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Burdens and opportunities: the importance of history for the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany

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JÜRGEN KOCKA

BURDENS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Importance of History for the Political Culture of the Federal Republic of Germany

I.

This is a very broad topic. To narrow it let me start by alluding to four intellectual-political events which occurred in West Germany during the last years, and which gave me an impulse to choose this problem for discussion.

May 8, 1985 was the 40th anniversary of the unconditional surrender of the German Reich, of the end of World War II in Europe, and of the Fall of the Nazi dictatorship. In the months and weeks before, a passionate debate evolved on whether this day should be commemorated and if so, how. Whether May 8 should be seen as a day of defeat or a day of liberation, whether it symbolizes primarily a catastrophic destruction or rather the opportunity of a new beginning — these were the controversial issues debated in the media, families, schools and parliaments. The most remarkable product of this debate was President Weizsäcker's 8th-of-May-speech which reconciled different interpretations without sacrificing historical truth: an example how bitter controversies over a common difficult past can *sometimes* be turned into a source of intellectual clarification and moral-political strength.¹

One year later, in spring 1986, another debate reached its climax and — so far — its end. The Bonn parliament dealt with the question whether a national historical memorial in order to commemorate those who died in the wars, and those who died and suffered from dictatorial rule should be built in the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, and if so in what way. Do we need such a monument? Should those who were mass-murdered by the National Socialist regime and those who died because they served this regime be honoured and commemorated together? Should the memorial stress the commemoration of German deaths only, or should memory transcend the national boundaries? Questions like this remained controversial, between the parties of the Bundestag. No majority was achieved for one decision or another, the case remained inconclusive, and probably we shall have to live without such a monument in the years to come.

Another public and controversial debate emerged when the government of Chancellor Kohl decided (in 1985) to build two representative, expensive history museums: a „House for the History of the Federal Republic of Germany" in Bonn and a German Historical Museum in Berlin. While the Bonn institution will concentrate on the history of the Federal Republic, the Berlin museum is meant to deal with the whole of German history in its European context, from the early medieval period until the present time. In the case of the Berlin museum at least, the government moved very carefully and cautiously. It did not try to influence the content, substance and message of the planned museum. It did not try to prescribe the basic lines of a West German „Geschichtsbild". It left the conceptualizing work to a group of historians and other experts selected from various parts of the intellectual and political spectrum. It also invited a broad public debate on the concept. Nevertheless, intellectual and political opposition was strong, particularly against the plan of a German Historical Museum in Berlin. The critics pre-

dicted that this enterprise would turn out to be a well funded attempt to present a harmonized, uncritical, agreeable picture of our past as a basis for collective identity perhaps even the place where an official interpretation of our history would be installed. And even if these dangers could be avoided, what do we need such a museum for? What belongs to German history in the sense of this museum? What about the Austrians, some of whom protested against being included in this museum too heavily? What really is German history around 900 or 1989, what are its boundaries? Is the concept „German history” perhaps in itself a 19th-century construction projected back through the centuries, a myth which we should not be reviewing nowadays? Opposition and distrust continue although the concept of the museum as finally presented in 1987 tries to avoid those pitfalls and traps successfully. Both institutions have been officially founded, they are already being built, and one has to wait and see whether the results will confirm the sceptics or not. The Bonn institution started with an exhibition on the occasion of the fortieth birthday of the Federal Republic, the Berlin museum had its première in 1989 with an exhibition commemorating the German invasion of Poland, September 1st, 1939, i.e., the beginning of World War II, 50 years before. In 1990 there will be a large exhibition on „Bismarck, Prussia, Germany, Europe”.²

Finally, the most heated and most widely publicized of the recent debates: the so-called „Historikerstreit” (historians’ controversy) between the summer of 1986 and the end of 1987.³ A large number of prominent and less prominent historians and journalists, social scientists and other intellectuals contributed newspaper articles, lectures, TV-covered panel discussions, books, anthologies and other comments to this unique debate which received much public attention at home and abroad. It was, partly, a shrill and passionate debate which produced and petrified deep rifts within the historical profession. Basically, it dealt with the place of National Socialism in German and general history and — related to this — with the collective identity of the Federal Republic of Germany. Should Nazi mass murder be seen (including the Holocaust) as a unique catastrophe of unprecedented and unparalleled proportions, or was it „just” one of several comparable genocides? Should it mainly be seen as a part of German history or rather as a part of a more comprehensive „European Civil War 1914–1945”,⁴ in particular? How do we deal with the Holocaust and, more broadly, the Nazi dictatorship once we accept it as a terrible but undisputable part of our heritage? How can one combine a clear moral judgement and a clear intellectual distance from the Nazi period with a just historical understanding of our parents and grandparents? Were there always clear lines between „Täter” and „Opfer”, persecutors and victims? Do we need a kind of „Schlußstrich”, i.e., should we put an end to the critical view of our past to achieve again something like an „aufrechter Gang” („standing upright or tall”) as a people? Or should we rather do everything to maintain its clearest possible memory as an important precondition of our collective identity in post-Nazi Germany? Should one remember and accentuate the more normal period of our national history in order to make it more agreeable and more acceptable as a basis for collective identity nowadays, which, according to some, is lacking or underdeveloped in the Federal Republic of Germany? On the other hand: do we — as citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany *or* as Germans — really lack collective identity, what is meant by „identity”, can it really be buttressed by history, particularly by national history, and what can be expected in this respect from historical scholarship?

