

## **Commemoration of War Dead for Peace Education: Implications from the Case of Germany**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on challenges in the commemoration of war dead for peace education, drawing on modes of remembrance of the war dead in Germany as an informative case: In Germany's official remembrance culture 'all victims of war' are mourned. Yet in public and in private divided narratives and interpretations have been cultivated. In this 'memory competition,' the vanishing of the contemporary witnesses of World War II entails challenges but it also offers opportunities for peace education. To take advantage of these, questions must be tackled publicly about what the (different) war dead may mean to us today, and to future generations. A reflective remembrance culture requires historical accuracy but also recognition of the complexity that belies the notion of there being *one* collective memory.

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2017, when election campaigns started for the German federal elections and the European Union had been confronted by a wave of 'Euroscepticism' including 'Brexit,' the banking crisis in Greece and resurging nationalist parties in some member states, the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. – in short 'Volksbund' – a humanitarian organization founded in 1919 and tasked by the German government with recording, maintaining and caring for the graves of German war casualties abroad, launched an unusual poster campaign against Euroscepticism: Images of war cemeteries were depicted together with the slogan 'therefore Europe'; or else with the following statement made by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, on different occasions over the past ten years: 'Those who have doubts about Europe should visit our war cemeteries.'

In the face of the upsurge of nationalist parties across Europe and beyond, it appears in fact to be true that there is a necessity, seventy years after World War II and a hundred after World War I, to remind Europeans of the death toll attributable to ethno-nationalist politics in the past, and of the progress that the European Union represents as a peace project; it has brought about the longest period in history without a war waged between European nations. Nevertheless, the allusion to war dead alone does not make for convincing peace education. It has become a routine phrase in official remembrance practices that 'the dead from wars past shall remind the living to keep the peace.' Yet, is the meaning of their deaths so clear? What exactly is the lesson that we today should or could draw from the – many different – dead of past wars? Most generally speaking, they do remind the living of the preciousness of peace. But that has always been true and has never prevented wars in human history. How can peace education embrace this knowledge and not end in disillusionment?

In this article, I want to scrutinize some conventional assumptions associated with practices of commemorating war casualties that are meant to serve as a reminder to the living to preserve peace. The development of today's established modes of remembrance of the war dead in Germany will serve as an exemplary case to discuss the inherent complexity and challenges connected with the growing distance of time. Here, remembrance of the dead from World War II has been connected with a specific uneasiness: The

historical knowledge that Germany initiated the war and inflicted mass atrocities rendered previous conventions regarding how the war dead are commemorated by the general public unacceptable: The dead German Wehrmacht soldiers could not be regarded as defenders of a good cause nor had the German civilian population been uninvolved in the political developments leading to the war, to displacements of large populations and to genocide. German society immediately after World War II, however, was not ready to engage in defining causes and effects, or perpetrators and victims. The dilemmas entailed in mourning the dead have only occasionally been the subject of societal and political processing and have instead been covered up with the routine compromise to mourn publicly for ‘all victims of war and tyranny.’ In this field of tensions, the imminent ‘vanishing of the contemporary witnesses’ (Frei, 2005) of World War II means a particular set of challenges and opportunities for peace education: Very soon this generation will no longer be present and be able to contribute to, or ‘bear witness’ as we attempt to understand the complicated relationship between individual historical perspectives and collective accountability. At the same time, the loss of so many idiosyncratic experiences and interpretations which were directly co-shaped by personal involvement also offers chances for the development of a more reflective remembrance culture grounded in historical accuracy, without passing over the suffering, nor the individual responsibility for engagement in collective violence (see Parent, 2017, for a related analysis of the postwar intergroup situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

If remembrance of the war dead is to assume significance beyond personal emotionalism and functionalization for particular group identities (and interests), questions need to be tackled publicly about what the life paths of the dead may tell us today and even future generations, in view of our interest in keeping the peace. This peace education perspective requires a conceptual shift in the way we understand and actually *make* memories with our cultural and social practice, for it makes it necessary to take into account the many heterogeneous factors involved in a historical situation, and not to simply reduce them to a common denominator such as the one of tragic ‘victimhood.’ In fact, the case of Germany is a very good demonstration that ‘those who understand memory as a form of competition see only winners and losers in the struggle for collective articulation and recognition’ (Rothberg, 2009, p. 5), and thus hampers a deeper understanding of the complexity of every (not just historical) situation that leads to political violence. My article thus argues for a broadening of the perspectives that guide our perceptions of the past that could let us understand the German experience in a more general context.

To this end, I will explain in a first step why the inevitable passing away of the generation of historical World War II witnesses may offer a chance to develop a more reflective relationship with the past in terms of peace education. The specific fault lines in German public remembrance of the war dead will be presented next, in order to make the problematic consequences of an ‘inability to mourn’ visible (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1967), which is not a phenomenon limited to Germany only but which has become very clear in this particular case. Finally, I will draw conclusions concerning the implications of this case for peace education goals: To prevent group-specific narratives (and their partly apologetic functions) being left untouched as if they were a private matter only, public commemoration must also tackle the ‘difficult dead’ whose individual shares in the paths towards collective violence vary. In the interest of a positive peace, a relationship with war history should be promoted that transcends indifferent victimhood narratives and instead employs multiple perspectives to make the complexity of root causes and concrete individual as well as societal conditions for political violence accessible.

### *Challenge and chance: The passing away of historical witnesses from World War II*

Though the sheer magnitude of the 60 to 80 million people who lost their lives during World War II is impossible to comprehend, it does give us some impression of how great an impact the personal losses must have had on the populations of all the affected nations. For the majority of the War’s survivors, their personal

memories are connected with mourning, whether for family members, friends or neighbors. Moreover, many survivors – civilians as well as members of the military – had themselves experienced traumatizing violence, dehumanization, or permanent injuries. Their sufferings and traumatization were mass phenomena in the war-afflicted countries but have come to be represented in the official national remembrance cultures selectively and in very different ways. Postwar political positions obviously tinged the kind of lessons that were drawn from past atrocities and the group of war victims who were to be mourned in the first place to symbolize these core lessons. In effect, many survivors kept their individual traumata in the subconscious for decades. They were manifested as emotional handicaps or psychosomatic symptoms and had an impact on the next generation; yet these forms of victimhood were largely treated as personal or private issues, and thus disassociated from collective memory, i.e., the ‘metanarrative, which a community shares and within which individual biographies are oriented’ (Eyerman, 2004, p. 66). The question has thus long remained unsettled how the relationship between individual suffering and the societal processes of defining lessons from past wars or other phenomena of mass violence can be made to ‘talk to each other’ in such a way that memories are not instrumentalized for apologetic purposes or a purported competition between the histories of suffering, but instead made fruitful for societal self-enlightenment and peace education.

