A Past That Refuses To Pass

Discuss how the Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the events of the second half of the Twentieth Century in Germany facilitated the Historikerstreit.

Germany’s abject past has been generally viewed as the twelve years of Nationalist Socialist rule. The wounds inflicted by Nazism on the minds of the German people have not been cauterised, instead they have festered into post-war historiographical debates. Debates which have ‘seen numerous attempts to negotiate the abject Nazi past within a discipline closely and publicly aligned with the (re)formation of national identity.’¹ The Historikerstreit or ‘Historians’ Debate’ of the late 1980s served as Peter Baldwin argues, to remind us ‘how close the fascist past lies under the surface of European and especially German politics.’² Although arousing external concern, especially in Israel and the U.S., ‘the quarrel was quintessentially an internal German affair, preoccupied with the “national” problem.’³ Its importance lies less in its originality or profundity than in its intensity. The denotation Historikerstreit conveys a militant mood of open confrontation. In particular, the use of Streit ‘conjures up images of two contending factions, butting heads over the governance of a common ground.’⁴ Germany’s historical interpretation of its past, in particular the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis, had been prevented during post-war reconstruction, however the ‘second-generation’ of the 1960s pressed forcefully for answers to the most troubling aspects of the past. Thus, German society began to come to terms with its past, a process which inevitably involved an acceptance of the existence of such a past. However, one could argue that the conservative historians of the Historikerstreit who advocated a sanitization of  

² Peter Baldwin., ‘The Historikerstreit in context’ in Peter Baldwin (eds.), Reworking the past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate (Boston, 1990), p. 3.  
the crimes of Nazism were countering the *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, instead creating a form of German nationalism that was not embarrassed by the hiatus of 1933-45. It is this debate, and the events of the twentieth century which facilitated it, that raises important historical and contemporary questions about Germany’s past, its future, and about the integrity and function of scholarship in a democratic society.

The incipient controversy erupted into public view following a responsive letter from Jürgen Habermas, ‘Germany’s pre-eminent and most polarising post-war social philosopher,’5 entitled ‘A Kind of Settlement of Damages’, which appeared in the progressive weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit* on 11 July 1986. In this article, Habermas accused revisionist historians Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer and Andreas Hillgruber of being proponents of a sanitisation and cold-blooded trivialisation of the Holocaust, the Third Reich and its crimes, by normalising German history in a neoconservative way. Habermas’ moderate to left colleagues included Hans Mommsen, Martin Broszat, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, amongst others, with the latter two being intellectually dominant in the period before the *Tendenzwende*, advocating a ‘critical history’ approach. Habermas succeeded in forcing his diverse conservative opponents into a seemingly homogeneous group and perhaps it is at this juncture that one must distinguish between the various standpoints of his adversaries.

One could argue that Habermas’ most important target, though not immediate, was Erlangen scholar Michael Stürmer who, as political advisor to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, had significant political influence. Indeed, Stürmer had advised Kohl on plans for two new museums celebrating modern German history in West Berlin and Bonn. Habermas expounded Stürmer as an obstacle in the process of ‘mental opening’ and the establishment of

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5 Jan-Werner Müller., *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (Yale University, 2000), p. 90.
firm political ties with the West, which the former saw as vital to the Federal Republic for economic and military purposes. Habermas argued that ‘those who want to drive the shame…out of us with phrases such as “obsession with guilt” and those who desire to call all Germans back to conventional forms of their national identity are destroying the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West.’  

In an article in the conservative Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) on 25 April 1986, Stürmer begins and concludes with the phrase, ‘in a country without memory anything is possible.’ He argues that ‘whoever thinks that this (Nazi past) has no impact on politics and the future ignores the fact that, in a land without history, the future is won by those who fill memory, stamp their mark on concepts and give meaning to the past.’ Furthermore, Stürmer stresses his desire for Germans to search for their lost past. ‘The search for a lost past is not an abstract striving for culture and education, it is morally legitimate and politically necessary.’ Mary Fulbrook articulates that Stürmer’s claims amounted to a ‘remarkably non-objective attempt to provide a politically relevant version of the past for current political (and conservative) purposes.’

