Mills*, "of all religious faiths, of all political beliefs;" there is no differentiation among the dead, no hint, for instance, that Jews comprised the vast majority of the religious victims.<sup>19</sup>

However, although this conception of the camps was firmly established in the international public sphere, and in spite of the saturation of the German public sphere with these images, most Germans harbored a quite different picture, as studies conducted as early as the summer of 1945 show.<sup>20</sup>

## II. The German Image of the "Clean Camp" (1947-1955)

The prevailing German image of the Nazi camps after the war was rooted in the peculiar nature of how the "early" concentration camps were experienced by the bulk of the German population during the Third Reich; it was formulated in contradistinction to the picture

(*Hamburger Nachrichten-Blatt*, 16 May 1945).

<sup>15</sup> David Culbert, "American Film Policy in the Re-education of Germany after 1945," in: Nicholas Pronay and Keith Wilson (eds.), *The Political Re-Education of Germany and her Allies After World War II*, (London: Croon Helm, 1985), 173-202, esp. 177-9. The newsreel *Welt im Film* devoted its entire fifth issue (week of 15 June 1945) to the most horrifying footage from the camps.

<sup>16</sup> For some examples of public talks held by former Dachau inmates after returning home, see: Max Lackmann, *Schuld und Gnade: Eine Heimkehr aus Dachau. Aus einem Vortrag Juli 1945*, (Aalen: n.p., 1945); Fritz Wandel, [city councilman in Reutlingen], *Ein Weg durch die Hölle. Dachau wie es wirklich war* (ms. 1945, Dokumentationsarchiv des deutschen Widerstands, Frankfurt); and Ernst Wilm, *Dachau - Bericht auf der Gemeindeversammlung, Sonntag den 28.10.1945 in der evangelischen Kirche zu Mennighüffen* (Dortmund: Evangelischer Vortragsdienst, 1948).

<sup>17</sup> Janowitz, "German Reactions," 143.

<sup>18</sup> See Brewster Chamberlin, "Todesmühlen: Ein früher Versuch zur Massen-'Umerziehung' im besetzten Deutschland," in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 29(1981), 420-36, and Culbert, "American Film Policy," 177-80, 196-9. Not until March of 1948 was distribution of the German version of "Death Mills" officially discontinued; cf. *VVN-Nachrichten* (Dusseldorf), 1 April 1948.

<sup>19</sup> Culbert, "American Film Policy," 180n18. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 254-61 demonstrates that the media efforts ignored the knowledge that the purposeful extermination was focused on European Jewry.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Janowitz, "German Reactions" (note 14, above). Janowitz conducted the study in June 1945.



propagated by the Allies. As I will argue, memories of the camps were already being shaped intentionally by the policymakers of the Nazi Party *as the populace was learning about the camps* in the 1930s.

During the 12 years of the Third Reich, the overwhelming majority of the German populace had received at least secondhand knowledge about the inner workings of the concentration camp system as a system of political repression, and a substantial proportion of the population had heard at least rumors about the extermination camps.<sup>21</sup> However, because of the stringent control of information circulating in the public sphere,<sup>22</sup> the only explicitly tolerated image was a relatively harmless official picture of what I will call the "clean" concentration camp.<sup>23</sup> This official image was one of orderly, spartanly efficient camps designed to "educate" persons with "asocial" behavior to become productive members of the German racial collectivity, and to isolate incurable social and racial "parasites" from productive members of society. The well-known inscription "Arbeit macht frei" on many concentration camp gates, and the slogan painted in huge letters on the roofs of the main buildings in camps such as Dachau and Neuengamme:

'There is only one way to freedom. Its milestones are: Obedience, Industriousness, Honesty, Orderliness, Cleanliness, Sobriety, Truthfulness, Self-Sacrifice, and Love of the Fatherland'

reflect this official image of the camps. In the words of a July 1933 article in the *Munich Illustrated News*, in Dachau

'Members of the *Volk* who had fallen victim to foreign seducers ... are being educated to become useful members of the National-Socialist state by the healing effects of productive work and tight discipline.'<sup>24</sup>

By that time, at least 12 people had been murdered or tortured to death in the camp.<sup>25</sup> In December 1936 the official illustrated newsweekly of the Nazi Party described the Dachau concentration camp as 'clean,' 'immaculate,' 'beautiful,' and 'orderly.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive overview of recent research and literature on this issue cf. Hans Mommsen, "What Did the Germans Know about the Genocide of the Jews?," in: Walter Pehle (ed.), *November 1938: From Reichskristallnacht to Genocide* (Oxford: Berg, 1991), 187-221.

<sup>22</sup> On the control of information in general, cf. Willi Boelcke (ed.), *Kriegspropaganda 1939-1941: Geheime Ministerkonferenzen im Reichspropagandaministerium* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1966), introduction. For examples of restrictions on information about the concentration camps, cf. Gordon Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 37,49,62,70,76,89,94f.