The four debates I mentioned have a number of things in common. They deal with history *and* politics, with „politics of history”, with the central problems of our collective identity — in the form of a historical debate. Controversial and conflicting interpretations of the past correspond to controversial and conflicting options as to our present self-definition and to our future strategies. In these debates the results of historical scholar-

ship are important. But they were not just scholarly debates, they cannot be decided on the grounds of historical scholarship alone, and those of us who participated did so not just as professional historians, but also as citizens. Those who debated dealt with history, but mainly with the history of 1933 to 1945, including the pre-history of this period. Over the last years no other historical topic has displayed a comparable power in serving as crystallizing points for present public controversies. Neither the history of Prussia nor Luther and the reformation nor Marx and the history of socialism have attracted public attention and investigation on a similar scale. The so-called Fischer-controversy of 1960⁵ was of a similar scope but, if one really thinks it over again, it dealt not only with the responsibility of World War I and German war aims, but also with the question of continuity from the Empire to Hitler. This paper also concentrates on burdens and opportunities of *recent* German history.

I want to answer one general question and I hope to make one general thesis plausible. *The question:* A comparison of previous decades looking to France, Switzerland, England, Scandinavia or the United States one gets the feeling that this mixture of history and politics is particularly vigorous, upsetting and engaging in the Federal Republic of the 1980's.⁶ Why should that be so? How does one account for it? *The general thesis:* contrary to the impressions one might get from the debates mentioned, those most problematic parts of our history are not only burdens for present-time Germany, but offer simultaneously some opportunities. One has to accept the burden in order to make use of the opportunity.

II.

To possess the unprecedented and unparalleled mass crimes of Nazi Germany as part of one's history has been a burden ever since. By this I mean the systematic annihilation of European Jewry the mass killing of Polish and Russian civilians, the persecution of the Sinti and Roma, the terror against minorities and other opponents. This outstanding and exceptional climax of systematic human destruction must be seen as the last step of an escalation of terror starting in 1933 and ending in 1945. The genocide against the Jews, for which the concept „Holocaust“ has come into common use in German as well, is a central part of this „German catastrophe“ (to use Friedrich Meinecke' booktitle of 1946). The recollection of the crimes committed by the National Socialist government of Germany, with the active participation of many and with the knowledge of many more Germans, without much resistance by the elites and the population at large — the memory of these crimes is difficult and depressing in general, but it is particularly difficult, burdensome and painful for Germans.

Certainly, the overwhelming majority of Germans living today are, as individuals, not guilty, neither directly nor indirectly. The thesis of a „collective guilt“ needs not to be rejected because it is hardly presented any more. Still, if one accepts the intergenerational community of language, culture, history and communication which constitutes a people at least to some extent as a reality (which I think one has to), it cannot be overlooked that „Auschwitz“ (to use this name as an abbreviation for the Nazi mass terror and policy of annihilation) is in a closer, more intensive, way part of the German heritage than anybody else's.

The National Socialist period is perhaps the best-studied period of our history. The facts on the whole are known. They could not be covered up after 1945, and they have not been covered up. Nobody in Germany (at least nobody to be taken seriously) has denied the existence of those crimes. Throughout the previous decades, extensive, accurate and successful research on the Nazi period — includig these crimes — has been conducted.⁷ And while the historical knowledge of the general population is limited in

general, the basic facts of National Socialism including the Holocaust are widely known and present in collective consciousness. The words „Nazi” and „fascist” are cursing words, to be used as heavy munition against the political opponent who may react by suing you for labelling him in this discriminatory way. If one neglects a small lunatic fringe on the extreme right, the negative evaluation of the Nazi period and the moral condemnation of its crimes are the rule. It took years for this negative consensus to develop. There are, of course, differences in interpretation and differences in the readiness to face the past. But this is the general picture which needs to be stressed first of all. It has not changed in recent years, and nobody denied and nobody excused Auschwitz in the „Historikerstreit”. And there were no dramatic new discoveries to change our view of what happened. Nor are they likely to occur in the future.