Ernst Nolte, whose views were first adumbrated in his 1963 work entitled Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche, translated as, Three Faces of Fascism, represented in Evans’ view, ‘the most determined attempts to get around the obstacle of Auschwitz.’ In that work, Nolte argued that Fascism was an ideology fundamentally different from that of Communism. His second book Germany and the Cold War, published in 1974, hinted at comparisons between the crimes of Nazism and the crimes of other nations, even going as far as to argue similarities between Auschwitz and the American prosecution of war in Vietnam. Indeed, his third work

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6 Die Zeit, 11 July 1986  
7 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 25 April 1986  
8 FAZ, 25 April 1986  
9 FAZ, 25 April 1986  
10 Mary Fulbrook., German National Identity after the Holocaust (Cambridge, 1999), p. 126.  
Marxism and the Industrial Revolution, published in 1983, stressed that Communism and indeed Marxism, was a stimulating influence on the development of Fascism. Nolte’s article in the FAZ on 11 July 1986, argued that the crimes of National Socialism followed the causal chain of crimes committed during the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, the Civil War, Collectivization and the terror of the 1930s. Indeed, Nolte posed the questions: ‘Was the Gulag Archipelago not primary to Auschwitz? Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the “racial murder” of National Socialism?’12 In other words, Communism showed Hitler the way. The Final Solution was ‘an “Asiatic deed”, which the Nazis learned from the Bolsheviks as early as 1917-21, adding only the technology of gassing.’13 However, his contention that the Holocaust was unique only in technical terms and could be compared to other Twentieth-Century atrocities, such as those committed by Stalin and Pol Pot, disrupts the construction of the kind of harmonious national historical narrative envisioned by Nolte. A responsive letter from Jürgen Kocka appeared in the Frankfurter Rundschau on 23 September 1986. Here Kocka argued that ‘the singularity of the German development arising from this frame of comparison should not be repressed by comparison with Stalin and Pol Pot.’14 Moreover, Hitler’s crimes cannot be understood as a logical response to Communism, and the Holocaust must be understood as an abject, rather than acceptable past.

However, the controversy surrounding the uniqueness of the Nationalist Socialist extermination of the Jews arguably leads to other implications, namely concerning the meaning of uniqueness within the annals of history. If one terms an event unique, an ahistorical terminology is introduced, therefore decontextualizing the event and rendering it inexplicable. However, as Norman Finkelstein asserts, ‘the Holocaust is unique because it is

12 FAZ, 6 June 1986
14 Frankfurter Rundschau, 23 September 1986
inexplicable, and it is inexplicable because it is unique.'\textsuperscript{15} Nolte’s comparative study proposed that although the Nazi regime was indeed evil and criminal, there were many others like it. Therefore, as Omer Bartov argues, if Germans subscribed to Nolte’s theory they would have ‘no more reason to feel guilty about their past than any other people, and could calmly go about re-establishing a proud national identity based on a history of great political and cultural achievements.’\textsuperscript{16} Nolte’s views were endorsed by the Bonn diplomatic historian Klaus Hildebrand, who argued that Nolte was “showing the way”, ‘because the work does the service of removing the “seemingly unique” quality of the history of the Third Reich.’\textsuperscript{17}

Cologne scholar Andreas Hillgruber raised the question; to what extent could Germans legitimately cast themselves as victims? Particularly the German Wehrmacht in their fight against the Red Army in the east. In his study entitled ‘Two Sorts of Demise, The Destruction of the German Reich and the end of European Jewry,’\textsuperscript{18} Hillgruber sought to elicit empathy for the German soldiers and civilians who fought to contain Communism on the eastern front, while making no connection between the prolongation of the war and the continuation of Nazi mass murder. If subscribed to, a shadow of blame is cast over Germany as a whole. The destruction of European Jewry can be ascribed to a relatively small circle of high-ranking officials, and therefore isolated from the Bulk of the German population, as is advocated by the intentionalist school of thought. However, Hillgruber’s romanticism of the Wehrmacht, based as it was on mass conscription and therefore representative of German society\textsuperscript{19}, has ‘legitimised the actions of German soldiers in the war as being in no way essentially different


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Die Zeit}, 11 July 1986

\textsuperscript{18} Andreas Hillgruber., \textit{Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reichs und das Ende des europäischen Judentums} (Berlin, 1986)

\textsuperscript{19} See Daniel Goldhagen., \textit{Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust} (New York, 1996)
from those of all soldiers.'\(^{20}\) This view was given expression by U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s address at Bitburg, in which he described members of Wehrmacht buried in the military cemetery also as victims of the Nazi regime. However, is on the issue of genocide that the Wehrmacht must arguably emerge as worse than any other modern army. Furthermore, one could also argue that Hillgruber was invoking a much larger contextual right-wing or neoconservative motif from the retrospectives of the end of the war, namely the west’s alleged betrayal of Eastern Europe at the Yalta Conference in February 1945.