<sup>23</sup> To date there has been no published systematic examination of the official portrayal of the concentration camps during the Nazi period; the focus of research has been on how much members of the German populace knew about the programs of mass extermination. Cf. Marcuse, *Nazi Crimes and Identity*, 66-76, and Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Résistants et Patriotes, *Le choc 1945: la presse révèle l'enfer des camps nazis* (Paris: FNDIRP, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> "Die Wahrheit über Dachau," *Münchener Illustrierte Zeitung*, 16 July 1933.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hans-Günter Richardi, *Schule der Gewalt: Das Konzentrationslager Dachau, 1933-1934* (München: Beck, 1983), 88-107.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Franz Bauer, "Konzentrationslager Dachau," in: *Illustrierter Beobachter*, 3 Dec. 1936, 2014-

However, rumors and unofficial information about the camps seem not to have been as rigidly repressed as other illegal discourse, as long as they remained within certain limits. Since the concentration camps drew their mass disciplinary power primarily from the frightening associations coupled with them (as opposed to the actual experience of arrest, which was ultimately limited to a minority), such unconfirmed rumors heightened that potential. In fact, all official descriptions of the camps refer implicitly or explicitly to the existence of a differing popular view, a critical anti-truth about the concentration camps. The first official pictures of Dachau were published under the title 'The Truth about Dachau,'<sup>27</sup> and in 1934 the commander of the Berlin-Oranienburg concentration camp published a book about his camp entitled 'Anti-Brown-Book.'<sup>28</sup> The latter admitted that 'some of the arrestees received treatment that was not all too gentle,' but reasoned that that had been a 'compelling necessity' because they had fought ruthlessly against the National-Socialist vanguard. Between the glowing lines of the 1936 Party newsweekly report, forced castration in Dachau is mentioned (against which a prisoner could supposedly appeal), as is the fact that 'all legal means' were used against intractable persons. What "legal" meant in those years of state-fostered street violence and after the passage of the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws should have been quite clear to every reader -- although such conclusions could only be drawn in private.

It should be noted that official reports about the concentration camps had tapered off by the time the war began, and that propaganda efforts concerning the mass executions and extermination camps after 1941 were limited to disclosures using distortingly euphemistic terms such as 'very strict measures,' or 'special treatment' (of the Jews).<sup>29</sup> In 1943 Hitler ordered that in all official pronouncements (which included the controlled press), 'transport of the Jews' be substituted for 'special treatment,' and that 'final solution of the Jewish question' be replaced by the 'complete mobilization of Jewish labor.' Thus the publicly shared knowledge about the camps was essentially frozen or moved back to the pre-'Final Solution' level, i.e. where "the camps" had supposedly been labor camps.

There is also convincing evidence that Nazi policymakers were quite aware of the absolute amorality of their programs of extermination and thus wished to conceal their genocidal activities both from contemporaries and posterity; one need think only of the lack of high-level

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17+2028.

<sup>27</sup> The article is cited in note 24, above. It should be noted that the pictures were posed and the captions false and misleading.

<sup>28</sup> Werner Schäfer, *Konzentrationslager Oranienburg: Das Anti-Braunbuch über das erste deutsche Konzentrationslager* (Berlin: n.p., 1934). The book contrasts news reports, letters, pictures and even tables listing the gain in weight of prisoners with German rumors and published foreign reports about barbaric conditions in the camp. The following quotation is from p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Marlis Steinert, *Hitler's War and the Germans: Public Mood and Attitude during the Second World War*, trans. Thomas de Witt (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State, 1977), 141-7.

written orders charting the course of the various murder campaigns,<sup>30</sup> or the concerted effort to efface extermination camps after their "function" had been fulfilled (e.g. Treblinka),<sup>31</sup> or at least to destroy incriminating documents in the last days before liberation. The necessity of concealing the murder programs from posterity was emphasized by Himmler in his widely quoted October 1943 speech at a gathering of SS leaders in Poznan:<sup>32</sup>

'Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, when 500 lie there or 1,000. ... This is the most glorious page in our history, one which has not been written and which shall never be written.'

This pronouncement shows that the official public portrayal was not only designed to erode potential popular protest,<sup>33</sup> but that it was also explicitly intended to make an exculpatory or at least euphemistic writing of history possible, even at a time when the Nazis were planning to write that history themselves.<sup>34</sup> The transition to the popular use of this "clean" image of the early camps for self-exoneration after the end of the war was smooth; its beginnings can be found in statements by Himmler himself.

In April 1945, after months of wavering between obedience to Hitler's 'scorched earth' policy and the desire to save his own skin, Himmler met with Norbert Masur, the director of the Swedish section of the World Jewish Congress. As related by his confidant-physical therapist, Himmler responded to Masur's reproaches about the concentration camps as follows:<sup>35</sup>

"They should have been called educational camps, for criminal elements were lodged there besides Jews and political prisoners. Thanks to their construction, Germany, in 1941, had the lowest criminal rate for many years. The prisoners had to work hard, but all Germans had to do that. The treatment was always just. ... I concede that [crimes were committed in the camps] occasionally, ... but I have also punished the persons responsible."

<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon is the basis for much of the pseudo-scholarly attempts to "revise" the history of 20th century German genocide, such as David Irving's attempted exonerations of Hitler. Cf. Martin Broszat, "Hitler und die Genesis der 'Endlösung,' aus Anlaß der Thesen von David Irving *VfZ* 25(1977), 739-75.

