

Holocaust

– Memory and German Identity – Three forms of generational practices

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Denn da wir nun einmal die Resultate früherer Geschlechter sind, sind wir auch die Resultate ihrer Verirrungen, Leidenschaften und Irrtümer, ja Verbrechen; es ist nicht möglich, sich ganz von dieser Kette zu lösen. (Since we are the results of earlier generations, we are the results of their errors, passions and even crimes as well. It is impossible, to get completely rid of this chain).

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

THE HOLOCAUST ROOTS GERMAN IDENTITY IN A CATASTROPHE

The Holocaust constitutes German identity by a catastrophe. As a pre-given event to be dealt with the Holocaust belongs to those events of the past which have determined the life situation of Germany today. It is a part of a history which led to a complete defeat of the nation and to a destruction of large parts of the country, to a political division of Germany, to a loss of land and the expulsion of its people and to a mental burden of guilt, shame, horror, suppression, trauma, and responsibility. The pre-given temporal chain of generations is the channel through which this event is related to the external and internal circumstances under which the Germans have to live.

Contemporaries, bystanders, perpetrators, victims, opponents	past
Modes of objective relation, the 'causality of fate'	history
The people of (West-)German living under conditions which are results of what happened in the past	present

Historical consciousness has to work through historical development which started in or at least passed the Nazi-time and which will lead into a different future. Bridging the gap between the conditioning past and the intended future, historical consciousness changes the fateful dependence into a value-guided acceptance or legitimacy of identity. In this transformation the experience of catastrophe remains a decisive point. On the intentional level it works as a normative factor, which decides about the interpretation by which the past becomes history for the present. Catastrophe here works as a negative evaluation which structures the decisive events in the narrative flow of historical arguments which shape the Germans' self awareness, their idea of collective identity and their distinction of otherness.

Contemporaries, bystanders, perpetrators, victims, opponents	past
Modes of objective relation	history
Collective identity of the (West-)German as a result of cultural activities dedicated to the memory and the consequences of the past	present

After 1945 the Holocaust has not always been the decisive event of the Nazi period in respect to which the Germans have related themselves to this period. On the contrary: the post-war-development of German historical consciousness is characterized by an increasing importance of the Holocaust with the growing temporal distance to it.² Since this distance brings about the already mentioned difference between memory and historical consciousness one can say that the Holocaust gained its historical significance in the transforming process by which the memory of the Nazi-time has developed the features of historical consciousness.

POSTWAR GERMAN IDENTITY BUILDING STARTED WITH A CONCEALMENT OF THE HOLOCAUST AND AN EXTERRITORIALIZATION OF NAZISM

I would like to propose an outline of the development of German historical consciousness and its related concept of collective identity according to the catastrophical traits of the Nazi-time and the Holocaust. I would like to characterize the very complex development of post-war German identity in an ideal-typological way distinguishing three main stages. It would be misleading to understand this distinction of three stages as if they replaced each other in a time sequence. In fact, they have coexisted and formed different constellations and mixtures. But logically and even in respect to temporal sequences they can clearly be distinguished.

In the first one the crime of the Nazi era remained, of course, in the minds of the perpetrators and the victims, who still lived in Germany, and of those who knew about what happened. As such it had the importance of an event against which identity was shaped, or at least the importance of an event which changed the collective identity substantially. The Germans entered the post-war era with a feeling of a collective catastrophe, of a complete defeat. This catastrophe was also seen as a rupture of identity, which radically weakened the hitherto strong nationalism. Self-esteem, which belongs to the traditional nationalism, became impossible vis-à-vis its role in the Nazi-period.

For the purpose of mental survival the Germans had to bridge the rupture within their historical identity and to overcome its fundamental crisis. The answer to the challenge of rupture was - at least on the level of the intellectual debate and the educational system - a revocation of national traditions, which could be interpreted as opposed to the Nazi-ideology. Friedrich Meinecke e.g. recommended Goethe as a renovating historical element of German identity.³ Long past events or historical elements of German history where collective identity could be positively rooted had survived the Nazitime and especially the Holocaust. The Holocaust was no historical element, which fitted into the realm of 'our' history. If it had an identity building role at all (on the level of deliberate mental activity and not in the unconscious) it indicated and manifested 'otherness'.