In the midst of this debate, the *Historikerstreit* raised fundamental questions regarding the function of historians, in particular their role in interpreting and presenting the past. Should their role be to facilitate “social integration” through what Stürmer claims as the “establishment of inner-worldly meaning”? Or to conjure up of positive images of the past, most notably through Hillgruber’s nostalgic portrait of the German Army battling valiantly to contain Communism during the closing stages of the war. Or should the historian take a more sceptical and critical approach, arriving at an independent and morally just point while simultaneously assisting the process of ‘coming to terms with the past’? A standpoint advocated by Habermas. In his final work before his death in 1987, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi describes an encounter with a fifth-grader in which the boy offered an elegantly simple plan for an escape from Auschwitz. Upon close examination of the camp layout, the boy asserted that Levi could simply have cut the guards throat, stolen his clothes, cut off the power to the search lights and the electrified fence and walked free. Bemused and disturbed by the boy’s nativity, Levi writes that ‘this little episode illustrates quite well the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were ‘down there’ and things as they are represented by the current imagination, fed by approximate books, films

and myths. It slides fatally towards simplification and stereotype... It is the task of the historian to bridge this gap, which widens as we get farther away from the events under examination."\textsuperscript{21} Levi’s observations on the failure of memory within West Germany serve as a useful preface in understanding the \textit{Historikerstreit}.

Why then did Historians debate with such rigour in 1986? To explain, one must examine the socio-political climate of the 1980s. The \textit{Wende}, which began in the late 1970s, was characterised by large political shifts in Europe and the United States, and was cemented in Germany and the United States by the formation of the Conservative Christian Democratic-Free Democratic coalition and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1982 respectively. Richard J. Evans argues that the change in the political climate was accompanied by a change in the intellectual mood. ‘Encouraged by the new government, its publicity machine, and its appointments policy, conservative intellectuals began to seize the initiative back from the Liberals and Social Democrats.’\textsuperscript{22} This \textit{Tendenzwende} saw the achievements of the 1970s denied and reversed. Nolte and his centre-right colleagues accused Habermas and his fellow left-wing historians, of instigating the debate due to their inability to control the shifting political climate. Conversely, the left-wing retort consisted of an attack on the conservatives, accusing them of ‘fostering a form of guilt free nationalism that was no longer possible for a post-Nazi Germany.’\textsuperscript{23} The sharpness of the debate can be partly attributed to what Hans Mommsen articulates as the ‘\textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung} partisanship for Nolte and its condemnation of left-wing intellectuals for supposedly attempting to use the Nazi past for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Primo Levi., \textit{The Drowned and the Saved}, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1988), pp 157-8
\item \textsuperscript{22} Richard J. Evans., \textit{In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the attempt to escape from the Nazi Past} (London, 1989), p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Peter Baldwin., ‘The Historikerstreit in context’ in Peter Baldwin (eds.), \textit{Reworking the past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate} (Boston, 1990), p. 24.
\end{itemize}
A Past That Refuses To Pass

their own purposes. The paper accused the Left of seeking to torpedo the long overdue historical normalisation being championed by the Federal government. 24

Ian Kershaw argues that the dispute was really a ‘debate about contemporary political and moral consciousness, masquerading as historical conflict.’ 25 Similarly, Hans-Ulrich Wehler asserts that ‘if one looks a bit more closely at the Historians’ Debate, examining the controversial theses, motives, and goals of those historians who have been criticised, it becomes very clear that this debate is first and foremost a public political controversy, not merely an academic discussion among specialists…Within the context of the Historians’ Debate, neoconservatives have tenaciously pressed for cultural hegemony in the realm of political ideas.’ 26 Nevertheless, a simple analysis of right vs. left polarity does not do justice to the complexity of themes and issues intertwined in the Historikerstreit. The place of National Socialism in German history, its historical roots and the meanings of its victory and defeat for a post-1945 Germany can perhaps be somewhat identified in the German Sonderweg or ‘special path’ debates.