These questions are of lasting importance whereas the lifetime of surviving witnesses from World War II is reaching its end. Once this generation of the directly affected passes away, so too will the private mourning for those killed during the War, whether they were civilians or soldiers. Remembrance will thus take on an altered significance. As opposed to the generation for which the War was a part of their personal or immediate family biography, the commemoration of the war dead will most probably take on a passed-down meaning for the following generation. If remembrance of the dead should be intentionally maintained beyond the timeframe of the so called ‘communicative memory’<sup>1</sup>, questions of ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ will inevitably arise. Private mourning undertaken by war survivors for the sake of coming to terms with personal losses does not require any justification. This stands in contrast to public remembrance, replacing personal involvement with a message directed towards the present and the future: Public, and especially state-led, commemoration practices aim at preserving certain experiences as well as moral and political lessons within the collective memory. Yet, what do the deaths from back then have to say to us today, and especially to future generations?

Questions of the future relevance and possible forms of remembrance of the past’s war dead also have a material dimension: What significance – if any – could the existing war grave sites have beyond their functions as cemeteries? The departure of the generation of contemporary witnesses marks the loss of personal memories, making possible and also necessitating renewed forms of historical appropriation. This transition will have implications for the ways in which the graves are made use of, and also for the institutions dealing with them: With regard to the German case, the original task of the Volksbund, namely the establishment of war graves, will be completed in the near future.<sup>2</sup> Members, along with donors from the generation of surviving witnesses, have supported this task and the related maintenance work for decades. But their personal concerns lay primarily in the cemetery function of the war graves: The remains of the dead were to be retrieved, insofar as this was possible, and given a proper burial, thus emphasizing their inviolable human dignity and creating a concrete space for mourning. This latter meaning is soon to be lost, and would relegate the official duty of preserving existing war graves eternally – as it is a norm enshrined in humanitarian international law – to cemetery garden work. From the perspective of peace education, such a shift would be a squandered opportunity. War grave sites in themselves have never in history functioned as peace messengers, but they need to be developed as an educational resource if they are to serve such a purpose. Many grave sites from World War II and more recent collective atrocities, such as during the civil wars in former Yugoslavia, may qualify as sites of historically-informed peace education which draws on research and documentation of the concrete paths that led to the breakdown of civility and left behind so many victims.

Whether or not later generations become conscious of such implications and their meaning for social and political practice depends, inter alia, on the extent to which knowledge is made accessible about the different responsibilities for concrete deaths. In light of this, a need exists (not just) in Germany to catch up in terms of critical reflection on and more differentiated examination of the various groups affected, for instance those that are commemorated together on public memorial days as ‘the victims of war and tyranny’; this phrase, which is worded as a compromise while also concealing certain truths, is proof that the different strands of remembrance cultures that have arisen since 1945 each have their own grounding and often run counter to one another (see Margalit, 2010). Germany is an informative case in this regard because fundamental interpretative conflicts in addressing the war dead of the Nazi period and the related war histories become apparent in this context. As moral and political lessons play an influential role in the public practices of remembering, the question how we could or should remember those Germans who were killed or injured through bombing and other acts of war inflicted by the Allied Forces during World War II without relativizing German war guilt is still open. The very ambiguity surrounding this relationship between individual biographies, historical responsibilities and collective memory imposes complexity beyond the specific shape it has taken in postwar Germany.

*Between moral norms and the desire to forget: German public remembrance of the war dead*

Conveying historical experiences to the next generation through public and especially state-led commemorations – such as the festive and ceremonial focus of anniversaries and memorial days; the designation of remembrance sites, along with the construction of memorials and symbolic practices such as wreath laying; the selection and presentation of topics dealt with in state schools – are all meant to carry supra-individual historical relevance and ethical and political lessons to the younger generation. Public memory and shared remembrance seek to anchor certain interpretations of the past within the collective memory. In other words, it requires a minimum amount of consensus in how history is interpreted and using this as a basis for the fundamental characteristics projected as a common political identity. For public remembrance of the deceased, this means commemorating, first and foremost, those who sacrificed their lives *for* the current political community and the central values it represents. In this vein, Reinhart Kosseleck has related the significance-granting interpretation of the public cult of the deceased to the ‘pledge of the surviving’ (Kosseleck, 1994, p. 9) – meaning that the survivors and those born later enjoy the fruits of what the deceased fought for or defended, and are thus obliged to give their thanks. The prerequisites that would have provided a political foundation for such a framing of commemoration of the war dead did not, however, exist in postwar Germany: ‘As horrible as defeat and death in war may be, their atrocity would have been alleviated by the moral triumph of a collective project that could have persisted even after a defeat and could even have earned the tacit respect of the victors – a heroic war of liberation and independence, for example. But moral justification of the war was entirely and radically denied for the Germans. The aim, the form, and the circumstances of the war were criminal and were so labeled by the victors. The shame connected with the German name from then on was a matter of collective identity. The trauma of 1945 did not only result from ruin and rape, death and defeat, but also from the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity’ (Giesen, 2004, p. 115).

