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The Burden of a Nazi Legacy: Coming to Terms with the Past

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the parallels between West Germany's collective response as a nation, from a political and public standpoint, and the individual reactions of the second and third generations of Nazi descendants in the aftermath of the Nazi era. It explores how both entities grappled with and confronted the enduring legacies of World War II, National Socialism, and the Holocaust. The research involved an analysis of academic journal articles, archival materials from the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and personal memoirs and autobiographies written by individuals after the war. By synthesizing these diverse sources and putting them into conversation with one another, this investigation will situate the maturation and evolution of individual memories and emotions within the broader context of national trends and developments in population attitudes and collective commemoration. Specifically, the paper scrutinizes the formidable challenges that West Germany faced in reckoning with its past within the realms of politics and public discourse. It also examines how the descendants of the perpetrator generation either identified with or resisted the societal changes stemming from this historical introspection. Spanning the period from 1945 to 1999, the year that the German parliament decided to establish a central memorial site for the victims of the Holocaust, this project aims to demonstrate that the collective and individual responses to the Nazi era are interrelated processes, intertwined with overarching concepts of memory, identity, and consciousness. The temporal scope chosen for this study endeavors to illustrate that these responses are not linear progressions but complex and cumbersome journeys.

Introduction

"These self-inflicted disasters toppled regimes, moved borders, killed millions—in short, caused untold suffering that engulfed the very people who had unleashed them."[1]

- Konrad Jarausch

The Nazi Party revealed the human capacity for destruction. After Germany's defeat in 1945, the nation endured psychological and institutional battles in both the public and private spheres to overcome the shadows of authoritarianism and rebuild the country. The evolution of political conflict and policies, along with the expression of public attitudes, served as responses to West Germany's memory of the Nazi period. Coming to terms with the past involved an ongoing negotiation, where the interplay of past and present shaped the narrative. By dissecting the development of memory over time and the tension between familial narratives and the historical record, this paper will demonstrate how individual responses to World War II and the Holocaust by descendants of Nazis mirrored the collective public response in West Germany from 1945 to 1999.

National Socialism exploited the instability of the German nation after World War I and spun the fantasies and desires of the people into a killing machine. While not every person contributed to the policies of extermination employed by the Nazis, many Germans collaborated with or supported the regime to some degree. As the people accepted the system, a pervasive culture of stigmatization and exclusion spread, fostering a widespread unwillingness to intervene on behalf of the victims.[2] While there are a variety of reasons for individual participation, war at

[1] Konrad H. Jarausch, *Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 361.
[2] Bernhard Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 114.

this scale required countless participants, and each small act encouraged the regime. A comprehensive understanding of the postwar era demands that we not only focus on the Nazi leaders but also acknowledge what journalist Peter Sichrovsky calls the "vast mass of loyal, decent bureaucrats—policemen, officers, mayors, railroad employees, teachers, and so on—that greased the wheels of the Nazi dictatorship."[3] These individuals may or may not have committed crimes against humanity but they all exhibited a failure to act, which fostered a collective complicity that allowed the Nazi regime to emerge and govern. It is important to study the Holocaust from the perspective of the victims, but I analyze the lives of the perpetrator generation and their descendants to advance an understanding of reconciliation in a post-Holocaust environment. Such an examination provides justice to the victims and investigates the methods through which German communities sought redemption.[4]

The ongoing process of West Germany coming to terms with the past, known as "vergangenheitsbewältigung," can be analyzed through three historical periods. I have chosen to periodize life in West Germany in this distinct manner since it details the transition from the perpetrator generation to their second and third-generation descendants.[5] It also charts the trends in broader West German history, as each period and phase I outline concludes with an event that confronts national and individual identities and highlights the diversity of perspectives towards

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[3] Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 5.
[4] Michael Berenbaum, David Engel, and Lucy Dawidowicz are three of the leading scholars in Holocaust Studies. Their works explore the history of the Holocaust through an examination of survivor experiences in the periods leading up to and during World War II, in addition to detailing the importance of antisemitism in the development of National Socialism. Their works also explore the state of Jewry after the Holocaust and how Holocaust survivors have shaped the study of modern Jewish history.
[5] In analyzing West German history after World War II, academic research often covers the second half of the twentieth century without interruption or highlights particular decades. The British historian Mary Fulbrook has published several books that outline the legacies of Nazi persecution and the development of German identity after World War II and the Holocaust. She provides a comprehensive and detailed exploration through the twenty-first century that investigates the intersection and differences between memory and history. Historians Harald Jähner and Bill Niven discuss similar themes, yet their works focus on specific time frames, such as Jähner exploring 1945 – 1955 and Niven exploring united Germany after 1991. All three authors discuss the legacy of the Third Reich and its effect on national identity.

the past on a private and public level. In addition, while acknowledging East Germany's relationship with the past, I focus on the contradictory nature of postwar reconstruction in West Germany.[6] The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), unlike the German Democratic Republic (GDR), reestablished democratic institutions and economic prosperity while reconciling the moral responsibility of its past. This presents an opportunity to investigate how the process of democratization influenced the development of a German national identity and memory culture.

From 1945 to 1959, the immediate postwar period, the FRG focused on the cultivation of a cosmopolitan culture to fortify relations with other Western nations and safeguard its newly defined idea of democracy. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, while making modest efforts to address the Nazi era, mirrored the general populace in selectively remembering the near past, which employed tactics of avoidance and promoted German victimization.[7] Transitioning from 1960 to 1979, the government prioritized economic concerns, but the public instigated a dramatic confrontation with the legacy of Nazism. Political conflicts and public debates dominated the period, with the younger generations challenging people to assess their wartime involvement.[8] Finally, from 1980 to 1999, the government shifted its focus to foreign policy and oversaw the unification of East and West Germany. Socially, attention to National Socialism and the Holocaust shifted from civil society to scholarly debate and historical research. While the events of the Holocaust remained central, efforts to forge a positive German national identity led many

[6] Jeffrey Herf and Siobhan Kattago are two pioneers in the field of postwar German political memory. They detail how each Germany, both East and West, has addressed the crimes of Nazism, yet by presenting the two histories side-by-side, they investigate the influence of left and right Cold War politics on the relationship between the nations. Both authors tell their stories through the depiction of key events in East and West German history to contribute to an overall understanding of the contentious role of building a new national identity.
[7] Robert G. Moeller, "War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (1996): 1021.
[8] Philipp Gassert and Alan E. Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict, 1955-1975* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2007), 26.

people to revert to old tendencies through the broadening of victimhood.[9] This paper will conclude with an analysis of the establishment of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin at the turn of the century, which is a place of remembrance for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and represents the culmination of efforts to bring the lessons of the Holocaust into the public mind and German consciousness. I present West Germany's response to the past as multifaceted and consisting of shifting public and private judgments over time. Nevertheless, a consistent thread persisted: even as temporal distance increased from the events, the World War II period continued to exert pressure on German society across all three chronological periods.

This paper also assesses individual stories and familial memories. Collective memory, though conceived through political and cultural representations in the public domain, is also internalized at the personal level. Individuals experience their private sense of memory, where their recollections of the past influence their understanding of both their history and future. This private act of remembering is inherently intertwined with the collective social and cultural context in which it occurs, but according to Israeli historian Alon Confino, "how individuals understand their past behavior, place it in a larger context, justify it, how they tell it to family and friends, how they change it over time, and how they translate their memories into social and political actions—are not quite the same as, and certainly not identical with, the narratives of national memory acted by states and institutions in the public sphere."[10] These instances of dissonance, where factual knowledge of history clashed with representations inherited through family narratives, created complex dynamics within communities and left individuals to bear the

[9] Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 44.
[10] Alon Confino, "Telling about Germany: Narratives of Memory and Culture," *The Journal of Modern History* 76, no. 2 (2004): 407.

burden of reconciling these contradictions.[11] Amidst the backdrop of political and social changes within West German society, families addressed the past in different ways, which affected the formation of both national and individual identities across successive generations.

How Germans acknowledged the legacy of National Socialism depended on their immediate surrounding context and how individuals responded to the stories told by their ancestors. Second and third generations of Nazi descendants often grappled with psychological and moral repercussions resulting from the way their parents and grandparents interacted with history. They did not learn from direct experience but through indirect representations, historical documents, mass media, and personal interactions. I integrate both the public and personal perspectives into a cohesive dialogue and explore how responses to the past from individual descendants of Nazis paralleled the developing memory tradition of collective West Germany.[12] By examining the role of memory and identity across generations, I endeavor to achieve a deeper understanding of what it means to be connected to a Nazi past and Holocaust history.

The second generation (2G) comprises the children of Nazis born in the years directly before, during, or after the war, roughly spanning from 1932 to 1947. Coming of age after the end of the war, their memories are shaped by defeat and its aftermath, making an analysis of their responses to the past particularly crucial in the immediate postwar and 1960-1979 periods. It is important to understand the experiences of the children of top-ranking Nazi officials, but I also analyze how, regardless of the rank of their parents, the children of Nazis all approached their distinct challenges and investigated and absorbed that era into their own lives. Many exhibited an

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[11] Confino, "Telling about Germany: Narratives of Memory and Culture," 411.
[12] Scholars Philipp Gassert and Alan E. Steinweis, in *Coping with the Nazi Past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict, 1955–1975*, analyze German history after National Socialism from a public lens, including how the social, political, and cultural context has influenced public modes of thinking. Conversely, Gertrud Hardtmann has provided a psychodynamic perspective that examines the personal viewpoints of the descendants of Nazi perpetrators. While the public and private reckonings of the past are often dependent on one another, these academic scholars, among others, maintain a more monolithic focus.

immense struggle to comprehend what happened during the wartime years and to build their own identity in the shadow of their heritage.[13] In addition, I explore how changing political and social constellations outside the home influenced how the 2G confronted the reality of war and their parent generation. As stated by Dr. Katharina von Kellenbach, "When the first generation fails to accept the challenge, its descendants inherit the task" of penetrating past silence and contending with a personal and historical legacy of destruction and genocide.[14]

The third generation (3G) comprises the grandchildren of Nazis, predominantly born during the 1960s and 1970s, which makes their responses significant for the 1980-1999 period. Similar to the 2G, these individuals demonstrate that there is a connection between new generations and old stories. However, in contrast to the 2G, they were superficially much less conflicted due to generational succession which allowed them to view their ancestors with a more critical and detached perspective. Still, it remained a painful process, since it is difficult to overcome blind spots created by the closeness to one's subject, in addition to the fear that investigating the personal aspect of history may jeopardize family relationships.[15] This paper juxtaposes personal stories with the historical context of how concepts of National Socialism and World War II are

[13] Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On published the first book on the children of Nazis in 1987 to reveal the experience of having Nazi Germany as a legacy shaped their childhood and interpersonal relationships. He demonstrates how they struggled to balance the positives of their parents with the crimes they inflicted on innocent people, providing a rare glimpse into the family life of those who experienced the Third Reich on a personal level. The stories are complex, which limits the ability of Bar-On to provide conceptualization and connect the experiences of those studied. Stephan and Norbert Lebert adopt a similar method by interviewing children of Nazi perpetrators, devoting individual chapters of their book to different perspectives. However, they only analyze the experiences of the children of the elite.

[14] Katharina von Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

[15] German writer Jennifer Teege published a best-selling book in which she recounts the revelation that Amon Göth, the commandant of the Plaszow concentration camp, was her grandfather, raising the unsettling possibility that he may have targeted her as a black woman. Her narrative illustrates the enduring impact of the third generation and prompts questions about the inheritance of evil. Swedish author Julie Lindahl also published a book exploring her connection to Nazism through an exploration of her grandfather and his involvement in the Nazi regime. These authors present an honest reflection of how their position as third-generation Nazi descendants influences their present identities.

addressed in public dialogue and action. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how the way children were exposed to history affected their relationship and understanding of the Nazi era.

The investigation of West German history will be grounded in academic journals and books, whereas the exploration of intergenerational history will rely on primary source work through personal memoirs and autobiographies from those whose parents were affiliated with the Nazi Party. These sources are selective since individuals can omit certain details or construct narratives, but there remains value in the biases present. Memoirs, in this context, become a medium to highlight how histories of guilt and shame have impacted subsequent generations. These individuals have elected to share their stories with the world, and they demonstrate that while individuals are born into history and culture, family and tradition play a crucial role in linking them to these larger dimensions of experience. This paper details how the difficult but often overlapping processes of internalizing the Nazi past have coincided with national and individual identities. Public and private responses to the past did not outpace one another, as public displays of memory and identity often reflected individual sentiments. The inconsistent ability of West Germany as a collective to come to terms with the Nazi era in the public sphere parallels the familial tensions that influenced the private responses to the past among the direct descendants of the perpetrator generation.

Immediate Postwar (1945-1959)

At the end of the war in 1945, Germany experienced a sense of general disillusionment after the collapse of the "Volksgemeinschaft," the community of the people, into the "Schulgemeinschaft," the community of guilt.[16] The nightmare for Germany began with a

[16] Karen Hagemann, Konrad H. Jarausch, and Tobias Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings: Rebuilding East and West Germany after Nazism," *Central European History* 53, no. 2 (2020): 280.

demoralized and exhausted population, engulfed in a landscape of physical, moral, and political ruin. The toll was staggering: 600,000 civilians dead, 800,000 wounded, and 7.5 million left homeless.[17] The bombs of the Allied Powers had reduced cities to the ground, leaving over one million German women widowed, with many enduring sexual assault and rape by the soldiers of the Soviet Red Army.[18] Buried under devastation and loss, the people plummeted to the bottom of the scale in terms of national pride and self-esteem. Yet to survive in a victor's world and to start the long and difficult process of reconstruction, Germany needed to develop new strategies to restore the civic life of its people. Many scholars have referred to this period as "Stunde Null," or the "1946 Zero Hour," where to move forward, Germany severed all ties with its Nazi past.[19] While true in a variety of ways, the notion of "Stunde Null" is a concept of convenience that perpetuates the myth of an entirely new beginning. The nation removed many of its totalitarian structures, yet it continued to bear the signs of the regime from which it emerged. Branded as the "land of perpetrators" by the international community, Germany faced several challenges in the periods moving forward. Despite the odds, Germany found a convoluted path toward self-renewal, where it managed to re-invent itself after conducting the largest mass genocide in human history and shattering the trust of the international community.

Some historians depict a narrative suggesting that all West Germans treated the past with collective silence and widespread amnesia.[20] However, the West German response to the past was not uniform; while some individuals embraced a strategy of repression, the majority

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[17] Seth Skundrick and Nicole Rittenmeyer, dir. *Third Reich: The Fall*, Documentary, aired 2010, by The History Channel.
[18] Hagemann, Jarausch, and Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings," 282-283.
[19] Stephen Brockman, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2004); John Perkins, "Review: Restoration & Renewal? West Germany since 1945," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 3 (1999): 487-497.; Ian Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2014).
[20] Jean-Paul Bier and Michael Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion, 1947-1979," *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 9-10.

followed a policy of *selective* remembering. Politically, the commemoration of the past correlated with the development of its democratic institutions. Maintaining silence about the past allowed West Germany to construct a functioning civil society along the broader path toward Westernization.[21] The state prioritized reconciliation with other Western European nations, even when it came at the expense of addressing many of the nation's unresolved issues. Although this mentality restored a degree of normality and stability to the nation, it also fostered a tendency to brush the past under the rug in a quick and efficient manner.[22]

Socially, the people eradicated the influence of Nazism from the public eye. The people purged evidence of National Socialism from the German language and literature, removed Nazi symbols from the city centers, rebuilt infrastructure and factories, and cleansed labor personnel previously affiliated with the Nazi Party (NSDAP).[23] However, despite attempts to depict Nazism as inherently evil and sinister, with an unspoken mandate to be condemned at all costs, the people continued to view the near past from a detached perspective. No one, neither the state nor the public, addressed the fact that over eight million Germans, constituting 10% of the population, had been members of the NSDAP and other Nazi-related organizations during the war.[24] And even more had expressed indifference and participated in a communal state of mind that contributed to the logistics, machinery, and legitimation of mass murder. Still reeling from their experiences of fervent nationalism and radical militarism, the worldviews of many individuals remained deeply ingrained with Nazi concepts and patterns of thinking; in reality, as historian Alon Confino asks, how could one "expect at all that those who committed or supported

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[21] Frederick Weil, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past: Anti-Semitism in West Germany since the Holocaust," *New German Critique* 20, no. 2 (1980): 141.
[22] Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacies," *History and Memory* 17, no. 1-2 (2005): 157.
[23] Hagemann, Jarausch, and Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings," 292.
[24] Alon Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance: Traces of National Socialism in West Germany, 1945-1960," *History and Memory* 12, no. 2 (2000): 93.

crimes during National Socialism should atone for their deeds just several years later?"[25] Melita Maschmann, a propagandist in the League of the German Girls (BDM), depicts this concept. Although postwar expectations demanded that individuals distance themselves from the Third Reich, Maschmann remembered the allure of the regime, which made them feel part of a cause grander than themselves. For people like Maschmann, it became "hard to have to give up the fragment of a great age one has experienced themselves."[26] In addition, most Germans concerned themselves more with the state of their own conditions than with a willingness to confront their implication. Maschmann expressed, "A vast army of ghosts, cripples, and monsters inhabited my dream landscape, where cities burned and forests were mown down by a hail of bombs."[27] For many demoralized Germans, they "made a peace treaty with their souls for a new start: there would be no discussion of that shameful past, no analyzing, no reflecting, no mourning, and no regretting."[28]

In the chaos of collapse, West Germany forged a politics of survival. Confrontation occurred from the outside as the Allied Powers informed West Germans in 1945 of their collective guilt and implemented policies to purge German society of Nazi ideology.[29] The American and British armies forced civilians in local towns to tour concentration camps like Dachau and Buchenwald and to rebury the deceased. In addition, the Allies orchestrated a systematic program of mass media to confront Germans with the enormity of the crimes

[25] Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance," 95.
[26] Melita Maschmann, *Account Rendered: A Dossier on my Former Self* (Lexington, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 2016), 198.
[27] Maschmann, *Account Rendered*, 195.
[28] Alan L. Berger, *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 359.
[29] Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 39.

committed and to educate them about the principles of democracy.[30] Furthermore, the Allies stripped Germany of its military capabilities, reintroduced free enterprise, and issued denazification questionnaires to identify people's levels of involvement in the Nazi Party. While these actions prohibited open avowals of National Socialism, they pushed issues below the surface, as individuals fought for ways to evade their involvement. These policies also fostered resentment towards the Allied nations, whom they perceived as taking advantage of their position as victors to exploit their influence on Germany.

Frustration, anger, and antagonism found their strongest expression among the children of Nazis, who grappled with a profound sense of defeat after witnessing their nation and parents in a state of ruin. Edda Göring, born in 1938 as the daughter of Hermann Göring, positioned herself as a victim, perceiving the behavior of the Allies as hypocritical by belittling Germany and capitalizing on its weakened state.[31] The German people once viewed Edda as the star and belle of the empire who lived her earliest years in luxury. Yet after the war, the American government seized her assets and tore her away from her family home. While her father awaited trial at Nuremberg, Edda and her mother, Emmy Sonnemann, lived in a small cottage without electricity or running water before the Allies sentenced them to a prison for the wives and children of Nazi leaders. The way the Allies treated her family fueled indignation, which left Edda embittered. She despised the way the Allies "profited" off the riches of her father's artwork and blamed the Western nations for uprooting and dismantling her life. This discontent manifested itself in an unwavering devotion to her father, where she refused to see him as anything less than the loving, attentive parent she had adored.

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[30] Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[31] Tania Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis: The Sons and Daughters of Himmler, Göring, Höss, Mengele, and Others – Living with a Father's Monstrous Legacy* (New York: Arcarde, 2018).

Similarly, Wolf Rüdiger Hess, born in 1937 as the son of Rudolf Hess, Deputy Führer to Hitler, blamed the Allies for leveraging their position of power to assert dominance over West Germany. He "considers his father a man of peace who was absolutely innocent but subjected to the improper and unfair Justice of the victors." They sentenced him to prison without the possibility of release, which served no cause other than to flaunt their wealth and status over a dejected German population.[32] Hess reassured himself that "in some years, history will take a different perspective on these so-called crimes, and [his] father will be seen in a proper and good way." He envisioned a future where the Allies faced accountability for their war crimes during World War II, and the people restored his father to the highest pedestal of leaders.[33] In general, Edda Göring and Wolf R. Hess represent exceptional cases given their level of privilege during the war, yet their mindsets are reflective of the anger and emotions experienced by many Germans during the Allied occupation. The denazification policies persisted for years, but their increasing leniency and shifting priorities revealed shortcomings in their initiatives. Instead of encouraging people to face the crimes committed in the German name, the Allied tactics contributed to the rhetoric of victimization by blurring the distinctions between levels of guilt and motivating individuals to resist confrontation.[34] In the end, the Allies recognized the value in refraining from further punishing Germany and instead sought to utilize the nation as a pawn and partner in their rivalry against the Soviet Union. They dismantled the denazification process and abandoned the expectation of collective guilt, aiming to accelerate reconstruction and salvage the administrative and technical expertise of West Germany.

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[32] Gerald Posner, *Hitler's Children: Sons and Daughters of Leaders of the Third Reich Talk About Their Fathers and Themselves* (New York: Random House, 1991), 41.
[33] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 69.
[34] Hannah Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany," *Commentary*, October 1950.

Postwar justice also took on a defined shape within the legal apparatus. From 1945 to 1946, the Nuremberg Trials tried 24 major leaders of the Nazi Party, the German government, and the German military under allegations of crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The prosecution condemned the Nazi regime as criminal by highlighting the operation of the concentration camps and corruption within the government, which exposed the true nature of the Nazi Party to the German people and discredited it in their eyes. The final verdicts delivered twelve death sentences, including those of Hermann Göring, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and Hans Frank; three life imprisonments, including those of Rudolf Hess, Walther Funk, and Erich Raeder; and four prison terms ranging from 10 to 20 years, including those of Baldur von Schirach, Karl Dönitz, and Albert Speer. Although these trials became the centerpiece of postwar prosecution, they faced criticism for their limitations. The legal system attempted to establish a precedent based on the acknowledgment of genocide, but prearranged and restrictive rules constrained its level of effectiveness.[35] In addition, the prosecutions focused on only a select few involved in the Nazi apparatus. While depicting them as "the living symbols of racial hatreds, of terrorism and violence, and of the arrogance and cruelty of power," the trial emphasized the criminality of the diabolical elite but overlooked the mass majority who contributed in other capacities.[36] The Nuremberg Trials brought many perpetrators to justice, yet thousands of individuals who enabled the nature of National Socialism escaped punishment.