<sup>31</sup> In 1943, special task forces were sent back to the sites of mass murder to exhume buried corpses and burn them to destroy all traces of the extermination program. To date there has been no systematic study of such cover-up attempts, which were apparently fairly widespread. For some examples, cf. Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Dimension des Völkermords: Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991), 320n55,469; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, rev. ed. 1985), vol. 3, 42f, 979f.; and Bridgman, *End of the Holocaust*, 21f.

<sup>32</sup> The speech was published by Poliakov/Wolf (eds.) *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden: Dokumente und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Arani, 1955), 215; and Walther Hofer (ed.) *Der Nationalsozialismus: Dokumente 1933-1945* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1960), 114.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the Steinert, *Hitler's War*, cited in note 29, above.

<sup>34</sup> For a similar interpretation of this quote, see: Saul Friedländer, "The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation," in Hayes (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies*, 23-35, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Felix Kersten, *The Kersten Memoirs, 1940-1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), with an introduction by H. R. Trevor-Roper, trans. by Constantine Fitzgibbon and James Oliver, p. 287. I have changed the translation of *Erziehungslager* to educational camp, instead of "training camp."

Thus for Himmler and other immediate perpetrators the propaganda lie became the personal lie. Over 30,000 people murdered at Dachau, more than 56,000 at Buchenwald, a nearly equal number at Neuengamme --not to mention the hundreds of thousands upon millions of Jews at the extermination camps--, all became "occasional crimes" which had already been expiated. And for those civilians who could deny firsthand (experiential) knowledge of the camps or the centers of physical extermination, the formerly dubious official version became the core of an image of the past which might protect them from the consequences of complicity now that they were at the mercy of their potentially vengeful conquerors: 'We did not know!', the ubiquitous popular claim of the post-war years, was born.

In November 1945, in one of the first major civilian commemorative ceremonies for concentration camp victims in occupied Germany, the mayor of Dachau gave this exculpation an especially eloquent formulation. One should know that prior to the First World War Dachau had been best known as an artists' colony, a counterpart to the north-German Worpswede. In a speech in front of numerous representatives of the occupation forces which was broadcast throughout Europe and the United States, he declared:<sup>36</sup>

'Ladies and Gentlemen!

How peaceful life once was here! Dachau, once the epitome of rural stolidity and earthiness, closely bound to its artists and their noble cultural efforts for more than a century! To mention only a few of the names that carried Dachau's reputation into the world: Christian Morgenstern, ... Karl Spitzweg, Wilhelm Leibl, Lovis Corinth, ...

*That was once our Dachau!*

But then non-local sadists came and settled on the outskirts of our city, and with horror and fear we had to watch as they defiled the name Dachau in the eyes of the entire civilized world.

For twelve long years the concentration camp weighed like a nightmare upon us.

At the beginning sparse reports about the inmates of the camp leaked out to us. But after construction was complete the hermetic isolation left us with only dark premonitions about the fates and human suffering behind the concrete walls topped with barbed wire. ...

And the name of our beloved Dachau is associated with all of these cruelties! But *the real Dachau was different!*

Today, with pure hearts and clean hands this "other Dachau" commemorates all of the victims whose blood has soaked our native soil and whose ash covers the paths within the camp.'

This speech is filled with subterfuges and contradictions. The Dachau concentration camp was all but "hermetically isolated" once construction was complete; local suppliers entered the camp daily throughout its existence, townspeople worked in the camp factories, and hundreds

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<sup>36</sup> Josef Schwalber, manuscript of speech for 9 Nov. 1945, Bavarian Main State Archive (BayHsta), Josef Schwalber Papers (js) 101, and draft of speech for 9 Nov. 1945, js25. Also printed in: *Augsburger Zeitung*, 15 Nov. 1945, p.1.

of prisoners marched through the town to their workplaces in Dachau's factories.<sup>37</sup> The speech does indicate how specific aspects of the experience of the camp were pieced together to form a memory of the concentration camps that was suitable as the basis for post-war (West) German identity: The populace at large remembered having been essentially ignorant and helpless concerning all that went on inside the camps, thus preserving its "pure hearts and clean hands." The camps themselves had come from the outside; they had been established by "non-local sadists." More generally, blame was placed on Hitler, Himmler or the SS, or one spoke of exogenous "Nazis" as perpetrators (as opposed to "Germans" or "we"). Conspicuously, in the speech no mention is made of any systematic extermination of human life (which, although there were no gassings, was also practiced in Dachau).

In the first post-war years, neither the Germans nor the international public associated with the camps any other extermination scheme than mass death by starvation, epidemics and faceless sadism -- the beatings and torture of the early camps, as well as the gassings of the extermination camps were absent from German and Allied memory. The main difference between the images held by the two groups was that the Allies projected their conception back indeterminately, whereas for the Germans it was limited to a relatively short (and, in that logic, relatively inconsequential) period of chaos preceding the end of the war.