If there are substantial changes during the last years at all it is neither in the sphere of science nor on the level of (moral) evaluation, but in the way the Nazi period and its crimes are faced, dealt with emotionally and put into proportion. It seems that presently the Nazi period with all its terror, atrocities and persecution is much more present in a troublesome, burdensome and troubling way than ten or twenty or thirty years ago. The media reflect and reinforce this intensified presence of that part of our past: films, serials, documentaries, discussions, particularly on TV. Historical novels and autobiographies dealing with persecution and survival are on the bestseller lists. Memorial days, some of which I mentioned, receive much attention and they provide occasions for public debates symbolic actions. Now and then one reads that somebody wants to draw a „Schlußstrich”, a line underneath our dealing with the past. Forty years are said to be enough, we should step out of the shadow of the Nazi past. Others seem to be surprised or deplore that this past is not fading away. I am sure many have thoughts and feelings like that. But one should understand these expressions as *reactions* to the continuous, intensified and burdensome presence of that past, expressions which usually have exactly the opposite effect of what they intend. They provoke rejoinders, criticism, alarm and discussion. Eventually they contribute indirectly to an even clearer, closer, and more depressing picture of what happened.

Vis-à-vis the tremendous moral, anthropological and political weight of the Nazi period and its ongoing importance, the Schlußstrich strategy is doomed to fail now and in the foreseeable future. Are there other *strategies* to deal with the presence of that part of our past which not only does not fade away but which seems to reappear with increasing vigour? There are, and I shall mention *three* of them before I ask why we are experiencing such a revival of the past now.

1. When the Berlin historian and philosopher Ernst Nolte referred to the Holocaust as an understandable, in a way defensive, though barbaric reaction to previous barbaric deeds and continuous threats from the East — the Nazi race murder as an answer to the Bolshevik class murder —,⁸ he did something very rare: He did neither excuse nor deny Auschwitz but, at least by implication, he accrued something like historical meaning to the Nazi genocide. His speculation could not stand scrutiny in the light of historical evidence, hardly any serious historian supported, but many criticized him. His speculation did not survive the debate. I mention it as one of the rare and futile attempts to make the memory of Auschwitz more bearable by imputing historical sense to those crimes, which are indeed particularly hard to remember because they are so senseless.

2. Comparison has been another intellectual strategy vis-à-vis Nazi mass terror. Different authors and speakers have questioned the singularity, the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide by pointing to other genocides and instances of mass terror in the 20th century: to Stalin's persecution of the so-called Khulaks, the Turkish persecution of the Armenians during World War I, Pol Pot's and Idi Amin's massacres more recently. Many people seem to be convinced that one's guilt or merit is relativized if one can show

that others have committed similar crimes or reached similar achievements. If genocides are a terrible but nevertheless not really exceptional reality of our times and perhaps also of previous centuries, Auschwitz might appear in a different light, a little less unbearable perhaps and less damaging to the collective self-consciousness of us as Germans. In different forms and with different degrees of sophistication, this type of argument (or elements of it) appear in many different situations, particularly outside the framework of academic discussions, but it has played a role in the recent „Historikerstreit“, too. What can be said about this?

Certainly, comparison is a necessary methodological tool for the historian and a legitimate type of argument in public debate as well. If you want to know what is specific to your own situation and your own tradition, you have to compare. In history, comparison is in a way the functional equivalent of the laboratory experiment in the natural sciences. If one wants to explain causally, one usually has to compare. Nor is the notion ‚absolute uniqueness‘ a very useful category in political and pedagogical terms. If one declares something to be absolutely unique, one implies that it cannot be repeated. Perhaps this would mean the abandonment of the chance to learn from past failures and catastrophes. In principle, comparison is justified and recommendable, and in my opinion this applies to our understanding of National Socialism and the Holocaust as well. Anyway, the comparative analysis of National Socialism has a long tradition, for instance with the help of the generalizing concepts of totalitarianism and fascism.⁹ But I should like to add three qualifications.

First, it is highly questionable, in which sense the memory of Auschwitz becomes more easy to bear if it turns out that similar atrocities were committed in the Gulag. The documentation of Soviet crimes does not at all reduce the magnitude and weight of what happened in Germany.

Secondly, more often than not, historical comparison leads to the discovery of differences, not only of similarities. If one compares Hitler's and Stalin's dictatorships in a sober and unprejudiced way, one finds, indeed, many similarities. One is impressed by the gigantic scale of human persecution and suffering on both sides, by the millions of murdered victims (even if one does not count the war casualties), by the massive and unrestricted violation of human lives and rights as a consequence of actions taken by the state and its organs, both in Germany and in the Soviet Union in the 1930's and 40's.