The moral ambiguity surrounding guilt found its complement in the private sphere. Immediately following Germany's defeat in 1945, social and cultural norms demanded that any moral justifications for the war be radically denied. Moreover, the people felt unable to mourn

[35] Mary Fulbrook, "Reframing the Past: Justice, Guilt, and Consolidation in East and West Germany after Nazism," *Central European History* 53, no. 2 (2020): 301.
[36] Devin O. Pendas, "Seeking Justice, Finding Law: Nazi Trials in Postwar Europe," *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 2 (2009): 358.

the loss of their land and the lives of soldiers, given the circumstances. This forced the people to grapple with a depleted reservoir of self-respect and integrity, which replaced the once-triumphant notion of the German "Kulturnation" and national community with the haunting consequences of the Holocaust.[37] Horst von Wächter, born in 1939 as the son of Otto Wächter, the governor of Krakow, articulated how the moral and ethical concerns following the war compelled individuals to reevaluate their lives and redefine their perception of themselves. As a young child after the war, he found himself reconciling his memories of family vacations, the vivacious energy of Hitler's speeches, and the communal spirit involved in parades and rallies, with the grim reality of a now-defeated homeland. He reflected, "It's not only that the regime broke down, but everything around us broke down."[38] Similarly, Irmgard A. Hunt, despite having a father who was only a low-ranking member of the NSDAP, recounted the level of devotion that her family professed to the fatherland. Born in 1934, Irmgard and other Germans felt "completely seduced by a feeling of belonging."[39] However, like Wächter, she too found herself disillusioned after the war, describing, "All I had ever known was Nazi Germany, and I was frightened by this visible physical collapse and by not having the vaguest idea what, if anything, would replace it."[40] Many individuals, overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and loss, sought to integrate their own destruction into the historical canon of postwar Germany.

The underlying support for Nazism differed from public acknowledgment, where a national survey conducted from 1945 to 1946 revealed that 47% of the public believed National Socialism was a good but poorly executed idea.[41] For many, they struggled to explain how a

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[37] Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference," 132.
[38] *What Our Fathers Did: A Nazi Legacy*, David Evans (2015; Los Angeles: PBS, 2018), film.
[39] Irmgard A. Hunt, *On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the Legacy of a Nazi Childhood* (New York: William Morrow, 2006), 172.
[40] Hunt, *On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the Legacy of a Nazi Childhood*, 203.
[41] Weil, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past," 141-142.

sense of duty and nationalism could have misled them into participating in acts of mass violence. However, rather than addressing these concerns, the majority regained a semblance of control over their circumstances by engaging in collective forgetting and repressing recollections of fascism that might recall its violent or murderous tendencies.[42] Ordinary individuals tainted by complicity reframed their personal stories to craft a narrative of victimization. They mourned the loss of their homeland in the East, and resurrected conversations about the enduring legacy and trauma associated with the experiences of falling bombs, fear, and familial and personal sacrifices. The discourse represented a sharp contrast to the strategy employed by the Allies, which sought to make the West Germans in 1945 atone for their transgressions. Instead, the people insulated themselves from self-reflection by avoiding themes of societal guilt and shame. They isolated behind a wall of state bureaucracy, which distanced the people from the burden of memory and focused on moral rehabilitation.

In addition, the people demarcated a boundary between themselves as ordinary citizens and those regarded as the "tatervolk," or the "true perpetrators." They achieved this division through the development of strict criteria to define an "oppressor," as well as the use of passive formulations and vague terms regarding the question of responsibility, which crafted an argument that exclusively placed the blame on Hitler and his "band of brothers."[43] The Nuremberg Trials had already fortified this narrative by focusing predominantly on high-ranking officials, but the public and private spheres extended its reach, demanding that it be accepted by the collective. This hesitation for people to turn the mirror on themselves contributed to a prevailing notion that only a small group of the worst criminals had organized the Nazi system. For example, postwar

[42] Daniel Levy and Jeffrey K. Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint: Holocaust Myth and Rationality in German Politics," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 6 (1997): 927.
[43] Pendas, "Seeking Justice, Finding Law: Nazi Trials in Postwar Europe," 353.

public onions revealed that only a handful of those surveyed believed that soldiers, ranging from the lowest rank to the highest members of the SS and Gestapo, had done anything beyond their duty.[44] They felt that the demands of war necessitated certain actions, even if perceived as crimes in hindsight and not permissible in a peacetime environment. In their eyes, the structure of National Socialism forced individuals to follow orders, which eliminated their autonomy and left them to now bear the consequences of those commands.

This defense of "just following orders," also known as the "Nuremberg defense," absolved individuals of personal responsibility and prevented accountability for those who participated in or contributed to events during the Nazi period.[45] Yet while this excuse became a tool for the perpetrator generation to distance themselves from the crimes of Nazism, their children adopted similar tactics of evasion. Many members of the second generation "inherited" the anti-Semitic and discriminatory beliefs of their parents, while also painting their families as acting under the expectations of war, thus releasing them from the threat of implication. The inability to attribute guilt or shame to their parents did not depend upon their rank or position within the Nazi Party, as children of both regular officers and those from elite backgrounds exhibited this inclination. Johannes, the son of a railroad operator during the war, argued that his father, like many other individuals, was so consumed by fear that he did not have the capacity to harbor, acknowledge, or address any other secrets concerning the Jewish people. Under a regime that ruled through terror, Johannes detailed how his father did not have an avenue to undermine the authority and "always had to be on the side of the strong. What else could he do?"[46] In addition, Hans Gilbert, the son of a Nazi general, acknowledged that everyone knew about the

[44] Levy and Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint," 933.
[45] Fulbrook, "Reframing the Past: Justice, Guilt, and Consolidation," 310.
[46] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 50.

concentration camps, but insisted that "if you didn't obey, you would be sent away to the gas."[47] Gilbert recognized the need to utilize the Nazi era as a lesson for the future, but he was unable to criticize his father and adopted an attitude of contempt toward anyone who tried to dictate how he or his family should think or act.

The children of high-ranking officials also defended their parents. Ingebrigitt Höss, born in 1933 as the daughter of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, claimed that her father was a cog in the machine. According to her, the expectations placed on him as an officer required that he commit certain actions within the concentration camp.[48] Similarly, Eva Bormann, born in 1938 as the daughter of Martin Bormann, the private secretary to Hitler, equated Germany under Hitler with an occupied country, where people lacked individual freedoms and had no choice but to obey orders. In her eyes, there "will always be politicians who do things that hurt people… if you judge someone, it's always relative [and they] will be seen as heroes at a different time.[49] Despite documented evidence against her father, Eva Bormann refused to see him as answerable for the crimes he committed, claiming, that in an "eat or be eaten" world, he tried to do his best.[50] Finally, Barbel Ludin, born in 1935 as the daughter of Hanns Ludin, Hitler's ambassador to Slovakia, rejected the label as the child of a perpetrator and expressed anger towards anyone who tried to impose this idea on her. Barbel remembered her father as a symbol of strength and beauty, and as a man who loved food, wine, and, above all else, his family. Since she believed that her father was unaware of the extermination policies of Germany, she did not count him among the Nazi criminals. The level of totalitarianism and terror orchestrated by Hitler rendered

[47] "Oral history interviews with children of Nazis in Austria and West Germany," United States Holocaust Museum, 1987, accessed December 5, 2023.
[48] Tania Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis.*
[49] "Oral history interviews with children of Nazis."
[50] "Oral history interviews with children of Nazis."

her father another one of his victims. Barbel also rationalized her father's obedience to tasks, including the death of Jews, whom she saw as anti-German partisans killed during the war.[51] Other West Germans also failed to assess the implications of their actions and those of their families, and, in a sense, justified committing crimes against humanity under the guise of merely obeying and following orders.

The people adopted a general coalition of silence around the Holocaust. By the autumn of 1941, knowledge about the Jewish question had grown rapidly under the impact of public rhetoric, and most people grasped that a central decision had been made to deport the Jews.[52] However, knowing that their awareness fostered a sense of complicity, the people adopted a mentality of "knowing without knowing" that did not invite any kind of public commitment, affirmation, or feeling of moral responsibility.[53] This fostered a shared German secrecy regarding the depth of collaboration that facilitated the ability of the Nazis to operate. Many still harbored positive memories of the previous era and preferred to cherry-pick the elements they remembered. By not seeking an understanding of the Nazi regime, they did not have to reckon with the true nature of their character. In their eyes, they had no choice but to remain mute, lie low, shift attention to other issues, and hope that no one asked the wrong questions.[54] If they could not keep entirely quiet, they turned public problems into private family affairs and opted to develop their own stories, often sanitized versions of the past that could be socially 'acceptable' for public discourse. This suppression, which concealed guilt on a widespread scale and framed their knowledge of the war to align with their interests, allowed individuals to declare a

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[51] *2 or 3 Things I Know About Him*, Malte Ludin (2005; Israel: Yad Vashem, 2005), film.
[52] Nicholas Stargardt, "The Shared Secret," in The German War: A Nation Under Arms (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 236-238.
[53] Stargardt, "The Shared Secret," 245.
[54] Michael Geyer and Michael Latham, "The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History," *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): 17-20.

semblance of closure. Their apologetic view of the past shielded them from the consequences of complicity, distanced them from accusations of antisemitism, and allowed them to support narratives that affirmed and validated their own experiences.

This transformation of silence into a method of escape manifested within families. Gerda Göring, born in 1909 as the first daughter of Hermann Göring, contended that her father bore no responsibility for the extermination of the Jewish people; despite his involvement in the organization of labor, he did not know about the nature of the concentration camps.[55] Although researchers and historians confronted Gerda with textual and oral evidence that proved the involvement of her father, she blocked out any negative associations to avoid confronting the past. Allowing such thoughts to penetrate her consciousness would jeopardize the cherished childhood image of her father, therefore threatening her entire upbringing and sense of self. Similarly, Rudi Niemann, born in 1934 as the son of Karl Niemann, an SS-Hauptsturmführer (SS-Storm Command Leader), never questioned his father and opted for silence, since he did not want to open the door to the possibility of unsettling, incomprehensible answers. According to Rudi, "Quite honestly, we don't really know if he did anything bad… but I'm convinced that he just did a good job, and that was that."[56] For many members of the second generation and West Germans at large, denial morphed into a form of self-preservation in the immediate postwar period. Distancing oneself from the past and relegating it as a phenomenon too exceptional to address, protected him or her from a reality that had become too painful to accept.

In late 1949, Hannah Arendt, a Jewish intellectual who fled from the Nazis in 1941, returned to Germany for four months.[57] After observing the people, she regarded any attempts to

[55] Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence.*
[56] Derek Niemann, *A Nazi in the Family: The hidden story of an SS family in wartime Germany* (London, UK: Short Books, 2015), 244.
[57] Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule."

escape from reality as an evasion of responsibility and characterized the German people as weak and dishonest. The lack of a strong figure such as the Führer to guide them rendered the Germans incapable of processing their emotions. Instead, they developed a temptation to attribute their problems to external factors, whether blaming the Allies for conducting a campaign of revenge or Hitler for corrupting and manipulating ordinary individuals during the war. Arendt details a nation where the people engage in superficial talk and behavior, writing, "This general lack of emotion, at any rate, this apparent heartlessness, sometimes covered over with cheap sentimentality, is only the most conspicuous outward symptom of a deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened."[58] She acknowledges the difficulty in distinguishing between guilt and responsibility, between Nazis and Germans, but believes that by refusing to examine the burden placed on them or denying its existence, Germans prevent comprehension of the events themselves. Although the reality was more complicated than Arendt depicted, it is important to acknowledge the depth of this collective apathy and indifference, if discernible from an outside perspective. Other countries and people began to perceive West Germany as exhibiting a lack of empathy towards the war and the fate of the Jewish people.

In October 1949, Germany also exchanged one set of complications for another as it gained a degree of self-sovereignty from the Allied nations but became divided into two separate states along the West and East borders—the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Heightened by Cold War tensions, each side engaged in a fierce competition to present itself as the "better Germany," detached from the Nazi past.[59] Unlike the East, the FRG understood itself as the successor state to the Third Reich, which

[58] Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule."
[59] Hagemann, Jarausch, and Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings," 281.

forced the nation and its people to internalize National Socialism. This understanding, however, did not spark a comprehensive reckoning with the past. Instead, it entailed a base-level recognition of the consequences of the Nazi era, where the FRG accepted its historical continuity with the Third Reich and referenced it, albeit in a careful and strategic manner. It also heightened the incentive for the nation to move forward and align itself with the democratic coalition of other Western nations. These sentiments contributed to a rise in conservatism, evident in both the public and private spheres, where the people and the government sought to salvage regional, religious, and humanistic traditions.[60] This tactic provided West Germany with a means to improve its public image while also mitigating individual responsibility.

The first West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), did not join the Nazi Party during World War II and even faced accusations of participating in the attempted assassination of Hitler's life in 1944. Yet, while an anti-Nazi on a personal level, he remained aware not to fall out of step with the attitudes of the people. Adenauer perceived the popular discontent over the Allied war trials and the denazification process as a threat to the democratic potential of the FRG and shifted his attention to establishing Germany as a "reliable nation" within the Western world.[61] To anchor his country in the Western camp, he "began to focus more on cultivating an image of a peaceful, friendly state and society superior to both the Nazi past and the other contemporary Germany."[62] In 1949, Adenauer passed the West German Basic Law, which displayed a new constitution committed to Western values. The law identified the causes of Nazism, established a robust government to ward against political extremism, and emphasized the concept of "nie wieder," or "never again war," by

[60] Hagemann, Jarausch, and Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings," 285, 293.
[61] Levy and Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint," 926.
[62] Hagemann, Jarausch, and Hof, "Introduction: Burdens and Beginnings," 286.

limiting the German army to defensive purposes. It also tried to perform a clean break with the past through articles such as "The Dignity of Man is Inviolable" and "No One May Be Prejudiced or Favored because of his parentage, his race, his homeland, his origin," which addressed the protection of human dignity and human rights by outlining the principles of democracy and social responsibility.[63] In addition to the Basic Law, the Federal Government expressed its loyalty to the values that National Socialism had tried to destroy by establishing the Court of Karlsruhe, a judiciary body independent of political pressures to safeguard against oppressive actions of the government. However, although founding the West German state on the rule of law convinced the Allied Powers that the FRG had severed ties with its Nazi past, Adenauer made many concessions to become a partner in the postwar Western alliance. The Basic Law, while rejecting any explicit mention of anti-Semitism, belittled the voices of the Jewish people by omitting anti-Jewish racism as a cause for National Socialism.[64] It portrayed such sentiments as a minority view that infected only the weakest and most criminal. In his official speeches, Adenauer seldom mentioned the Holocaust or the notion of perpetrators. Instead, he referred to the "dark times of the past," or the "time of unfathomable barbarism," to avoid direct acknowledgment of the crimes committed.[65]

The transition to the 1950s marked a more defined trajectory toward liberal democracy, accompanied by the ongoing immunization of the people and the sanitization of the past. Upon evaluating West German society, social psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich asserted that Germans should have come to an understanding of their deep identification with Hitler. Yet, they observed an inability to mourn, which manifested itself in a lack of sympathy for

[63] Alfred Grosser, *The Federal Republic of Germany: A Concise History* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1965), 19.
[64] Levy and Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint," 926.
[65] Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators."

those victimized. The unwillingness of the people to engage with the wartime period received support from the expansion and modernization of industry. Rather than reopening past wounds, West Germany demonstrated their rejection of previous ideologies by articulating their commitment to the Western world, standing against communist threats, and emphasizing their dedication to global security and peace. Consequently, prioritizing the establishment of a Western future often took precedence in the public sphere over engaging in historical reflection.[66] A more nuanced approach to the past developed throughout the decade, yet in general, the West German populace continued to reject the notion of collective guilt and deny personal responsibility. They isolated fascism from its very context, ignored conversations about anti-Semitism and genocide, and forged a tacit agreement among the dominant conservative elite to put the past behind them.[67] In fact, British historian Mary Fulbrook records that "during the 1950s, around half of all Germans questioned in opinion polls still believed that had it not been for the war, Hitler would have been one of the greatest statesmen ever."[68]

When West Germany prioritized its integration into the Western alliance, it re-established its relations with the international community. In 1952, German President Theodor Heuss visited the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen and declared, "None will lift this shame from us," which represented the only instance during the 1940s and 1950s when a public official confessed any semblance of guilt for the Holocaust.[69] This exhibition of public reflection from a leader of the West German government not only made Germany more respectable in the eyes of the international community but also demonstrated the commitment of the nation to addressing its

[66] Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967).
[67] Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).
[68] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 167.
[69] Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators."

past. In another attempt to convince Western allies that Germany would confront its obligations, Adenauer increased gestures of goodwill by endorsing reparations for the victims of National Socialism. The Luxembourg Agreement, established on September 10, 1952, offered $70 billion in reparations to Israel and expanded restitution payments to other victims across Germany.[70] This action supported survivors and their families and recognized the Jewish people's claim to reparations. The promotion of Jewish victimhood advanced the political goals of West Germany by serving as a test of its postwar democratization and a point of entry into the Western community. However, history is convoluted, and a series of setbacks exposed the failures of diplomatic protection toward the Jewish population. Regional finance officers blocked the process, federal restitution laws introduced uncertainties based on wording, and critics argued that the measures glossed over the past without mentioning specific events, thereby diluting the authenticity of the Jewish experience.[71] Chancellor Adenauer even received criticism for "paying off" guilt by providing money to quickly turn the page on the trauma of Auschwitz.

In addition, tensions escalated as the government increased support for the Jewish population. After the government established relations with Israel and instituted financial packages for survivors, "rumors circulated that Jews were profiting from the situation by claiming assets that they had never possessed, and a virulent antisemitism resurfaced."[72] Peter Sichrovsky addresses this idea after conducting a series of interviews with the children of Nazis. Gerhard, referred to as "The Baffled One," the daughter of a German mayor, perceived it as unfair that her family name and the German nation received no respect after the war. She

[70] Regula Ludi, "The Vectors of Postwar Victim Reparations: Relief, Redress and Memory Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 3 (2006): 427.
[71] Moeller, "War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past," 1020.
[72] Géraldine Schwarz, *Those Who Forget: One Family's Story; A Memoir, A History; a Warning* (London: Pushkin Press, 2021), 77.

claimed that soldiers had died on the battlefields, individuals lost their jobs, and the Allied powers stripped Germany of its reputation, yet in the postwar period, everything went to the Jews, leaving the Germans with nothing.[73] Similarly, Stefan, known as "The Proud One," the son of an SS soldier, painted German children as the "true tortured creatures of fascism," contending that while Jewish suffering ended after the war, the Germans continued to endure a never-ending battle of pain. He recounted a childhood of insecurity, where he suffered from bullying, difficult relationships with women, and a sense of disillusionment about his place in society.[74] However, none expressed their anger toward the Jews more definitively than Ingeborg Day, the daughter of Reinhard Seiler, a decorated member of the Nazi SS. Born in 1940, Ingeborg grew up in a household flooded with fascist literature and felt it to be an injustice that her childhood, family, country, and heritage would be forever warped by the events of the past. Feeling suffocated by the incessant pressure to reject antisemitic sentiments, she knew that embracing such feelings would require distancing herself from her parents, an unbearable thought. Instead, she succumbed to antisemitic thoughts, expressing, "I felt: the legacy of the Holocaust had destroyed my father. I felt: the legacy of the Holocaust has irreparably damaged my mother's life. I felt: the legacy of the Holocaust has tarnished me beyond all methods of cleansing. I felt: I hate the guts of every Jew alive."[75]

Restitution failed to catalyze an awakening of social responsibility; Instead, it mostly had the contrary effect by bolstering sentiments of victimization and revitalizing dormant Nazi networks. Many individuals believed that West Germany had met its internal obligations toward the Jewish people, making there no need for further repentance. Instead, the people cultivated a

[73] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 85.
[74] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 145.
[75] Ingeborg Day, *Ghost Waltz: A Family Memoir* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 203.

national rhetoric that emphasized economic recovery and unity, rather than shame and belittlement. As a result, Adenauer devised a series of programs with a distinct German identity. He pledged to restore the losses of those whose livelihoods and homes had been destroyed by the Soviet Red Army, and he acknowledged the needs of German victims of war, of which, at the time, eighteen million West Germans counted themselves among the 'war damaged.'[76] The establishment of a welfare state covered medical costs, pension payments, and appointments for disability, illness, and mental disorders for those in need, but it remained exclusive to German citizens, demonstrating continuities with the exclusionary racial and migrant policies of the Third Reich.[77] It also benefitted privileged perpetrators and their families while discounting the needs of many victims. In addition, Adenauer prioritized the plight of East German civilians and soldiers under communism in the East. He visited Moscow in September 1955 to negotiate with the Soviet Union to release the remaining ten thousand German prisoners of war, yet made no distinction between those unjustly imprisoned and those liable for war crimes.[78] The attention to German conditions and prisoners of war reflected a version of the Nazi legacy that all major political parties could agree upon, where the rhetoric of victimization suppressed and overshadowed the memory of the victims.[79] Similarly, the children of Nazis employed the rhetoric of "we suffered too" as a moral argument to center on their own experiences. They positioned their parents as victims of circumstance, regarding them as victims of Hitler's madness rather than its facilitators. Believing to be unfairly harmed by this "Nazi fate," they harbored resentment at the moral imposition placed on them by the government and society to renounce their loved ones and acknowledge the horrors inflicted in the past.

[76] Moeller, "Germans as Victims?," 157.
[77] Moeller, "War Stories," 1020-1021.
[78] Ludi, "The Vectors of Postwar Victim Reparations," 426-427.
[79] Moeller, "War Stories," 1021.

The effort to "normalize" the West German state translated to the judicial field. Adenauer enacted the "131 Law" on May 11, 1951, which re-integrated ex-Nazis into positions of power and offered pensions to 150,000 individuals who had been active in the civil service and military during the war. Aside from the major offenders identified during the denazification process, this act expunged the pasts of Nazis and allowed them to rejoin civil society. By 1957, former members of the Nazi Party represented 77% of the German Ministry of Justice's senior officials.[80] In addition, the introduction of the FRG into NATO and the Western European Union in 1955 contributed to an increased leniency in war trials. As more Germans awaited trial, public anxiety intensified, with people fearing that they too might face public scrutiny. Although this apprehension stemmed from a desperate need to conceal their past, they benefitted from a judicial environment that fostered denial. By the late 1950s, the FRG halted proceedings against those accused of war crimes, and judges issued lesser sentences to those already on trial.[81]

Amid a political and judicial climate that abandoned views on collective guilt in favor of reconstruction, West Germans developed an even deeper preoccupation with German victimization. They portrayed themselves as double victims of both war and the Nazi regime, which they perpetuated through the mass circulation of images depicting fallen soldiers and territorial devastation. Despite rejecting attempts to organize memorials for the Jewish victims at concentration camps, local Germans established a memorial at Ohlsdorf Cemetery in August 1952 to honor the 37,000 victims of the Hamburg Firestorm Bombing.[82] The memorial portrayed the war as a matter of fate and glossed over the connection between 'ordinary' Germans and the

[80] Levy and Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint."
[81] Aryeh Neier, "Varieties of German Guilt and Their Consequences: *The Question of German Guilt*, Karl Jaspers," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2022): 416.
[82] "Ohlsdorf Cemetery – Monument to victims of the 'Hamburg Firestorm,'" Memorials in Hamburg, Stiftung Hamburger Gedenkstätten und Lernorte, 2010, https://gedenkstaetten-in-hamburg.de/en/memorials/show/friedhof-ohlsdorf-mahnmal-fuer-die-opfer-des-feuersturms-1.