Although the Sonderweg thesis has many facets, it was crystallised by a contest between two remarkable books; the aforementioned Hans-Ulrich Wehler and his 1973 study Das Deutsche Kaiserreich and David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley’s 1980 Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung, translated and expanded into English as The Peculiarities of German History. The proponents of Germany’s ‘special path’ including Wehler, advocated that nineteenth century Germany was politically backward and consisted of Nation-building from

26 Hans-Ulrich Wehler., ‘Unburdening the German Past? A Preliminary Assessment’ in Peter Baldwin (eds.), Reworking the past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate (Boston, 1990), pp 214-5
above, lacking the experience of a successful bourgeoisie revolution from below. Germany was unique among western nations armed with a maimed path to modernity. Indeed, Helmuth Plessner’s 1959 republished version of Die Verspätete Nation (The Belated Nation), stressed that Germany had missed the seventeenth century, which was crucial for the development of a modern and liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{27} Subsequently, Germany’s desperate efforts to catch up and compensate for its deficiencies in state building and national consciousness enabled it to be led down a ‘special path’, a path in which the end result was the Third Reich. The view that Germany missed a ‘revolution from below’ is countered by Michael Stürmer. He argues that ‘to lament the absence of revolution in our history would be to little understand the agrarian revolution, the demographic revolution, the industrial revolution, the revolution of 1848, and the revolution from above that triumphed with Bismarck.’\textsuperscript{28}

Furthermore, Habermas’ attack on Nolte regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust in the \textit{Historikerstreit} invoked a modified rendering of the \textit{Sonderweg} thesis. Conversely, this view was opposed by those aligned with the necessary corrective study of this ‘uniqueness’ by Blackbourn and Eley. They advocated the modernity of the \textit{Kaiserreich} and the relative strength of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, those structures and processes identified by the proponents of the \textit{Sonderweg} thesis did indeed facilitate the collapse of the Weimar Republic and eventually, the victorious rise of the Third Reich. In addition, the thesis also helps to understand why there were so few barriers against the rise of Fascism in Germany, but it lacks in its explanation of Fascism itself and the events of 1933-45. Kocka argues that ‘the Third Reich was not predetermined by this history, but is unthinkable without it.’\textsuperscript{29}

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Helmuth Plessner., \textit{Die verspätete Nation: über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes} (Stuttgart, 1959)
\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung}, 25 April 1986
\end{itemize}
In addition to the *Sonderweg* debates, continuous change and shifts in perspective between 1945 and 1985 helped form the backdrop for the intense debates of the 1986-7. The end of the 1950s saw the beginning of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a process which led to a remarkably self-critical historical culture. Indeed, it was in 1959 that Theodor Adorno delivered an influential radio talk discussing ‘What does working through the past mean?’ The ‘Hitler Youth’ generation of West German historians, born between 1925-30, began to focus on the recent past (1933-45) in an attempt to find the moral and political lessons for the future. Thus, the ‘old guard’ of German historians, schooled in the Weimar era, politically and methodologically conservative and perpetuating the tradition of German historicism, were pushed aside. Contributing to their demise was the publication of Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961, a challenging and controversial pro-*Sonderweg* thesis on the German race for European hegemony from 1914-18 and the continuity between the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich. Following the heated debate, Evans argues that ‘it became clear that Fischer’s work had been the starting point for a wholesale revision of German historiography undertaken by a generation of younger historians. Historicism was out, social science was in.’

The new generation of scholarly work was twofold; studies of foreign policy and war leadership illustrated the inextricable link between Hitler and the Nazi regime. Conversely, an exploration of the internal agencies, ministries and party-state relations within National Socialism, with an emphasis on internal conflicts and administrative confusion, revealed Hitler’s role as one of less prominence. The question of Hitler as master of the Third Reich or weak dictator emerged. This disharmony in scholarly research facilitated in part the ‘intentionalist-functionalist’ debate, ‘a simple division of labour in a climate of increasing moral and political preoccupation with the Third Reich following long years of relative

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neglect."\textsuperscript{31} The Cumberland Lodge Conference of 1979, themed ‘The Nationalist Socialist Regime and German Society’, provided the ‘platform for a sharp disagreement about the decision-making processes of the Nazi regime’\textsuperscript{32} between the aforementioned intentionalist and functionalist historians. It was the 1979 Conference that prompted Ian Kershaw to write his book \textit{The Nazi Dictatorship, Problems & Perspectives of Interpretation}. In an interview with \textit{Making History}, Kershaw admits that he was ‘struck by the ferocity of the debates and the polarisation into two groups who couldn’t see eye to eye with each other at all. This was actually on the place of Hitler in that regime, and on the question of whether it was ideologically driven by Hitler’s own intentions, or whether it had to be seen as something that was an almost chaotic development driven by structural determinants within that regime, with Hitler as a ‘weak dictator’. Those debates dominated the 1980s and went on well into the nineties.’\textsuperscript{33}