The Germans used the National-Socialist propaganda image of the clean concentration camps to counter the Allied image of the chaotic death camps. These conflicting memory-images of the camps are reflected in their concrete uses by each group. The Allies used many former concentration camps (esp. those near urban centers) as internment camps for members of the SS, Nazi Party, and German Army.<sup>38</sup> For them, the symbolism of the concentration camps as sites of heinous crimes was an important factor: in Dachau the SS men were imprisoned in the former prisoners' compound, whereas Party and Army functionaries shared more tolerable quarters in the vast SS barracks adjacent to the camp.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, once the Allies had relinquished the camps, West German authorities had no qualms about reusing the physical plant for 'practical' purposes (such as social hygiene), much as the National-Socialists purported to have done. In Dachau and Neuengamme they went so far as to attempt physically to recreate the "clean" camp.

In January 1948 all parties of the Bavarian parliament united to pass unanimously a

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<sup>37</sup> Sibille Steinbacher has written a master's thesis at Munich University on this topic.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Heiner Wember, *Umerziehung im Lager: Internierungslager in der Britischen Zone* (Düsseldorf: Klartext, 1991); Christa Schick, "Die bayerischen Internierungslager," in: Martin Broszat/Klaus-Dietmar Henke/Hans Woller (eds.), *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), 301-25.

<sup>39</sup> For detailed documentation cf. Harold Marcuse, "Das ehemalige Konzentrationslager Dachau: Der mühevollen Weg zur Gedenkstätte 1945-1968", in: *Dachauer Hefte* 6(1990), 182-205, 185f.

resolution calling for the conversion of the former concentration camp into an *Arbeitslager*, a forced labor camp for 'asocial elements' which would 'reeducate the work-shy to be willing laborers.'<sup>40</sup> The minutes of parliament in 1948 echo almost verbatim the Nazi-era descriptions of "clean" concentration camps quoted above. In Hamburg the situation was only slightly different: the "dirty" camp was mentioned explicitly, but only as a historical aberration which was to be eradicated. In October 1947 the director of the prison authority wrote to the mayor:<sup>41</sup>

'Concentration Camp Neuengamme weighs like a curse on Hamburg's conscience, its honor and its reputation. Neuengamme's reputation of inhumanity and cruel horrors must be eradicated from the memories about our times. Now the opportunity presents itself to build a model penal institution which will restore Neuengamme's and thereby Hamburg's reputation. This mark of past shame should be obliterated ...'

While a new prison was erected within a year in the heart of the Neuengamme camp (using i.a. the bricks of the crematory to build a theater), the rapid escalation of the conflict with the Soviet Union prevented the realization of the Bavarian work-camp plan. In April 1948 the heightened influx of refugees from the East prompted the Bavarian parliament to move to refurbish all concentration/internment camps vacated by the Allies for use as refugee camps.<sup>42</sup> When the Dachau concentration camp was turned over to German authorities in the fall of 1948, the enormous sum of 5 1/4 million newly minted German Marks was quickly appropriated to convert the barracks not into a temporary refugee camp, but rather into semi-permanent apartments for 2000 refugees. Here the uprooted undesirables from the East were to run their own model community strictly separated from the town, to prove their mettle before being allowed to resettle elsewhere. In the ensuing years, the camp street was paved, street lights installed, flower beds planted, and stores and factories granted concessions in the old camp buildings.

In West Germany, the early 1950s saw a reversal of many of the measures taken to "denazify" public offices. Cold War considerations spurred the western allies to curry favor with former Nazi elites, and hand in hand with the remilitarization of the Federal Republic as a member of NATO went a rehabilitation of former Nazis in West German society. Essentially all German perpetrators who had been convicted by Allied courts (unless they were among the few who had been sentenced to death and already hanged) were pardoned and released from

<sup>40</sup> *Verhandlungen des Bayerischen Landtags*, vol. 2(1947/48), pp.587 und 589 with supplement no. 871. Cf. also Ausschuß für Sozialpolitik, proposal by Hans Hagn and Comrades re: "Freimachung von Lagern zur Benützung als Arbeitslager für asoziale Elemente," 21 Nov. 1947; Archive of the Bavarian State Diet, bound volumes of committee minutes.

<sup>41</sup> Gefängnisbehörde to Senat, 21 Oct. 1947, Dokumentenhaus Neuengamme; cf. Marcuse, "Gefängnis als Gedenkstätte," unpubl. seminar paper, Univ. of Hamburg, 19849; in turn quoted by Fritz Bringmann and Hartmut Roder, *Neuengamme. Verdrängt - vergessen - bewältigt? Die zweite Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Neuengamme* (Hamburg: VSA, 1987), 38f.

<sup>42</sup> *Verhandlungen des Bayerischen Landtags*, vol. 2(1947/48), p. 1346.

custody,<sup>43</sup> and former Nazi Party members comprised the majority of the employees in many government institutions, e.g. in 1951 94% of all Bavarian judges and state prosecutors, 77% of the employees in the Ministry of Finance, and 60% in the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>44</sup> This was just the tail end of a development that had been going on for a number of years,<sup>45</sup> although it was not publicly legalized until 1951 with the passage of a law fulfilling Article 131 of the Federal Constitution. That so-called "131 law" made the reinstatement of all Nazi officials dismissed during denazification possible, and in practice essentially no one was refused reemployment. With this legalization of the personal renazification of state offices came the first active German measures to eradicate the Allied image of the chaotic death camps from public memory, which was in turn paralleled by the physical creation of the image of the "clean" camp.