But there was also a qualitative difference between the dispassionate, bureaucratic, systematic mass murder by the industrialized, highly organized, and relatively advanced German Reich on the one hand, and the brutal amalgam of civil war, mass liquidation, slave work and starvation in the relatively backward Stalinist Russia on the other. I do not want to say that there were differences in the degree of immorality and guilt. It is anyway difficult for the historian to measure and deal with guilt on this gigantic scale. All I want to say is that under Stalin, the massive destruction of human life was mostly an accepted, perhaps quietly welcomed, perhaps even calculated result of measures whose prime purpose was economic (forced industrialization, collectivization, development of Siberia etc.) or political (internal power struggle, class warfare, elimination of opponents), while the Nazi genocide was directly (as such) intended, planned and executed. Compared with the Stalinist mass terror, the racial „logic“ of the National Socialist system of destruction seems even more inexorable, irrational and ultimately incomprehensible.

The documents relating to the so-called Khulak persecution of 1929 to 1933 and the purges of 1936 to 1938 are not easily accessible. The topic has been a taboo in the Soviet Union until recently. Robert Conquest interprets the persecution of the Khulaks 1929 to 1933 as a systematically planned genocide of Ukrainians and the starvation catastrophe of those years (especially 1932/33) as consciously intended and brought about by

government policies in order to achieve the annihilation of the Ukrainian people. If he were right, certain fascist-Stalinist similarities would be more pronounced. But his theses are highly disputed.¹⁰ As far as I can see at the moment, close and careful comparison tends to show the exceptional, very particular character of the Holocaust.

A last remark with respect to comparison. To whom does one want to be compared? Should we compare ourselves with Stalin's dictatorship, the Turks' mass murder of the Armenians, Pol Pot in Cambodia or Idi Amin in Uganda, as has been suggested? Or should we rather continue a long tradition of critical scholarship, and compare ourselves with *western* and other European countries, which are more similar to Germany in terms of common cultural traditions and economic development, but did not turn fascist and totalitarian in the inter-war period? Without doubt the result of any comparison strongly depends on the choice of reference points. And this choice is not only a scholarly question, but also a political one, in the broad sense of the word.

All this taken together it seems unlikely that accurate and honest comparison will have an exonerating or relativizing effect, which some of us hope for and some of us fear.

3. There is a third approach which was recently advocated and applied to the Nazi period: „Historisierung“, „historicization“. Martin Broszat among others called for the historicization of the Nazi period a few years ago. Others, like Saul Friedländer from Tel Aviv, have criticized the idea.¹¹ Historicization means different things at the same time, and historicization is on the way. Historicization does not mean a denial of the Nazi crimes nor a playing-down of its moral, anthropological and historical weight. It is not an apologetic relativization of what happened neither an excuse. Rather is it an attempt to condemn *and* to understand at the same time. It is an attempt to treat the Nazi period and its crimes not only as an object of cool analysis from which to learn and to draw certain conclusions, but also as a terrible, but recognized part of our historical heritage. It was Christian Meier, ancient historian and, until 1988 president of the West German Historical Association, who expressed it most clearly in his recommendable book „40 Jahre nach Auschwitz. Deutsche Geschichtserinnerung heute“.¹²

He thinks that Germans must learn again to say „we“ when talking about their history, even though and when it is the history of the Nazi period and Auschwitz. Meier stresses the difficulties and necessity of a full and lively memory. He sharply opposes forgetting, suppression and relativization. He takes a rather moralistic position and leaves no doubt about where he stands in his condemnation of what happened. At the same time he thinks that a theoretical analysis in terms of totalitarianism or fascism, of Hitlerism, in terms of class analysis or in other similar terms is not enough. He wants us to accept that it was us who did it. And he tries to evoke understanding for, as he says our parents and grandparents who lived and acted at that time.

Everyday-life history projects („Alltagsgeschichte“) have also contributed to this process of historicization by reconstructing daily experiences and actions of the „small people“, fears and hopes, disappointments and opportunities, the different mixture of courage and cowardice, of support and resistance vis-à-vis the regime. Viewing things in a manner of rigid black and white categorizations are modified, shades and nuances are stressed. One realizes that most contemporaries were neither heroes nor rascals, but — so to say — relatively „normal“ persons, many of whom felt and thought, acted and failed in a rather understandable way. One realizes that had one lived at the time, one might not have behaved altogether differently. On the other hand one cannot overlook that such „normal“ actions and omissions, contributed, at the same time, to the rise and the maintenance of the system which led to the most outrageous, most exceptional atrocities, crimes and destructions. This discrepancy between the apparently „normal“ behaviour of many (not all!) Germans at the time and the completely abnormal, disastrous results of the process which was made possible by „normal“ behaviour, is a difficult

theoretical problem which reaches far beyond the possibilities of „Alltagsgeschichte”.¹³ It is also a moral problem and a problem of self-identification. It is understandable that this demand for historicization has been discussed in a controversial way. Critics have expressed fear that historicization might lead to the relativizing of moral judgements, to the blurring of the line between good and bad, victims and actors, to a form of reconciliation which comes too early. I think these critics have a point, at least in the sense that they identify a danger though perhaps not a necessary result of historicization.

III.