The crisis of collective identity was overcome by leaving aside if not suppressing the memory of the Holocaust and related crimes in the realm of the public discussion and political activity. The new West German democracy

became very successful, and one condition for this success was the integration of large parts of the elite of the Nazi-system into the new Republic. This integration had a mental dimension, for there was an unspoken agreement not to deal with the far-going entanglement in the Nazi-system.⁴ In the mental strategy of identity building the threatening features of the Nazi-period were projected into the otherness of the perpetrators beyond the limits of one's own self. The Nazis were demonized and exterritorialized into a realm beyond the main lines of German history. Nazism and Nazi dictatorship shrank into an invasion of a relatively small group of political gangsters coming out of nowhere and occupying Germany.⁵ The 'ordinary' Germans - and that meant those who had to come to terms with their own past - were characterized as victims of a devilish Nazi-seduction.⁶ The psychological strategy of this kind of moulding collective memory in order to get rid of the burden of one's own entanglement is described as the procedure of 'reversing' in psychoanalysis.

The concept of totalitarianism later on confirmed this exterritorialization: now during the cold war period 'the others' could be identified beyond the iron curtain, and the burdening experience of Nazism could be inscribed into the face of the common enemy, the communists. So a collective conviction could be brought about: Not we, but the others were guilty.⁷

Later on this strategy of public silence and exterritorialization was criticized as a mental failure, a structural deformation of the German mind. This criticism was the consequence of a new moralistic approach to the Nazi-period, which constituted the second period. This criticism, the most prominent document of which is Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's "Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern"⁸ overlooked the limited possibilities of mental survival and the function of forgetfulness in overcoming a deep identity crisis caused by a rupture of historical continuity.

There were lines of continuity, of course, which went across the Nazi period and bound it to the real German history and therefore could be publicly commemorated: the German opposition to Hitler (except for its Communist branch) e.g. could function as such an exemption from the rupture of continuity in German history. Another example is the 'silent opposition' (*innerer Widerstand*), which many intellectuals who were not expelled and who did not leave Germany claimed for their behavior in the Nazi Era. By this 'opposition' they intended to stand for the ongoing validity of traditional values in the time of their negation and destruction.

HOLOCAUST – MEMORY AND GERMAN IDENTITY – ...

IN A SECOND STEP OF IDENTITY BUILDING THE HOLOCAUST BECAME A CONSTITUTIVE EVENT BY MORALISTIC CONDEMNATION

The second stage came along with the next generation of Germans who had to gain their own concept of collective identity by struggling with their parents. Their concept is characterized by its relationship to the Holocaust by two conflicting intentions: The first is to keep the Holocaust up and give it a historical relevance and importance for German collective memory. Now for the first time it got its place in a historical perspective, which ended in the mental field of historical German self-understanding. It was not especially the Holocaust, but the Nazi-period in general, which played a new role in building collective identity: Now it was used as a counter-event, which constituted German identity in a negative way. In this negative way the Nazi-period became an integral part of German history.

The new generation grounded its self-esteem in a strictly moralistic criticism of this period using universalistic standards of political culture, which had become valid in their political socialization.⁹ In its most elaborated form this negative constitutive role was confirmed and realized by an identificatory step into the period of Nazism: selfness got its moralistic power by an identification with the victims. The others were the perpetrators and bystanders. Otherness now lost its transhistorical status and became a part of German history itself, against which the new Germany was placed.

What were the consequences of this integration of the Holocaust into German history for the concept of collective identity? In respect to its peculiarity German History lost the features of an obligatory tradition. Tradition was replaced by universalistic values and norms. This universalism has now become a constitutive factor of reshaping German identity.¹⁰ It has got its mental power and the strength of its conviction by the negative historical experience of Nazi history. Brought into the horizon of German self-awareness it pushed the new generation into the mental attitude of standing for its contrary and of placing itself strictly beyond any historical relationship reaching into the center of oneself. Therefore „critique” became an essential attitude in interpreting German history. By this approach otherness has become a part of one’s own history: now it is manifest in the past of one’s own people but in a way that it is excluded (by critique) from the realm of oneself.