And yet, in spite of this collective loss of moral integrity, the German survivors of World War II, among them millions who were bombed out, became widows or orphans, were disabled or displaced, were, without a doubt, far from uniform in terms of their concrete historical responsibility, political judgment, orientation and expectations. This must also have been the case in their retrospective evaluation of the Nazi regime, in their opinions about who was to blame for the war, belligerence, conduct of the war and armistice, about the role of the Wehrmacht in the war of extermination in the East, and about responsibility for the mass murder of Europe’s Jewish population as well as millions of other victims of war crimes and crimes against

humanity. Although a few well-known intellectuals such as Martin Niemöller and Karl Jaspers or the attorney general Fritz Bauer soon became engaged in questions of guilt and the concrete identification of historical responsibility, many Germans willingly pushed these conflict lines aside, remaining silent about them or suppressing them: 'Postwar Germany responded to the disclosure of the Holocaust by a "communicative silence" (Lübbe, 1981) about the unspeakable or inconceivable horror (...)' (Giesen, 2004, p. 116), that is, through a tacit agreement to not make it an issue. In respect of their own possible sufferings during the war, this eloquent silence implied the 'inability to mourn' (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1967), and for a variety of reasons. Not only did the victimhood of the Germans appear slight next to the war crimes and atrocities that had been committed by the Germans, but the generations that had been born and raised in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been exposed to educational ideals and practices which rewarded the suppression of emotions. During the Nazi period this had become systematic with the aim of generating willing and emotionally cold soldiers. To this end, mothers were for instance advised in the standard guide book for 'the German mother' not to satisfy their babies' needs immediately but to leave a crying child alone. Such disturbances of bonding in early childhood have had long-term effects on emotional regulation capacities (Kratzer, 2018): This kind of socialization contributed to the production of 'willing executioners' of Nazi policies, whether it is regarded as a mass phenomenon (Goldhagen, 1996) or not; and it amplified the 'inability to mourn' that Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich (1967) drew attention to.

Moreover, in the everyday life of the postwar world it was apparently not hard to give priority to pragmatic mastering of daily necessities, to organizing personal survival, and often to rationalizing or forgetting personal participation in or else unopposed tolerance of the crimes carried out by the Nazi regime. The transition to normal life and the reconstruction of postwar Germany in the 1950s that led to the 'economic miracle' in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was testament to the fact that critical self-reflection was not the main desire in the country at the time. On the other hand, considering that parts of the population were still enmeshed in Nazi ideology, and taking into account the disparate individual suffering and/or even profits gained from the War, along with very widely varying conditions at play at the supposed 'zero hour', such willingness for self-inquiry and societal self-enlightenment could hardly have been expected. One ought not to talk about rope in the house of the hangman, lest one face resentment, said Theodor Adorno, referring to the unspoken agreement of guilt deflection in postwar West German society. Yet encapsulated in the eloquent silence was also a traumatic shock. Sociologist Bernhard Giesen named this conflation of shame and trauma as cause for the effective 'coalition of silence,' for 'those who had directly participated in the genocide, obviously, stayed silent in order to avoid imprisonment. Neither the individual trauma of rape, death, and dehumanization, nor the collective trauma of guilt and defeat could be turned into the theme of conversation' (Giesen, 2004, p. 117).

Apart from the fact of Germany being divided, which resulted in differing official historical perspectives for East and West Germany,<sup>3</sup> the dissociation from individual blame and compliancy entailed questions which were generally too complex to permit the articulation of interpretations supported by society of the country's Nazi past and World War II immediately after 1945. The very ambivalence towards the complex separation between (criminal) offenders and victimized groups, as well as between individual blame and spreading responsibility across society, has been one reason for the denial and outright truth avoidance by criminals and accomplices among the generation of the involved. What dominated societal practice was initially the desire to simply pass over the Nazi and war past and keep remembrance within the realm of private mourning for 'their own' dead. Nevertheless, in both halves of divided post-World War II Germany, by the late 1940s an apologetic narrative had already emerged. In his book on German commemoration after 1945, Gilad Margalit (2010) calls this first overarching narrative 'the reconciliation narrative.' It stressed the sufferings of so-called average Germans, and played down individual as well as shared responsibilities for past crimes and for the war.

While official commemoration policies were established under the recognizable influence of the different occupation forces, focused on remembrance of fallen Red Army soldiers and the victims of the Communist resistance in eastern Germany, and on the Nazi persecution of political opponents and Jews in western Germany, respectively, the tradition of a 'Day of National Mourning' had already been revived by 1948, that is, even before the official establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany. This particular commemorative ritual was an invention of the Volksbund at the end of World War I with the intention of expressing national solidarity with the surviving dependents of the fallen soldiers. Its reintroduction is a telling expression of the commemoration narrative which had emerged during the late 1940s among Germans and which did not tackle the set of complex problems connected with public mourning for the fallen members of the Wehrmacht. Alexandra Kaiser's study of the history and the changing practices of the 'Day of National Mourning' (Kaiser, 2010) shows clearly that from an early point in time the dead Wehrmacht soldiers were viewed uncritically as 'victims' on this occasion. The Volksbund functioned in fact as a medium for channeling nationalist heroism in the post-World War II years. It was not until the late 1960s, when criminal tribunals against Nazi atrocities took center stage, that the questionability of such continuity in national remembrance was raised for discussion in the wider West German public. The prosecution of judicial offences and debates about what fell within the domain of litigation and what did not were crucial for the gradual development of self-criticism in the political culture of the Federal Republic. However, attention initially remained fixed on concentration and extermination camps and thus produced what Margalit (2010) identifies as the second master narrative in the culture of remembrance in postwar Germany, namely 'the Jewish Holocaust narrative' which took hold in West German society from the 1960s onwards. The related reckoning with German society's participation in Nazi crimes made more differentiated perspectives on the Nazi history emerge, and challenged not just the 'coalition of silence' still being observed in society but also convenient self-inclusion in the framing of all-encompassing suffering in the war and victimhood.

In spite of this shift in attention towards one particular group of true victims, the war crimes committed by soldiers of the Wehrmacht and this military institution's key role in the murder of the Jewish population only entered the scope of attention very much later. Hence, the tension between the two 'master narratives' of remembrance remained unresolved, but was increasingly merged into the compromise formula of collective grieving for the 'victims of war and tyranny.' The ceremonial commemoration of the dead on the Day of National Mourning begins with these words, and since 1993 this common denominator has also been quoted in the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany, dedicated to 'the victims of war and dictatorship,' the 'Neue Wache' in Berlin.<sup>4</sup> At least this latter memorial sparked far more controversy while it was being planned, to wit, that victimhood is represented in the 'Neue Wache' by the Pietà statue 'Mother with her Dead Son' which Käthe Kollwitz created in memory of her son who had died a soldier in World War I.