The first explicit eradictory measure was the curtailment of the commemorative activities relating to the concentration camps which had been organized annually by former persecutees since 1945. After 1951 and until 1957, state representatives no longer participated in memorial ceremonies organized by former prisoners in Dachau. Rather, from 1951 to 1956, the week during which most of the concentration camps had been liberated was chosen as a lavishly endowed national week of commemoration for German "prisoners of war."<sup>46</sup> Official representatives of the state spoke instead at patriotic rallies demanding the return of German POWs from the Soviet Union. Also in 1951, the organization of former German Dachau inmates was placed under police surveillance and its activities narrowly circumscribed.<sup>47</sup> In 1953, after a year-long malicious media campaign against an exhibition in the Dachau crematorium which portrayed the "dirty" side of the concentration camp's history, the relics and documents were removed by state officials. The next step, the closing of the former crematorium itself (the paramount symbol of the "dirty" camps) to public access and ultimately its demolition, was only narrowly prevented by massive international intervention in 1955.

### **III. The Process of the Historical Rediscovery of Genocide and Murderous Repression, 1957-65**

There can be little doubt that without pressure from abroad, West German authorities

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Frank Buscher, *The U.S. War Crimes Trial Program in Germany, 1946-1955* (New York/Westport: Greenwood, 1989), chaps. 4, 5, and 7.

<sup>44</sup> Unsigned memorandum by the state chancellory, 17 Mar. 1950, BayHsta Stk 113626. The statistic was compiled by the VVN.

<sup>45</sup> Hans Woller, *Gesellschaft und Politik in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone: Die Region Ansbach und Fürth* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1986), 111-15.

<sup>46</sup> Detailed documentation of the interaction between Bavarian and national authorities relating to the "Kriegsgefangenengedenkwoche" can be found in BayHsta, MArb 114829.

<sup>47</sup> Files pertaining to these police measures can be found in the Munich City Archive, BuR 2467ff.



would have completely eradicated all physical remains which could trigger associations of the Nazi concentration camps and genocidal programs. From 1945 until today, international attention which focused on the former concentration camps at critical junctures has been crucial in determining the fate of their physical remains. However, whether in Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Flossenbürg or Neuengamme (the four major former concentration camps in West Germany), after the departure of military government until the late 1960s all monuments, museums and ceremonies commemorating National-Socialist state terror were established *solely through the initiative of former persecutees*, and almost always against great resistance on the part of state authorities. Although this rule held true with chillingly few exceptions for two decades, beginning in the second half of the 1950s the emergence of a second public image of the Nazi camps in West Germany can be discerned.

By the late 1950s a new generation old enough to have experienced public life in the Third Reich firsthand, but too young to have occupied positions of responsibility (i.e. especially those born in the later 1920s and early 1930s) began to gain influence in the German public sphere. We can observe a rejuvenation of interest in the darker sides of the Nazi period. By the time of a 1958 lawsuit in Ulm in conjunction with the 131 law, this change in public interest could no longer be overlooked. In Ulm a former Nazi police sergeant had sued for his reemployment as a high-ranking police officer.<sup>48</sup> When it was discovered that he was responsible for the murder of 4000 Jews in Lithuania, there was a vehement public reaction, and politicians were quick to act. The "Central Office of State Judicial Authorities for the Pursuit of Violent National-Socialist Crimes" was created. That Ulm trial marks the beginning of a series of trials which, in spite of their rather narrow judicial scope, made a major contribution to historical and public knowledge of the Nazi camps. In fact, until the 1970s, the most important research on the National-Socialist programs of repression and genocide carried out in West Germany was conducted in conjunction with litigation by this institution.<sup>49</sup>

At the sites of repression in West Germany the generation of teenagers and students began to show interest in the past. As West German historian Peter Steinbach put it:<sup>50</sup>

'In the late 1950s the [West German] public sphere split into a group of those who were asking questions, and a group of those who were embarrassed for lack of answers but who made up the bulk of the electorate.'

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Peter Steinbach, *Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen: Die Diskussion in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit nach 1945* (West Berlin: Colloquium, 1981), 46ff.

<sup>49</sup> Important examples include the study prepared for the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt in 1964, published as: Hans Buchheim, Martin Broszat, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Helmut Krausnick, *Anatomie des SS-Staates* (Munich: dtv, 1967), and Reinhard Henkys, *Die nationalsozialistischen Gewaltverbrechen: Geschichte und Gericht* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1964). The most prominent exception was Eberhard Kolb's study: *Bergen-Belsen: Geschichte des "Aufenthaltslagers" 1943-45* (Hanover, 1962).

<sup>50</sup> Steinbach, *Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen*, 46. For an excellent monographic study that confirms these findings, cf. Michael Schornstheimer, *Bombenstimmung und Katzenjammer: Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Quick und Stern in den 50er Jahren* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1989).