Nazi regime. The public also deflected attention from their guilt by drawing attention to the actions of the "good, courageous, and honest" Germans during the war, in the hopes that the guilt would go away if ignored for long enough.[83] They emphasized the resistance movements against Hitler, which particularly promoted the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler's life. These actions highlighted the German experience without acknowledging any forms of Jewish resistance, such as the Warsaw Uprising in the Polish ghetto. They blamed the Allies for destroying archives containing material on these events and accused them of contributing to public ignorance about German acts of opposition.[84]

West Germany continued to foster a climate of self-pity by disseminating war stories of communist brutality and the loss of the German East. They supported arguments in favor of a "balance of victims" that equated the suffering of German victims with those victimized by the Germans.[85] To support these notions, the West Germans spread volumes, diaries, scientific commissions, and eyewitness accounts to develop a detailed record of German loss and suffering.[86] In addition, the government pledged to preserve the cultural values of expellees by incorporating their history into the curriculum at schools and research institutes, which solidified the testimonies of expellees and prisoners of war as integral to public memory. While these initiatives sought to mitigate the burdens of war and compensate the war-damaged, they raised concerns regarding West Germany's ability to address the past, since researcher Robert G. Moeller explains, "POWs and expellees depicted themselves individually and collectively as victims of an ideology no less irrational than National Socialism."[87] They balanced the methods

[83] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 18-19.
[84] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 20.
[85] Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule."
[86] Moeller, "War Stories," 1023.
[87] Moeller, "War Stories," 1028.

used by National Socialist leaders with the methods used against German expellees, thus devaluing the loss of Jewish life and downplaying the distinctiveness of Nazism. In a concerted effort to salvage a German identity based on "self-confidence instead of dejected self-doubt," the people relegated the Holocaust to a phenomenon exclusive to Jewish historians and Jewish history and pushed the idea of the Shoah to the periphery of their consciousness.[88] This approach cemented collective memory not based on the inmates' experience but on the German experience, preserving a perspective that minimized the gravity of the Holocaust.

West Germans interwove their wartime experiences into the fabric of their postwar identity by constructing mythic narratives that reverberated through successive generations. Many children in the second generation shared a common experience of being told family stories that led to a fragmentary and distorted knowledge of National Socialism and the involvement of their own families. According to German Professor Erin McGlothlin, while some encountered silence in the household, others remembered the "guarded and ritualized litanies that carefully regulated the way in which the past could be represented."[89] Families often engaged in discussions about history but propagated falsehoods that concealed a family past immersed in Nazism. Eicha Schmidt, the illegitimate son of Wolfram Sievers, the head of the Ahnenerbe Institute for Racial Purity, grew up being told that his father served as a political opponent of Hitler.[90] Whenever any mention of the racial institute arose, his father justified his actions by claiming to have treated the Jewish people with kindness. For Eicha, the stories he received about his father, while simultaneously learning about history from external sources, such as school textbooks and media outlets, created a contradictory image of his father, whose

[88] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 53.
[89] Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (New York: Camden House, 2006), 222.
[90] "Oral history interviews with children of Nazis."

ambivalent character evaded his thoughts well into adulthood. Ingeborg Mochar, born in 1945 as the daughter of Ernst Mochar, a leader in the Nazi Party, also experienced a childhood shrouded in lies. As a child, her father recited nightly bedtime stories that depicted himself as a clever and brave soldier, and until the age of seventeen, her mother portrayed herself as a courageous BDM (League of German Girls) leader who raised children on her own against the backdrop of terror and devastation. Ingeborg admitted, "During those years, I accepted my father's ideas about nature, God, about almost everything," which meant seeing National Socialism through a positive lens and believing that the Jewish people deserved their mistreatment.[91] Despite developing an estranged relationship with her father when she learned the truth, she found it challenging to break free of the chokehold her family and their lies presented. The way that the perpetrator generation reinterpreted their experiences and presented themselves to their children affected the development of memory and identity within the family unit.

The tendency of families to valorize their roles and manipulate language to circumvent liability inflicted the children of even the highest-ranking officials. Monika Hertwig, born in 1945 as the daughter of Amon Göth, the commander of the Plaszow concentration camp, grew up with a distorted image of her father, shaped by stories and photo albums. This information created a rose-tinted version of his participation in the war, and in fact, "[her] mother had built up such an image of this man; he was like a deity to [her], a terrific man, a tremendous father."[92] Monika did not confront the full extent of her family's deception until she watched the film *Schindler's List* in theaters and witnessed the brutality of her father play out on the screen. Unlike Schmidt and Mochar, who felt conflicted towards their fathers after uncovering the truth, Monika reached a limit on her level of tolerance, where she could no longer see Amon as a

[91] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 182.
[92] Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*, 271.

rational and honest human being. However, the legend of her father as a war hero overshadowed her life since she struggled to distance herself from history. Monika refused to accept that she had the right to live a happy and free life, not tainted by questions of guilt and responsibility.

In the homes of the second generation, parents seldom accepted responsibility for their actions and often twisted the truth of the past, which manipulated and confused their children. The avoidance of difficult conversations and the reluctance to confront their levels of complicity not only distorted the children's perceptions of the war but also had negative effects on interpersonal relationships by fostering tension and animosity within families. This approach to memory extended beyond the home and contributed to the broader development of collective consciousness. West Germans kept topics like fascism and authoritarianism at arm's length and omitted any mention of the Holocaust from their discourse to avoid the threatening presence of the Jews that pervaded their consciousness.[93] They also refused to accept the unfathomable nature of the Holocaust and preferred to address National Socialism in abstract and allegorical terms. The act of purposefully forgetting or intentionally softening negative memories allowed West Germans to regain authority over the postwar narrative.

West Germany developed stories that praised its apparent distance from the Nazi regime. These images allowed the nation to adopt a self-congratulatory tone of optimism, where the people considered themselves "clean" of Nazism.[94] As a result, they permitted themselves to redirect their attention to more immediate concerns of family, economy, peace, and rebirth. Historians reframed Nazism as part of a broader European phenomenon, employing the rhetoric of totalitarianism instead of fascism, and the public inflated the role of Hitler, assigning guilt to a

[93] Dan Diner, "'Negative Symbiosis: Germans and Jews After Auschwitz,'" in Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate, ed. P. Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 427-428.
[94] Theodor Adorno, *Guilt and Defense: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

singular individual as opposed to questioning their implication.[95] To prove they had changed, the people embraced what they considered the "opposite" of Nazism by emphasizing traditional morality. Mass media propagated images of a harmonious society and endorsed the "great family medium," which shied away from controversy and enhanced traditional values and social integration.[96] The state cracked down on any forms of music or dress that might provoke the younger audiences and endorsed the reinstatement of traditional general roles, where men returned as the primary breadwinners in the home. While women had earned a greater degree of autonomy in World War II, postwar norms emphasized women as wives and mothers, subordinate to the needs and interests of their husbands.[97] In addition, religion emerged as a refuge to avoid collusion through the walls of repentance. The allure of Christianity lay in its promises of moral transformation and second chances. Priests and pastors refashioned the memory of religion during the war into an example of a resistance movement, despite the wartime alliance of the Catholic Church with the Nazi Party.[98] They also Christianized forms of remembering by establishing confessional buildings on the sites of previous concentration camps.[99] By providing spiritual support, they could make amends for the degree to which they had tolerated and even collaborated with Nazism. However, giving the concentration camps a second use obscured the events of the past and treated the suffering of inmates as a secondary concern. In addition, the emphasis on forgiveness and redemption fueled a lack of accountability since it shielded the general populace from the consequences of their actions.

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[95] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*.
[96] Cristina Von Hodenberg, "Mass Media and the Generation of Conflict: West Germany's Long Sixties and the Formation of a Critical Public Sphere," *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 3 (2006): 373.
[97] Jean O. Brandes, "The Effect of War on the German Family," *Social Forces* 29, no. 2 (1950): 166.
[98] Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators*.
[99] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past,* 12.

The revival of conservatism depoliticized the West German people, which worked to the benefit of the government. Private conservatism stabilized the state, bolstering the legitimation of West Germany on the international stage and influencing other nations to acknowledge the nation's commitment to its objectives of Westernization. However, many scholars, such as the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, held German society to a higher standard and cautioned against the tendency to wash away the legacies of the Nazi period.[100] He argued that a hazy memory on both the public and personal levels changed the subject from the guilt of the Nazis and represented an "empty and cold forgetting."[101] This urge to avoid self-reflection increased the risk of allowing the residual afterlives of National Socialism to persist. He believed that West Germany had two choices: to remain at the level of reproach or to withstand the horror by having the strength to comprehend even the incomprehensible.[102] If willing to challenge oneself and select the more difficult path with option two, the process would start by conducting a more thorough investigation into the interaction between individuals and the state during World War II. Adorno acknowledged that moral redemption required examining the ordinary existence of people during the war and revealing their level of neglect toward violence and brutality, yet he saw it as imperative to prevent the resurgence of fascist tendencies.

During the immediate postwar period, the process of remembrance involved a selective approach, where different agents advanced their distinct agendas and competed for moral and political supremacy. The people sidestepped a culture of guilt by prioritizing discretion, silence, and commemoration on their terms. However, towards the end of the 1950s, German society

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[100] Jeffrey K. Olick, "What Does It Mean to Normalize the past? Official Memory in German Politics since 1989," *Social Science History* 22, no. 4 (1998): 560.
[101] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 98.
[102] Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," 100.

witnessed a series of turning points that ushered in an era of rebellion and confrontation. Magazines and television channels gained popularity for their harsh attacks on government policies, which encouraged citizens to become more involved in political affairs. In 1958, the government established the Central Office of Land Judicial Administrations for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, a landmark institution that became the epicenter of postwar justice. Initially restricted to investigating crimes that occurred outside of Germany and only those committed against civilians, it expanded its scope to investigate all war crimes without limitations in time or geography.[103] Also in 1958, the Ulm Einsatzgruppen Trial revealed the destruction of European Jewry for the first time since the Nuremberg Trials. As the first major trial of Nazi crimes conducted under West German law, it exposed the arbitrary nature of postwar prosecutions up until that point and increased public support for additional investigations.

However, old attitudes die hard, and although the trial charged ten former members of the Einsatzkommando killing units for their involvement in the mass murder of Lithuanian Jews, their sentences classified them as accessories to murder, deeming individuals such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich as the primary perpetrators of Nazi crimes, with everyone else serving as "mere tools of the leader."[104] While the trial revealed the actions of the Einsatzkommando, many West Germans still reframed the narrative to fit their personal biases. They utilized the trial as a tool to reinforce the prevailing sentiment that a small elite orchestrated the entire genocide, rather than a widespread, multifaceted machine of persecution.

This trend of narrowing the definition of a perpetrator is reflected in the second generation. The people of West Germany found themselves under both societal and individual

[103] Pendas, "Seeking Justice, Finding Law: Nazi Trials in Postwar Europe," 364-365.
[104] Patrick Tobin, "No Time for "Old Fighters": Postwar West Germany and the Origins of the 1958 Ulm "Einsatzkommando" Trial," *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 687.

pressures to address and respond to the legacy of the Nazi era. However, the absence of systematic approaches to remembrance left a void in reconciliation. Dealing with immediate concerns of survival, collective reconciliation moved to the secondary, and many individuals from the perpetrator generation, even those who did not hold prominent positions in the Nazi hierarchy, absolved themselves of guilt by burying their National Socialist affiliations. They shifted blame onto the high-ranking elite and embraced the new governmental system to evade the complexities of guilt and shame, a pattern of avoidance and denial that trickled down to their offspring. In the aftermath of the war, the individuals with ties to the highest echelons of bureaucracy were those most likely to confront their family's complicity and involvement in Nazi crimes. These include Gudrun Himmler, Edda Göring, Karl-Otto Sauer, Wolf R. Hess, and Horst von Wächter, among others. Whether privileged by their social standing or compelled by moral and legal considerations of guilt imposed by society, they shared their stories. However, this focus on the children of the elite mirrored postwar strategies of repression, allowing lesser-known figures to escape accountability while also shielding their children from introspection.

As the postwar period neared its end, the majority of West Germans, including the children of Nazis, perceived themselves as victims of circumstance. They highlighted the hardships endured by the German people and nation, which overshadowed the injustices faced by the Jewish people and impeded support for acts of restitution. Whether due to the inability to confront uncomfortable truths, fear of damaging personal relationships, or perceived threats to Western progress, this mindset perpetuated a cycle of negative thinking and behavior. From 1959 to 1960, the nation experienced a "swastika epidemic," where 833 separate anti-Jewish acts occurred over two years.[105] Notably, this included the vandalization of the Roonstrasse

[105] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 13.

Synagogue in Cologne, Germany on Christmas Day in 1959. When analyzed based on the acts themselves and their intended meaning, the swastika epidemic demonstrates that antisemitic sentiments still infected the population, and topics of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust remained taboo, contradicting the "new democratic conformism" in German society.[106] However, the significance of these incidents can also be viewed based on how people responded. While the attacks exposed the underlying feelings that many harbored towards the Jewish population, others confronted the Nazi era through more progressive approaches.

Anti-Semitic attacks in the West restored the Holocaust to public consciousness. In response to the swastika epidemic, 40,000 people marched against anti-Semitism and expressed solidarity with the Jewish community in a demonstration in West Berlin in the early 1960s. In addition, to counter the wave of anti-Semitism, Chancellor Adenauer took a significant step by visiting the site of a former concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen for the first time. He delivered a speech that affirmed Bergen-Belsen as a site of Jewish remembrance and assured the Jewish residents living in Germany that they deserved the same respect and security as everyone else.[107] He also agreed to pay military aid to Israel, amounting to 320 million marks, on March 14, 1960. The contrast between projecting one version of the self and nation in public and political settings versus experiencing and processing familial memories on the individual level revealed a growing divergence of emotions within the broader populace. Moreover, this situation demonstrated the ongoing struggle within West Germany to confront its historical legacy. When West Germans chose to overlook their history in favor of focusing on their immediate needs or the process of Westernization, they did not necessarily perpetuate the ideologies and practices of National

[106] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 13.
[107] Roni Stauber, "'Realpolitik' and the Burden of the past: Israeli Diplomacy and the 'Other Germany,'" *Israel Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 105.

Socialism. However, they relegated the Nazi era to the margins of their collective memory, which hindered a comprehensive process of coming to terms with their past. In addition, antisemitism persisted for a variety of reasons, including a failure to punish past Nazis and place antisemitism at the center of recent history, and because of personal failures to grapple with individual guilt and complicity. This concern indicated that the West German attempt to move forward and pledge "never again" would entail consistent controversy and backlash.

Dramatic Confrontation (1960-1979)

West Germany underwent a dramatic break from the previous period between 1960 and 1979, as a new generation made guilt and accountability more visible in the public and private spheres. At the start of the period, the public experienced a general indifference towards the past, while the government moralized its ramifications and shifted its emphasis to economic recovery as a strategy for acceptance on the international stage. By 1965, the judiciary took over the role of reflection by conducting a series of publicized war trials that increased public interest in the topic. Many people leveraged their economic success to distance themselves from the legacy of Nazism, claiming their wealth and prosperity as evidence of their efforts to rectify the ills of the past. However, the public nature of the trials facilitated an exploration of collective consciousness and laid the groundwork for a generational shift through the rise of extraparliamentary left-wing politics. This new generation entered the political stage without personal memories of the war, which allowed it to approach trauma from an external perspective and dismantle the antiliberal stance of the perpetrator generation. By challenging the collective and individual to confront their historical responsibility and its impact on the present, the people began to explore the wartime period in greater detail. The way they engaged with history led to

the internalization of the Nazi past as an integral component of West Germany's self-understanding. Influenced by debates within households and communities, a more critical perspective on National Socialism emerged.

In the immediate postwar period, Chancellor Adenauer employed a strategy of pragmatism. He implemented changes that granted political stability to the state while also pardoning many ex-Nazis and accustoming Germans to a style of decision-making that made them apolitical.[108] However, starting in the 1960s, the government assumed greater authority in international politics by publicizing the success of the German "economic miracle" to depict the nation as having overcome its Nazi past. Years of prosperity and social reforms resolved many of the challenges associated with the postwar period, which gave people the comfort of examining their compromised pasts. Yet the booming consumer culture also allowed people to minimize reminders of the Nazi era and to erect mental barriers between themselves and the harm they caused. For example, Germans embraced travel culture to forget about the war and stage life as if nothing had changed. In exploring other nations, they projected their identities as middle-class, bourgeoise citizens and promoted positive displays of their current circumstances.[109] While their well-choreographed happiness symbolized agency and independence, it also functioned as a mechanism for withdrawing from the unsettling qualities of the Third Reich.

In their eagerness to focus on the future, people adopted strategies to downplay their role in the Nazi system; historian Mary Fulbrook remarks that for them, "'it' was always just a little distant, a little too far away from where one had happened to be for any personal sense of guilt."[110] However, their insulation from knowledge, and therefore from implication, was

[108] Alf Lüdtke, "'Coming to Terms with the Past': Illusions of Remembering, Ways of Forgetting Nazism in West Germany," *Max-Planck-institute für Geschichte*, Göttingen, 553.
[109] Confino, "Traveling as a Culture of Remembrance," 103.
[110] Fulbrook, "Reframing the Past: Justice, Guilt, and Consolidation," 300.

shattered in May 1960. The Israeli foreign intelligence service seized Adolf Eichmann, a high-ranking Nazi German official and war criminal, in Argentina and brought him to Israel for trial before a special tribunal of the Jerusalem District Court. An astounding 85% of the West German public followed the Eichmann Trial, which found him guilty for his role in the "Final Solution."[111] Yet, the public reacted in divergent ways. For the first time in detail, West German newspapers discussed Nazi crimes of mass murder, and the term "Holocaust" became embedded in public consciousness.[112] The people also started questioning the capability of the German government to handle its own perpetrators and instill a lasting democratic system. This concern became more pervasive when the press revealed that Dr. Fritz Bauer, a German judge and prosecutor, had discovered the whereabouts of Eichmann first, but had to share the information with the Israeli government after German authorities declined to capture Eichmann. This reluctance stemmed from a desire to avoid another trial on German soil and the risk of exposing former party members within the current democratic government.[113] Adenauer even expressed concern that the Eichmann trial might give the 'wrong' impression that a greater number of Germans were convinced Nazis than actually were.[114] The public, too, sought to evade confrontation. They distanced themselves from responsibility by claiming that, for the fate of the Jews, they "personally had nothing to do with it and didn't want to hear anything more about it."[115] Fortunately for them, the media played into their hands, since the coverage of the trial reinforced historical distortions by downplaying the voices of victims and framing Eichmann as an anomalous criminal. It also laid the groundwork for the 1961 German Judiciary Act, which

[111] Schwarz, *Those Who Forget*.
[112] "The Eichmann Trial," United States Holocaust Museum, December 15, 1961, accessed December 5, 2023.
[113] Schwarz, *Those Who Forget*, 112.
[114] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, xiv.
[115] Weil, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past," 145.

complicated future court proceedings on Nazism. It made it more difficult to find individuals guilty without explicit evidence, thus allowing war criminals to receive mild sentences, defendants to be acquitted, and trials to be terminated without conviction.

However, attitudes varied across the nation. While the media promoted Eichmann's character as a "monster," philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt challenged this notion. Arendt, who had commented on the emotional state of West Germans in the postwar period, reinserted herself into the German consciousness through a series of controversial *New Yorker* articles covering the trial, where Arendt argued that the court approached the trial from the incorrect perspective. Presenting Eichmann as the principal architect of the Holocaust depicted him as a criminal mastermind who stood above the general populace in terms of intent, intellect, and conviction. In opposition, Arendt characterized his actions as the "banality of evil," suggesting that rather than being inherently wicked, he represented an ordinary bureaucrat entangled in the Nazi system whose way of thinking "had constituted the general, and generally accepted, atmosphere of the Third Reich."[116] She also denoted similarities between his decision to hide in Argentina and the postwar strategies of repression and denial in West Germany. She wrote, "Eighty million Germans had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann's nature."[117] By referencing "eighty million Germans," Arendt emphasized the vast organization of the Nazi regime, which implicated the entire population. She suggested that the same mechanisms of self-interest and indifference that characterized the mindset of individuals like Eichmann, a high-ranking official, also functioned on a broader societal level. Thus, the totality of the Nazi power

[116] Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," *The New Yorker*, February 16, 1963, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/02/16/eichmann-in-jerusalem-i.
[117] Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem."

did not rest on the actions of a few individuals but required widescale complicity of the masses. Sparking widespread debate across West Germany about the nature of evil and responsibility, Arendt repudiated the legal and academic narrative regarding Eichmann's distinct criminality. She suggests that the biggest problem with Eichmann is how the portrayal of his character and behaviors are motivating a larger refusal across West Germany to reflect on their involvement.[118]

Three years later, the public faced another publicized war trial, as the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials in 1963 disrupted the comfort and routine of everyday life. This trial, grounded in the statutes of the FRG rather than international law, indicted 22 defendants for their roles in the Holocaust as officials in Auschwitz. While the trial succeeded in making the word "Auschwitz" synonymous with evil and drew attention to survivors, it continued to highlight the role of prominent individuals, which further narrowed the conception of what it meant to be entangled in the Nazi system.[119] The court, in conjunction with the West German media, confined the question of guilt to specific individuals and allowed the general public to immunize themselves from accusations of guilt. Rather than fostering a deep confrontation with the past, the trial contributed to a lingering sense of complicity. Moreover, this evasion of responsibility did not limit itself to the general public as a collective; it infiltrated households and influenced individuals with familial ties to Nazism. By asserting ignorance and shifting blame to the Nazi elite, people communicated their family stories without having to accept guilt or shame on behalf of their loved ones.

Regina Seiler, born after the war as the daughter of Rainer Hofer, a member of the Waffen-SS, expressed, "I can't imagine that the German people, even my father, … I really think

[118] Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem."
[119] Weil, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past."

they couldn't imagine something like that could happen."[120] In an attempt to shield her father from the truth, Regina refused to register the extent of her father's crimes. She framed his actions within a particular context of rationality and morality, which excluded her father from an accusation of criminality and protected herself from claims of inherited guilt that would pressure her to atone for the sins of her family. Similarly, Willy Schumann, born in 1927 to a father who joined the NSDAP in 1933, declared him innocent and villainized the Nazi elite. He found the postwar shaming of his father to be unacceptable and did not condemn his parents for their participation, as he wrote, "My father probably knew little about the character and aims of the NS party. I am certain he had not read Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* or the official party platform."[121] He even asserted that his parents could not be labeled as anti-Semitic since they did not discuss Jewish people in the home. However, silence speaks for itself, wherein by not disagreeing with the policies of National Socialism during the war, the family reinforced the power of the Nazis. Their attempts to conceal the past reveal the extent of shame within the family. Second-generation descendants like Regina and Willy, along with other West Germans, questioned the need for the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials and demanded that the past be left alone. With 57% of the German public expressing a lack of support for additional Nazi trials, the government faced pressure to exonerate the remaining liabilities of the Nazi regime.[122]

The practices of the judiciary aligned with the economic imperatives of West Germany to bolster its commitment to European cooperation. In prioritizing progressive values, the FRG positioned itself as a Westernized and liberal society amidst the geopolitical tensions of the Cold

[120] Harald Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education: National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Family Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 292.
[121] Tiia Sahrakorpi, "Memory, Family, and the Self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives," *Journal of Family History* 45, no. 1 (2020): 97.
[122] Weil, "The Imperfectly Mastered Past."