The extreme politicisation of German Universities in the late 1960s, together with the student demonstrations of 1968 had a profound effect on the \textit{Historikerstreit}. The traditionalist camp of Hildebrand, Hillgruber and Stürmer ‘consisted of a cluster of middle aged former liberals who had grown more conservative during the Student Rebellion of 1968. And although speaking with individual accents, the critical group of the Mommsens, Jürgen Kocka and Martin Broszat, was composed of historians from the same generation who had maintained their progressive outlook.’\textsuperscript{34} The revived appeal of Marxist theories on Fascism and the

\textsuperscript{32} Richard Bessel., ‘Functionalists vs. Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years on or Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?’ In \textit{German Studies Review}, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), p. 15.
\textsuperscript{33} http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Kershaw_Ian.html (accessed: 29.4.12)
challenges presented by the social history of Nazism in the mid-1970s, served to further widen the gap between the new generation of leading German historians.

The 1980s were no less problematic for German society in their attempts to address the treatment of the past. The discussion following Ernst Junger’s nomination for the Goethe Preis in 1982, the controversy surrounding the production of Rainer Fassbinder’s potentially anti-Semitic play Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod in Frankfurt in 1985 together with the investigation into Austrian president Kurt Waldheim’s activities during WWII mobilised the media for a showcasing of the Historikerstreit. However, one must also acknowledge the ideological context of the 1980s.

The meeting of U.S. President Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Kohl at the German military cemetery at Bitburg for a wreath-laying ceremony in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of Germany’s unconditional surrender on 5 May 1985 provides an apt contextualisation for the Historikerstreit. Kohl’s invitation to Reagan to visit Bitburg was an audacious step aiming to facilitate the acceptance of the Federal Republic of Germany as a fully-fledged Western democratic nation, and in turn, offset, ‘or at least attenuate the ignominy of Germany’s Nazi past by focusing on its proven democratic virtues and reliable support for Western alliance.’

Indeed, in his speech at Bitburg, Reagan said that ‘we celebrate today the reconciliation between our two nations that has liberated us from the cycle of destruction. Look at what together we've accomplished. We who were enemies are now friends; we who were bitter adversaries are now the strongest of allies.’

The attempts by the West German government to ‘normalise’ the Nazi past are illustrated by Kohl himself. In an article for The Times on 7 May 1985, Frank Johnson wrote that ‘Herr Kohl’s actions and

personality are much less dominated by Germany’s past. He does not see his every diplomatic move in the context of German guilt. He does not deny that guilt, but believes that Germany has atoned for it.\textsuperscript{37} The discovery that SS soldiers, who had participated in the executions of American soldiers, were buried at the Bitburg ceremony raised international concern and facilitated an outpour of West German nationalism, in which a broad spectrum of conservative opinion demanded that a line be drawn under the Nazi past. Significantly, Reagan claimed that all buried at Bitburg were “victims of Nazism”. Whether they were in the stripped uniforms of concentration camp inmates, or in the uniforms of the Waffen-SS, the victim fates of Jews and Germans, were being equated.

Charles Maier proposes the term ‘Bitburg history’ to describe the revisionist-conservative scholars and their attempts to create a proud nationalist future for Germans. While obscuring the coherence and cohesiveness of the revisionist enterprise, Maier succeeds in identifying the aforementioned conservative historians as uniting victims and oppressors while simultaneously rejecting collective guilt. Bitburg history, Maier argues, ‘suggests that the particular edge of Nazi crimes is less cutting given the general record of Twentieth-century massacre and murder…Bitburg cast into relief fundamental questions about historical judgement…It opened the question of whether Nationalist Socialist Germany was itself so special a case in the annals of mass murder…By their inability to discriminate mass reconciliation from revisionism, the participants at Bitburg helped dissolve the inhibitions of historical discourse in Germany.’\textsuperscript{38} For Kohl’s critics on the left, ‘Bitburg was especially problematic because it suggested that democratisation and Vergangenheitsbewältigung were

\textsuperscript{37} The Times, 7 May 1985
\textsuperscript{38} Charles S. Maier., \textit{The Unmasterable Past, History: Holocaust, and German National Identity} (London, 1997), p. 16.
finite processes. With that work now complete, West Germans could leave the unpleasant and shameful Nazi legacy in the past and construct a useable national identity for the future.\textsuperscript{39}