In the summer of 1956 West German newspapers reported critical remarks regarding the neglected condition of Bergen-Belsen made by Winston Churchill and British journalists who had visited the site earlier that year.<sup>51</sup> A number of youth groups became interested in Belsen and organized commemorative ceremonies. On 20 July 1956 the student government of the University of Hamburg laid a wreath with the inscription: 'The students of the University of Hamburg honor the men and women of the other Germany' - referring to the putsch attempt organized by the conservative German military elite on 20 July 1944. In September the trade union youth organizations of Lower Saxony and Luneburg commemorated the 'victims of the National-Socialist and communist dictatorships,' and resolved to hold a ceremony each year on 17 June, the anniversary of the massive workers' strikes against the government in East Germany in 1953.

These spontaneous outpourings of interest and concern demonstrate both the extraordinary power of Cold War ideology, and the historical naiveté of the young protagonists exposed to it: the events of 20 July 1944 or especially the invocation of anti-(Stalinist)-communism were far more closely connected to the Nazi elites than to the victims in Belsen. For one thing, some of the German military men who had tried to depose Hitler in July 1944 had colluded in the deportations and genocidal programs which ended in the inferno of Belsen and other camps; but the German *Wehrmacht* had also used Belsen prior to the construction of the concentration camp in 1943 as a POW camp where soldiers of the Red Army were confined in an open area and basically left to die. The students not only made no mention of these Soviet victims, they probably did not even know about them. This lack of historical knowledge was typical of the state of public consciousness about the concentration and extermination camps in the 1950s: They were places where terrible things had happened, but there was very little knowledge as to who the victims were or who the perpetrators had been.<sup>52</sup>

In the years between 1957 and 1964, this situation changed dramatically. Teenagers were fascinated by the history of the Nazi period, which, at the popular level, was gradually broadened from the limited post war conception of the chaotic death camps to encompass the history of the extermination camps. The diary of Anne Frank, which ended with her and her family's deportation from Amsterdam, is a case in point.<sup>53</sup> The diary was first published in the Netherlands in 1947, then in Germany and France in 1950, and the United States and Britain in

<sup>51</sup> Cf. H. G.. van Dam "Monument der Unmenschlichkeit: Wächst Gras darüber?," in: *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland*, 8 June 1956.

<sup>52</sup> Several authors examining the historiography of the Holocaust (i.e. the National-Socialist judeocide) have confirmed this finding. Cf. Leon Jick, "The Holocaust: Its Uses and Abuses," in: *Brandeis Review* (Spring 1986), 25-31, 27f.; Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, N.H./London: Univ. Press of New England, 1987), 2.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Alvin Rosenfeld, "Popularization and Memory: The Case of Anne Frank," in: Hayes (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies* [note (?)], 243-78.

1952. In 1955, however, a popular German paperback edition was published. Then in 1958 the German author Ernst Schnabel published an immensely popular book which traced Anne Frank's history beyond Amsterdam to the camps at Westerbork, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.<sup>54</sup> Not only was the perspective of the victims made accessible to a wide audience for the first time, but it also included a description of the actual experience of the process of extermination.

By that time, the French documentary film "Night and Fog" was being shown in schools throughout West Germany. When the film was first released in 1956, the West German foreign office successfully pressured the French government not to show it at the Cannes Festival,<sup>55</sup> but several screenings for selected German audiences in the ensuing months received considerable media attention, so that the National Office for Educational Materials (*Bundeszentrale für Heimatdienst*) was obliged to commission a German synchronization.<sup>56</sup> By Spring 1957 the film was being shown in commercial movie theaters throughout Germany, selections were broadcast in the TV discussion program "Panorama," and distribution to educational film suppliers had begun.<sup>57</sup> An accompanying teacher's guide contained surprisingly accurate and comprehensive information about the development and inner workings of both the concentration camps and the programs to murder all the Jews of Europe.<sup>58</sup>

In the 1960s public interest in and popular consciousness of the Nazi camps was fueled by widely publicized and discussed trials of central figures in the repression, extermination, and exploitation programs, especially the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1964.<sup>59</sup> Concurrently, pedagogues began to think of ways to teach about the Nazi period -- the concept of "coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) came into common use.<sup>60</sup> Theodor Adorno's famous essay: 'What is: Working through the Past?' (1959) was an early attempt to influence this discussion.<sup>61</sup> By the mid-1960s a substantial proportion (but nonetheless a minority) of the popula-

<sup>54</sup> Ernst Schnabel, *Anne Frank: Spur eines Kindes* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1958)(1988: 165,000th copy printed); *Anne Frank: A Portrait in Courage*, trans. R. and C. Winston (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958). This book was immediately adapted as a radio play; a film version of the original diary came out in 1959.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Korn, "Nacht und Nebel," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 April 1956.

<sup>56</sup> *Die Europäische Zeitung* (Bonn), 20 Nov. 1956.

<sup>57</sup> *Die Zeit*, 7 March 1957.

<sup>58</sup> Günter Moltmann, *Der Dokumentarfilm Nacht und Nebel* (Hamburg: Kuratorium für staatspolitische Bildung, 1957; Düsseldorf, 1960).