War. Despite this, the government recognized the need to conduct itself in a manner that did not resurrect memories of World War II, thereby safeguarding their German image abroad. On March 21, 1966, the FRG agreed to recognize Israel on an international level, and West Germany founded the "Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft" (German-Israeli Society) in the capital of Bonn, along with an Israel State Travel Agency in the city of Frankfurt.[123] The government believed that by fostering solidarity with the state of Israel, it confronted the historical injustices on the part of Germany and fostered reconciliation between the two parties in a post-Holocaust era. However, during the same year, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), a far-right Neo-Nazi and ultranationalist political party, received 8% of the popular vote.[124] In addition, on November 27, 1966, German citizens defaced the Dachau concentration camp with swastikas. These acts signaled the persistent undercurrents of political extremism and anti-Semitism, as the public grew less sympathetic to Jewish victims.

By the mid-1960s, West Germany had emerged as the third-largest economy in the world, often burying its past transgressions beneath a veneer of material comfort. Yet it faced one of its greatest postwar tests amidst a tenuous situation between Israel and the Arab Nations.[125] When Israel launched a preemptive air strike against Egypt on June 5, 1967, it triggered the Six-Day War, a conflict that entangled Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Syria. Before the war, support for Israel had defined leftist politics. However, the success of Israel during the conflict diminished its image as a victim and dependent, and West Germans began to see the attention to Israel and Holocaust victims as an unnecessary burden. Personal reflections from second-generation Germans like Stefanie, whose father was a high-ranking Nazi officer, and Peter, the son of a

[123] "Germany and Israel: 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations," *KAS International Reports*, (2015): 6.
[124] Karl Dietrich Bracher, "Democracy and Right Wing Extremism in West Germany," *Current History* 54, no. 321 (1968): 285.
[125] Gassert and Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past.*

physician at Auschwitz, reveal the nuance of these sentiments. Stefanie claims, "You know, sometimes I wouldn't mind being one of those poor little Jews…everybody would feel sorry for me."[126] Peter builds on this idea by asserting that the outcry over Jewish suffering only began after Germany's defeat in the war, at a time when the German population faced its own challenges.[127] The Six-Day War not only brought to light underlying hostilities toward the Jewish population but also amplified them within public discourse. The conflict catalyzed a surge of sympathy for the Palestinian cause, leading some to perceive Israel as exhibiting the first signs of fascism in the postwar context. This shift influenced leftist politics, which increased support for the Palestinian armed struggle against Israel and endorsed the 1968 charter affirming that the Palestinian people had a legal right to the territory of Jerusalem. In addition, although a significant portion of the population remained indifferent to the Israel-Arab conflict, they preferred not to get involved in Israeli politics if it led to confrontations outside of their borders. As Historian Professor Carole Fink remarks, although "mainstream Israelis continued to link their national identity and destiny with the crimes of the Third Reich, mainstream West Germans, on the other hand, in pursuit of a peaceful, European solution to their national problem, viewed the Nazi past through a more distant lens."[128]

Nonetheless, history is non-linear, and despite the preference for continued conservatism and tactics of avoidance, a new generation of youth scrutinized the older concepts of tradition and the state. The term "68ers," also known as the "Nachkriegskinder," is a concept coined by later scholars to encapsulate this new generation and delineate different student organizations

[126] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 32.
[127] Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*, 31.
[128] Gassert and Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past*, 285.

that shared similar attitudes and behaviors that defined the period.[129] Motivated by a fascination with the mysteries embedded within the family, and the simultaneous saturation of war trials like Ulm, Eichmann, and Auschwitz, they challenged those they believed to be Nazis. These individuals grew up largely unaware of National Socialism and the involvement of their parents, which contributed to the development of a sober relationship with the West German state from a distanced, critical, and self-conscious standpoint. They harbored anger at not being responsible for the Nazi crimes yet shouldering the consequences of imposed guilt. In addition, they felt frustrated at the loss of their German identity due to the consequences of silence and repression. In response, they blamed the perpetrator generation for failing to resist National Socialism, falling complicit in the crimes of the Nazi Party, and adopting a postwar code of good behavior that left the burden of struggle to their children in the next generation.[130]

Niklas Frank, the son of Hans Frank, the governor-general of Poland, epitomized the level of anger and frustration that galvanized the momentum of the 68ers. Born on March 9, 1939, Niklas came of age amidst the aftermath of war and expressed criticism of how the nation handled its history. He did not believe that the nostalgia for the Reich disappeared, recounting how "every measure was taken to prevent the regime from facing trial, to stop sons from questioning their fathers, to block any kind of sincere introspection."[131] In addition, he saw the inability of West Germany to reckon with the past as rooted in a collective sense of mourning over the previous regime, Hitler himself, and the people's egoistic ideals of themselves as the center. Akin to the 68ers, Niklas challenged both the authority of his father and the government. He published two books as an adult, where he describes how being the son of a Nazi perpetrator

[129] Gracie M. Morton, "*The Long March of the German 68ers: Their Protest, Their Exhibition, and Their Administration*" (Master of Arts Thesis., East Tennessee State University, 2007), 5.
[130] Morton, "*The Long March of the German 68ers,"* 1-100.
[131] Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis*, 97.

drove him to spend his entire life confronting the older generation. As a child, Niklas could witness the Krakow concentration camp from his bedroom window, the horrors of which burdened him with an enduring sense of guilt for the actions of his father. He is grateful for his father being killed after Nuremberg, unlike the children of other prominent Nazis such as Speer and Hess, whose fathers remained in the public eye. Still, he insisted that the legacy of Hans Frank tainted his development since he could never understand or rationalize what drove his father to commit such horrific crimes. He expressed, "My anger for him grows and grows."[132]

In addition to having a war criminal as a father, Niklas also grappled with a mother, who like many other West German women in the postwar period, portrayed herself as a model citizen, claiming she had no choice but to obey her husband during the war. However, Niklas Frank shattered this façade by exposing her level of complicity and tearing down the traditional notions of women as dainty and fragile. For example, Armin Lehmann, born in 1929, discusses the tense relationship with his father, a low-level member of the Nazi Party, who he casts as evil, while he describes his mother as a nurturing figure removed from the horrors of Nazism: "[My] father was an authoritarian so perhaps it is understandable that he admired the new regime. But my mother was as loving and as caring a person as you can possibly imagine."[133] Niklas rejected this position, where children of Nazis would consider their father's behavior unacceptable but normalize the actions of their mothers and shift them to the backdrop of the family story. Niklas revealed the participation of women within the Nazi Party, highlighting how they "belonged to the electorate that voted the Nazis to power and… in many cases, they benefitted as much as their male counterparts from the racist and militaristic policies."[134] Niklas dismantled and

[132] "Oral history interviews with children of Nazis."
[133] Sahrakorpi, "Memory, Family, and the Self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives," 97.
[134] McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature*, 178.

pulverized the image of his parents in the public eye to foster awareness about the dark and uncomfortable aspects of history. He urged society to confront its own "monsters in the closet" and recognize that the distinction between Nazis and Germans is often unclear, which limits the ability of individuals to exonerate themselves.

Other children of Nazis also supported the mission of the 68ers. Ursula Mahlendorf, born in 1929, expressed relief that her father, a member of the SS, died in 1935 since she is adamant that he would have disliked the later direction of the party. However, after the war, she began to question her mother about the extent of her father's involvement and his knowledge of the Nazi policies. Instead of answering with the truth, her mother "remained general and evasive," in addition to her teachers who struck down all conversations about Kristallnacht or the Holocaust and treated the idea of being Jewish as an abstraction, something deceitful.[135] It took many years for this emotional numbness to dissipate in Mahlendorf, yet it found a new host in expressions of rage toward the older generations. She realized that while it can be "tempting to erase the memory rather than feel the shame of having failed to protest," there are no excuses for the level of ignorance exhibited by many West Germans in the immediate postwar period.[136] She condemned them for turning to religion, cultural institutions, and consumerism to nourish their depleted and guilty souls, which contributed to their willingness to assign blame to individuals other than themselves.

Similarly, Ulrike Sonntag, the daughter of Otto Sontag, an architect of Dachau and building surveyor in the Luftwaffe, heeded the warnings of figures like Niklas Frank regarding inherited complicity. Born in the spring of 1945, she lacked direct memories of the war but

[135] Sahrakorpi, "Memory, Family, and the Self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives," 99.
[136] Ursula Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2009), 289.

developed a deep preoccupation with the persecution of the Jews and "particularly torments herself with questions about her mother and father's behavior during the Nazi period."[137] Although she confronted her father, he refused to admit guilt, which heightened her frustration and contributed to a growing sense of secondhand guilt, shame, and dishonor. Ulrike found herself burdened by a need to shoulder the blame for her father, feeling obligated to apologize for his behaviors. This responsibility strained her mental health, including depression, sleep apnea, and recurrent nightmares about being attacked by her father's victims. Concerned about how she might be susceptible to National Socialist tendencies under certain conditions, Ulrike sought solace in the ideologies and actions of the 68ers.[138] She organized and led protests against the perpetrator generation, where in doing so, she aligned herself with a movement that shattered the cycle of silence, fostered accountability, and challenged the societal norms that shielded the previous generation from scrutinization.

The 68ers stylized themselves as the new victims by drawing parallels to the plight of the Jewish people under National Socialism and contending that they too lived under fascist conditions in West Germany.[139] They argued that the state imposed values on the youth, reintroduced authoritarian measures, balanced guilt with personal suffering, and, at large, ignored the Nazi past. For individuals like Sonntag, these circumstances resulted in unfair psychological problems for the second generation. The 68ers undertook the political struggle their parent generation had abandoned, finding a platform in universities to widen their scope of participation. Between 1960 and 1966, the number of students enrolled in higher education

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[137] Gabriele Rosenthal, *The Holocaust in Three Generations; Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi Regime* (Washington, D.C.: Cassell, 1998): 254.
[138] Rosenthal, *The Holocaust in Three Generations*, 258.
[139] Bill Niven, "Generation War and Post-Didactic Memory," in *Remembering the Second World War,* ed. Patrick Finney (New York: Routledge, 2018), 36.

increased from 195,000 to 281,000.[140] Initially, the university setting fostered a healthy environment for debate that contained the students, but in 1967, their conversations exploded onto the street. On June 2, a coalition of students organized a series of protests against the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin. The protestors believed that the Shah had manipulated Western countries against the Eastern bloc and censored their people through secret police organizations and control over the press and media. The West German police enacted brutal tactics to control the crowd, where in the process, an officer shot and killed student leader Benno Ohnesorg.[141] His death encouraged students to mobilize in a series of marches across West Berlin, which intensified the movement's efforts to reform higher education and demand change.

The movement gained further legitimation when its leader, Rudi Dutschke, utilized the death of Ohnesorg to express his discontent with city authorities. He criticized Western forms of capitalism and called for the appropriation of the conservative *Axel Springer Press*, which endorsed police brutality and organized massive campaigns against the protestors. The students also labeled the publication as 'Goebbels' heirs,' since it controlled over 78% of the daily newspaper and magazine circulation in Berlin.[142] The situation escalated when Josef Bachmann, a right-wing extremist laborer, shot Dutschke three times in the head on April 11, 1968. As the leader of the APO, the extraparliamentary opposition, and the SDS, the Socialist German Students' Union, Dutschke wielded massive support within the West German community. His attempted assassination affected and resonated with many people, leading to the eruption of major protests across 27 German cities over the Easter holidays that followed the incident. This

[140] Michael A. Schmidtke, "Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock? Student Radicalism and 1968 in Germany," *South Central Review* 16, no. 4 (1999): 78.
[141] Schmidtke, "Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock? Student Radicalism and 1968 in Germany," 78.
[142] Hodenberg, "Mass Media and the Generation of Conflict," 372.

marked the greatest and most serious unrest the FRG had experienced up to that time.[143] Suddenly, what began as conversations confined to the classroom transformed into a growing militancy that flooded onto streets across the nation.

Through a series of direct actions, such as sit-ins, protests, and book burnings, the students created situations to challenge the authority of the perpetrator generation and the existing government.[144] However, historians Philipp Gassert and Alan E. Steinweis explain that although they "succeeded in disrupting the 'communicative silencing' of the Nazi past on a broad scale and in calling up the repressed memory of Auschwitz in the collective consciousness," many of their tactics resembled fascist ideologies.[145] Rather than exercising their civil rights, the radical student demonstrators abused their freedoms to subvert the democratic state. They sought to vilify Israel to expunge Germany of its guilt and claimed innocence of the past as an excuse to condemn Israel without moral or ethical constraints.[146] In addition, the 68ers extended the authoritarian and intolerant thinking they opposed in Nazism, which led to the emergence of a leftist intellectual form of antisemitism. Their propaganda employed bright red banners, their speeches featured hyperbolic rhetoric, their methods to punish their parents resembled Nazi strategies, and they branded anyone a "fascist" who associated themselves with official institutions.[147] While presenting themselves as a stark contrast to the Nazis, the 68ers "made little effort to learn about or understand everyday fascist behaviors," in addition to the policies and structure of the FRG.[148] Their theoretical analysis of the structural elements of fascism lacked an interest in grappling with its effects. More focused on radicalizing the present to forge their own

[143] "Iconic student leader," Freie Universität Berlin, Universität Berlin, accessed January 28, 2024, https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/sites/75seiten/7-dutschke/index.html.
[144] Gassert and Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past*.
[145] Morton, "*The Long March of the German 68ers,* 47.
[146] Niven, "Generation War and Post-Didactic Memory," 35.
[147] Morton, "*The Long March of the German 68ers,* 49.
[148] Moeller, "Germans as Victims?," 233.

future than uncovering the truth about the past, the students imposed their model of remembering on Germany and tore apart the structures of collective and personal memory.

The pursuit of the 68ers correlated with a new form of literature known as "vaterliteratur," characterized by tormented familiar narratives written by the children of Nazis. In an intimate reckoning with the past, these individuals attempted to deal with the past and comprehend National Socialism and the Holocaust by analyzing the relationship between themselves and their parents. Born after World War II, the writers of this literature grappled with the reality of war they discerned through the lens of their mothers and fathers, while also navigating the depth of lies and secrets transmitted within their families across generations. They attempted to break from Germany's fascist past by addressing themes such as the guilt of one's fathers, the conflict between the guilty and the innocent, and a pervasive sense of powerlessness when confronted with the harsh realities of the past.[149]

Peter Schneider, born on April 21, 1940, wrote the book *Vati,* which embodied the vaterliteratur genre. The book mirrors the lives of Josef Mengele and his son Rolf, where a young German lawyer travels to South America to meet his father, who has fled there to escape trial for Nazi crimes. Although fictional, Schneider's work resonated with the experiences of many second-generation individuals, portraying a main character whose connection "to his father's crimes was an inheritance of both biblical proportion and genetic character that is fundamental to his own identity."[150] Despite the distance the protagonist places between himself and his father, he always feels left with the burden of answering the consequences of the past, and like an inherited genetic trait, he carries around the stigma of guilt as he grapples with the

[149] Susanne Luhmann, "Filming Familial Secrets: Approaching and Avoiding Legacies of Nazi Perpetration," *New German Critique*, no. 112 (2011): 121.
[150] Susanne Luhmann, "Filming Familial Secrets," 134.

difficulties of his own life. Schneider's book marked a shift from the previous era, where the perpetrator generation guarded their feelings through denial and arrogance. Driven by a fear of being associated with guilt, many parents lacked the courage to face their deeds and experienced an internal compulsion to conceal the truth. They opted to protect their sense of self by resorting to displays of silence, guarded speech, and coldness. These tendencies manifested themselves in a widespread conspiracy of silence, as the perpetrator generation cultivated a culture of suppression. However, without any period of mourning by the parents, they passed down a legacy of avoidance, forcing their children to process this unaddressed history.[151] Schneider depicts this dilemma through the analysis of a son who is coming to grips with a man whom he can neither repudiate nor embrace. Many children of Nazis, including those who formed the base of the 68ers' revolution, intended to control and mold the narrative of their parents. Yet, while their arguments and methods persuaded many people, West German society as a whole still subjugated its moral conscience. A critical response to vaterliteratur emerged, with individuals depicting the books as an unfair display of disrespect toward one's parents. They believed that those condemning their fathers sought public attention and sympathy and did nothing more than "reproduce fascist discourse under the guise of revolutionary anti-fascism and a radical coming to terms with the past."[152]

Still, the 68ers and the writers of vaterliteratur shattered the façade of collective amnesia. Master of Arts student Gracie Morton interprets their influence, explaining that they "forced their fellow West Germans to examine the Third Reich in greater detail and exposed a number of politicians for being former Nazis."[153] However, by threatening the government and the parent

[151] C. Chung and K. Martin, "We Take Over the Guilt of the Fathers," in *Repentance for the Holocaust: Lessons from Jewish Thought for Confronting the German Past*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 236.
[152] McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature*, 153.
[153] Morton, "*The Long March of the German 68ers,* 47.

generation through aggressive and violent methods, they invited other groups to challenge their authority and respond in diverse ways. In the "counter-generation" of 68ers, a group of non-ideologized and non-fanaticized students advocated for a revolution driven by rationalism rather than romanticism.[154] They also favored university reform but honored the pragmatism of the postwar period, believing that adopting Western views offered the FRG its best path forward. This stance aligned with the conservative cohort, who expressed pride in the German economic miracle and continued to support the existing regime. They expelled the 68ers for destroying the Adenauer paradise, preferring "to confine the blame to a small circle, exculpate the majority of decent burghers, and explain the Third Reich as the result of overwhelming forces."[155] In their opinion, National Socialism alienated individuals from Christianity, which limited their ability to make rational decisions.[156] The son of one of Himmler's associates illustrated this idea by arguing that ideology can be fashionable, and individuals, enchanted by National Socialism, were victims of circumstance. He stated, "I believe there are depths within a human being that one is incapable of imagining as a normal person under normal circumstances, depths that can open up when a person gets into some sort of exceptional situation."[157] Blinded by the promises of power, community, equality, and nationalism, many Germans committed themselves to serving the Führer and the German state with unyielding faithfulness.

On the contrary, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) viewed the interests of the New Left as undermining the ability of Germany to reclaim its proud identity. They aimed to recapture positive recollections of life under the Third Reich and saw any attempt to hold West

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[154] Anna von der Goltz, "Generations of 68ers: Age-Related Constructions of Identity and Germany's '1968,'" *The Journal of the Social History Society* 8, no. 4 (2011): 480.
[155] Gassert and Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past*, 23.
[156] Gassert and Steinweis, *Coping with the Nazi Past*, 285.
[157] Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*, 197.

Germans accountable for the war and genocide as a way to keep Germany in a state of dependence and marginalize the nation within the international community.[158] In West Germany, the government had implemented laws to prevent the resurgence of Nazism, which made it difficult to organize in large groups, banned the NSDAP, and criminalized extremist dissent. However, the NPD proclaimed these initiatives as an encroachment on their basic freedoms. Considering themselves the last executors of Hitler's will, the NPD waged a propagandistic war to glorify the actions and minimize the crimes of the Third Reich while also working to liberate West Germany from the alleged threat of Jewish influence.[159] One of their major strategies involved the use of Gudrun Himmler, the daughter of Heinrich Himmler born in 1929, as the symbol of their mission. Gudrun, known as "Puppi," remained fixated on the past after experiencing a privileged upbringing as the perfect German child during the war. She decorated her apartment with artifacts she collected about her father, refused to change her name, and benefited from Stille Hilfe, a relief organization for arrested, condemned, and fugitive SS members.[160] Despite the controversial legacy of her father, Gudrun regarded him as one of the great figures of German history and attempted to venerate him, asserting, "I want to try to revise his image. At least to get the facts straight about what he thought and why he acted as he did."[161] The NPD regarded her as a "Nazi princess" at their rallies, which granted her a platform to inspire far-right groups and infiltrate schools with a revisionist form of history. Although the NPD did not pose a significant threat within the mainstream of West German society, democratic

[158] Bracher, "Democracy and Right Wing Extremism in West Germany," 286.
[159] Bracher, "Democracy and Right Wing Extremism in West Germany," 284.
[160] Lebert, *My Father's Keeper,* 106.
[161] Lebert, *My Father's Keeper*, 106.

parties absorbed much of their extremist potential by using similar slogans and arguments, and the party gained support by appealing to Hitler's middle-class nationalism.[162]

These groups, though diverse in their policies and tactics, shared similarities in the way they shaped West German discourse. They encouraged conversations on the topics of World War II and the Holocaust, in addition to broader themes of guilt, responsibility, and remembrance. While the development of collective memory required public institutions like museums, publications, and literature, it also relied on individual actors and agencies such as these. In competing for public attention, these different entities pushed memory and culture in a direction of reflection, and by the end of the 1960s, the Third Reich could no longer be excluded as a focal point in the discussion of German identity. Instead, it demanded a reexamination in light of expanded critical analysis, increased public interest, and a second generation willing to challenge their parents and initiate public dialogue about the nature and extent of perpetration.

The Federal Republic of Germany continued to take pride in its economic performance in the 1970s, yet conflicts persisted regarding the public and private efforts to work through the past. For the second generation, it became even more difficult to overlook the involvement of their parents and to ignore the ordinary existence of those complicit in the Nazi system. Despite some individuals who resented the fact that the past continued to influence the present, a growing portion of the population began to feel a sense of individual and collective responsibility toward the Nazi era. Where the first generation might have hesitated and hung their heads, subsequent generations took on the task of witnessing and confronting various shades of trauma and guilt. Over time, Germans shifted toward progressivism, as collective memories focused more on German collaboration in war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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[162] Bracher, "Democracy and Right Wing Extremism in West Germany," 287.

West Germany achieved an unparalleled position in the global economic landscape by solidifying its dominance on an industrial level.[163] The FRG delivered high-quality investment products at competitive prices, increased exports to finance the needs of the state, and made informed economic decisions that aligned with their financial and political capabilities. This marked a change from the immediate postwar period, where other nations dictated the extent of West Germany's involvement in international affairs and often "bullied" the nation into overextending itself. In addition, unlike the previous Adenauer administration, which only contained the bandwidth to handle one priority at a time, West Germany now diversified the capabilities of the state, and "the task of commemorating the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust became a defining mark of the political identity."[164] In 1969, the people elected Willy Brandt as the first Social Democratic chancellor, who redefined West Germany's relationship with Nazism and ushered in a new wave of liberal leadership.[165] Brandt stood against everything the Nazis represented, having fought against the Germans as a member of the Norwegian resistance movement during World War II. His experiences translated into an outspoken belief in a sober confrontation with the Nazi era and a commitment to holding citizens accountable for their roles as bystanders and perpetrators. He also argued that, given the established economic successes of the nation, West Germany deserved to take a more active role in world politics.[166] Instead of remaining a puppet nation with strings manipulated by the Western world, Brandt advocated for the prioritization of German national interests. This new approach to leadership demonstrated

[163] Gebhard Schweigler, "A New Political Giant? West German Foreign Policy in the 1970s," *The World Today* 31, no. 4 (1975): 137.
[164] Oliver Schmidtke, "Competing Historical Narratives: Memory Politics, Identity, and Democracy in Germany and Poland," *MDPI Social Sciences* 12, (2023): 396.
[165] Schweigler, "A New Political Giant,?" 139.
[166] Schweigler, "A New Political Giant,?" 138.

that West Germany could maintain a productive economy while addressing and making amends with the people and nations it had wronged.