So far I have tried to show that, in West Germany as of today the Nazi period is omnipresent in an upsetting and concerning way, more so than ten or twenty years ago. And I have discussed three more recent approaches or strategies of dealing with this part of our past which does not fade away but which re-emerges as part of our memory, with unexpected vigour. Why are we experiencing this wave of memory now? How do we account for the revived interest in our National Socialist past?

There are several reasons, including a specific generational situation. But I want to stress one explanation which, in my opinion, is basic. I want to stress that, in Germany and in other places, interest in history has grown tremendously in the last fifteen years or so, in many different forms ranging from local history workshops („Dig where you are”) and amateur family historians to the government initiatives already mentioned. Behind this broad and rising demand for history is a new demand for defining one's identity. People want to discover their origin in order to know more about the problem where and to whom they belong, a problem felt more urgently now than two or three decades ago. This demand for collective identification is not just a phenomenon on the conservative side of the intellectual and political spectrum. Rather it can be found among Social Democrats and Greens as well. And recently the liberal weekly „Die Zeit” introduced a new page („Zeitläufe” — events of the time, conjunctures) in which it started to present narrative history and historical interpretations in order to respond to the „basic feeling” of a turbulent epoch in which people search assurance and orientation by reflecting on origins and future.¹⁴

It was different in the sixties and early seventies. Then, the general feeling of those who participated in discussions, worked for reforms or joined movements was that they were surrounded by overtly stable, petrified relations which they wanted to ease. At some point in the seventies this mood of criticism and optimism changed. The perception of a tremendously fast social change and the feeling of losing control led to a certain yearning for stability. The thrust of progress diminished. The non-intended, partly damaging, disintegrating consequences of rapid modernization were stressed — and this was not just the analysis of philosophers like Hermann Lübbe,¹⁵ but it became a widespread mood which some people like to call „postmodern”. It is in this intellectual and emotional climate that interest in history built up again, but not so much interest in a past to be criticized, changed or overcome, but rather interest in a past as tradition, as a basis of collective identification. „Erinnerung” — memory or recollection — has become a key concept now which it has not been in the sixties and seventies.

If one turns to one's history in order to re-call, to re-collect, to re-incorporate it — memory rather than analysis, identification rather than criticism —, Auschwitz is a barrier or a rock in one's way. The more one turns to history as a source for meaning and identification, the more unbearable, the more irritating and upsetting Auschwitz becomes. This, I think, basically explains why there is, in West Germany, such a new in-

tensity in facing the Nazi period, now. This is why history has become more important for our political culture than it used to be in the fifties and sixties. This is why we have so much „politics of history“, and why we have the „Historikerstreit“ now instead of one, two or three decades ago.

I have mixed feeling when observing this renewed interest in history as tradition and memory, as a source of identification and meaning.

On the one hand, this reinvigorated stress on recollection and roots has spread and intensified our knowledge of the past, particularly of the National Socialist past. From many points of view this deserves to be welcomed. Furthermore, the honest recognition and — in a way — the full acceptance of Auschwitz as part of one's own heritage may indeed help to bring forth a feeling of shared responsibility, a specific kind of collective modesty, a sense of caution, a type of sceptical commitment — all of which I tend to see as an advantage and, in a way, as a sign of maturity. Maybe Richard von Weizsäcker's 8th of May speech was one way of formulating this spirit.¹⁶

In addition, I would admit that the creation of a collective identity, the existence of a minimum of shared experiences, beliefs and loyalties, is important for any complex society which, after all, has to be able to define common goals and solve common problems. The recollection and commemoration of a common past can indeed be of help for such an identity to develop or to survive. Governments usually recognize the value of rites and traditions, and they cherish them if available. The celebration of bi-centenaries, recently celebrated in the United States, and in France, are cases in point.

On the other hand I think that the identity, the cohesion, the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany are not that underdeveloped. They flow from different sources, not only from a consciously shared past, but even more from economic, cultural and political qualities, from what the country has to offer to its citizens, in terms of opportunities in life, freedom and participation, cultural climate, education, standard of living, future perspectives, etc. If *such* sources of loyalty and integration work well, maybe the turn toward the common memory is less compelling.

In addition, in the German case one can ask whether the turn to national history will really help to buttress the kind of collective identity we need as citizens of the Federal Republic. There may be a certain tension between a comprehensive German identity and the identity of each of the two German states. This is a complicated problem.

A further, even more important point: usually, the past is full of failures and injustices, of conflicts and defeats, of ugly and terrible things. This is certainly true in the case of Germany. If one turns to history for identity and consolation, stability and meaning, the temptation becomes very powerful to see and represent one's past in a more acceptable way than it deserves. There is the danger of purification and beautification of the past, of relativization, of escaping into the cultures of distant past, into legends, myths and — entertainment. This is the problem which Jürgen Habermas meant in his polemics against what he called „Entsorgung der Vergangenheit“, the construction of a more acceptable past.¹⁷ If one lacks traditions which invite easy identification, the temptation is strong to invent them. Particularly if you have a history full of ruptures and breakdowns, the pressure may grow to harmonize them a little. If history is, in the main, desired and conjured for identity purposes, these are big dangers, and in the light of many examples in many countries one wonders how long history as a critical scholarly discipline can resist the pressure of such expectations.

