The Dilemmas of Commemoration

Introduction

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A few weeks after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in May 1949, American High Commissioner John McCloy addressed an assembly of representatives from the West German Jewish community. In a much-discussed speech, he emphasized the central importance of public recollection of the crimes of the Third Reich for the political culture of the young republic. In particular, said McCloy, the relationship of West Germany towards the Jews would be “one of the real touchstones and the test of Germany’s progress toward the light. The moment that Germany has forgotten the Buchenwalds and Auschwitzes, that was the point at which everyone could begin to despair of any progress in Germany.”¹ Germany’s reintegration into the community of civilized nations would only be possible if the Federal Republic did not repress the Nazi crimes but rather kept their memory alive and actively fought antisemitism. The attitude toward the Nazi past in general, and toward the Holocaust in particular, thus became a yardstick for measuring the “maturity” of political culture in West Germany. Though initially employed by those viewing the Federal Republic from the outside, this yardstick became increasingly significant in West Germany’s internal discussions and self-evaluations, eventually coming to play a crucial role in the self-understanding of the Bonn republic. In this regard the Federal Republic differed markedly from the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

To be sure, for both German states demarcating the Third Reich and overcoming the fascist legacy constituted focal points for the establishment of postwar political identity. Coming to terms with the Nazi past, however, took place in very different ways. In the GDR,

the communist party and government leadership used the fight against fascism as an occasion to transform completely the socio-political system. One could say that the GDR mastered the past on behalf of its people, from above. Antifascism became a means to legitimate the rule of the party, to stabilize the status quo, and to repel efforts at reform. An open discussion of the Nazi past was not possible in the GDR, as this would have called into question the monopoly on power and interpretation held by the party.

Although National Socialism was officially rejected from the beginning in the Federal Republic, real sociopolitical change did not occur until the 1960s, when the thesis of an “unmastered past” was successfully used as an instrument of social criticism. Coming to grips with the legacy of National Socialism thus became, especially after 1968, a dynamic element in West Germany’s history, serving to legitimate political and social reforms, as well as new approaches to education and lifestyle in general, and decisively shaping the political identities of the younger generation.

As a result of fundamentally different political and ideological orientations, the two German states also attributed very different degrees of social significance to the memory of the Holocaust. Within the context of the GDR’s antifascist doctrine, the murder of the Jews represented only one of many crimes committed in the name of fascism and, compared to the persecution of communists or the attack on the Soviet Union, was not even the most important. Thus treatment of the Holocaust in education or public discussion did not present itself as a specific problem. In the Federal Republic, by contrast, the genocide committed against the Jews became *the* central event of the Third Reich, a focal point for public and highly controversial discussions of guilt and responsibility, of coming to terms with the past and making reparations. To the extent that the catch phrase “unmastered past” was used to legitimate political change, especially in the 1960s and beyond, the memory of the Holocaust was also politically instrumentalized, above all by a younger generation molded through the student movement. This can be seen particularly clearly in the Federal Republic in the 1980s, when hardly a single major political conflict—from the armament debates to controversies over immigration—was discussed without mention of the Holocaust as both an exemplary lesson and moral legitimation for a particular position.

Due not least to this very politicization, the treatment of the past itself became a political conflict. Events such as Helmut Kohl's visit to Bitburg with Ronald Reagan, the Jenninger speech of 1988, and the Historians' Debate of the 1980s made it clear that West Germans were deeply divided on the issue of how to deal appropriately with the Nazi past. Whereas one side interpreted the issue with the help of the dualistic model of "remembrance versus repression," claiming for themselves the morally superior, "right" form of coming to terms with the past, the other side viewed the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and its concomitant moralization of politics primarily as a tactical strategy designed to further the interests of the political left. At least in retrospect, it is not difficult to recognize that this debate had less to do with the appropriate treatment of the Holocaust as such than with a symbolic conflict between left and right over discursive control and over the political self-understanding of the Federal Republic. Therefore it is not surprising that a consensus on this issue was not found.

When we consider the public approach to the Holocaust in Germany today, fourteen years after Bitburg, thirteen years after the *Historikerstreit*, and eleven years after the scandal of the Jenninger speech, the difference from the 1980s becomes immediately apparent. Within the context of a changed, post-unification political situation, the topic has lost much of its significance as a shibboleth in internal political conflicts. The tone of the debate has become correspondingly less shrill. Recent historical analyses have shown that the treatment of the Holocaust in early postwar West Germany should be seen in far more differentiated terms than those indicated by morally-loaded antitheses such as "coping versus repression," or the indiscriminate thesis of a "second guilt."²

If the public debate in the 1980s over the Holocaust was overshadowed by larger political controversies, in the 1990s it has revolved primarily around questions of how to anchor Holocaust commemoration in the national historical consciousness of a unified Germany and how to choose forms of cultural memory that best suit this end in the "nation of the guilty."