### *Conflict lines under the umbrella of victimhood*

The development of a public culture of remembrance in the Federal Republic of Germany was complicated by the facts: World War II had taken a toll of casualties across a wide range of people who had occupied varying positions prior to the 12-year Nazi regime, in the years preceding and after the Second World War; not even minimal societal consensus had been reached about the evaluation of that recent history. A day for remembering the invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht was not specified until a politically-motivated citizen's association<sup>5</sup> established the 1<sup>st</sup> of September as Anti-War Day in 1957. It took until the 1960s before any notable public discussion of contemporary history and its root causes was brought about by the capture and deportation of holocaust 'mastermind' Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires and his subsequent court tribunal in Israel. Public awareness stayed focused on this in the following years because of a series of concentration camp tribunals in West Germany (the Auschwitz proceedings in Frankfurt on Main from 1963-65, the Sobibor

proceedings in Hagen from 1965-66, the second Treblinka proceedings from 1964-65 and the third from 1969-70 in Dusseldorf). Although the Nazi crimes were already known to the public immediately after the War, when the Americans forced Germans to visit sites and watch films of the atrocities committed, this did not trigger any considerable coming to terms with what had happened. Neither were the court proceedings that had been held under the aegis of the Western Allies directly following the War comparable in their effects with the tribunals in the 1960s. These broke the persistent silence, which had been an act of conflict avoidance, denial and trauma suppression by many direct historical witnesses. Micha Brumlik, former director of the Fritz-Bauer Institute in Frankfurt, called the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials the turning point in the German population's confrontation with its own criminals. While the witnesses in the trials reported on the brutalities of everyday camp life on Hessian Radio (Hessischer Rundfunk), with both German and international newspapers publicizing details of what happened at the Birkenau extermination camp – turning Auschwitz into a symbol of industrial genocide of Europe's Jewish population par excellence – in December 1963, members of Frankfurt's police unabashedly saluted SS members being tried (Brumlik, 2004). Such scandals led to growing national as well as international media coverage of the crimes under the Nazi regime, and even though this was driven by only a minority of society at the time, this socio-political history of conflict became formative in West Germany's remembrance policies. It crystallized in the form of a moral obligation during the 1970s to maintain an authoritative reminder of the plunder and murder of Jewish and politically persecuted peoples in the public remembrance culture.

The more complicated question of whether or not an imperative to commemorate Germany's remaining civilian and military victims of World War II also existed, as well as how this could eventually be brought into the general remembrance culture, was largely avoided. The problem in addressing these dead lay in the fact that collective attribution of either victim or criminal status clearly did not work: Among the dead left behind by Allied bombings of large German cities, or those who died while fleeing, were fervent Nazis, more traditional nationalists, collaborators who had no political leanings, and 'internally emigrated' members of the opposition; but also countless numbers of children, far removed from any political blame. Zealous Nazis could also be counted among the fallen soldiers of the German Wehrmacht, as well as pathological sadists and war criminals. Wehrmacht soldiers were spectators, confidants and accomplices. However, the fallen also included politically indifferent young men with no burning desire to drive the conquest campaign for the German Reich to the far ends of Europe, but wishing rather to simply survive. It is even within the realm of possibility that some of them acted humanely in terms of the modern laws of war.

While it has since been proven that the institution of the Wehrmacht was active in creating the plans and means for conducting the war in Eastern Europe, utilizing the services of forced labor slaves and carrying out or assisting in the extermination of local populations including the Jews, detailed historical investigation remains the only way to determine the innocence or blame of individual war participants. The same applies to the historical fact that Nazi Germany instigated the World War and that the German populace carried through with little resistance the systematic disenfranchisement of Germany's Jewish population, political opponents, or those labeled hereditarily sick in the years before the war. Individual perpetrators and accomplices also elude identification as do assumptions of innocence without specific knowledge of who acted in what way, because German society was not homogenous, even during Nazi rule. The resulting political and moral dilemmas tended to be covered up with the all-inclusive compromise formulation in the official remembrance discourse that mourns all 'victims of war and tyranny' with the intention of glossing over lines of conflict. And yet, the obscuring inclusive phrase, *inter alia*, has the effect that explicit (and exclusive) mourning for Germany's civilian and military war dead has turned into an ideal topic for symbolizing opposing interpretations of history and denial of guilt: Historical revisionists and right wing extremists push this point and intentionally stage commemoration acts, for example by means of events remembering only the German civilian victims of war bombings. The perfidious phrase 'bombing holocaust,' introduced by National Democratic Party (NPD) politicians and neo-Nazi organizations at their 'memorial marches' in Dresden, is one

example of such a targeted political functionalization of one particular group among the war dead, with the aim of blurring the specificity of Nazi crimes and rehabilitating the Wehrmacht. In its political rhetoric, postwar Germany had constructed narratives to encompass exactly this option. Phrases like ‘the dark past,’ or the ‘catastrophe of German history’ (see Dubiel, 1999) moved historical responsibility into a zone of vagueness. Such formulations may have helped keep the societal peace between different groups of war survivors, but they also disguised the agency behind the atrocities.

Commemorating the various victims of war and of persecution under one umbrella made it politically feasible to include German soldiers who fell in World War II in the mourning on National Memorial Day, although they had not fought for a democratic Germany but in an unjust war and in the name of a totalitarian regime. Apart from the official Memorial Day remembrance ceremonies that include them, the fallen soldiers of the Wehrmacht have also been commemorated on memorials in many towns and communities, as well as among the forces of the West German Bundeswehr. Military comrades’ and veterans’ associations that have maintained remembrance of the dead since the end of the last War have regularly done so without broaching the issue of the political and military turning point of 1945, or the differences between the two World Wars. In many communities and at many military sites existing locations for the remembrance of the fallen in the Franco-German wars and/or World War I were simply enlarged with the dates 1939-45 and the names of the local fallen soldiers added. This imparts a kind of timeless, supra-historical aura to the soldiers’ deaths, blurring out the specifics of World War II (see Echternkamp, 2008).<sup>6</sup>