Finally, I should like to stress that there are other, probably more important way in which history can serve the needs of the present time: One can be interested in history as something to learn from instead of something to identify with. One can also be interested in the past as something to overcome, to be changed and criticized. If one is guided by *this* type of historical interest one stresses a more analytical approach to histo-

ry (more in tune with the principles of history as a scholarly discipline). For instance, one tries to find out why and how National Socialism came to power, how and why dictatorship and mass terror became a possibility, why it happened in Germany and not somewhere else, why in the 30's and 40's and not at another point in time. Questions like these played a surprisingly minor role in recent debates. But historical memory cannot replace historical explanation. And it can be meaningful to remember and analyze history in order to stress the difference, the discontinuity, the break between past and present.

IV.

This brings me to an alternative way of defining the relation between our National Socialist past and our present situation as Germans and as citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany.¹⁸

There have certainly been many continuities reaching from the pre-1933 and pre-1945 era into the post-1945 years and right into the years of the Federal Republic. In contrast to what some contemporaries thought and hoped, 1945 was not a „Stunde Null“, not a „tabula rasa“ on which a completely new beginning could have been attempted. Capitalism survived in spite of several attempts for socialist reforms in 1946 and 1947. The civil service, the bureaucracy, the „Beamtenstaat“ survived as well although the American and the British who came from other traditions tried hard to change it. The Nazi elites were destroyed, replaced and degraded, and the break with the Nazi ideology was explicit. But after a relatively short period of deep reaching de-nazification, especially in the American zone, most of the dismissed civil servants and most of the degraded managers and experts came back — a basic continuity and even restoration, no doubt.

Still, if one takes the years around 1945 together, let us say from 1943 to 1948, the break, the rupture, in some respects even the revolution was very deep indeed, deeper I think than the breaks of 1918/19 or of 1848/49. The Federal Republic of Germany — as well as the GDR in a different way — is a product of a basic discontinuity, of a break of tradition. This involves certain burdens but important opportunities, as well. Let me give some illustrations.

As to social structure and mentalities the totalitarian dictatorship, the war, defeat and occupation brought about a deep re-shuffling. The Prussian *Junkers* for instance, a privileged, (semi-) aristocratic land owning class East of the river Elbe, had been a characteristic element of the German upper class: a pre-modern ruling elite with a specific life-world, high prestige and much political influence, largely sceptical about or hostile to parliamentarization and democratization, a burden for the politics of the Weimar Republic, to the breakdown of which they heavily contributed. Together with other parts of the Prussian nobility the *Junkers* were ruined and destroyed as a class in the war and during the course of their belated resistance against Hitler, due to persecution, expropriation and expulsion by the Russians and Poles as well as under the impact of compulsive land reform in the Soviet occupation zone. This involved much human suffering. A culture disappeared which had had its virtues, merits and charms as well — as one can read in the memoirs of Marion Gräfin Dönhoff.¹⁹ But at the same time a strong obstacle standing in the way of democratization and parliamentary government, was removed forever.

A similar argument can be made with respect to militarism. The officer corps' traditional claims to autonomy and exclusiveness as well as the importance of military values and symbols in the Prussian-German culture had been serious burdens for the development of civic virtues, a liberal society, and representative democracy. Nazi military policy on the one hand, war and defeat on the other have brought this tradition to an end.

In spite of all continuities a certain reshuffling of the elites took place, and something like a learning process is observable among those who stayed in power, for instance in the business elites. Class-conflict from above had a strong tradition, now it lost some of its rigour. And for the first time in German history, the propertied upper classes and the high civil servants, the majority of whom had been hostile towards the first German Republic (1918–1933), now accepted the democratic rules as it had been a matter of course in the Anglo–American democracies.²⁰

Nazi politics, the war, the breakdown, the influx of about ten million refugees and expelled persons contributed to a tremendous mobilization and re-shuffling of German society. Inherited affiliations were weakened, norms of the past were questioned, traditional lines of social conflict were blurred. Traditional patterns of village life were drawn into the dynamics of Nazi mobilization. Less than before, was the education of children left to families and churches. Dictatorship, war, defeat and particularly the full revelation of the Nazi crimes led to relativizing traditional values, e.g. belief in the nation. The forced migrations of unprecedented scale opened up closed local milieus, weakened tradition-based, small-scale loyalties and re-shuffled populations. In 1939, there were 1424 exclusively Catholic local communities in Bavaria, in 1946 only 9. Under the impact of dictatorship and war the tension between the denominations eased. The American and British bombing raids on the cities also destroyed old working-class quarters. Later on new buildings and broad streets would be built in their place. Neighbourhoods disappeared which had been the basis of subcultures. The dissolution of a specific working-class culture had begun long ago, the pressure of the dictatorship, the war and its consequences accelerated this process of class devolution.²¹