<sup>59</sup> For a collection of reactions to Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, cf. Friedrich Arnold Krummacker (ed.), *Die Kontroverse: Hannah Arendt, Eichmann und die Juden* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1964). Peter Weiß' oratorium "Die Ermittlung" and Gerhard Zwerenz' essay "Unser Auschwitz" are examples of the discussion initiated by the Auschwitz trials. Cf. also Hermann Langbein (ed.), *Der Auschwitz-Prozeß: Eine Dokumentation in Zwei Bänden* (Frankfurt: EVA, 1965).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Hans Wenke, "'Bewältigung der Vergangenheit' und 'Aufarbeitung der Geschichte': Zwei Schlagwörter, kritisch beleuchtet," in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 11(1960), 65-70.

<sup>61</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit," in: idem, *Eingriffe:*

tion in West Germany had transcended the limited German images of the Nazi camps as either hard-line work camps or sites of random mass death.

The interest of this generation coincided with the revival of commemorative activities by the surviving persecutees after those had reached a low point during Cold War suppression and repression. Between 1960 and 1968, cornerstone layings and dedications of memorials and commemorative facilities initiated by groups of former prisoners in Dachau were taking place at an average of 2-3 times per year - with noteworthy public participation and good publicity. By the mid-1960s former prisoners, with the aid of international publicity, had been able to force regional West German governments to erect a museum in Dachau (1965) and an exhibition in Bergen-Belsen (1966).

#### IV. The Vicarious Experience of the Nazi Past, 1970-present

This reestablishment of National-Socialist genocide and murderous repression as elements of public memory, however, remained curiously external to the identity of its subjects. Just as the sites of the former concentration camps were sanitized of remains which could conjure up images of the infernal experiences there, the German translation of Anne Frank's diary had been sanitized of most references to Germans as perpetrators.<sup>62</sup> Where Anne Frank wrote of fighting against "the Germans," her German translator substituted "the occupying power" or more generally "repression." On 9 October 1942 Anne Frank wrote in her diary about the Jews deported to the transit camp Westerbork:

'If it is as bad as this in Holland whatever will it be like in the distant and barbarous regions they are sent to? We assume that most of them are murdered.'

The second of these sentences was simply omitted from the translation, so that German readers received no image of the daily terror Anne Frank had to bear.

In historical discourse the Nazi past was conceived of as a set of stereotypes and referred to with such set phrases as the "National-Socialist Rule of Terror," or the "Regime of Injustice." When German students condemned conservative politicians as "fascists" and "Nazis" in the late 1960s, their reproach was based on rather tenuous links and a superficial knowledge of the inner workings of the Nazi state; at the same time, they were clearly claiming exclusion from the influence of the same traditions.

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*Neun Kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), 125-46 [English: "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?," in: Geoffrey Hartmann (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1986), 114-29].

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed discussion of this, see: Alvin Rosenfeld, "Popularization and Memory: the Case of Anne Frank," in: Peter Hayes (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 1991), 243-78.

It was not until the 1970s, with the entrance of an even younger generation onto the contested terrain of public memory, that this abstract conception of the past was reconnected to its experiential roots. Beginning in this decade and continuing during the next, the unearthing of the suppressed *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life, of the grandparents' generation began.<sup>63</sup> The Nazi past was slowly personalized and localized; historical knowledge was anchored in the realm of day-to-day life. This development marks the beginning of the integration of the vicariously experienced Third Reich into the personal identities of a not insubstantial minority of younger West Germans. Anniversaries of important dates on the National-Socialist road to carnage drew large crowds, even before the film "Holocaust" opened the floodgates in 1979. The broadcast of that film was as much an effect as it was a cause.

Salient examples of nationally celebrated commemorative events in the 1980s were the 50th anniversary of the Nazi accession to power in 1933 in 1983, the 40th anniversary of the end of the war in May 1985, and the 50th anniversary of the anti-Jewish campaign of 9 November 1938 in 1988. The latter two events illustrate the intergenerational bifurcation of public memory: in 1985 Bergen-Belsen and Bitburg represented respectively the "dirty" and sanitized images of the Nazi past; three years later the novel but in the public domain almost exclusive use of the term *Reichspogromnacht* --the night of the pogrom against the Jews--, instead of *Kristallnacht* --the night of broken glass--, testified to the new concreteness of history, while the insensitivity and use of well-worn stereotypes by parliamentary president Philipp Jenninger in his nationally televised commemorative speech led to his removal from office.

#### V. Bifurcated Memory and Moral Identity in the 1990s

The Historians' Debate and the resurgence of the extreme right-wing in the late 1980s show, however, that the assimilation of the "dirty" side of the past into personal identity that began in the late 1950s has not been able to attain a hegemonic position in the construction of public memory. Although the bulk of the publications in the Historians' Debate came out on the side that recognized and accepted the ineradicable stain of the Nazi past, the efforts of the revisionist historians to sanitize German history were not insubstantial.<sup>64</sup> In conclusion, I would like to outline the consequences of each of the two competing conceptions of the past for

<sup>63</sup> The great interest in the school historical competitions for the "prize of the national president" in the late 1970s are indicative of this. Cf. Dieter Galinski and Wolf Schmidt (eds.), *Jugendliche erforschen die Nachkriegszeit: Materialien zum Schülerwettbewerb Deutsche Geschichte 1984/85* (Hamburg: Körber, 1984).