In Germany today, renewed debates on continuity have emerged as an area of central research. Most notably, research has focused on Germany’s colonial era, with comparative studies focusing on the treatment of Jews under Nazism and the treatment of colonised people prior to World War I. In particular, studies into whether or not the biological racist policies of Hitler stemmed from the racial policies of the \textit{Kaiserreich} have been undertaken. Furthermore, this new research has attempted to establish the extent to which these racial policies led to genocides in colonial German Southwest Africa and in the east in the latter stages of the war. Thus, the attempt to explain the position of the abject Nazi past in the broader history of Germany, a unifying issue of the historians of the \textit{Sonderweg} and \textit{Historikerstreit} interludes, currently plays a prominent role in the debates regarding German colonialism and genocide. Indeed, Benjamin Madley argues that the German terms \textit{Lebensraum} and \textit{Konzentrationslager}, both widely known because of their use by the Nazis, were not coined by the Hitler regime; rather they were minted years earlier in reference to German Southwest Africa.\textsuperscript{40} As with the \textit{Sonderweg} debates on continuity however, there are limits to the continuity thesis between German colonialism and Nazism. Birthe Kundrus’ study \textit{Moderne Imperialisten, Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien}, articulates that there was no clear path from Windhoek to Nuremberg. Proponents of this theory point in a number of studies to the prominence of hierarchical rather than biologically racist thinking as crucial during the colonial period. Nevertheless, as Fitzpatrick argues, ‘the questions of


A Past That Refuses To Pass

uniqueness and continuity that lay at the heart of the Sonderweg and Historikerstreit controversies have returned to plague yet another generation of historians. This time however, the transnational, comparative approach, in its ability to ‘contextualise German Southwest Africa within the broader framework of radical colonial violence in European liberal imperialism, offers a way out of the impasse.’

Questions still remain however over whether or not Germany will ever escape the hiatus of 1933-45. Jürgen Kocka argues that ‘the moral, political and anthropological weight of the Nazi experience is such, and its effects on the following decades of German, European and world history are so far-reaching, that the explanation and understanding of National Socialism continues to be the central, most sensitive and controversial issue, both in scholarship and in the public domain.’ Although writing in 1988, Kocka’s view of the dominance of the Nazi legacy in German society is vindicated by Kershaw’s analysis. Now, in a unified Germany within a transformed Europe, Kershaw argues that ‘drawing a line under the Nazi past appears less easily possible. The reawakened problems of Fascism, Racism and Nationalism straddle the decades and ensure a continuing pre-occupation with the Hitler era.’ Perhaps a debate which will fill Germany’s newspapers in the months and years to come is one regarding the republication of Mein Kampf, with the copyright ban due to expire in 2015.

Thus, one poses these difficult questions. Can one come to terms with the past? Should one? Is it not more reasonable, and for purposes of a new democratic beginning more helpful,

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especially in the case of National Socialism and its crimes, to leave the past alone? In a speech made to the German Bundestag during a Ceremony commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe and of National Socialist Tyranny on 8 May 1985, Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker made a fundamental response to these questions. ‘It is not a case of coming to terms with the past. That is not possible. It cannot be subsequently modified or made not to have happened. However, anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.’

Weizsäcker, who nearly forty years earlier had defended his father before a Nuremberg trial, was providing ‘evidence of how far many Germans had come in unequivocally accepting responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich,’ a stark contrast to the attempts to equate all victims at Bitburg just days earlier.

In conclusion, the sixty seven years which have passed from Stunde Null have seen ever changing debates and shifts in perspective, as Germany comes to terms with its past. Due to the sheer mass and complexity of these continuous debates, this paper has omitted many, including Martin Broszat and Saul Friedlander’s dispute over the ‘historisation’ of Nazism, the renewed search for a nation-state and continuity in history after the events of 1989-90, and the Goldhagen debate. Although attacked by the left today, the Vergangenheitsbewältigung, of which uniqueness and comparability are key factors, has been considered a success. One can argue that continuous debate, including harsh, personalised controversies have been vital to this success. The Historikerstreit was born out of a new generation of historians and its timing owed much to the shifting political scene. The protagonists of the 1980s have largely passed into retirement and research of the Nazi era has passed into new hands. ‘With this generational changing of the guard, much of the rancour

45 http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/TCEH/Weiszacker.html (accessed: 9.5.12)
has left scholarly debate on the Third Reich.⁴⁷ However, with this natural development come changed perspectives and new emphases. Ernst Nolte was correct when he proclaimed the Nazi past as ‘a past that will not pass away.’ By having done the unthinkable, ‘Hitler has permanently warped the categories of German history.’⁴⁸

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