Although the newly-created Army of 1955 was meant to be seen as a new beginning, negating the heritage of the Wehrmacht in the reformation of the West German armed forces, personal continuities and solidarity among army comrades ensured a stubborn and continuing remembrance of the fallen World War II soldiers in barracks of the German Bundeswehr throughout the 1950s and 60s. This clearly contradicted the new normative principle of the democratic ‘citizens in uniform,’ so that Kai-Uwe Hassel, the Defense Secretary at the time, felt obliged to adjust the traditions of the German Bundeswehr per decree: The Prussian military reformers, the military resisters in the Third Reich, and the genuine conception of the German Bundeswehr as a democratically integrated army were the cornerstones of this prescribed understanding of tradition from 1965 on. In 1982 and in 1995, the Defense Secretaries again felt urged to clarify the matter, stating that no tradition could justify the unjust regime of the Third Reich (Hans Apel), and that troop divisions and soldiers of the Wehrmacht were, at its peak, enmeshed in the crimes of the Nazi regime in view of the fact that the Wehrmacht was a core organization of the Third Reich. This meant that the Wehrmacht was ultimately ‘not an institution worthy of forming the basis of a tradition’ (Rühe, 1995, p. 945). For the politics of commemoration, the fallen German soldiers of World War II could therefore not play a role in the sense of having made a public contribution to the meaning of the democratic constitutional state, but rather ‘their political power of symbolism found its complete expression *ex negativo*’ (Echternkamp, 2008, p.55) – as a sheer reminder of senseless death for a bad cause, even though some individuals possibly went to war in the belief that they were conferring a worthy service for their German fatherland.

### *Enduring fault lines over generations?*

The negative assessment of the Nazi period and of the role of the Wehrmacht has certainly not been supported by all, and the refusal to accept the historical judgment was not restricted to the immediate postwar decades. One instance where this troubling fact became evident was in 1985, when then German Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker designated May 8 German Liberation Day (‘Tag der Befreiung der Deutschen’) on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender. His public statement that May 8, 1945 ‘liberated all of us from the inhumanity and tyranny of the National-Socialist regime’ (Weizsäcker, 1985) meant a turning point, especially against the background of Weizsäcker’s own biography, as a former



Wehrmacht member, and his political party affiliation with the conservative Christian Democrats. Explicitly giving it importance ran counter to attempts at disassociating past crimes against humanity from allegedly seduced 'bona fide' soldiers and German civilians. Among conservative circles and also within his own party, even as late as 1985, Weizsäcker's rejection of this narrative met with indignation.

Even though more than 30 years have since passed, there is no doubt that particular remembrance communities continue to exist within German society (see Cornelißen, 2012; Wernstedt, 2005), and their divergent views on German Liberation Day will not fade away automatically as historical witnesses pass away. The recent upsurge of right wing parties across Europe, including those in Germany, has, on the contrary, even widened some of the fault lines and brings a host of relativizing narratives to the fore again. The 'rupture in civilization' at Auschwitz (Diner, 1988) has rightly stood in the foreground of historical consciousness since the 1960s, still triggering deep-seated distress among the following generations, leading to history workshops and initiatives for researching Nazi history at the local level. All this, however, is only one part of the historical impact. Repression, denial and even rationalization of the atrocious crimes committed by the Nazis have still resurfaced in every generation. Given the German unification and the fact that East Germany had followed partly different strands in official commemoration, contradictory effects have continued to exist, and competing interpretations of history are continuously being brought into circulation.

The self-victimizing discourse of the 'children of war' is illustrative in this regard: In the wake of debates among historians during the 1980s, this term was introduced by contemporary witnesses who had experienced World War II as children and wished to have their victimization recognized. These 'children of war', who were psychologically and/or physically damaged by the events they experienced, have started voicing their traumatization in past years. The fact that individual war traumas affected their quality of life negatively is not to be denied. However, the discourse surrounding the German 'children of war' is marked by what Michael Rothberg calls the 'memory competition' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 11): Undoubtedly influenced by their traumatic memories from childhood, these people often over-emphasize their own painful experiences on the home front, thus ignoring collective reflection upon their country's responsibility for the war, let alone admitting it. This effect of understanding memories as if they were in a competition with other memories and tied to a struggle for recognition has been analyzed as an agonizing problem by Michael Rothberg in which 'many people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3).

The fact that discrepancies exist between public and private spheres of communication with regard to the narration of historical interpretation sustains Rothberg's diagnosis of the 'competitive memory' problem. While the official public remembrance culture of Germany is morally and politically obliged to pay tribute to the primary victims of persecution and murder, based on the historical facts, quite differing narratives and depictions of the Nazi period and the war can still be communicated in private remembrance practices, and often this seems to follow the zero-sum logic. In other words, private commemoration stories primarily focus on sufferings experienced by family members as the result of bombings, war imprisonment and escape from the Red Army. Mention of the disappearance of the Jews, of the Roma and Sinti population, of the political opposition and other persecuted groups from German public life in the 1930s and early 1940s are practically absent from this private communicative memory, as well as the presence of millions (!) of forced laborers in wartime Germany. One explanation for this is that most do not want to link their family with the crimes of the Nazi period, and that young people also avoid confronting the possibility that their (great-)grandparents may well have been undecided, ignorant or even active in the context of the ideology and related crimes, perhaps bearing irrefutable blame (see the impressive empirical research on this aspect in: Welzer, Moller, and Tschugnall, 2002; Thiessen, 2007).

Parallel practices involving the formation of selective histories of victimization (including legends) around the role of the Wehrmacht and the allegedly limited responsibility individual soldiers had in the war of extermination are documented: ‘The statements, all added together, come to the conclusion that one was not an offender, but rather a victim of history’ (Heer, 2005, p. 114). It must be conceded that – at least – history revisions such as these demonstrate that a societal consensus has developed at the level of negative moral evaluation of the Nazi regime and World War II over the years. They also bear witness to the interests that are being served by different social groups’ narratives of victimization. However, the dialogical interactions among the different historical perspectives remain invisible as long as the ‘competitive memory’ mode that Michael Rothberg’s work draws attention to is not broken open. The gradual passing away of historical witnesses offers an opportunity, *inter alia*, by means of peace education, to do exactly this and work towards overcoming the competitive positioning of victims in collective memory narratives.