These examples should suffice. Those years brought a deep break, a destruction of tradition, a relativization of values, a loosening of loyalties, a questioning of inherited identity. It was a catastrophic and partly traumatic experience, which, however, affected persecutors and victims, majority and minorities, classes and groups in very different ways. All this meant heavy losses and there is good reason to look back with regret and grief. Destructions of this sort are on the ground of the particular modernity of West German society, which, however, was perfected only later, in the years and decades of accelerated economic growth and consumption. Indeed, this *loss of tradition* can be seen as a deficiency and a burden. It involves a certain amount of insecurity and perhaps even unpredictability. Here is the main reason why there is so much excited talk about collective identity in the Federal Republic, why „politics of history” plays such an important role.

On the other hand it should be stressed that the fundamental shake-up of those years also helped to loosen up traditional rigidities of the social structure, to soften previously self-destructive conflicts and to weaken certain burdening traditions which had contributed to Germany's „divergence from the West” and finally to its catastrophic course in the 30's and 40's.

On the basis of this schism, a new beginning could be made, at least in the West. The party system was deeply restructured, the system of labour unions changed, for the first time a *functioning* parliamentary system emerged. In these and some other respects the record of the Federal Republic is not too bad at all, particularly if one compares it to previous periods of our history and with other countries. This relative success had many causes and conditions, but among them is the deep break of tradition around 1945, which was not just a loss and a burden, but also an opportunity.

I have presented a very West German perspective in discussing the importance of the break around 1945 for the identity and the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany. There are good intellectual and political reasons for this self-restriction. But certainly, the Germans in the GDR share the historical heritage which I am discussing

here. They sometimes suppress this, but partly they are aware of it, and increasingly they recognize it, even on an official level.²² Auschwitz is „gesamtdeutsch“, and so is the schism around 1945, at least in the beginning, before the bifurcated development began.

And one cannot overlook that this break around 1945 also involved the amputation and division of the German nation state. This involved a particularly difficult mix of burdens and opportunities.

The nation state has not been the rule in modern German history. It came late, against much opposition, and one can argue that it has produced more problems than it solved. In Wilhelmine Germany and in the Weimar Republic the stress on national identity and the religion of nationalism belonged, not exclusively, but predominantly and increasingly, into the world of the political right in its different forms. The discrediting of the national idea was not begun by the Nazis but was brought by them to an extreme climax and thus far to and end. Seen in this context, the destruction of the German nation state around 1945 was not only a catastrophe.

Nowadays, when markets and corporations, media and cultures, ecological problems, nuclear threat and protest movements cut across national boundaries, the future of the nation state as a dominant principle of organizing political society, is not self-evident any more. There are interesting debates about post-national identities.

It would, of course, be hypocritical to deny the widespread receptiveness for the allurements of national greatness, glory or, at least, recongition. At the same time, belonging not anymore to the inner circle of great powers, is a matter of relief. And if comparative surveys seem to show that the Germans in the Federal Republic (together with the Dutch) rank lower on a scale measuring national pride and identification than the French or the Americans, this may not be only a disadvantage. As the Stuttgart historian Eberhard Jaeckel recently wrote: „Perhaps we should even be proud of the fact that we are not that proud of our in-born nationality anymore.”²³

On the other hand, this is a field of unexplored collective emotions full of potential surprises. The more the Germans in both German states deal with their pre-1945 history as a source or as a problem of their collective identity, the more they tend to stress something they have in common, in spite of their distribution between two states and two systems. This is happening now. And even if one does not naively take the national state as *the* best and „natural“ form of organizing peoples in a political way, one cannot overlook that the deep breach of national history which occurred in Germany around 1945, may be a burden in the long run, especially since the principle of the nation state remains tremendously powerful in other countries and other parts of the world. One cannot disregard that the desire for national unification and greatness may become stronger again among Germans of future generations, which would involve political problems. No doubt, if one has unquestioned, broadly accepted national traditions of a relatively democratic and non-repressive kind, they may be helpful as a basis of problem-solving loyalties which every society needs. But if one does not have them, or just in a fractured, questioned, discredited form, one can do without them, and one cannot invent or construct them. It will be only at a much later point in time that historians will be able to judge what the loss of national unity around 1945 really meant, and in what blend it involved opportunities and burdens.²⁴