Brandt began his reign with a foreign policy known as Ostpolitik, or the "Eastern Policy," which normalized diplomatic relations with the Soviet-bloc countries. Since the division of Germany into two states in 1949, the FRG and GDR experienced fraught interactions. However, Brandt saw an opportunity to ease the tension through verbal communication. While he acknowledged the potential discontent from Western allies over collaboration with the "other side," Brandt desired to remove the constraints on the FRG's freedom of action in world politics and thus signify the growth of the West German identity.[167] In 1973, Brandt recognized the GDR and expanded commercial relations with the other Soviet countries. In addition, he facilitated conversations with Poland, which led to the establishment of various treaties that included territorial concessions to Poland, the recognition of the Oder-Neisse line as Germany's eastern boundary, and compensation to the Polish victims of Nazism.[168] By addressing the suffering inflicted on nations with which Brandt sought improved relations in the East, his actions acknowledged the consequences of past foreign policy decisions under National Socialism. In a sense, his initiatives also conveyed a form of apology for Germany's history.

Brandt's actions extended beyond the lines of the Cold War. He used his vision of democracy to guide West Germany in confronting its unresolved past. On May 8, 1970, Brandt delivered a speech before the German parliament at the Bundestag, where he declared that "no one is free from the history they have inherited."[169] Regardless of the time passed, he believed that individuals were always left with the burden of answering to the actions of the perpetrator

[167] Schweigler, "A New Political Giant,?" 140.
[168] Grosser, *The Federal Republic of Germany: a Concise History*, 121-122.
[169] Moeller, "Germans as Victims,?" 169.

generation, and when people avoided discussions about the past, it hindered the formation of a defined national and individual identity.[170] This reluctance made it more difficult for subsequent generations to relate to the suffering of the victims and condemned them to follow a similar trajectory as their parents through a continued absence of guilt, emotional detachment, and perpetuation of xenophobic and antisemitic tendencies. Yet, Brandt recognized this behavior as incongruent with West Germany's aspirations to be an open and democratic institution. Before the Bundestag, Brandt declared, "Let's dare more democracy…we want to take a chance on more democracy." He translated his proclamations into action a few months later, when in December 1970, Brandt took on the burden of collective guilt by kneeling and laying a wreath at the sight of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.[171] Though a small gesture in bridging the gaps between Germany and Western Europe, it had long-lasting reverberations in the domestic and international communities, becoming an icon of recent German history. This act marked the first instance of an official from the nation of perpetrators acknowledging the crimes of the Nazi era. It also served as inspiration for his successor, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who, on November 23, 1977, became the first chancellor to visit Auschwitz. There, he pushed for the Holocaust to be recognized as the core legacy of the Nazi regime.[172] Since the legacy of the Holocaust shaped the West German identity in the postwar periods and demanded a lasting impact on contemporary consciousness, it emerged as the foundation for German self-understanding.

However, despite the work of the government to acknowledge the past, a conflict arose between the political and public spheres. In 1971, 48% of West Germans regarded Brandt's symbolic act of kneeling in Warsaw as excessive, highlighting the inconsistent challenge of

[170] Karen Remmler, "'Normalization and Its Discontents': The Transnational Legacy of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany," in *Three-Way Street*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).
[171] Moeller, "Germans as Victims,?" 169.
[172] Herf, "Legacies of Divided Memory," 11.

confronting the legacies of Nazism. After the turbulent decade of the 1960s, some segments of society became nostalgic for elements of the Nazi era. In 1966, Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments and War Production, published a memoir, *Inside the Third Reich*, which explained his fascination for Hitler. For his son, Albert Speer Jr., born in 1934, this work provided a nuanced perspective on his father's achievements as a decorated architect and attempted to rationalize his wrongdoing by offering an honest portrayal of his role in the war effort and the inner workings of the Nazi state.[173] However, far from a private matter, the memoir triggered an intense "Hitler wave" in the late 1970s that included shameless exploitation of the Nazi past in books and films.[174] Fascism exploded into an entertainment attraction, with a surge in Nazi relics and the mass production of biographies and documentaries about Hitler. This sensationalized display of Nazi imagery contributed to the portrayal of Hitler as the sole perpetrator responsible for the events of World War II and allowed people to interact with the Nazi period from an abstract and impersonal perspective.

This trend of selective memory gained credence from academic research, which concerned the causes and conditions of Nazism but omitted any mention of specific perpetrators.[175] While this pursuit safeguarded the political interests of West Germany, it contributed to a sense of complacency in national dialogue and public opinion. This avoidance extended into the realm of falsification, as cultural representations in film, art, and literature ignored the realities of the Holocaust and decentered the victims' experience. Instead, German academics, decision-makers, and the general populace opted for a German-centric history by highlighting German victimhood, the spectacle of the masses during the 1930s, and the concept

[173] Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis*.
[174] Tom Dreisbach, "Transatlantic Broadcasts: Holocaust in America and West Germany," *Penn History Review* 16, no. 2 (2009): 84.
[175] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 18.

of resistance. Even after the two-year Auschwitz Trials of the 1960s, the name "Auschwitz" lost its credibility. The people no longer expressed doubt over documenting the life of Hitler or portraying him in a positive light, which contributed to a romanticized view of history. Authors Jean-Paul Bier and Michael Allinder reveal that some people even justified National Socialism, claiming, "[Hitler] had given national dignity back to the Germans, had solved the unemployment problem, and had re-established in the hearts of millions of Germans a feeling of law and order."[176]

Although many craved order and stability, West Germany experienced political turbulence, as the nation witnessed the intensification of leftist extremism. The 68ers had devolved into the Baader-Meinhof Gang, also known as the Red Army Faction (RAF), a militant group that sought to subvert the economic and political landscape of West Germany. Drawing parallels between the policing and judicial system of the FRG and the practices of the Nazis, its members brought direct reference to National Socialism and the Holocaust to the forefront of public discourse.[177] Their arguments resonated with the youth who pushed back against perceived societal injustices, and with middle-class workers who felt threatened by the influx of migrant workers and refugees. However, their use of violent measures to challenge the state decreased any nostalgia that had been resurrected during the Hitler-wave, since it reminded people of the authoritarianism of the Nazi regime and the dangers of extremism.[178] In addition, the government's response to the RAF reflected a heightened awareness of the past by demonstrating the lessons learned from the Nazi era. The FRG increased police surveillance and

[176] Bier and Allinder, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion," 25.
[177] Mary Nolan, "Pushing the Defensive Wall of the State Forward: Terrorism and Civil Liberties in Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 117 (2012): 121.
[178] Nolan, "Pushing the Defensive Wall of the State Forward," 130.

strengthened its democratic institutions to prevent the resurgence of political violence.[179] At a time when people grappled with confronting the Holocaust more explicitly than ever, the actions of the RAF and the public response illustrated the continued impact of the Nazi period.

The varied attitudes toward history in the public sphere reflected the reactions of Nazi descendants. Some children denounced their fathers, condemned their actions, and wanted them to be held responsible. Margarete Speer, born in 1938, distanced herself from her father after the release of his memoir, since she resented him for profiting off his crimes and attempting to circumvent guilt.[180] Karl Otto Saur, born in 1902 as the son of Karl Saur, the Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, denied any comments vindicating his father, writing, "My father was responsible for helping to create those shadows. He must be held accountable."[181] However, even within the same family, internal conflicts and tensions between siblings emerged. Klaus Gerhard Saur, brother of Karl Otto Saur, opted to absolve his father of guilt, contending that "it was professional ambition that drove him during the war, not ideology. I am sure of it. He was very pragmatic."[182] Similarly, Norman Frank, the eldest son of Hans Frank, diverged from his brother Niklas in his interpretation of their father. Instead of admitting his criminality, Norman asserted that higher authorities coerced his father into the system, while his mother remained unaware of the events inside the camps.[183] This diversity of perspectives within the same family demonstrates the multifaceted dynamics intertwined with the legacy of the past. The task of the second generation to address this "fate" paralleled that of the broader populace, where the diversity of attitudes and responses influenced the political and public sphere.

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[179] Nolan, "Pushing the Defensive Wall of the State Forward," 123.
[180] Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis*.
[181] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 93.
[182] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 76.
[183] Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis*.

Many second-generation children also extended full support to their parents for various reasons—whether to reap the benefits of their wartime glory, to protect themselves from the reality of the truth and thus avoid accusations of guilt, or to do justice to the legacy of their parents. These sentiments then manifested themselves in different ways. Some became defensive when the crimes of the Third Reich were mentioned, such as Eberhard Sonntag, daughter of Otto Sonntag, and Cordula Schacht, daughter of Hjalmar Schacht, the Reich Minister of Economics. Cordula, born in 1943, claimed, "You cannot help everyone… I do not allow myself to judge him on every point because I know too little. I have not lived this period."[184] Certain individuals denied any wrongdoing by their parents, such as Brigitte Höss and the children of Baldur von Schirach, the head of the Hitler Youth, who spent their lives in Berlin pleading for the release of their father from Spandau Prison.[185] Some proclaimed victimhood, asserting that their parents' legacies have been besmirched and they have experienced a loss of innocence in being deprived of a normal childhood, such as Wolf R. Hess and Barbel Ludin. Others expressed an unrelenting pride in their fathers, as exemplified by Ursula Dönitz, born in 1917 as the daughter of Karl Dönitz, Hitler's named successor: "I am proud of my father. No one can change my mind on this. I do not like that my father has the title of war criminal."[186] And worst, there were cases where individuals prolonged the ideologies of the past, whether through the idealization of the self, the disparagement of foreigners, or heightened antisemitism. This trend was evident in individuals such as Hans-Jürgen Höss, Ingeborg Day, and Gudrun Himmler.

Others branched in the opposite direction, choosing to sever ties with the remnants of the Third Reich and break away from their family legacies. They viewed rejecting their family as a

[184] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 98.
[185] Lebert, *My Father's Keeper*, 237.
[186] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 157.

way to avoid following in their footsteps and escape the weight of their history. Many of their parents fostered strict, authoritarian environments at home, where they refused to discuss the past and exhibited no guilt or remorse. Sibylle, known as "The Orderly One" by author Peter Sichrovsky, and daughter of an SS soldier stationed on the Eastern front, recounted how her father remained entrenched in his ways by promoting bigotry, which contributed to a sense of dysfunction and unease within their family. She loathed their refusal to accept their mistakes or change their behavior, and as a result, she expressed, "All I ever wanted was to escape, preferably to a place where I didn't know anybody, and they didn't know how bad I was."[187] Similarly, Anna, dubbed "The Decent One," grew up in a household marked by indifference. Her father, who served as the head of the guard detachment at a concentration camp, endeavored to provide Anna with a semblance of normalcy throughout her childhood, yet he adhered to a simplistic mentality of "no guilt, no sorry, no responsibility."[188] When Anna broached the topic of her father's role during the war, her mother reacted with agitation and insisted that she leave him alone. The emotional detachment exhibited by her parents traumatized Anna, making it difficult for her to navigate and process her own emotions. However, rather than living in constant fear, Anna opted for a fresh start. Not wanting any witnesses from the past, she excluded her parents from her wedding and avoided all family interactions.

Bernd Wollschlaeger, born in 1958 as the son of a Wehrmacht officer, felt stifled by the inability of his family to distance themselves from the ideals of Nazism and engage in open dialogue about their experiences. As he grew older, Bernd underwent a painful disintegration with his father, since the man's demeanor in the home fostered an insatiable appetite within Bernd for answers about the past and prevented him from finding peace within West Germany.

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[187] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 89.
[188] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 24.

He asserted that "we cannot just forget and move on as if all this never happened. It did happen, and those who suffered deserve to have their story told."[189] Despite recognizing that he is unable to change the past and will always bear the burden of being German, Bernd sought solace in finding an identity and spirituality away from the shadows of secrecy within his homeland and family. Reflecting on the fractured relationship with his family, he remarked, "We drifted apart a long time ago and now I have to go my own way."[190] His journey led him to Israel, where he interacted with Holocaust survivors and discovered spiritual meaning in Judaism.

This path of connecting with Judaism reflected a broader phenomenon among descendants of Nazis. Many saw identification with the victims, conversion to Judaism, or visits to Israel as a way to separate from the ideologies of their families and make amends for the crimes of the Nazi era. Ingeborg, known as "The Conciliator," whose father opened a German sports academy for the Hitler Youth, left home and became infatuated with Jewish culture. Although aware of the inherent differences between her background and the Jewish community, she considered her marriage to a Jewish man as the most significant act of repudiation against her father.[191] Similarly, Ingeborg Mochar and Maria Körber, born in 1930 as the daughter of the notorious film director Veit Harlan, known for his antisemitic propaganda film *Jud Süss*, married Jewish men who represented complete breaks from the past and the ways of life of their fathers. Maria, often feeling invisible as a person, experienced a need to compensate for the actions of her father and felt that she committed a good deed by marrying someone whose family had

[189] Bernd Wollschlaeger, *A German Life: Against All Odds, Change is Possible* (Irvine, California: Emor Publishing, LLC, 2007), 49.
[190] Wollschlaeger, *A German Life*, 181.
[191] Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty*, 133.

suffered during the war.[192] This choice illustrated a distinct way of confronting the legacy of her family and finding a way to relate to the victims.

Peter Thomas Heydrich, born in 1931 as the son of German actor and SS-Obersturmführer Heinz Heydrich, and the nephew of Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's viceroy in Czechoslovakia, similarly forged connections with the Jewish community by transforming his artistic career into a means of confronting his past. As a cabaret performer, he recited the work of Jewish poets and collaborated with Jewish performers, engaging in acts of cultural resistance that would have been forbidden in the Third Reich.[193] In a similar vein, Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On outlines the story of a man he refers to as "The Rabbi from Jerusalem." This individual, born to a father who joined the Waffen-SS, cut ties with his family due to his father's refusal to renounce his beliefs. Grappling with the unknown of what people knew and did during World War II pushed his life in the direction "to familiarize [himself] with the Jewish people and to think about the Jewish people," which entailed engaging with their lifestyle, history, and traditions.[194] This process allowed him to better understand the Holocaust from the perspective of those who suffered through it and allowed him to break the cycle of neglect and denial prevalent in his family. Descendants like these pursued connections with the Jewish community for various reasons, yet their actions reflected a common desire to disassociate from the actions of their parents by forming positive relationships with those their families once targeted. Such engagements facilitated a process of personal healing, where individuals addressed the trauma and stigma associated with being related to the perpetrator generation.

[192] Felix Moeller, dir. *Harlan – In the Shadow of Jew Süss*, Documentary, aired March 3, 2010, by Zeitgeist Films.
[193] Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*, 144.
[194] Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence*, 164.

However, the conflicting, inconsistent, and uncertain dynamics of the historical period did not bypass the entire second generation. While many children supported their parents, others moved away from their families, and some turned to Judaism, a significant number found a middle ground and balanced the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. Rather than passing a final judgment or seeking to exculpate their parents, these individuals endeavored to gain a level of understanding. They often felt compelled to assume and comprehend their inherited legacy, which created an insatiable pull toward the truth. Martin Adolf Bormann Jr., the son of Martin Bormann, the head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, exemplified this complex exploration. Born on April 14, 1930, he grew up as the "crown prince" of Germany, even being named "Kronzi" by Hitler himself. After the war, he sought an explanation for his father's devotion to National Socialism and came to regard his father with a critical assessment. However, he also experienced dual feelings stemming from the love he shared for his paternal figure. It felt difficult to condemn his father as a murderer when he had never seen or experienced him in that role. To process his emotions, Martin turned to Christianity, where he discovered that since the fourth commandment demands honor towards those in authority, including one's parents, Martin never denounced his father, believing only God can judge.[195] Rolf Mengele, born in 1944 as the son of Josef Mengele, the doctor of Auschwitz known as "the Angel of Death," also did not agree with his father's devotion to National Socialism but remained conflicted about how to approach his legacy. Rolf believed that his father deserved the consequences he received, living a life alone in exile. Despite these sentiments, he felt an obligation to know his father better, and in 1977, he met his father in his hiding place in Brazil for the first time in over twenty years. His father frustrated him through his inability to accept

[195] Crasnianski, *Children of Nazis*.

responsibility, yet Rolf never betrayed his father's whereabouts to the authorities, claiming that his "complex feelings ranged from criticism and condemnation to loyalty that compelled him to protect his father from many hunters."[196]

Other children, such as Albert Speer Jr., Ingeborg Mochar, and Dagmar Drexel, born in 1956 as the daughter of Max Drexel, a member of the Einsatzgruppen, described these complex feelings as being trapped in a "double bind:" despite recognizing the horrors of their family's pasts, they grappled with the enduring influence of the contradictory images of the parents they knew and loved.[197] In the words of Helga Schneider, the daughter of an Auschwitz guard born in 1937, "I look at you, mother, and I feel a terrible lacerating rift within me: between the instinctive attraction for my own blood and irrevocable rejection of what you have been, of what you still are."[198] The task of reconciling these emotions produced psychological challenges for the second generation, condemned by history to uncover their parents' actions and motivations, and the reasons for their apparent lack of guilt or shame after the war. In addition, most struggled with being haunted by the question of whether they inherited not only the capacity for evil but also the propensity for secrecy and repression. However, with time, they learned to separate their parents from their parents' deeds and to see that the burden of their parents' legacies existed outside of their control. According to Rolf Mengele, "We have established our own lives in a very different way. Whatever it was that drove [our] fathers, it wasn't genetic. Our environment is totally different."[199] The second generation also realized that while they might carry the emotional weight of the pain and shame of their parents, they did not bear responsibility for any wrongdoing. Seeking diverse outlets for expression, they turned to religion, art, and writing,

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[196] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 4.
[197] McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature*, 172.
[198] Helga Schneider, *Let Me Go* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2001), 82.
[199] Posner, *Hitler's Children*, 134.

engaged in work with Holocaust survivors, and participated in different forms of activism. It is difficult to draw connections between the 2G due to their diverse range of experiences and reactions to the Nazi era. They did, however, generally share a desire for positive validation from outside the home. In their journey into the past, they sought to both evaluate their parents and develop a defined identity of their own beyond the confines of their families.

The process of working through the past unfolded as a continual and often contentious battle. However, a turning point in West German memory culture occurred as the 40th anniversary of Kristallnacht approached, when director Marvin J. Chomsky released his "Holocaust" mini-series in 1979 on millions of televisions across West Germany. In what the popular magazine *Der Spiegel* termed the "catharsis of the nation," the series charted the story of a fictional Jewish family, the Weiss,' from bourgeoisie affluence to the tragic fate of the gas chambers.[200] It also featured the German Dork family, which showcased an ordinary German who ascended the ranks of the Nazi Party to become Reinhard Heydrich's right-hand man as one of the principal architects of the Holocaust. In stark contrast to previous films and publications, the mini-series focused predominantly on Jewish victimhood and the "Final Solution, bringing the harsh realities of these historical events into the intimate setting of the home. It depicted numerous tragedies that occurred both up to and during World War II, including Kristallnacht, the construction of the Jewish ghettos, the T4 Euthanasia program, and the use of the gas chambers, which captured the lives of two members of the Weiss family.[201] Notably, the series provided faces, names, and voices to the Jewish victims, which offered a more personal

[200] Siegried Zielinski and Gloria Custance, "History as Entertainment and Provocation: The TV Series "Holocaust" in West Germany," *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 85.
[201] Zielinski and Custance, "History as Entertainment and Provocation," 87.

perspective on their experiences for the audience. This departure from earlier portrayals marked a shift in how the media approached the Holocaust and prompted new modes of representation.

Before its release, the content of the mini-series incited public controversy. Some people claimed that the past should be left alone, with right-wing radicals bombing the TV transmitters in the days preceding the release. On the other hand, some felt that West Germany had a moral obligation to air the show and that people needed to confront the human aspect of genocide.[202] When the series aired on German screens over four nights, 36% of West Germans with televisions, accounting for approximately 20 million people, viewed at least one part of the series, with two-thirds of viewers saying that the miniseries had deeply moved them, and one-fifth claiming to have nearly cried.[203] In tandem with the series, the producers aired two fact-based documentaries about the "Final Solution" and accompanied each night with a midnight forum. These sessions provided an opportunity for people to phone in and ask questions, leave comments, and interact with survivors, sociologists, historians, and psychologists. According to NPR correspondent Tom Dreisbach, the series "broke through thirty years of apathy" and "visualized the crimes committed in the name of Germany in a way that shook millions."[204]

The release of "Holocaust" brought the entire West German population into conversation with each other through the process of communal self-reflection. Even if individuals did not watch the series, it is estimated that the idea of the Holocaust as an icon of horror and inhumanity reached over 80% of the German population as news of the show spread through communities and homes.[205] German fascism could no longer be perceived as a mysterious event or sudden catastrophe, the term "Holocaust" entered the common vernacular, and questions of

[202] Zielinski and Custance, "History as Entertainment and Provocation," 87-88.
[203] Dreisbach, "Transatlantic Broadcasts," 89.
[204] Dreisbach, "Transatlantic Broadcasts," 86.
[205] Dreisbach, "Transatlantic Broadcasts," 89.

causation and moral judgment troubled the viewers.[206] These ideas prompted millions to suspend the attitude most of them and their ancestors had pursued before 1945: that of bystanders. Instead, they formed a new self-consciousness that approached the process of remembering by viewing their familial history with objectivity and hyper-criticism. More than ever, individuals distanced themselves from their loved ones, with one woman expressing the generational divide by noting, "Our 18-year-old grandson accuses us of being a treacherous people. He doesn't want to have a thing to do with us and wants to move out."[207] In addition, tens of thousands of German youths investigated the histories of their hometowns and families, which sparked a nationwide grassroots history movement. Students pressured teachers to address the subject in class, rewrite history textbooks to better document the Nazi period, and organize a greater number of visits to concentration camps. As *Der Spiegel* stated, "'Holocaust' managed to do what hundreds of books, plays, films, and TV broadcasts, thousands of documents and all concentration camp trials in three decades of postwar history had failed to do: to inform Germans about the crimes committed against the Jews in their name in such a way that millions were shaken."[208]

Finally, while it can be difficult to identify the direct impact of the show on political policy, the dramatic changes in public opinion and consciousness following the show's release most likely influenced the legal field to some extent. After the show, polls "marked [an] increase of 24% among those West German respondents who wanted the prosecution of Nazi war criminals to continue."[209] This surge in public sentiment prompted Parliament to end the long-standing "Verjahrungsdebatte," the debate on the statute of limitations for war crimes, by

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[206] Andrei S. Markovitz and Rebecca S. Hayden, "'Holocaust' before and after the Event: Reactions in West Germany and Austria," *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 62.
[207] Markovitz and Hayden, "'Holocaust' before and after the Event," 63.
[208] "Holocaust (miniseries)," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust_(miniseries)#:~:text=Der%20Spiegel%20stated%20that%20Holocaust,such%20a%20way%20that%20millions.
[209] Markovitz and Hayden, "'Holocaust' before and after the Event," 67.

abolishing any statute of limitations for murder on July 3, 1979. This removed any deadline for initiating legal proceedings against Nazi criminals, thus allowing Germany to hold individuals accountable for their actions during the war at any point in time. Furthermore, it expanded the definition of "perpetrator" by redirecting the narrative and attention from high-ranking Nazi officials to the broader German populace. This shift implicated a wider segment of society, asserting that there is a metaphysical stamp that attached West Germany in perpetuity to the Nazi period. The government also adopted a hypervigilant stance against the rise of Neo-Nazi activities. It spoke out against genocide, outlawed the marketing of children's toys with swastikas or National Socialist emblems, and fostered an atmosphere conducive to large-scale debates about human rights.[210] With issues of social and historical relevance resurfacing and individuals registering the Nazi era and the Holocaust on an emotional level, West Germany stood on the brink of its next phase of transformation.