*Should the dead bury the dead?*

Considering the unease associated with how, concretely, to commemorate the German ‘war victims’ of World War II, would it not be best to just let the matter be, simply accepting the gradual passing away of the historical witnesses, with their personal memories and desire for places of mourning; perhaps even seeing the development of the times as a ‘liberation from the historical witnesses’ (quoted as ‘some people’s view’ in Ueberschär, 2007, p. 6) who insist on their personal views and experiences of the past being recognized? If the assumption holds true that collective memory serves collective identity formation, is there not a necessity to really reconsider what deserves further commemoration, and not focus so strongly on World War II any longer? Not least in importance is the point that the historically dead have in the meantime been joined by more recent ‘war victims’: Germany has been involved in a military conflict in Afghanistan and Bundeswehr soldiers died there. Additionally, Germany’s population has become more heterogeneous in the past decades as the result of immigration, meaning that the generational memories existing in German society have become increasingly pluralistic.

Immigrants mourn the victims of their own wars or genocides, victims who are hardly included in the public conscience in Germany, if at all: refugees of international and civil wars in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia or Lebanon. Public remembrance that is exclusively concentrated on World War II would certainly not be just in this situation – also presenting a novel challenge for the didactics of history in state schools. According to historian Christopher Cornelißen, ‘the hermetic metanarratives of national remembrance cultures that were mostly connected exclusively to individual communities have lost their right to exist’ (Cornelißen, 2012, p. 7). In fact, the previously quoted European perspective, which Jean-Claude Juncker directed at German war cemeteries gives expression to a transnational reception of war history that has developed over the past decades. Responding to a question about the meaning of war graves, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Sandweiler German War Cemetery, Juncker said: ‘Those who doubt, those who also are in despair over Europe (...) should visit a cemetery for soldiers. There one can see where ideas of non-Europe, of peoples against peoples, of not desiring to be united, of the inability to be united, are all bound to lead. War cemeteries are therefore (...) permanent testimonies to the sacred obligation to not allow the European friendship to end, so that despite all trials and tribulations, despite all constraints, despite all problems, despite all moments of weakness, despite all doubt and sometimes desperation, it must be resolutely continued.’ (Juncker, 2005)

That war cemeteries unequivocally advance the idea that (mostly) young men have been sent to the battlefield at all times in the name of a reputedly greater cause is nothing new. This is true of the cemeteries for World War I, and also for those of the Franco-German Wars, their existence not having prevented any further violent conflicts. There are primary characteristics of World War II, however, that distinguish it from

previous military conflicts, and thus place its war graves in a different context: (1) the hitherto unprecedented character of Germany's waging a racist war of extermination in Eastern Europe, where the applicable laws of war were deliberately disregarded and civilians systematically killed on purpose; (2) the fact that it created new alliances and solidarities across national boundaries – also on both sides of the political divide; and (3) the war's eventual impact on the political will to overcome historical animosities among the nations in postwar Europe, leading traditional enemies to achieve reconciliation under the banner of Europe. For the sake of teaching peace, these moments are important achievements, and are even more important in view of the European Union's current political and identity crises. Although it may not stand to reason at first, some 'German' war graves are, in fact, especially suitable for methodical reflection upon these insights.

One of the peculiarities of World War II – waged as a war of extermination in Eastern Europe, thus, in part, bringing about the 'denial of all things civilized without precedent' (Fischer, 2005) – is that it led to war graves which are not exclusively for soldiers. The civilian population had never before been pulled into this sort of 'total war' and its accompanying reign of death to such a large extent. This can be experienced at war graves, where, in some cases, executed forced laborers are buried alongside members of the Waffen-SS or Wehrmacht soldiers. Historical research on the differing life paths of people from various parts of Europe that intersect at such cemeteries entail opportunities for education on the conditions that made the mass violence possible in the first place. It is exactly the fact that evidently not all are equal in death that make such war graves 'useful' as representations of a particular history of mass violence.

Another dimension that deserves to be studied with an eye to the interpretation of the causes and the costs of war concern the controversies addressing the specific politics of commemoration, which have been debated over time. These include issues such as the layout of mass grave sites as an expression of a particular political imagery (see Fuhrmeister, 2007), the wording of commemorative texts, and the scope of caretaking tasks – carried out on behalf of Germany by and with the Volksbund, but in many cases across Germany also carried out by municipalities. After considerable delay, and at times significant pressure from outside the Volksbund in regard to caring adequately for the remains of deceased victims of Nazi violence (see Kaiser, 2010; Keller, 2000, who works through one exemplary case<sup>7</sup>), the Volksbund was finally persuaded to provide them with caretaking, the moral norm of humanitarian fairness also implying that these dead should not be buried as nameless 'war victims,' where personal identification is possible. Strengthened in part by the generational shift within the institution, historical accuracy in regard to documentation of the graves and the people buried in them on commemorative and memorial plaques has in many instances improved. Such information can be used together with changes documented over time to foster a critical understanding of both political iconography, and what Rothberg (2009) conceptualizes as the 'multi-directionality of memory': War graves are at the same time sites, symbols, and results of the ways in which different individual and collective actors engage in the making of memory, and thus 'demonstrate the stakes of the past in the present' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 6).

The further peculiarities of World War II – the wounds inflicted across nations and the will for European reconciliation built upon the rubble – also give war graves meaning: many have become sites of congresses and work camps organized by the Youth Work Division of the War Graves Commissions. Educational programs<sup>8</sup> are enjoying remarkable success as they bring together young people across borders and inform them about the specific facts of a given site and allow young people from various nations to undertake historical research together; for they offer them a space for re-interpretive 'placemaking' practices (McEvoy-Levy, 2012) – currently still with support from historical witnesses. Whether this will also be the case in the future, once World War II has become a historical event of times long past, remains an open question. There are no long-term experiences with enterprises of this kind because the use of war gravesites for peace work through international youth congresses was only developed after 1945 and did not exist before that. That young people

of today are drawn to these programs is certainly not totally independent of the fact that the communicative ‘three-generation horizon’ of World War II has so far remained within view.