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1. R.v. Weizsäcker, Zum 40. Jahrestag der Beendigung des Zweiten Weltkriegs, in: *Geschichtsdidaktik* 10, 1955, pp. 233—40.
2. The debate is documented in: Ch. Stölzl (ed.), *Deutsches Historisches Museum. Ideen — Kontroversen — Perspektiven*, Frankfurt 1988.
3. The best documentation: „Historikerstreit“. Die Dokumentation der Kontroversen um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung, München 1987. (There are Italian and French editions, an English translation is being prepared). For a polemical contribution and a well-documented chronology of the debate cf. H.—U. Wehler, *Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit? Ein polemischer Essay zum „Historikerstreit“*, München 1988. A kind of summary: DJ. Peukert, *Wer gewann den Historikerstreit? Keine Bilanz*, in: P. Glotz et al. (eds.), *Vernunft riskieren. Klaus von Dohnanyi zum 60. Geburtstag*, Hamburg 1988, S. 38—50.; Th. M. Gaus (ed.), *Die Last der Geschichte. Kontroversen zur deutschen Identität*, Köln 1988.
4. Cf. E. Nolte, *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917—1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, München 1988. Nolte initiated the controversy, and he was one of its key figures. He has been criticized by J. Habermas, H. Mommsen, H.—A. Winkler and others (cf. „Historikerstreit“, n. 3). See the very critical reviews of Nolte's „Europäischer Bürgerkrieg“ by H. Mommsen and W. Schieder in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (GG) 14, 1988, pp. 495—512; 15, 1989, pp. 89—114.
5. Cf. V. Berghahn, *Die Fischerkontroverse — 15 Jahre danach*, in: GG 6, 1980, S. 403—419.
6. In the meantime, a controversial and revisionist debate over recent history has gained momentum in the Soviet Union. Again, it can be observed that basic re-orientations of present policies and changing interpretations of one's past are closely related.
7. Summaries can be found in: K.—D. Bracher, *Die deutsche Diktatur. Entstehung, Struktur und Folgen des Nationalsozialismus*, Köln 1980⁶; K. Hildebrand, *Das Dritte Reich*, München 1987³.
8. Cf. E. Nolte, *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*, in: „Historikerstreit“ (n. 3), pp. 39—47.
9. Vgl. *Totalitarismus und Faschismus. Kolloquium des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte am 24. Nov. 1978*, München 1980.
10. Cf. R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, London 1986. Critical views of Conquest's interpretation are presented in: St. Merl, *Wie viele Opfer forderte die „Liquidierung der Kulaken als Klasse“?*, in: GG 14, 1988, pp. 534—540; id., „Ausrottung“ der Bourgeoisie und der Kulaken in Sowjetrußland? Anmerkungen zu einem fragwürdigen Vergleich mit Hitlers Judenvernichtung, in: GG 13, 1987, S. 368—81.
11. M. Broszat, *Nach Hitler. Der schwierige Umgang mit unserer Geschichte*, München 1986, p. 166 etc.; S. Friedländer, *Überlegungen zur Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus*, in: D. Diner (ed.), *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, Frankfurt 1987.
12. München 1987.
13. There has been a lively debate on the merits and limits of „Alltagsgeschichte“ in recent years.
14. From the announcement of the new series in: *Die Zeit*, Sept. 16, 1988.
15. H. Lübke, *Über den Grund unseres Interesses an historischen Gegenständen. Kulturelle und politische Funktionen der historischen Geisteswissenschaften*, in: H. Flashar et al. (eds.), *Geisteswissenschaften als Aufgabe*, Berlin (West) 1978, S. 179—193.
16. See n. 1 above.
17. *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*, in: „Historikerstreit“ (n. 3), pp. 62—76.
18. Documentation for the rest of this article can be found in: J. Kocka, 1945: *Neubeginn oder Restauration?*, in: C. Stern and H. A. Winkler (eds.), *Wendepunkte deutscher Geschichte 1800—1945*, Frankfurt 1979, pp. 141—168; id., *Zerstörung und Befreiung. Das Jahr 1945 als Wendepunkt deutscher Geschichte*, in: id., *Geschichte und Aufklärung*, Göttingen 1989.
19. Marion Dönhoff, *Eine Kindheit in Ostpreußen*, Berlin (West) 1988.
20. R. Löwenthal in: id. and H.—P. Schwarz (eds.), *Die zweite Republik. 25 Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland — eine Bilanz*, Stuttgart 1974, p. 10.
21. M. Broszat et al. (eds.), *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland*, München 1988.

22. Cf. the contributions to a symposium of both West and East German historians: S. Miller and M. Ristau (eds.), *Erben deutscher Geschichte. DDR — BRD: Protokoll einer historischen Begegnung*, Reinbek 1988, esp. 26—86.
23. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, June 6, 1987, quoted in Meier, *40 Jahre nach Auschwitz* (n. 12), p. 74.
24. Although the situation has deeply changed in the meantime, I have not changed the text at all which was presented to an audience in the fall of 1988 and written down for publication in the spring of 1989. The revolution of 1989 and the process of German unification now underway have not made the considerations of this article obsolete, quite on the contrary.