Normalization (1980-1999)

The next period in West German history marked a crucial "coming-of-age," during which the government and its people redefined the German national identity. Nora Krug, the granddaughter of an SS militant and the niece of a Nazi soldier, grew up in Germany in the 1980s and experienced a nation that lacked a sense of "Heimat." The English translation of the word "heimat" renders it as "belonging," yet this translation fails to capture the depth of the original term. The word is embedded with numerous meanings and emotions, making it resistant to simple translation. In German history, the people associated it with a spiritual sense of home, which evoked a connection to specific landscapes and familiar scenery. However, in the 1930s,

[210] Markovitz and Hayden, "'Holocaust' before and after the Event," 72.

the Nazi Party manipulated the word to serve their agenda. Their vision of "Heimat" cultivated an exclusionary notion of a national German community, which enabled the party to marginalize and persecute various segments of the population. In the aftermath of World War II, the concept of Heimat disappeared from German discourse, supplanted by feelings of shame and guilt. For Krug, the simple act of her German citizenship bound her to the Holocaust, thus leaving her without a sense of cultural belonging. She expunged the words "pride, hero, race, and victory" from her vocabulary and struggled to reconcile her identity with traditional notions of German character. These struggles spread across the youth, as Krug claims that the "concept of inherited sin – as the Germans call original sin – and of having to bear the consequences of another generation's actions" affected the psyche of many children in the second and third generations.[211]

Like other West Germans, Krug felt uncomfortable discussing the past, writing she "was too afraid to ask, feeling that this was something embarrassing to talk about… something evoking the same unsettling feelings."[212] This unease stemmed from a desire not to disturb the idealized narrative her family constructed. By painting themselves as heroes during the war, they established a barrier that protected them from painful memories. However, Krug grew tired of being ashamed to identify as German and decided to confront her relationship with guilt. Whereas the details of what happened in her own family remained taboo and shrouded in silence, Krug endeavored to understand how the past shaped the present. The legacy of World War II and Nazism cracked the foundation of national identity, as the shadows of the Holocaust overpowered and constrained everyday life. In addition, the willingness of the perpetrator generation to banish the past to the periphery of indifference led to unresolved feelings in their descendants. Despite this phenomenon, the second generation had laid the groundwork for

[211] Nora Krug, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (New York: Scribner, 2018).
[212] Krug, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*.

change in asking difficult questions and re-conceptualizing "heimat" as the common denominator that unites individual experiences and national traditions. By returning to her father's hometown in Germany, exploring local and national archives, and interacting with Native Germans, Krug reclaimed the Heimat lost by herself and the nation. The way she grappled with the past paralleled the broader shifts in German society. From 1980 to the turn of the century, West Germany balanced the weight of history with the expectations placed on them as a world power.

The political culture of the FRG intersected with that of other Western nations by the 1980s. This evolution fortified Germany as a liberal, democratic state that had broken the political and ideological traditions of its Nazi predecessor. Yet, the international community still demanded that Germany act in a way that acknowledged its historical burdens.[213] With the disappearance of the perpetrator generation and the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors, questions of how to remember National Socialism coincided with important milestones, such as the 50th anniversary of the Nazi accession to power in 1983, the 40th anniversary of the end of the war in 1985, and the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988. This climate facilitated a more nuanced assessment of one's relationship to National Socialism and triggered conversations over how to interpret the past given the democratic present of the FRG. While some exposed the reality of violence, others hid evil under a veneer of normalcy. The period from 1980 to 1999 witnessed the escalation of popular interest in the Holocaust, with a growing diversity of survivors advocating for their place in history. The divide widened between those who sought to "normalize" Germany and move forward and those opposed to allowing the past to cede into the

[213] David B. Morris, "Bitburg Revisited: Germany's Search for Normalcy," *German Politics & Society* 13, no. 4 (1995): 105.

background. The various perspectives shaping the discourse around the role of West Germany in the modern age reflected unresolved tension within the nation.

Although postwar West Germany looked forward, each step of progress carried the risk of regression. In a conservative backlash to the 1960s and 1970s, West Germany encountered a political victory of the "tendenzwende," or reversal of trend, as the Social Democratic Union (SDU) relinquished power to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of the Adenauer era.[214] Chancellor Helmut Schmidt faced his first test of power in the spring of 1981 when he negotiated the sale of mass weaponry to Saudi Arabia, which raised concerns due to Germany's special relationship with Israel. Schmidt declared that "West German foreign policy should no longer be held hostage to Auschwitz" and that the nation deserves to be released from the constraints of its unmasterable past.[215] This speech referred to the limitations imposed on Germany after 1945 and how NATO, EU, and American policies had restricted German activities in the realm of power politics. Yet, in conducting a balancing act between the principles of "never again war" and "never again Auschwitz," West Germany wanted greater autonomy in its foreign policy, which drew inspiration from the earlier proclamations of Willy Brandt. Chancellor Helmut Kohl seized control from Schmidt in 1982 but continued his mission of neoconservative relativization. He advocated for a more systematic politics of memory that reflected the German identity in a post-Holocaust nation.[216]

In seeking to promote a positive German identity, Chancellor Kohl debated between two proposed museums as places of German national memory. The House of History in the capital city of Bonn would begin its story in 1949 and narrate 40 years of West German history in the

[214] Dominick LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide," *History and Memory* 9, no. 1 (1997): 104.
[215] Levy and Olick, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint," 921.
[216] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 202-203.

FRG. On the contrary, the German Historical Museum in Berlin would narrate all of German history. Although critics argued that the German Historical Museum would place German history in an international context, therefore downplaying the events of Nazism, Kohl wished to emphasize the traditional aspects of the German past and declared the founding of the museum a national priority.[217] This controversy sparked conversations over how contemporary and future generations of Germans should remember and incorporate the Nazi past into German history. In Kohl's perspective, he wished for the people, and the outside world, to make a "sharp turn from the German as a guilty pariah to the German as a normal European," disassociating the nation from National Socialism.[218] Despite facing criticism for his nationalistic tendencies, Kohl continued to separate Germany's past from the present by removing the German question from the Jewish question. On March 1, 1984, Kohl visited Israel and delivered an address before the Israeli Parliament, where he spoke of "the grace of being born too late."[219] While this act fostered reconciliation between the two nations, his speech contained conservative undertones that signified his desire to shift from demonization to normalization.

Kohl also reshaped the memory of National Socialism to emphasize the tragedies of civilians and soldiers alongside the suffering experienced by those the Nazis persecuted. In 1985, he visited the city of Hannover for an annual rally that recognized the Germans expelled from Silesia at the end of the war. He called for remembrance of the 'infinite suffering that the war and totalitarianism inflicted on nations,' which recognized the pain experienced by all people as a result of both the war itself and the oppression of totalitarianism.[220] While no one objected to this

[217] Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory*, 55.
[218] Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory*, 46.
[219] Clayton Clemens, Ronald Granieri, Mathias Haeussler, et.al, "In Memory of the 'Two Helmuts,'" *Central European History* 51, no. 2 (2018): 297.
[220] Moeller, "War Stories," 1041.

gesture, Kohl encountered controversy a few months later. The Moscow government launched a revanchism campaign against West Germany that attempted to undermine its relations with the East. Moscow leveraged the German past to arouse suspicion about its credibility as an alliance partner and warn against the perceived threat of "pan-Germanism."[221] In response, Kohl increased diplomacy with the United States, urging America to look ahead at Germany rather than back at it. President Ronald Reagan agreed to work with Kohl and relieve Germany of its feelings of guilt by visiting the Bitburg cemetery on May 5, 1985, in honor of Germany's war victims. However, not only did the cemetery contain the graves of over four dozen soldiers of the Waffen-SS, therefore commemorating their contributions to the war effort, but when Reagan announced, "They were victims, just as surely as victims in the concentration camps," he marginalized the memory of the Holocaust.[222] While Reagan received criticism from the American press, Kohl, given Germany's delicate history, could not afford to make mistakes such as Bitburg. His attempt to disperse collective guilt and downplay Germany's historical legacy had unintended consequences since Germany's moral stature in the eyes of the international community deteriorated after the event. In response, President Richard von Weizsäcker delivered a speech before the Bundestag, insisting that German crimes against humanity remain at the forefront of public memory and that West Germany faces its historical responsibilities.[223] Although helpful from a public relations perspective, Kohl maintained his conservative agenda, which inspired support among the West German people for his portrayal of German victimhood.

The controversies on a political level did not remove the Holocaust as a point of discussion but recentered the narrative. No one disputed the truth of the Holocaust, and public

[221] Morris, "Bitburg Revisited."
[222] LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," 96.
[223] Clemens and Granieri, "In Memory of the 'Two Helmuts,'" 298.

institutions established memorial sites and reconstructed cities to remember the past. However, individuals criticized the existing scholarship on National Socialism for its failure to document the suffering endured by Germans. Those who cautioned against calls for normalization feared that this resurgence of German victimization would lead the nation "in the direction of apologia and the false equation of German suffering with the crimes committed by the Germans."[224] Yet, as progressive political leaders and new social movements (NSMs) transformed the West German landscape, the people experienced a greater sense of empowerment compared to the previous periods.[225] They embraced an environment that shattered traditional taboos and allowed for the expansion of freedoms and dialogue. While West Germany devolved into a frenzy of conflicting ideas, public intellectuals and professional historians attempted to transcribe logic onto social thought and seize control over the cultural field.[226] They used their positions of authority to address issues that Germans had harbored for years but had never felt able, or comfortable, to articulate until this point.

The "Historikerstreit" of 1986-1987, the Historians' Debate, defined the 1980s by encapsulating the ideas and opinions that dominated West German society. The debate dealt with both historiographical and social concerns related to the formation of national identity and the way the people experienced a persistent reliving of the past. Ernst Nolte, a German historian and philosopher, represented the conservative faction of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which believed in forging a new national consciousness by focusing on the future. He argued that unlike other dark chapters in the history of Germany, World War II and the Holocaust

[224] Moeller, "Germans as Victims,?" 150.
[225] Peter H. Merkl, "How New the Brave New World: New Social Movements in West Germany," *German Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (1987): 125.
[226] Stephan Brockmann, "The Politics of German History," *History and Theory* 29, no. 2 (1990): 179.

represented a "Vergangenheit die nicht vergehen will," a "past that refuses to pass."[227] Nolte contended that the normal process of forgetting should have set in with time, yet the artificial prolongation of the history of Nazism became a growing problem with each passing year. As an academic, Nolte perceived this phenomenon as an impediment to the pursuit of historiography. He criticized the literature about National Socialism, asserting that its narrow way of thinking prevented historians from conducting an objective examination of the Third Reich and posing the broad questions of intellectual history imperative to understand the truth.[228] Embedded in this problem was a "failure to admit that all Nazi deeds had already been described in the voluminous literature of the 1920s" and that National Socialism should be viewed as a global political challenge within the larger crisis of European constitutionalism.[229] By comparing Nazi crimes to other forms of modern genocidal phenomena and attempting to relativize the Holocaust within the immediate context of war, Nolte challenged the dominant orthodoxy that viewed the Holocaust as a unique form of evil. However, in doing so, he inadvertently dissolved and suspended the question of guilt for the German population. This provided them with a sense of permission to relegate the Shoah to the periphery of their consciousness.

In 1989, Ralph Giordano, a German writer and publicist, supported Nolte in his article, *The Second Guilt on the Burden of Being German*. Giordano dedicated his piece to the innocently burdened sons, daughters, and grandsons of the perpetrator generation who found themselves victims of what he termed "secondhand guilt."[230] He accused the older generation, the "Hitler generation," of burdening their descendants with an intergenerational contract of guilt

[227] LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," 90.
[228] Brockmann, "The Politics of German History," 184.
[229] LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," 91.; Confino, "Telling about Germany."
[230] Chung and Martin, "We Take Over the Guilt of the Fathers," 249.

that transferred sociopsychological contaminants through family ties and bloodlines.[231] Burkard Bilger, born in 1964 as the grandson of Karl Gönner, the head of an Alsace village in Nazi-occupied France, experienced what Giordano described as an inescapable Mark of Cain, which is a mark of identity branded upon him. Despite being innocent of a crime, Bilger bared a relation to a tainted history and the name of a criminal: "Each of us carries the seeds of murder and mercy within us."[232] Growing up, Bilger felt that "to be German, it seemed, was always to be one part Nazi," which compelled him to spend most of his life concealing his German identity, since it seemed easier to accept that Germany might be broken beyond repair than to embrace redemption.[233] Ralph Giordano represented the voices of young Germans like Burkhard. He advocated that the normalization of Germany would liberate the nation from an expectation that their identities be dictated by the past. In essence, normalization would enable them to rediscover pride and honor in being German.

The conservatives filtered the past through the lens of German continuity, thereby acquitting the younger generations. However, many critics viewed this notion as a form of right-wing revisionism. Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and representative of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), condemned Nolte for offering an apologetic view of the Third Reich. He regarded the attempt to exculpate Germany as nothing more than a neoconservative conspiracy. Instead, Habermas viewed the Holocaust as an unprecedented event, wherein a regime dismantled democratic institutions and orchestrated an institutional mass murder of millions of people. Thus, it defied adequate representation or narrative treatment comparable to other historical phenomena. In addition, it was a unique event in terms of its relationship to

[231] Chung and Martin, "We Take Over the Guilt of the Fathers," 247.
[232] Burkhard Bilger, *Fatherland: A Memoir of War, Conscience, and Family Secrets* (New York: Random House, 2023), 8.
[233] Bilger, *Fatherland*, 21.

Germany, which made the subsequent guilt a distinctive aspect of the German legacy. This legacy, in Habermas's opinion, imposed a historical responsibility on Germans, demanding continual rethinking that transformed the event into the foundation of the modern German identity. He argued that the door to the past could not be shut, since there was a cross-generational demand and an obligation for Germans to assume liability for the acts of the perpetrator generation. Habermas emphasized, "We in Germany have – even if no one else any longer assumes it – to keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered by German hands."[234]

In many cases, no one shouldered the memory of Nazism more than the third generation of descendants. The German grandchildren of World War II, known as the "Kriegsenkel," unraveled the emotional attachments within their families and explored the lives and legacies of their relatives. While relishing in prosperity, access to education, and the peace and stability of West Germany, many grappled with the burdens of their families, where their private recollections diverged from public commemoration. The increased number of opportunities due to Germany's international position and the liberalization at the domestic level contributed to heightened levels of confidence. The third generation recognized that they could facilitate reconciliation between past memories and future expectations, between their grandparents and themselves, and attempt to break free from the constraints of a suppressed German consciousness. They aspired to not only reclaim Germany's humane orientation but also to uncover the truth about their personal histories. Alexandra Senfft, born in 1961 as the granddaughter of Hanns Ludin, the German ambassador to Slovakia, emphasized the importance of confronting family stories for the health of German society and ensuring that history did not

[234] LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," 97.

repeat itself. Her mother raised her to believe that her father was “a good Nazi,” which sacrificed reality in favor of denial. The thought of opposing her family and researching the past evoked feelings of fear and uncertainty, but Alexandra stressed, "If I had continued to remain oblivious and silent about my grandfather's crimes, I would have become complicit myself, perhaps without even being aware of it."[235]

While Habermas described the influence of the Holocaust on national consciousness, it also defined the individual identities of the third generation. Frustrated at being consumed by the past, feeling as though their identities were inescapably intertwined with the lives of their grandparents, many members of the third generation issued aggressive demands for people to remember the past. Rainer Höss, born in 1965 as the grandson of Rudolf Höss, the longest-serving commandant of Auschwitz, described, "I'm ashamed too, of course, for what my family, my grandfather, did to thousands of other families. "So, you ask yourself, they had to die. I'm alive. Why am I alive? To carry this guilt, this burden, to try to come to terms with it.”[236] The inheritance of a 30-kg chest adorned with SS emblems and swastikas spawned research into his family history. This included the examination of 2100 pages of unpublished records, detailed depictions of scenes of mass extermination, and even Rudolf Höss’s cold-blooded, posthumous memoir. The images lingered in his consciousness and motivated him to take a stance against those who remained implicit after the war, announcing, “I want to hold a mirror up to them and make them look at themselves.”[237] Rainer became active in Holocaust education and dedicated

[235] Kirsten Grieshaber, “Germans delve into sins of Nazi grandparents,” NBC News, The Associated Press, May 14, 2011. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna43033872.
[236] Frances Cronin, “Nazi legacy: The troubled descendants, BBC News, BBC News Services, May 23, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18120890.
[237] Rainer HöB, “My Nazi family,” Exberliner, Berlin Media Group, May 6, 2014, https://www.exberliner.com/berlin/an-auschwitz-heritage/

his life to teaching the evils of National Socialism. However, his tactics were not always the most appropriate, as the police have convicted him for threats and assault.

Anna Rasmus, born in 1960 as the granddaughter of a man who Aryanized a Jewish business, also condemned the older generations. When President Gustav Heinemann promoted history competitions among the younger generations in the early 1970s, Rasmus wrote an essay for the national contest, which evolved into her life's work.[238] After researching the experiences of her hometown Passau during World War II, she published her findings in two memoirs, *Against the Stream* and *Out of Passau: Leaving a City Hitler Called Home*. In these works, Rasmus revisited the crimes perpetrated in her German hometown and demanded the older generation remember what happened during the "forgotten" years of Nazi rule when the majority of Passau supported the Nazis. Rasmus did not shy away from controversy, as she exposed the complicity of the Catholic Church and filed a lawsuit against the Passau government for restricting her access to the archives. Despite being branded "The Witch of Passau" and the "Nasty Girl," she remained committed to her pursuit and vowed, "I won't rest until I see at least some of the people responsible for these atrocities apologize to their victims."[239]

Similarly, Silvia Foti, born in 1961 as the granddaughter of Jonas Noreika, a district chief in Lithuania, could not detach herself from the past. Although she never met her grandfather, his presence overshadowed her childhood, and the aura of his perceived heroism had been transmitted through generations. Once Foti learned the truth about his role in Lithuania, where he had "ordered Jewish men to exhume the Lithuanian martyrs, wash their bodies, and lick their

[238] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past,* 24.
[239] Alan L. Berger, *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 286.

decayed wounds," she could no longer ignore the stifling emotions within her family.[240] Her anger surged towards her grandfather for his crimes, her grandmother for feeding her propaganda, and Lithuania for perpetuating a positive image of a murderer, even going so far as to name street signs and elementary schools in his honor. Foti committed her life to research, refusing to stop despite a series of personal setbacks: accumulating debt from two graduate degrees, growing estranged from her daughter and husband, and suffering a heart attack that landed her in the hospital for several weeks. Regardless of what she lost in the process, she insisted, "We must face our grandparents' misdeeds. It is time."[241]

In their fervor to distinguish themselves from the past, individuals such as Höss, Rasmus, and Foti often resorted to extreme measures. The way they handled their emotions struck many as inappropriate, raising questions about their true intentions. However, by centering the conversation around the motivations of these descendants, whether an attempt at redemption and validation, exploitation, or an act of genuine remorse and reflection, it neglects the broader social context and detracts from the victims' experience. These are also matters of speculation since it is impossible to understand the exact incentives behind individual reactions to historical events. Rather, it is more important to remain sensitive to the issues at hand and seek a middle ground. It is helpful to acknowledge the pain endured by the victims while also recognizing the complexities of intergenerational guilt.

The responses of the third generation, alongside the Historian's Debate, illustrate how one's engagement with the past influences the construction of the present and the future. The Historikerstreit did not question the validity of the Holocaust but focused on its interpretation.

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[240] Silvia Foti, *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered my Grandfather was a War Criminal* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011), 310.
[241] Foti, *The Nazi's Granddaughter*, 324.

This made the Holocaust open to rational challenge, which "transformed it from a constraint that could only be obeyed or transgressed to one that could be investigated scientifically."[242] By the late 1980s, the majority of West Germans believed that the debate should be put to rest, yet divisions persisted on what this meant in practice. Many yearned to end the stigmatization and criminalization of German history by accepting Germany as a normal nation—a progressive state that had learned from its history and devoted itself to the rule of law.[243] They envisioned Germany on the cusp of becoming a world power again and longed to shed the Nazi burden and the postwar shackles imposed by the Allied powers. However, the understanding of National Socialism and one's involvement in the events from 1933 to 1945 had matured since the end of the war. In 1988, President Philipp Jenninger delivered a speech on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht that resulted in his resignation from office, reflecting the people's heightened awareness of their relationship to Nazi history.[244] On the surface, the speech offered an unexceptional recitation of Germany's past, yet the international community, the West German press, and a large segment of the public stressed portions of his speech where he excused German indifference to Jewish suffering and validated the different reasons why average Germans expressed enthusiasm for National Socialism. These sentiments made German complicity and conduct during the war sound reasonable, and it portrayed Germans, in a sense, as "collectively good."[245] Jenninger tried to create a common history that all parties could agree upon, but the study of history remained a controversial process in West Germany. Even if Jenninger did not commit any factual errors, the way he manipulated his words echoed the

[242] LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," 933.
[243] Philipp Felix Lutz, "Evolution and Normalization: Historical Consciousness in Germany," *German Politics & Society* 30, no. 3 (2012): 42-43.
[244] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 100.
[245] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 102.

manipulation of history that produced Hitler and propelled him into power. This ongoing battle over the "right" way to remember indicated that history stood at the forefront of German memory and that the people could acknowledge the centrality of the Holocaust.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and Germany faced the challenge of addressing not only the social, political, and economic considerations of a unified state but also how a unified state would deal with the legacy of its past. The uncertainties of unification overshadowed many ideas of remembrance, but the nation worked to bridge its divided memory and open the archives of experiences to incorporate them into an overriding national narrative. The Western government and its people integrated the East into the West German traditions of commemoration, which involved an examination of Nazi crimes and years of public debates with shifting opinions on the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust.[246] According to Mary Fulbrook, a professor of German History, "With the end of political division, the nation is becoming an everyday reality; normality is resuming;… the completion of unity offers Germans the possibility of reconciliation with themselves… the pragmatic Germans have thus been given a double chance."[247] However, using this second chance, many advocated for a "Schlubstrich," a moving-on point that intensified normalization and emphasized a forward-looking approach. Although Germany experienced a public reassessment of Nazism, where accountability took center stage, reminders of the past and the way people opted to remember resurfaced.[248]

Similarly to the 1980s, public debates dominated the 1990s. In 1991, historiography and academic research on National Socialism became more widespread, yet 53% of the public

[246] Mark A. Wolfgram, "The Legacies of Memory: The Third Reich in Unified Germany," *German Politics & Society* 21, no. 3 (2003): 90.
[247] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 9.
[248] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*.

reflected a preference for closing the door on the past.[249] Frustrated over the continuous blame placed on them, the people argued for the Nazi crimes to be put into perspective, reminiscent of the Historians' Debate and the views expressed by Nolte. Chancellor Helmut Kohl endorsed this vision, as he aimed to prioritize the future role of Germany as a united nation and to expand the realm of liberal and democratic ideologies. He spoke in Israel about the decreased burden of guilt on his generation, equated Nazism with East German communism, and promoted the remembrance of German suffering.[250] The rhetoric of German victimization, a consistent theme since 1945, continued to center around the bombing of German cities and the expulsion of German citizens from former territories in the East. Notably, 36% of all Germans believed that the expulsion of Germans from the Eastern Front equaled as great a crime against humanity as the Holocaust.[251] On an official level, Kohl recognized German victims in 1993 with the renovation of the *Neue Wache* Memorial, a central memorial of the FRG to the victims of war, tyranny, and the rule of violence. Although Kohl described the monument as "an important symbol of reunited Germany and the free democratic system of our constitution, which affirms the dignity, value, and rights of each citizen," its primary intent served to honor the German victims of World War II.[252] Many protestors argued that the statue failed to differentiate between victims and perpetrators, yet Kohl received positive feedback, as the people took pride in carving out space in history for the German experience.