*Peace education’s demands on war dead commemoration*

Remembering the war dead of the past is not a self-evident act for succeeding generations, nor does it necessarily serve the promotion of peace, democratic values, or human rights. For peace education to be effective in this latter sense, certain conditions must be met. The onward march of time always brings about a paradigm shift from personal mourning to public remembrance. Through this, the levels of remembrance – Aleida Assmann (2006) distinguishes among individual, social, political and cultural remembrance – are changing, losing their relative importance as a result of the ever-growing temporal distance; opening up the risk of remembrance being reduced to mere performance of rituals. That said, the shift in perspectives also presents new opportunities, in that it contains the potential for greater weight of evidence-based knowledge compared with the interest-based narratives of particular groups. In particular, the new generation is less influenced by the highly potent subjective versions of history told to them by their family members in the context of close-knit social bonds. Rather, their access to history has to rely on varied sources – as is the case for historians – thus increasing the probability that historical facts and differentiated perspectives will be attained, allowing questions regarding appropriate assessment criteria, empathy and explanatory concepts to arise in the midst of divergent interpretations. One of the core aims of peace education concerns exactly the methodical development of such competencies in source assessment and self-reflection, or ‘complexity thinking’ (Ratković and Wintersteiner, 2010): ‘It is a non-linear, complex process to go from the actors, their contradictions, their assumptions and attitudes to the understanding of the structural and cultural deeper dimensions, which propagate the violent conflict constellation’ (Graf, Kramer, and Nicolescou, 2010, p. 79).

In spite of the gains which greater distance promise, some risks are also striking: Historic curiosity is very often inspired by personal relations and an emotional identification with a particular group. The experiences from the youth work programs of the War Graves Commission mentioned above are telling in this respect: young people are moved when they discover how young many soldiers were when they died and develop an interest in finding out more about the events that lie behind a grave. This in itself is, however, not sufficient to produce an awareness that ‘recognizes the aporia of responsibility’ (Rothberg, 2009, p. 265). From the perspective of peace education, an essential factor for the future use(fulness) of the remembrance of the war dead is whether or not it is possible to instill within people a level of awareness which considers the causes beyond simplistic codifications of good and evil over a longer and longer period of time. This criterion of a critical remembrance culture requires highly diligent historical specification in regard to the dead of World War II – particularly for the Germans – so that all-encompassing ‘war victim’ semantics that may serve a revisionist blurring of boundaries between groups of victims and perpetrators are replaced with notions that consider the multipart complexity of political mass violence more precisely.

Precision is also necessary in order to counter the frivolous attempts at ‘closing the historical file.’ For this reason, historian Rolf Wernstedt cited the unconditional honoring of the Nazi’s main victims a historical obligation and necessity for *any* German commemoration practice: ‘For the Germans, these mass crimes must be the starting point for reflection at any remembrance or reappraisal (...) This is history’s yardstick.’ (Wernstedt, 2010, p. 31-34) For peace and human rights education, the ‘extreme history of the 20th century’ means a repository ‘with all forms of politically, socially and culturally initiated violence’ (Knigge, 2010, p. 14) that must not leave the impression that there were no alternatives to the use and toleration of violence. One way of countering such impressions is to study biographies and social situations which illustrate the scope of possible agency even under difficult circumstances. Grave sites of World War II which can prompt this sort of self-guided research should be made use of. It would be a fatal mistake to exclude these sites and

thus reproduce the postwar ‘inability to mourn’ on a different level; or perhaps even insinuate that any consideration of those who died during the war, either as German soldiers or as home front civilians involves having to choose sides. The contemporary resurgence of right-wing nationalism should serve as an inducement to prevent exactly these kinds of false appropriation of the dead.

As cemeteries that are associated with pedagogical endeavor, specific grave sites are in fact confronted with challenges quite similar to the ones faced by sites of Nazi crimes, which turned out to be constitutive in the development of an education on national memorials, and especially so-called ‘holocaust education,’ or an ‘education after Auschwitz.’ The latter is, *inter alia*, concerned with the question of how the crime scenes of Nazi violence – which are obviously often also cemeteries – can be used to trigger reflection instead of emotions alone, through the use of suitable didactics. Theodor Adorno’s demand of all education was that Auschwitz must not happen again (Adorno, 1971), and whether in paraphrases or in exactly these words the educational goal of violence prevention is found in school curricula all over Germany. Experience proves, however, that the practical application of this principle must go beyond appellative rituals. The fact that societal circumstances change must also be taken into consideration. In the past thirty years, research on conditions for an ‘education after Auschwitz’ has had to consider not just the disappearance of the contemporary witnesses and survivors of the atrocities. Further challenges arise from German society’s increased diversity in terms of national origin and family memories – frequently also containing memories of more recent atrocities – and also from processes of globalization and the impact of European as well as German national unification.

Just like memorials, war grave sites can be used as starting points for historical and civic education that aims at transcending pity for the victims. Remembrance of the past and the learning of human rights in contemporary society and for tomorrow are two sides of the same coin. This should be in the foreground rather than the (presumed) historical authenticity of the places, as this moment tends to mystify the sites rather than make them understandable for purposes of research and education on the causes of violence and on violence prevention. In other words, the primary concern of peace education is to sensitize people to general conditions leading to violence, both in belief and action, aimed at the present and the future. In order to achieve this, connections to the present must be established, such as highlighting current human rights violations and attempting to resolve the animosities persisting in our own world.

Theodor Adorno spoke of the imperative within peace education to make historical events recognizable in their fundamental actuality. He labeled this the ‘turn to the subject,’ and argued that ‘one must recognize the mechanisms that make people capable of committing such acts, identifying these mechanisms oneself and seeking to avoid that they should ever again come into being, and all this by awakening the general consciousness of these mechanisms’ (Adorno, 1971). Turning to the subject implies confrontation with the varied assumptions and frameworks for interpreting the world, and the variance of this is all the greater the more pluralistic ways of life become within society. Along with the context of the subject, which today is socialized into a far more individualized society than during Adorno’s time, the historiographic discourses have also changed. This shift cannot remain without consequences for didactics addressing memorials or the sites of war grave: Attempts at a historiographic universalization of the Nazi crimes (such as the approach fostered by Levy and Sznajder, 2001, 2005; Sznajder, 2016) reframe the historical interpretation so as to uncover the universal meaning of historical examples of political violence; which contains its own dilemmas and risks. A substantial number of historians have pointed this out since the 1990s, as the past collaboration with the Nazi regime among European neighbors and the deportation of the Jewish population have been increasingly dealt with, this has led to a certain ‘Europeanization of the Holocaust.’ Michael Jeismann posed the provocative question of whether ‘blame as Europe’s new foundation myth’ (Jeismann, 2000, p. 454-458) was being constructed, warning of the trivializing effects and of the morally and intellectually arbitrary exploitation of history for the demands of the present day.