This distinction between self and otherness within the same (German) history is a step beyond the exterritorialization of the Holocaust out of the identity building history. Now German identity has come to terms with the Holocaust experience by interpreting it in a framework of historical interpretation based on universalistic values according to a Western concept of modernity. This interpretation leaves a decisive question unanswered which raises from the catastrophic character of the Holocaust: Is this character not left out, or at least 'normalized' when the Holocaust functions as a historical example which confirms the validity of the value system of Western civilization by the disastrous consequences of its negation?

This relationship of German identity to the Nazi period shows a fragile mixture of a metahistorical universality of norms and values and of a specific historical experience, mediated by contradiction and it still prevails with a lot of Germans. The next step is dedicated to the task of overcoming the fragility of this mixture into an entire historization of the Nazi past including the Holocaust.

THE OTHERNESS OF THE HOLOCAUST TENDS TO BECOME INTEGRATED BY FURTHER HISTORIZATION

The third stage has just started and it is an open question whether it will come to a peculiar new form of collective identity. But there are clear indications for it. The decisive new element, which reshapes German identity is an opening of the German mind to the genealogical relationship to the perpetrators. The moralistic criticism of the Holocaust, accompanied with an identification with the victims, kept this relationship outside the constitutive historical elements of the Germans' self-identity. The growing distance of generational change enables the Germans to bridge the mental gap, which separated them from their fathers and grandfathers in the historical perspective of their self-awareness. Those who committed the Holocaust, were 'the others'. But these 'others' were at the same time Germans like those who radically dissociated themselves from them along the line of temporal change in German history. Now this mediation takes place: prominent historians start to say 'we' to the perpetrators.¹¹

This indicates a challenging need for reconceptualizing German identity. The objectively pre-given genealogical chain of generations now has become a structural element of the historical perspective within which German identity is shaped. The Germans start to define themselves as a result of a historical transformation, in which the perpetrators and bystanders become integral parts of the historical experience, which moulds the feature of German peculiarity as a mirror of self-reflection. The a-temporal moral distance of the second stage is transformed into a specifically *historical* distance. The Holocaust is about to get a place in the chain of events, by which the shape of German identity is constituted. In this 'historical' place the Holocaust, of course, has not lost its character as the contrary of any valid system of values which the Germans feel collectively committed to. The point is that this otherness is now a part of one's own self.

It is not yet visible what this means in respect to the symbolic order of historical experience as a feature of the collective self of the Germans. Such a feature always needs a certain coherence in arranging the events of the past into a concept of temporal order, which may function as a pattern of self-understanding and of cultural orientation. Coherence allows constitutive values to play a legitimatory role. For the Germans the Holocaust can never serve as a legitimation of their peculiarity as a nation whatsoever. The reason is complex. Certainly there is a genealogical line between the Germans today and the perpetrators, but this line doesn't exclusively combine them with the perpetrators, since a part of the victims and of the opponents were Germans as well. On the other hand this line is so strong that any legitimatory approach to the Holocaust would put the Germans of today into the role of the successors of the perpetrators. This strictly contradicts the respect for universalistic values, which were deeply rooted in the German political culture, and which are a constitutive element of their collective identity. As long as the perpetrators are integrated into a common 'Germanhood', i.e. as long as they are recognized as Germans, German collective identity is featured by a *negative constituting event as an inclusive part of their own history*.