In 2002, German social psychologist Harald Welzer published the results of his decade-long study titled "Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi," which explored German subjectivity three

[249] Lutz, "Evolution and Normalization: Historical Consciousness in Germany," 49.
[250] Mary N. Hampton and Douglas C. Peifer, "Reordering German Identity: Memory Sites and Foreign Policy," *German Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (2007): 380.
[251] Moeller, "War Stories."
[252] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past.*

generations after the end of World War II. Welzer addressed the theme of German victimization by using a sample of third-generation Germans. Despite some members of the 3G criticizing their grandparents, he found that others tended to heroize the first generation through a retroactive and idealized reconstruction of the past: "That my grandfather should have participated in these things, that is beyond my imagination."[253] Similarly to how the government embellished the truth to present itself in a specific way, the third generation upheld myths of memory to exert control and autonomy over both their sense of self and how others viewed them and their actions. They could recognize the criminal nature of the Nazi system and the Holocaust as an unparalleled crime, but registering historical events became different when talking about one's personal history. Welzer described how the relationship descendants have formed with their ancestors through socialization and time together is retroactively applied to earlier periods within the family, where ties of family loyalty prohibited people from seeing their loved ones as part of the perpetrator generation. Even with more academic knowledge about the details of persecution, there was a tendency to uphold the moral integrity of their grandparents and highlight the tragedies experienced by their families. According to Welzer, there existed a "subjective need to assign one's grandfather or grandmother the role of the 'good' German in everyday life under the Nazis."[254] This phenomenon, coined by Welzer as 'cumulative heroization,' demonstrated that there is an opposition between loving one's family and acknowledging their role in history.

Uli Sonntag, born in 1957 as the grandson of Otto Sontag, denied any accusations of his grandfather being anti-Semitic. He deflected from conversations of persecution, preferring to discuss the spirit of nature and rebirth embedded in the Nazi ideology. He absolved his

[253] Rainer Schulze, "Memory in German History: Fragmented Noises or Meaningful Voices of the Past,?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004): 641.
[254] Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education," 298.

grandfather of responsibility by qualifying his decisions, expressing that he would likely succumb to similar outcomes due to his aversion to confrontation and willingness to conform.[255] Similarly, Nele, Lena, and Lotte, the grandchildren of Veit Harlan, did not understand the controversy surrounding their grandfather. They found his films to be well-told and deserving of greater appreciation within the public sphere. They also defended their grandfather by asserting that he had Jewish friends and that his choice of subject matter did not reflect his true feelings but rather aligned with popular opinion and the expectations of the Third Reich.[256] This strategy of denial extended to their grandmother Kristina Söderbaum, the lead in *Jud Süss*, as they did not condemn her for seizing an opportunity to perform for a renowned director.[257] While they struggled to comprehend the enduring impact of the name "Harlan," they exuded pride over the success of their grandparents. Other grandchildren also protected their families but adopted a different strategy, avoiding the topic of World War II altogether. Benita Ludin, the granddaughter of Hanns Ludin, and Stefan Quandt, the grandson of Günther Quandt, the owner of BMW, who employed forced laborers, saw no value in investigating the crimes of the Holocaust. For Benita, her grandfather "simply lived and did things," performing a job to the best of his ability. For Quandt, he believed his grandfather's "life's work" justified his crimes, ending the conversation on that note and redirecting attention to other matters.[258] He also disliked when people assumed his family was "dirty" or that their money came from dishonest sources.

In addition to making excuses for their grandparents, the third generation also centered the conversation on their losses. Postdoctoral researcher Tiia Sahrakorpi explains how stories

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[255] Rosenthal, *The Holocaust in Three Generations*.
[256] Moeller, *Harlan – In the Shadow of Jud Süss*.
[257] Moeller, *Harlan – In the Shadow of Jud Süss*.
[258] *2 or 3 Things I Know About Him*, Malte Ludin; Stefan and Gabriele Quandt, interview by WirtscharftsWochhe, *You feel horrible and ashamed*, WiWo, September 28, 2011.

concerning family life in Nazi Germany demonstrate the power of exclusion since authors can omit or embellish details to present their stories in a certain light. Many individuals depicted themselves as victims of war by highlighting their experiences of suffering, whether from hunger, disease, relocation, or death.[259] For example, Eluned Gramich, born in 1989 as the granddaughter of a Nazi party member in the Sudetenland, recounted the story of her grandmother's expulsion from her homeland in the east, writing, "Her words evoke even darker images: coal wagons, lice, rotten turnips, armed soldiers, the Czech partisans who stole 'everything.'"[260] Gramich did not believe in carrying guilt as a member of the third generation and filtered history through the perspective of seeing her mother's childhood trauma explode into the present. Her act of remembering involved the use of expellee memoirs, where she protected her family from the horrors of war by prioritizing the experiences of ordinary Germans over those persecuted.

While German citizens projected themselves as victims, the public sphere challenged their perception of history. On March 1, 1994, the premiere of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* captivated millions of German viewers.[261] At the time, the nation had experienced a decreased interest in the past, since individuals believed that attention to the Third Reich should dissipate over time. The number of visitors to concentration camps had dwindled, and many people adopted complacent attitudes towards the increase in right-wing extremism. However, *Schindler's List* disrupted this trend by reviving interest in the Holocaust.[262] The film highlighted the truth about the silent majority who remained indifferent to the lives of the Jewish

[259] Sahrakorpi, "Memory, Family, and the Self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives," 89.
[260] Eluned Gramich, "A Burden of Memory: Inherited Trauma, Fiction, and the German Expulsions," *Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society* 3, (2019): 27.
[261] Rick Atkinson, "Germany Views Its Past Through 'Schindler's List,'" The Washington Post, The Washington Post Company, May 3, 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/review97/germany.html.
[262] Atkinson, "Germany Views Its Past Through 'Schindler's List.'"

people, which countered the notion that only a few prominent figures deserved blame for the Nazi era. It also showcased the rarity of individuals like Schindler, who risked their lives to help those in need. And for those that did, postwar Germany seldom commemorated their courage. Oscar Schindler himself spent the last sixteen years of his life broke and alone.

The public sphere continued to confront the narrative of victimization after the impact of *Schindler's List*, challenging individuals to dispel the myth of ignorance and replace an abstract understanding of Nazi crimes with a fuller sense of the Nazi state. On March 5, 1995, the 'War of Annihilation – Crimes of the Wehrmacht' Exhibit in Hamburg debunked the fallacy of innocent Germans being seduced by Hitler.[263] The exhibit widened the notion of what it meant to be a perpetrator by presenting over 1000 documents and photographs that implicated thousands of ordinary German citizens in the crimes of the war between 1941 and 1944. It connected the regular German army on the Eastern Front with knowledge of the mass violence and extermination of the Jewish people and demonstrated the willingness of officers and soldiers to cooperate with the Einzatzgruppen. While most of the public audience felt moved by the exhibit, and politicians and intellectuals flocked to the site, it also triggered widespread reactions of shame by exposing private war experiences within a public exhibition space.[264] The evidence of war crimes committed by ordinary Germans transformed the collective memory of postwar Germany. It visualized deeds long excluded from private and public accounts, shattering decades-long declarations of "not knowing" and challenging the moral foundation of the new German identity. It also disproved the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht," a negationist notion within Germany's collective memory that sought to absolve the German armed forces and, by

[263] Axel Bangert, "Shameful Exposures: Ordinary Germans and the Nazi Past in Contemporary German Documentary Film," *New German Critique*, no. 123 (2014): 163.
[264] Bangert, "Shameful Exposures: Ordinary Germans and the Nazi Past," 165.

extension, the German populace, from involvement in the Holocaust and other war crimes.[265] This shared narrative of innocence, which often portrayed ordinary Germans as victims of the Nazi regime, had been a cornerstone of the memory politics of postwar West Germany.

Chris Kraus, born in 1963 as the grandson of an SS major, reflected on the reluctance of Germans to acknowledge their involvement. He observed that growing up in Germany in the 1980s, "people preferred to see the Nazis as monsters who were nothing like the rest of the population," thereby absolving people of guilt and painting them as staunch anti-Nazis.[266] This phenomenon was particularly prevalent within the family unit, as Kraus described, "Throughout Germany, it's like the Nazis came down from Mars: most people say that their grandparents were excellent people, anti-Nazis and that Hitler, Himmler, and four psychopaths were to blame for everything."[267] However, by presenting the Wehrmacht and ordinary citizens in a light that showcased their human dimensions – individuals capable of love and humor – yet complicit in heinous crimes, the exhibit revealed the mundanity of perpetration. It confronted people with the idea that human nature can exhibit beauty in the face of horror and that the capability for both good and evil, innocence and guilt, resides within ordinary people. This realization threatened individual identities by challenging them to reconcile these human complexities with the reality of genocide. The backlash to the exhibition led to its closure, yet its impact symbolized a critical development in Germany's ongoing reckoning with its past. It penetrated German public consciousness and catalyzed a deeper reflection on the nature of guilt, memory, and identity.

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[265] Narayan J. Saviskas, *"The Clean Wehrmacht: Myths about German War Crimes Then and Now,"* (Bachelor of Arts Thesis, Georgia Southern University, 2020), 2.
[266] Jacinto Antón, "The horror of discovering that your grandfather was an SS officer who personally murdered Jews during the Holocaust," El País, Ediciones El País, September 26, 2022, https://english.elpais.com/culture/2022-09-27/the-horror-of-discovering-that-your-grandfather-was-an-ss-officer-who-personally-murdered-jews-during-the-holocaust.html.
[267] Antón, "The horror of discovering that your grandfather was an SS officer."

The release of Viktor Klemperer's wartime diary, *I Shall Bear Witness*, coincided with the Wehrmacht Exhibition in late 1995. Klemperer, a German-Jewish academic, detailed his life under the Third Reich and depicted the escalating discrimination against, and exclusion, of Germany's Jewish population. His portrayal intertwined elements of hope with cycles of grief and documented a sense of crisis for Germany at large but with Jews in a position of heightened vulnerability.[268] In contrast to previous histories, Klemperer documented the story of a victim, and his writing allowed readers to better understand individuals rather than systems and to see ideology in context rather than an abstract notion. He explored the mentality and psyche of Germans, illustrating that although some individuals extended kindness and solidarity towards Jews, others orchestrated or condoned acts of mass violence. Crucially, Klemperer revealed that perpetrators of discrimination and violence often blended into society, manifesting their prejudices through everyday actions.[269] He shed light on the banality of evil and demonstrated the efforts people took to conceal the truth.

One year later, in 1996, Harvard historian Daniel Goldhagen continued to indict the German people with the publication of his book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. He denigrated Germany for its antisemitic traditions and expanded the notion of the perpetrator to include almost all Germans in the Third Reich, believing that anyone in the right conditions could be responsible for unspeakable actions.[270] In addition, Goldhagen argued that guilt could not be traced to a singular individual since the Nazi crimes implicated the entirety of the population. The German people had lost all sense of morality and honor in their decision to uplift Hitler and support his policies. The abstractness of extermination and participation rendered everyone part

[268] Viktor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941* (New York: Random House, 1995); Viktor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1941-1945* (New York: Random House, 1995).
[269] Viktor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1941-1945*.
[270] Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

of the killing process, and as a collective, Germans erased their moral and judicial personhood in overseeing the process of institutional destruction.[271] The book became an instant best-seller, sparking indignation, provoking the public, and receiving both acclamation and condemnation. However, perhaps its greatest effect lay in its connection to Klemperer in forcing people to reckon with the reality of human nature. While Klemperer detailed 'ordinary Germans' on the home front, Goldhagen focused on 'ordinary Germans' on the killing front.[272] The way he represented millions of Germans as embodying Nazi ideology shocked the public and triggered public interest in the relationship between German history and its present identity.

Influenced by public discourse, the third generation of Nazis explored their personal histories. Individuals remained cognizant of the emotional impact on their parents but recognized that their families could no longer hide behind myths of innocence. In addition, while they valued the integrity of the family unit, they aimed to demystify the past of their families by acknowledging that their ancestors knew something or, at the very least, supported the regime to some degree. Derek Niemann, born in 1961 as the grandson of Karl Niemann, an administrative member of the SS at Dachau, understood that "most of those who carried out the crimes were not the inherently evil ogres we wanted to believe they were;" instead, they were ordinary people driven to insanity.[273] Even if his grandfather did not commit crimes against humanity, he still contributed to a culture of violence. Despite his family's silence, Derek explored family photographs and archival materials, which exposed the minimal consequences faced by former Nazis in the postwar era. Moreover, he uncovered that a substantial portion of the German population bore guilt beyond being mere followers. Similarly, Martin Davidson, born in 1960 as

[271] Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.
[272] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past,* 138.
[273] Niemann, *A Nazi in the Family*, 248.

the grandson of Bruno Langbehn, a captain of the SS, viewed the story of his grandfather, "so anonymous and ordinary in every other respect, [as playing] at least one useful role—as a cautionary tale, a living example of the harm even little men can achieve in times of historical madness."[274] As a child, his grandfather placed Germany's military pursuits in context with the larger European struggles for imperial expansion. However, in 1992, Martin discovered that "no matter how many lies and excuses he must have told both in his denazification papers and to himself, the final truth about Bruno is blunt and horrifying."[275] It demonstrated the predatory instinct of himself and his comrades, individuals who used self-interest and idealism as an excuse to "prey on others, no matter the cost."[276]

Géraldine Schwarz also exposed the nature of the "Mitläufer," the people who "followed the current" during the war. Schwarz, born in 1974, knew firsthand that her grandfather, Karl Schwarz, had joined the Nazi Party, but he had not occupied an official position within the Third Reich. However, his decision to Aryanize Jewish businesses made him an accomplice to the crimes of Nazism. While she acknowledged that "there were certainly many crueler profiteers than [her] grandfather," she still saw him as an opportunist who exploited and capitalized on the downfall of the Jewish people for his benefit.[277] His lack of guilt and unwavering support for National Socialism allowed him to neglect responsibility for his crimes, and Géraldine noted, "There was little empathy when it came to the Jews; it was shocking."[278] Despite straining the relationship with her family, Géraldine did not regret unearthing the shadows in her family's closet. She saw herself as part of a broader movement to weave together family memories with

[274] Martin Davidson, *The Perfect Nazi: Uncovering my Grandfather's Secret Past* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011), 255.
[275] Davidson, *The Perfect Nazi*, 253.
[276] Davidson, *The Perfect Nazi*, 145.
[277] Schwarz, *Those Who Forget*, 49.
[278] Schwarz, *Those Who Forget*, 182.

the history of National Socialism. Her exposé on the collective guilt of ordinary people broadened the definition of "perpetrator" and showcased the different people and backgrounds of those involved in the crimes of the past.

The prominence of personal stories pushed the rituals of accountability to center stage. However, achieving collective reconciliation still demanded a greater exploration of family secrets, memories, and states of mind. After the Historians' Debate, the people displayed an increased readiness to acknowledge the scope of Germany's role in the war. This meant that they focused less on admitting the crimes of the Nazi period and more on how the Holocaust should be remembered, working to integrate Holocaust survivors and their descendants in the shaping of German memory culture. According to political scientist Mark Wolfgram, the public blended memory into policy, emphasized sites of commemoration, and endorsed a "growing inclusiveness of various victims into German discussions about Nazi crimes."[279] These sentiments translated into direct action, as the government designated the day January 27 to be an annual day of commemoration for the victims of National Socialism. In addition, on January 21, 1997, the German and Czech Heads of State and Foreign Ministers signed the German-Czech Reconciliation Declaration, where Germany accepted responsibility for the injustices done to Czechs during the Third Reich.[280]

Still, despite acknowledging Germany as the place of origin of the Holocaust, an understanding of the shame and responsibilities associated with this burden did not always translate into an admission of guilt. The 'Crimes of the Wehrmacht' exhibition continued to receive criticism as it spread to different cities, and the nation experienced an increase in right-wing extremism, with the NPD winning 12.9% of the popular vote in the Saxony-Anhalt

[279] Wolfgram, "The Legacies of Memory: The Third Reich in Unified Germany," 93.
[280] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, xx.

region.[281] In 1998, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder became the first German chancellor to be born after World War II, and therefore bared no personal memory of the conflict. He listened to the concerns of the public, who advocated for the Nazi crimes to be put in perspective, and resented the fact that contemporary Germans continued to be held responsible for events of the past. While he established a compensation fund for forced slave laborers exploited during the Nazi era and stressed the historical responsibility to Poland and Israel, he also absolved subsequent generations of Germans of personal guilt. By asserting that Germany was no longer inferior to other nations on the international stage, he declared his desire to draw a line under the past.[282]

German writer Martin Walser also attempted to mitigate German guilt by reflecting on the challenges of living with a German name and background. When he accepted an award at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 1998, he condemned the "Holocaust industry," claiming that the government and international community used Auschwitz as a routine threat against today's new generation of Germans. Walser perceived this instrumentalization of the Holocaust as the "incessant presentation of our disgrace."[283] He did not intend to trivialize the significance of the Holocaust, but he objected to over-exposure to the Nazi past in the media and argued that enough time had passed, where Germans needed to be allowed to move on from their guilt. Walser claimed, "I would like to understand why, in this decade, the past is being presented as never before."[284] Ignatz Bubis, the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, responded by calling Walser's statements "mental arson." He contended that his sentiments encouraged anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi activities in Germany by contributing to an ideology of intellectual

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[281] Hans-George Betz, "Politics of Resentment: Right-Wing Radicalism in West Germany," *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (1990): 46.
[282] Eric Langenbacher, "Does Collective Memory Still Influence German Foreign Policy," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2014): 60; Hampton and Peifer, "Reordering German Identity."
[283] Andrea Hepworth, "From Survivor to Fourth-Generation Memory: Literal and Discursive Sites of Memory in Post-dictatorship Germany and Spain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 1 (2019): 143.
[284] Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past,* 1.

nationalism, which contained a subconscious element of anti-Semitism.[285] However, the public remained divided. Some feared that Walser's speech provoked right-wing extremists, while others appreciated his honesty. They viewed Walser's sense of "permission" in allowing them to leave the past behind as an opportunity for Germany to break free from being punished and demonized.

Walser and Bubis reinforced questions that reverberated throughout the decade: what is the future role of Germany, and where does the country stand in responding to its past? What remains unresolved, and what defines the new "normal" for Germany?[286] In the immediate postwar period, the Allied powers only permitted Germany to have a military force for defense purposes. However, in the 1990s, approaching the memory of fascism and the Holocaust encouraged a rights-based approach to democracy that emphasized the need to safeguard the fundamental protections of liberalism. Germans accepted their moral duty to uphold democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms, and the sentiment of "never again Auschwitz" replaced the earlier mentality of "never again war." Germany exercised power in foreign policy, diversifying the numerical and geographical scope of military deployments outside its borders. For example, the Federal Parliament sent the armed forces to participate in the NATO special Allied force in Kosovo in 1998 and deployed 3900 German troops to Afghanistan in 'Operation Ending Freedom' in November 2001.[287] These actions showcased Germany's military strength and reinforced its understanding of history. While working alongside the Allies in the name of democracy, Germany addressed the past by affording victims more agency and expanding access to information about National Socialism. Although many argued to recognize Germans in the

[285] David A. Kamenetzky, "The Debate on National Identity and the Martin Walser Speech: How Does Germany Reckon with its Past?," *SAIS Review* 19, no. 2 (1999): 258.
[286] Hampton and Peifer, "Reordering German Identity," 387.
[287] Hampton and Peifer, "Reordering German Identity," 384-385.

memory of the victims, these conversations did not run contrary to the topic of the Holocaust and the Jewish experience. Rather, they contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the past, where people represented history from different angles. This approach avoided a hierarchy of victims and had Germans accept the past as encompassing both collective injustice and the acknowledgment of the darker chapters in their history and memory.[288]

For the third generation, Frances Cronin of BBC News remarks that "it's a very heavy burden having someone like that in the family, so close. It's something that just keeps hanging over you."[289] Their connection to history often drove them to pursue the truth with a level of intensity higher than that of most West Germans in the 1980s and 1990s. However, they also began to move away from a mono-dimensional perspective and to view history, and their loved ones, with a more nuanced understanding. Linda Kistler, born in 1960 as the granddaughter of Boris Kinstler, a member of the Arajs *Kommando* in Latvia who received a war cross for his role in the murder of Jewish civilians, grappled with the paradox of wanting to distance herself from history but also feeling compelled to document it. She conveyed how the name “Kinstler” followed her throughout life, even after migrating to the United States. This feeling of being tethered to something and someone larger than herself incentivized Kinstler to explore her family’s history, becoming infatuated with the characters of the Arajs unit.[290] She visited locations frequented by her grandfather, scoured through documents that traced his life, and studied his memoirs, which approached the events of National Socialism in abstract and objective terms. Despite harboring no doubts about the complicity of her grandfather, Kinstler also acknowledged the complexity of his character. She recognized that two qualities could be

[288] Olick, “What Does It Mean to Normalize the past?”
[289] Cronin, “Nazi legacy: The troubled descendants.”
[290] Linda Kinstler, *Come to This Court and Cry: How the Holocaust Ends* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).

true at the same time: he might have witnessed and even engaged in massacres, while also saving and protecting Jewish people at other moments. Kinstler refrained from making excuses for her grandfather and expressed frustration at his inability to atone for his mistakes. Still, she did not banish positive memories of him from her consciousness; instead, she aimed to conduct a deeper analysis of his character and the historical context in which he lived.[291]

There was also a distinction between the learned legacy of the Third Reich, acquired through textbooks, memorials, and public policies, and the lived history inherited through family narratives and experiences. Since the end of World War II, public institutions made a concerted effort to educate younger generations about the events of National Socialism. However, factual information did not always facilitate emotional understanding. Despite being aware of the past at an abstract level, children may not have felt inspired to investigate their family histories or threaten the conspiracy of silence. Discrepancies also arose when children encountered different narratives of history at school compared to what they heard at home. Roger Frie, born in 1965 as the grandson of a member of the National Socialist Motor Corps (NSKK), a paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party, reflected on the personal dimension of Holocaust education. He articulated how "history is conferred on us before we are born. Our identities are historically and culturally grounded, and in this sense, unbidden, a function of the narratives, traditions, and language that we inherit through family and community."[292] The felt awareness of his grandfather's and parents' immediate struggles, transmitted through intergenerational conversations, felt more authentic than the sanitized version of history communicated in schools and by the government. However, confronted with the tension between his familial stories and

[291] Kinstler, *Come to This Court and Cry.*
[292] Roger Frie, *Not in My Family: German Memory and Responsibility after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 160.

the historical record, Frie endeavored to reconcile the gaps in memory. Through his research, he realized that much remained unresolved within private memory, as the shame and struggles endured by his parents, and their inability to discuss the past, had created a sense of emotional detachment. This allowed him to use the trauma of his family to deflect feelings of inherited guilt and responsibility, where he ignored questions about their involvement in the war and abstained from uncomfortable conversations.