<sup>64</sup> I am referring here not only to the 'revisionists' who took part actively in the debate, but also to the works of historians such as Uwe Backes, Eckhard Jesse, Michael Wolffsohn and Rainer Zitelmann. A number of these right-leaning publications are cited in: Peter Dudek, "'Vergangenheitsbewältigung': Zur Problematik eines umstrittenen Begriffs," in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 3 Jan. 1992, 44-53, esp. notes 18-21. There is a vast literature on the Historians' Debate, little of which transcends the narrow confines of historiography. For a solid contextual discussion including broader philosophical issues see: Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1988); pp. 39-54 and 167-72 are especially pertinent to the present discussion.

the moral nature of present political culture.

In the summer of 1987 a group of prominent historians, sociologists and philosophers in West Germany met to discuss the consequences that the destruction of moral consciousness under National-Socialism has had for the philosophy of ethics in West Germany.<sup>65</sup> The political leanings of the participants ran the gamut from the outer reaches of the mainstream left (e.g. Detlev Peukert, Dan Diner) to the stolidly conservative right (e.g. Heinrich Lübbe, Richard Rorty). In his presentation, Karl-Otto Apel, a senior professor and colleague of Jürgen Habermas at the left-leaning University of Frankfurt, asked if the Germans 'could have learned anything special from the national catastrophe of the Hitler-years.' In answer to his own question Apel argued that the National-Socialist experience was helping to propel Germany through the 'world-historical transformation to post-conventional morality.'<sup>66</sup>

Heinrich Lübbe, a professor who had served at the upper levels of state government (*Staatssekretär beim Ministerpräsidenten von Nordrhein-Westfalen*), avoided such heights of theoretical argument in the application of his theory of "common sense" (he used the English term) to the role the National-Socialist experience has played in West German public consciousness.<sup>67</sup> Lübbe argued that most (West) Germans reacted in a 'natural' way to the revelations about the concentration camps at the end of the war (i.e. they were horrified), and that their relationship with the past had only been distorted at some unspecified later date by left-wing critics who claimed that they were repressing the evils of National-Socialism. As evidence for this assertion Lübbe offered a novel interpretation of the outpouring of emotion following the broadcast of the film "Holocaust" in Germany in 1979. It was not the painfully shocked recognition and acceptance of one's own past, he argued, but rather the restoration of the traditional integrity of "common sense" as a moral authority. For instance, he claimed, the positive portrayal of Jewish partisan resistance demonstrated that bravery was indeed a virtue and thus rehabilitated the bravery of German soldiers which had been discredited because it had been abused by Nazi war-mongers. Thus he, too, conceived of the decades since World War II as a process of moral learning, but one which had been hindered, not sparked, by the

<sup>65</sup> The papers were printed in: Forum für Philosophie Bad Homburg (ed.), *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewußtseins: Chance oder Gefährdung? Praktische Philosophie in Deutschland nach dem Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, "Zurück zur Normalität? Oder könnten wir aus der nationalen Katastrophe etwas Besonderes gelernt haben? Das Problem des (welt-)geschichtlichen Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral in spezifisch deutscher Sicht," in: *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewußtseins*, 91-142. Apel's position is similar to the one taken by Habermas in his opening article in the historians' debate. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung," in: *Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986; translated in: idem, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 199x).

<sup>67</sup> Heinrich Lübbe, "Verdrängung? Über eine Kategorie zur Kritik des deutschen Vergangenheitsverhältnisses," in: *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewußtseins*, 217-28. See also Lübbe's contribution to a mammoth state-sponsored gathering of historians on the 50th anniversary of Hitler's take-over in 1983, in: Martin Broszat et al (eds.), *Deutschlands Weg in die Diktatur: Internationale Konferenz zur nationalsozialistischen Machtübernahme im Reichstagsgebäude zu Berlin. Referate und Diskussionen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1983), 329-45, with discussion pp. 351-77.

creation of new collective and public memories of the worst aspects of experience under National-Socialism.

These two interpretations represent the most sanguinely progressive and the most apologetically conservative positions vis-à-vis "coming to terms" with the National-Socialist past in West Germany: on the one hand, with the introduction of the 'Holocaust' into collective identity, the ultimate moral lesson is being learned, on the other, through the rehabilitation of positive aspects of the Third Reich, present public ethics are seen as 'at last' returning to the 'healthy' state of naive self-assurance they have always, at least intuitively, had. Thus the central duality in the West German collective memory of the Nazi past is the basis for divergent conceptions of Germany's future: Whereas Lübke's sanitized image of responsible popular behavior during the Third Reich legitimates present-day Germany's unhindered rise to world power status, Apel's notion posits that the historical experience of Nazism should be an ethical touchstone constraining political and economic expansionism.







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