This inclusion of the otherness of the Holocaust requires a new logic of historically shaping collective identity: the strict exclusion of negative elements in the horizon of historical experience related to one's own people has become impossible. The temporal chain of events, which constitute historically collective identity includes the Holocaust with its negative meaning

and significance. This significance prevents any form of coherence in the historical feature of oneself, which is brought about by an entire positive identification with the past. The historical feature of oneself has become fragmented and loaded with tensions and even contradictions. As long as this fragmentary character and negativity is conceptualized with a principle of historical sense it can serve as a reliable cultural frame of orientation and identity building. 'Sense'¹² in this respect means an essential openness of the temporal dimension of historical identity, a contra-factual validity of fundamental regulative ideas, which place the collective self just on the borderline between past and present where the transformation of pre-given circumstances takes place. Here an essential queasiness in respect to descent origin ends in the projective force of the human mind, which discloses creative chances of change. Identity - whether it is a personal or a collective one - is always a synthesis of what one was and of what one would like to become. In respect of this tensional synthesis the constitutive force of the Holocaust in the historical perspective of German identity evokes its complement as a projection of a future, which is committed to the categorical consequence of the Holocaust which Adorno has stated as a general principle of human thinking: it should never happen again.¹³

Situated on this line of rupture, even the catastrophic element of the Holocaust as crisis can be recognized: It disturbs the hitherto self-understanding standards of coherence in the concept of historical identity.

Within this new feature of collective identity the relationship of crisis and identity has essentially changed. In traditional cultural procedures of commemoration the crisis will be overcome: the discontinuity and rupture caused by contingency is transformed by historical consciousness into a new meaningful coherence in the temporal connection of past, present and future. Now crisis has become an element of identity itself. This means that the people cannot rely on a deep conviction that their form of life is fundamentally legitimated and that they can rely on the permanence of their life form at least in its essential elements. An inbuilt 'critical' element in this feature furnishes this permanence and legitimacy with projective elements, e.g. regulative ideas of practical reason. They are permanently generated and pushed forward by the sting of memory, which keeps the Holocaust present. The memory of the Holocaust has been transformed into a historical consciousness, which relativates one's self-esteem into a character of imperfectibility, and this imperfectibility can be realized as a chance for practical activities.

Concerning this third stage one can only observe indications and starting points. So it is an open question whether and how this new logic of identity building by the Holocaust-memory will bring about a new relationship of German national identity and the Holocaust, as well as a new structure in the concept of collective identity, where otherness and selfness will get a new mediation beyond the cultural logic and practice of identity building by exclusion of otherness.

Statt des Schlafes tropft vor das Herz
schwer die Erinnerung und ihre Qual, und
ob der Sinn sich auch sträubt, es kommt
die Erkenntnis. ...

(instead of sleeping the heart is burdened with memory and its anguish.
And although the mind is against it, cognition will come).

Aischylos¹⁴.

NOTAS:

¹ Quoted in Leicht, Robert: Nur das Hinschauen macht frei, in: Die Zeit 21.12.1986, p. 1.

² Cf. Broszat, Martin: Nach Hitler. Der schwierige Umgang mit unserer Geschichte. München 1988.

³ Meinecke, Friedrich: Die deutsche Katastrophe. Wiesbaden 1946 (in: Werke, vol. 8: Autobiographische Schriften. Stuttgart 1969, pp. 323-445).

⁴ This is the famous thesis of Hermann Lübbe, which originally caused much emotional contradiction, but in the meantime has got widespread acceptance: Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein, in: Historische Zeitschrift 236 (1983), p. 579-599

⁵ An example for this exterritorialization is the inaugural speech of Leopold von Wiese at the first postwar meeting of German sociologists: „Die Pest“ kam „über die Menschen von außen, unvorbereitet, als ein heimtückischer Überfall. Das ist ein metaphysisches Geheimnis, an das der Soziologe nicht zu rühren vermag“ (The plague came upon the unprepared people from outside. This is a metaphysical secret, not to be touched by a

sociologist). Wiese, Leopold von: Die gegenwärtige Situation, soziologisch betrachtet, in: Verhandlungen des Achten Deutschen Soziologentages vom 19. Bis 21. September 1946 in Frankfurt a.M. Tübingen 1948, p. 29.

⁶ A rather late example for this presentation of the Nazi-time is the film: Hitler - eine Karriere, directed by Christian B. Herrendörfer and Joachim Fest. 1976.