Indeed, a fundamental tension is inherent in employing perspectives that aim at an abstraction from the specificity of concrete historical facts, and peace pedagogical work, whether at the remembrance sites of Nazi crimes or at war grave sites, has to achieve a delicate balance in this regard and negotiate a path between the challenges of interest-based attempts at ‘universalization and historization’ (Gryglewski 2016). Consideration of cross-cutting lines of approach is on one hand especially promising for the normative desire to advance a deep understanding of historical conjunctures. They direct attention to the many dimensions and multi-faceted root causes of historical examples where civilizing norms and humanitarian values were dismantled, ideals turning this into the basis of social action for a peace culture. They must on the other hand not become a handy tool for functionalizing history in such a way that true historical responsibilities are blurred or relativized. Since history is always filtered, documented and understood from a particular perspective, it is among the most important (not only peace) educational goals to provide the key abilities for distinguishing memories from both historiography and from historical facts.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘communicative memory’ refers to the oral transmission of personal experiences, which is mostly limited to three generations (i.e., 80/90 years) and ends with the death of its participants. The narrations that make up the communicative memory are transient and change with time, but they are characterized by their strong impressiveness: Familial stories are told in the language of close and highly emotional daily relations. This is an extremely effective mechanism for their transmission.

<sup>2</sup> The ‘Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.’ is a non-commercial humanitarian organization. It was founded in 1918 at the end of World War I in order to express solidarity and organize practical help for the families of fallen soldiers. The Volksbund is tasked by the German state with registering the German war dead abroad and with taking care of the graves of the soldiers killed in action who are entitled to eternal resting places by international law. The Volksbund has been advising relatives in matters pertaining to war grave care, a task that has meanwhile changed in character and moved towards the documentation of war graves and registration of those buried. The organization supervises public and private sites, including grave sites on German territory where Prisoners of War (POWs) are buried, supports international cooperation and fosters the engagement of young people in war cemetery care with an international youth encounter program. See <http://www.volksbund.de/volksbund/volksbund-en.html>.

<sup>3</sup> While the murder of the Jewish population was not an issue for public commemoration in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the communist victims of the Nazis and the fallen Red Army soldiers were not present in collective remembrance practices in the FRG.

<sup>4</sup> The Prussian castle’s New Guardhouse (Neue Wache) was situated on Eastern territory in divided Berlin. During GDR times, the mortal remains of an unknown concentration camp captive and of an unknown soldier were interred there. Chancellor Helmut Kohl put the reconstruction of the memorial on his agenda after national unification in 1990, having a copy (enlarged by 1.5 meters) of Käthe Kollwitz’s Pietà erected on the site. The words ‘Den Opfern von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft’ (dedicated to the victims of war and tyranny) were engraved on the floor in front of it. With his decision Kohl ignored the public controversy that had shown that the abstraction of the victims through the chosen words, as well as the iconographic aspects and appropriateness of the symbolic meaning connected to the Pietà were highly contested.

<sup>5</sup> This was initiated by the ‘antimilitary campaign,’ which was an alliance between the Socialist Youth/the Falcons (Sozialistische Jugend/Die Falken), the Young German Nature Lovers (Naturfreundejugend), and the Association of Conscientious Objectors (Verband der Wehrdienstverweigerer). The Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) decided to accept September 1 as Anti-War Day in 1966, whereas the German Salaried

Employees' Union (DAG) only agreed to the date in 1983 (the DGB and the DAG were both founded in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949).

<sup>6</sup> An issue has been made of this practice in the most recent past only, as the desire to similarly commemorate soldiers who died during German Bundeswehr deployments abroad, which were indeed carried out in the name of justice and freedom: New remembrance plaques were installed or the texts and dates reformulated on memorial sites for the fallen of the two World Wars (e.g., at the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress in Koblenz for members of the army). These sorts of unhistorical ad hoc practices proved that a well-reflected handling of the highly different types of individuals among the war dead had been absent, as was any governmental policy regarding possible soldier deaths in German Bundeswehr out-of-area deployments. In 2007-2009, under the then aegis of Franz-Josef Jung, the Ministry of Defense had a memorial erected in the ministry's Bendler-Block building in response; probably also for the sake of preventing any unauthorized 'creative solution' for honoring the dead within the military in historically problematic framings. Despite a brief spurt of controversy over the plan's cost estimates, its placement and architectural form, the interests of the political public sphere in the new memorial were, remarkably, kept in check (see Hettling, 2009; Mannitz, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Keller documents the mass murder of forced laborers in Hirzenhain, Hesse, in March, 1945. The victims of this mass shooting were exhumed in May 1945 when the US War Crimes Branch received notice of the events and had their bodies moved to the monastery at nearby Arnsburg, a 'war victims cemetery' where Wehrmacht soldiers who quit service upon arrival of the US troops and were shot as deserters by their superiors, members of the Waffen-SS and POWs from several countries were also laid to rest. This site is cared for by the Volksbund together with the local municipality and only after decades of struggle did the Volksbund finally agree to replace the gravestones of supposedly 'unidentified war dead' with ones that provided information about the crimes that had actually turned these people into victims and identified them by name. As a result of ongoing research on the historical events, further information has subsequently been made available on the site itself and also via internet resources.

<sup>8</sup> There are four purpose-built facilities where working camps and youth encounter workshops are organized on a regular basis: Ysselsteyn (the Netherlands), Lommel (Belgium), Niederbronn (France), Golm on the Island of Usedom (Germany).

<sup>9</sup> He first made his famous statement that all education today has to be seen as education after Auschwitz in the radio speech 'Education after Auschwitz' in 1966; the radio speeches were five years later published as a book.

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