Yet, his memories could not be isolated from the contemporary social and political landscape. For Frie, the dynamic nature of German society in the 1980s and 1990s encouraged him to engage with history and confront the cognitive dissonance within his family. He discovered that contrary to the tales of German victory recited by his parents, "given the enormity of the genocide, the scale of the killing, and the depth of the horror, virtually every German with an awareness of the outside world must have known about the 'Final Solution' on some level."[293] Specifically, his grandfather attended Nazi institutions and likely participated in Kristallnacht. This revelation forced him to juxtapose the image of his grandfather as 100% antisemitic with the energy and love through which his grandfather doted on him as a child. His research also illuminated the wartime experiences of his mother, dominated by the threat of Allied bombings and the loss of her home. This influx of information was difficult to process and compelled Frie to reconcile the inconsistencies of German culture and history. While he recognized the depth of the anxieties, shame, and silence that pervaded his family, he admitted that their relationships and memories are integral to his identity. Though he did not hold the third generation responsible for past events, he extended the themes of his research to a broader call to action, arguing that they bear a responsibility to grapple with memory and avoid facile

[293] Frie, *Not in My Family*, 148.

remembering.[294] These revelations prompted Frie to relinquish the shame associated with being German and strive to develop a moral compass for understanding German memories in tandem with the suffering of the Jewish people. Despite an apparent disconnect between the lives of survivors and Germans, a connection exists between these two groups and their descendants. The identities of both populations are defined by the legacy of the Holocaust, where the aftermath of mass murder has created a shared foundation for self-understanding. Despite being depicted in contrast with one another, Frie advocated for a more nuanced appreciation of both sides and the impact of the Nazi era on their lives and experiences.

Rachel Seiffert, born in 1971, also felt conflicted by her positive memories of the perpetrator generation. Her grandparents occupied modest roles within the Nazi hierarchy—her grandfather serving as a Waffen-SS doctor and her grandmother supervising a party-funded nursery in Bavaria—yet they supported the regime until the end. Faced with knowledge about her family's background since childhood, Rachel acknowledged that the wartime period required an ongoing re-examination as she navigated the legacy of her ancestors and the mundanity behind their involvement. Her sentiments toward her family were complicated, reflecting, "On the one hand, I knew this very uncomfortable series of facts about my grandparents and their political beliefs, but then I also had my family and this incredible positivity."[295] She recalled her grandmother as a tender and loving figure, while "growing up knowing [her grandfather's] watercolors and hearing his jokes, and of his love for the heathland," demonstrating the humanity of their characters despite their affiliation with the Nazi Party.[296] Rachel struggled to differentiate

[294] Frie, *Not in My Family*, 205.
[295] Rachel Seiffert, "Rachel Seiffert: 'My Grandparents were Nazis. I can't remember a time when I didn't know this," The Guardian, Guardian News & Media Limited, May 27, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/27/grandparents-nazis-inspired-my-novel-about-holocaust.
[296] Seiffert, "Rachel Seiffert: 'My Grandparents were Nazis."

between the goodness she had experienced in her loved ones and the awareness of the harm they caused during the war. There was a desire to preserve the positive aspects of their relationship but also a need to condemn the wrongdoing. Seeking to resolve the ambiguity, Rachel did not claim redemption for her grandparents but endeavored to empathize with their motivations and contextualize their circumstances.

As third-generation Linda Kinstler expressed, "Memory can be a special kind of prison, one from which there can be no easy escape, no path to parole."[297] The German "vergangenheitsbewältigung," or "coming to terms with the past," followed an inconsistent trajectory. The historical period from 1980 to 1999 witnessed the revival of nationalist tendencies and German victimhood, yet the establishment of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin at the turn of the century represented a pivotal moment in the culmination of past initiatives. On January 30, 1989, the Citizens' action group 'Perspective Berlin' called for the construction of a Holocaust Memorial, but their initiatives lost momentum due to widespread disapproval. However, after unification, official national policies declared for professional museology to take over the process of constructing a memorial, beginning a ten-year journey to find the most effective representation of their visions. In 1994, the Berlin Senate and the Federal government launched a design competition for German artists to submit their proposals. Although painter Christine Jackob-Marks won, Chancellor Kohl vetoed her proposal after backlash from political figures, such as the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany.[298] Architect Peter Eisenman won the subsequent competition in 1997, but Kohl and the German Secretary of Culture insisted on numerous modifications throughout the construction process, which Humanities Professor

[297] Kinstler, *Come to This Court and Cry*, 8.
[298] Hepworth, "From Survivor to Fourth-Generation Memory," 141.

Andrea Hepworth describes as "a clear indicator of its political importance for a unified Germany."[299]

The final design, approved in 1999, spanned the length of two football fields, featuring a 'field of remembrance' with 2700 stone pillars of different sizes. This design induced an unsettling atmosphere to transport visitors back in time and make them "feel a lack of identification typically experienced at most memorials."[300] The Bundestag also approved the addition of a museum, information center, and exhibition space to outline the history of the "Final Solution." This sought to provide contextualization and educate visitors by displaying important memories and moments of the Holocaust. In a project that cost over $25 million, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe opened on May 10, 2005, sixty years after the end of the war. Members of the German government, Holocaust survivors, and a new generation of Germans attended the ceremony, which exhibited a collective commitment to preserving the memory of the past.

While West Germany as a nation turned a corner on its approach to the past, the voices of the third generation also surpassed those of the second generation in many regards. They lifted the veil of silence from their families and began to see their identities as distinct from the Nazi period. They embraced their role as the bearers of memory, feeling empowered and motivated to study history and their own families. This process allowed them to educate the younger generations and bring into sharper focus the relationship between shame and identity. Margarete Brinkmann, the granddaughter of supporters of the Nazi regime, described, "All I can do is know them, now who we are, who we were, and learn."[301] Many attempted to piece together the

[299] Hepworth, "From Survivor to Fourth-Generation Memory," 148.
[300] Hepworth, "From Survivor to Fourth-Generation Memory," 105.
[301] Margarete Brinkmann, "Margarete Brinkmann diary," May 9, 1945 – 1992, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, United States Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C., 21.

fragments of their histories using resources such as historical archives, meetings with extended family members, and returning to their ancestors' places of origin. Others turned to seminars, workshops, and therapy sessions, which offered both research guidance and psychological support.[302] Ursula Boger, carrying the legacy of her grandfather Wilhelm Boger, known as the most dreaded torturer at Auschwitz, embarked on a journey of healing through the power of therapy. Her grandfather invented the "Boger swing," a device consisting of an iron bar that hung from chains on the ceiling, where German guards forced naked inmates to stand over the bar while they beat their genitals until they fainted or died. Born in 1970, this emblem of torture threatened Ursula's well-being, as she wrestled with guilt by association. However, in the sanctuary of therapy and group seminars, she confronted the silence consuming her from within.[303] Therapy provided Ursula with the tools and techniques to express her thoughts and navigate the complexity of emotions tied to her legacy.

This therapeutic process reflected a broader movement in Germany, where, throughout the 1990s, there had been a significant increase in the number of psychotherapists in German cities.[304] These services became crucial for the descendants of Nazis since they provided a resource for individuals to grapple with and examine the level of suffering and shame passed down through generations. Therapists specializing in this area addressed a variety of issues, from depression and anxiety to substance abuse and loneliness, challenges that paralyzed even those from middle-class or privileged backgrounds. The rise of therapeutic discourse empowered the third generation of Nazis to dissect their family histories and the impact of those narratives on their identities and experiences. Through this introspection, individuals like Ursula cultivated a

[302] Lina Jakob, "Suffering and liberation in the age of therapy," *Ethnography* 18, no. 4 (2017): 457-458.
[303] Grieshaber, "Germans delve into sins of Nazi grandparents."
[304] Jakob, "Suffering and liberation in the age of therapy," 456.

deeper evaluation of themselves. By investigating the intergenerational transmission of trauma, they abandoned feelings of isolation in favor of a future marked by hope, resilience, and a commitment to a happier, healthier tomorrow.

In addition, individuals benefitted from creative outlets, which enabled them to explore the lives and legacies of their families while also highlighting their own experiences. The use of film was a powerful medium that allowed individuals to grapple with their familial legacies of perpetration and work through the affective afterlives of National Socialism. This mode of reflection represented a departure from the confrontational stance often found in the vaterliteratur of the second generation, where the narrators presented themselves as victims of authoritarianism and used the past to express anger and accuse their parents.[305] Instead, these films offered a more empathetic approach to remembrance, characterized by a desire to mend and strengthen familial bonds rather than rupture them. An example is Claudia von Alemann's 2000 documentary, "Once There Was a Wild Watersprite," where she enlisted the help of her teenage daughter Noemi. The film centers around Ludwilla von Alemann, Claudia's mother, and Noemi's grandmother. Ludwilla and her husband had joined the Nazi Party and continued to admire Hitler and Nazism after the war, rationalizing their racial policies and the extermination of Jewish communities.[306] Noemi felt disappointed at the inability of her grandmother to acknowledge her mistakes, but she was proud of herself for following through with the filmmaking process and interrogating the intricate interplay between family dynamics, memory, guilt, and shame.[307] The process not only provided a path for her family to come together but also enabled Noemi to reclaim agency over her own identity and the extent to which it depended on her connection to a Nazi history.

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[305] Kerstin Mueller Dembling, "Opa Was a Nazi: Family, Memory, and Generational Difference in 2005 Films by Malte Ludin and Jens Schanze," *The German Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 480-481.
[306] Bangert, "Shameful Exposures," 169.
[307] Bangert, "Shameful Exposures," 176.

In 2005, Jens Schanze, born in 1971 as the grandson of an SS officer in Poland, released a documentary "Winter Children–The Silent Generation," where he discussed the legacy of his deceased grandfather with his mother, father, and sisters. Schanze broke with the taboo that prevented people from admitting the support for Nazism within one's own family, as he provided a sympathetic yet critical examination of the past and the difficulty in remembering one's grandfather as a Nazi. He grappled with the guilt of his grandfather but also carved out space to address the suffering endured by his own family, which reflected broader societal trends in embracing the study of history as consisting of diverse perspectives. By investigating his family, Schanze embarked on a cathartic process of working through and liberating himself from the burden of his Nazi past. [308] Still, he did not process his emotions alone but made the construction of his grandfather's story a family project. Schanze fostered an open dialogue with his loved ones to help them identify with and understand individuals and regimes of the past. This exchange facilitated an emotional transformation in the family, which bridged the gap between generations and nurtured a deeper connection to their shared history.

Other individuals have utilized the written word to comprehend their personal histories. Julie Lindahl, whose grandfather served in Hitler's mounted SS horse riding branch, encountered convoluted feelings towards her German heritage. Born in 1997, she exhibited a "love-hate relationship with German culture that permeated [her] home, just as a child can simultaneously love and detest her parents."[309] Her family had funneled away feelings of pain and discomfort, burdening her to bear the shame and "be the guilty one."[310] Despite not understanding what it meant to be the descendant of this suffering, Lindahl felt drawn to the darkness. She conducted

[308] Bangert, "Shameful Exposures," 175.
[309] Julie Lindahl, *The Pendulum: A Granddaughter's Search for Her Family's Forbidden Nazi Past* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 25.
[310] Lindahl, *The Pendulum*, 5.

research in the German and Polish archives, traveled to different towns to establish connections to her family's history, and confronted her grandmother, who concocted lies to defend her husband and falsify the Holocaust. Initially, Lindahl harbored resentment towards her ancestors for their evasion of responsibility and the unresolved trauma transmitted through generations, remarking that "those responsible had shunned responsibility, and the unrecognized victims were their children."[311] Yet, rather than letting anger consume her, she learned to approach history and memory from an analytical perspective. Lindahl distinguished between her genetic lineage and her identity and established a boundary between getting too engulfed in the past and protecting her well-being. She wrote, "These sinister fragments of another time had stayed with us, all because we simply let them."[312] Embracing the larger environment of change and making a conscious decision to free herself from the chokehold of the past, Lindahl departed from traditional forms of reflection. She embraced a forward-looking approach, which involved talking to young people about the legacy of her family and founding a nonprofit to foster dialogue about human nature. Through these efforts, she aimed to enlighten future generations about the dangers of fascism and the importance of confronting hate. Her interest in pedagogy reflected a growing awareness that younger generations need to be informed about the past and recognize how Germany had changed since the end of the war.

Jennifer Teege, born in 1970 as the granddaughter of Amon Göth, the commandant of the Plaszow concentration camp, experienced an entirely different upbringing than Lindahl after being adopted and studying in Israel. Nonetheless, she too was a third-generation descendant of a Nazi who believed that history could provide lessons for the future. At the age of 38, Teege stumbled upon a book in the library, where the author mentioned her childhood and revealed

[311] Lindahl, *The Pendulum*, 98.
[312] Lindahl, *The Pendulum*, 84.

information about her background that she had never known. Teege felt frightened when she recognized the physical similarities between her and her grandfather, and she started to question whether, if they looked alike, perhaps she carried something of him in herself.[313] However, through visits to Poland, encounters with Holocaust survivors, and sessions of therapy, she learned that one does not inherit the "Nazi gene." In contrast to the notion of a predetermined life, everyone is born with a clean slate, responsible for who they are and who they become.[314] Teege emphasized the power of individual choice, asserting that unlike her mother, Monika Hertwig, she did not need to be a victim of her past. If anything, the past served as motivation to set a positive example, preserve human dignity, and live life to the fullest with the virtues of compassion, loyalty, and respect. Teege employed her personal stories to educate others about the Nazi period and speak out against human rights violations and abuses.

Conclusion

"Today's Germans are not the Germans of the past, nor should they be confused with the Germans of the past," and today's Germany is not the Germany of the past, nor should it be confused with the Germany of the past.[315] The nation addressed the crimes of the Wehrmacht, compensated Holocaust victims, sentenced perpetrators, established memorials, and engaged in collective introspection to confront public and private accounts of the past. The inevitable march of time also brought about generational turnover from the World War II period. However, as Germany anchored its society in democratic institutions and rebuilt the nation, the construction

[313] Jennifer Teege, *My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me: A Black Woman Discovers Her Family's Nazi Past* (New York: The Experiment, 2015), 5-6.
[314] Teege, *My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me,* 225-230.
[315] Michael Schuldiner, *Contesting Histories: German and Jewish Americans and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 2011), 224.

of a new national identity could not escape its orientation to the past. The impact and memory of the war and the Holocaust did not diminish with temporal distance but acquired a deeper significance. In addition, history underwent a continual reinterpretation through the interplay of political, cultural, and academic actors, reflected in the struggles over remembrance, the conflict between public life and family loyalty, and individual self-reflection. Over time, the people demystified the reality of National Socialism as the tension between collective and individual memory evolved toward a more critical direction. This shift paralleled the evolution of the nation, characterized by the sustained development of peace and the economic, political, and social stability of West Germany. Despite shifts in public and private sentiments, the omnipresence of the Nazi era continued to draw German people back to their memories and experiences, influencing subsequent generations as they moved forward in time and understanding.

At the opening of the Nuremberg Trials on November 20, 1945, Chief Justice Robert H. Jackson acknowledged the momentous nature of the trial for the world. He declared, "The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated."[316] While his speech referred to the 24 individuals on trial, its essence encapsulated the evils associated with National Socialism, which West Germany sought to address and confront in the aftermath of World War II. In the immediate postwar period from 1945 to 1959, West Germany presented itself as a "reliable nation" that prioritized European integration into the Western community. However, according to Mary Fulbrook, "working through the past was complicated and overlain by pressures for conformity to the new rules of

[316] "'The Grave Responsibility of Justice': Justice Robert H. Jackson's Opening Statement at Nuremberg."

political culture," and the CDU-led government under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer prioritized Westernization and fostered a rhetoric of German victimization.[317] From 1960 to 1979, a new generation challenged the indifference of postwar West Germany. Encouraged by the second generation of Nazi descendants, they felt an urgent obligation to confront the past and draw more radical lessons from the Nazi period. Individuals challenged the structures, policies, and attitudes of the FRG and altered the perception of the Holocaust in West Germany. Finally, the period from 1980 to 1999 experienced a reversal of the trend, returning to conservative policies reminiscent of the immediate postwar era. The calls for "normalization" and a renewed emphasis on German victimization emphasized a forward-focused approach to foreign policy and international affairs. Nonetheless, legacies from the previous generation lingered, and the people acknowledged the Nazi past as a distinct burden and responsibility placed on Germany. Political and collective memory shifted from strategies of concealment and fabrication to active remembrance and reparation, which fostered the rebirth of trust between Germans and the individuals and communities they wronged.

In addition to public acts of commemoration, time also allowed subsequent generations to investigate the private sector of Nazi involvement. Unlike the perpetrator generation, they had nothing to hide but rather a desire to uncover and expose, and they learned to work through their ancestor's role during the Third Reich in a more objective and diligent manner. The responses and attitudes of the 2G and 3G vary depending on the individual and time period since these generations were exposed to different circumstances that affected their views and behaviors. The second generation tended to focus more on how their relationship with their ancestors impacted their own lives, while the third generation approached the past with a more detached lens, often

[317] Fulbrook, *German National Identity*, 233.

striving to construct a comprehensive narrative of their grandparents. Still, although their experiences cannot be synthesized into a single perspective, the two generations have grappled with many of the same questions: can they remain unaffected by the consequences of their ancestors? How do they address the legacy of those ancestors who were neither Nazi criminals nor resistance fighters but somewhere in between, a bystander or follower? How has the authenticity of family memory been compromised by interferences in its transmission? Are they irredeemably stained, destined to think and act in a similar manner mirroring the past? These concerns have motivated the descendants of Nazis to develop a common interest in researching their family histories and integrating past narratives into their lives and identities. Moreover, the reluctance of the first generation to reflect on the past represented a shared source of frustration. However, by endeavoring to empathize with the experiences of both victims and perpetrators, these descendants took over the task of their parents. They engaged in an act of vulnerability that could have jeopardized their life stories but that offered a chance to liberate themselves from the haunting reminders of their legacy. Many devoted their lives to the investigation of their families and preserving the memories of the victims. This process fostered a deeper understanding of their family history, in addition to prompting a critical examination of societal development and growth. It illuminated the path society has taken, highlighted the lessons learned, and illustrated the directions it must pursue for a better future. While the majority today bear no guilt for World War II and the Holocaust, they feel a particular responsibility to ensure that something like it never happens again.

This idea of reflection and accountability is exemplified in both the public and private spheres. In 2020, more than 80 years after Kristallnacht, the government officials of Hamburg returned the Bornplatz Synagogue to the leaders of the Jewish community. Once the largest

synagogue in northern Germany, the Nazis burned it to the ground in 1938. The effort to rebuild the synagogue in the twenty-first century amassed public support after an increase in attacks on the remaining Jews in Germany. This gesture served as a reminder of the community's loss and symbolized a turning point in Jewish-German relations. As Israeli-born entrepreneur Daniel Sheffer expressed, it represented "the victory of justice and Jewish life in Hamburg over the barbarism of the Nazis."[318] Moreover, it demonstrated Germany's commitment to preserving the memory of the Holocaust. This commitment extended beyond restitution and memorials; it permeated educational institutions, public discourse, cultural initiatives, and private conversations. For example, third-generation German, Thomas Edelmann, born in West Germany more than 25 years after the Allies defeated Hitler, discovered as an adult that his grandfather Willi Edelmann Aryanized a Jewish business in southern Germany.[319] To educate his family on the significance of historical events and their ripple effects through generations, Edelmann sent a letter to Emma Heidelberger, the granddaughter of the Jewish owner who lost his business to the Edelmanns. He wrote, "I do understand that you might not see any benefit for yourself personally in talking to me. But with me understanding and being able to teach my children and possibly other family members about the impact of particular historical decisions, this might help them to make better decisions in their lives."[320] His actions reflected a desire to arm future generations with the courage to oppose oppression. By examining the actions of the perpetrator generation, Thomas and his children could appreciate their impact on modern society and learn what choices to make for a more just and conscious society.

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[318] Jackie Hardenberg, "Hamburg Jewish community to rebuild grand synagogue burnt down on Kristallnacht, Times of Israel, RGB Media, September 29, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamburg-jewish-community-to-rebuild-grand-synagogue-burnt-down-in-kristallnacht/.
[319] Lianne Kolirin, "A German man's Nazi grandfather took over a Jewish man's store. He tracks down his descendants to apologize," CNN, Warner Bros. Discovery Company, November 14, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/14/europe/nazi-grandfather-store-scli-intl-grm/index.html.
[320] Kolirin, "A German man's Nazi grandfather took over a Jewish man's store."

In this paper, I have supplemented historical narratives with personal experiences to lend a human dimension to the study of past events. The descendants of Nazis illustrated how their efforts to grapple with the personal memories and legacies of their families have been influenced by the collective pursuit of postwar West Germany. Their engagement with the past, echoing broader societal trends, highlighted the dynamic nature of memory, shaped by evolving norms and expectations. In addition, their reactions and emotions toward the Nazi era have often mirrored and paralleled those of the wider population across the three historical periods. This connection between individual reflection and broader collective narratives demonstrates the impact of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and World War II on both historical consciousness and the formation of identity in Germany. The process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and internalizing the legacy of Nazism, reveals the cumbersome, complex, and sometimes ambiguous nature of the confrontation, particularly when there are disparities between the collective and individual spheres. These contradictions have made it difficult to develop a monolithic identity for Germany yet debate and contemplation encapsulate a common thread: a commitment to addressing and learning from the darkest chapters of history.

The ongoing dialogue between the past and present ensures that history remains alive. It is through the evolving role of memory that the past maintains its relevance as a public concern. While collective consciousness is a socially constructed concept rooted in institutional frameworks, individual perspectives are also shaped by interactions within the family unit. Both elements are integral to German democratic culture and pivotal in shaping a future where the lessons of history inform the values and decisions of both the nation and its citizens. The presence of memorials, museums, and educational programs throughout Germany serves as a constant reminder of the nation's continued journey toward reconciliation. As Germany

progresses, the contours of its collective memory and the challenge of balancing the burden of historical responsibility with its future development will endure. In addition, a distinct obligation to confront the past persists, with the timeline for when or if this burden will be alleviated still uncertain. Nevertheless, the efforts to integrate its history into a forward-thinking political and cultural discourse represent a model of how societies can confront uncomfortable truths while striving for a better future. Through a collective endeavor to honor the past, Germany is crafting a legacy of resilience, reflection, and responsibility that will guide future generations.

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