⁷ This again can be exemplified by Nolte's thesis that Nazi-dictatorship was only a reaction to Bolschewism and the Holocaust only an answer to a 'more original' event, namely the October Revolution and the crimes of the Bolsheviks.

⁸ Mitscherlich, Alexander und Margarete: Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens. First edition Munich 1967, reprinted Leipzig 1990 (Mitscherlich, Alexander und Margarete: The Inability to Mourn. Principles of Collective Behavior. New York 1975).

⁹ Martin Broszat has emphasized the political consequences of this approach: by „the self-critical handling of their older and younger history” the citizens of the federal Republic have brought about „one of the best elements of political ethics, which has been slowly developed since the late fifties” (Durch den „selbstkritischen Umgang mit ihrer älteren und jüngeren Geschichte” hätten die „Bürger der Bundesrepublik Deutschland ... eines der besten Elemente politischer Gesittung” gewonnen, „das seit den späten 50iger Jahren allmählich in diesem Staatswesen entwickelt worden ist” (Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit: Ein polemischer Essay zum Historikerstreit, Munich 1988, p. 103; „Historikerstreit”: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung. Texte von Augstein u.a., München 1987 (Serie Piper Aktuell), pp. 189-195).

¹⁰ The most important and influential representative of this concept is Jürgen Habermas. In historical studies it is manifest in the so called Bielefeld School of social history.

¹¹ Christian Meier e.g. (40 Jahre nach Auschwitz. Deutsche Geschichtserinnerung heute. Munich 2nd Ed. 1990) argues in favour of the integration of the Holocaust into the identity building perspective of German history. In his foreword of the new edition of 1990 he clearly speaks of a „hypothetical attempt, to include the Germans from 1933 till 1945 into a historical 'We'" (p. 10). Meier himself did the step from hypothesis to positive assertion in an article, published in „Die Zeit” April 11th 1997, p. 48, commenting the controversial debate on a Holocaust memorial in Berlin. He speaks about the Holocaust and uses the words „our crimes” (unsere Verbrechen”). Another finding: Reinhart Koselleck: „Vier Minuten für die Ewigkeit”, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 9th, 1997. - Some further observations: „Als Deutscher stehe ich unvermeidlich auf der Seite der Täter. ... Wenn ich mich in meinem Land verwurzelt fühlen möchte,

muß ich mich auch in die Geschichte seiner Menschen hineinversetzen. So werde und bleibe ich verantwortlich verbunden mit dem, was Deutsche getan haben..." (Achter, Thomas: *Jenseits des Versöhnungsprinzips. Die Grenzen des Erinnerns*, in: *Universitas* 52 (1997), p.230-240, cit. p. 231.

¹² More details of this principle were discussed in Rüsen, Jörn: *Historische Sinnbildung durch Erzählen. Eine Argumentationsskizze zum narrativistischen Paradigma der Geschichtswissenschaft und der Geschichtsdidaktik im Blick auf nicht-narrative Faktoren*, in: *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 18 (1996), p. 501-543; Rüsen, Jörn: *Was heißt: Sinn der Geschichte? (mit einem Ausblick auf Vernunft und Widersinn)*, in: Müller, Klaus F., Rüsen, Jörn (Eds): *Historische Sinnbildung - Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien*. Reinbek 1997, pp. 17-47.

¹³ Adorno, Theodor W: *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, in: idem: *Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2*. Frankfurt am Main 1969, p. 85-101, cit. p. 85.

¹⁴ Agamemnon 177sq.

RESUMO: O Holocausto dos judeus no período nazista constitui, para os alemães, em um elemento de identidade invertida pela catástrofe. A qualificação dos papéis sociais na memória alemã da segunda metade do século 20 conduz à identificação da sociedade alemã (ocidental) a partir de atividades culturais dedicadas à memória e às conseqüências do passado. A alteridade é readmitida na consciência histórica do alemão contemporâneo pelo resgate moral da diferença e pela superação do trauma pelo luto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Holocausto, Alemanha, trauma, memória, identidade, moral.