That the topic of public memory dominates this debate is no accident. It is linked on the one hand to the fact that the lives of those directly involved are coming to an end. The recognition that the

generation of surviving eyewitnesses to the Shoah will soon be gone has recently led to increased efforts to preserve their testimonies and experiences, and to make them available to future generations. We are currently in a phase of transition from personal memory to “history,” or, in the words of memory-theorist Jan Assmann, from “communicative memory” (in which one can interview directly those with first-hand knowledge of events) to “cultural memory” (in which memory becomes institutionalized through cultural means, such as commemorative rituals, memorials, museums, and archives).³

Additionally, the transformation of Berlin into the Federal Republic’s refashioned capital has rekindled the debate and inspired new questions about a representative memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. How should the memory of the Holocaust be passed on to future generations? Is a memorial the most appropriate medium for accomplishing this? Shouldn’t a Holocaust memorial in Germany differ from those elsewhere, in Israel or the United States, for example, since a memorial in Germany cannot simply commemorate the suffering of the victims but must also address the deeds of those responsible and the nation’s collective shame regarding those deeds? Would a national memorial for the “murdered Jews of Europe,” especially one of monumental proportions in the heart of Berlin, not also symbolize self-righteousness, in the sense of “look at us, look at how well we have mastered our past!” Wouldn’t this be, as critics have pointed out, a kind of “Reich Victims’ Field,” which in its monumentality and symbolism participates in a problematic tradition and works against a real examination of the past? The list of questions could be easily extended. It is clear, however, that the frame of reference for the public debate over the Holocaust has shifted in the wake of the memorial discussion. One can no longer speak of clearly defined fronts, as was possible in the politically charged debates of the 1980s. Supporters and opponents of the memorial project belong to all political camps, though motives and reasons for support or opposition vary widely. Many of those who have long been concerned with the public representation of the Holocaust—teachers, historians, museum curators, heads of existing memorials—have taken a negative view of the Berlin project, while others, among them many politicians, have voiced their approval. Overall the number of skeptics has grown during the years of intensive discussion of the

memorial. Whereas many agreed with FRG President Richard von Weizsäcker when, in his famous May 8, 1985 speech in reaction to Bitburg, he quoted a line from the Talmud ("The secret of redemption lies in remembrance"), the difficulty of achieving a concrete realization of these words today, at least as regards the Berlin memorial, testifies clearly to the dilemmas of commemoration. It has become increasingly clear to many that traditional, unmediated aesthetic forms of public memorialization are, at least in Germany, inadequate to the Holocaust and cannot substitute for more cognitive approaches to the past—approaches involving documentation, research, and extensive discussion. But how to combine aesthetic and cognitive commemoration has remained an open question.

The Berlin Holocaust memorial project entered its crucial phase in the fall of 1998 when the new government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder pushed for a decision, and its top cultural official, Michael Naumann, led the quest for a compromise. In this situation, those who had opposed the memorial project and had thus far remained silent made themselves heard. In his 1998 speech in acceptance of the prestigious peace award of German publishers, writer Martin Walser attacked public commemoration of the Holocaust in Germany as "permanent representation of our shame."⁴ He criticized the ritualization of commemoration in the media and the instrumentalization of Auschwitz for political ends. The planned Berlin Holocaust memorial seemed to him a "nightmare the size of a soccer field," a "monumentalization of disgrace," and an expression of "negative nationalism."⁵ Rooted in the idealism and rhetoric of classical German *Bildungsreligion*, Walser left the commemoration of the Holocaust to the conscience of the individual alone and argued against any form of public ceremony. Walser's speech prompted fierce criticism from Ignatz Bubis, the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Bubis interpreted Walser's confession of "turning his eyes away" when confronted with the horrors of the Shoah as an appeal to forget this dark chapter of German history and accused Walser of being a "latent antisemite." After a meeting with Walser, Bubis later withdrew this accusation. In his legitimate criticism of Walser's provocative speech, Bubis remained rather isolated.

Given the growing public opposition to the Berlin memorial that was led by Berlin's mayor, Eberhard Diepgen, the final outcome of

the parliamentary decision was far from predictable. In its session on June 25, 1999 the German Bundestag approved in a decisive 314 to 209 vote architect Peter Eisenman's plan for a memorial to the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The approved memorial, which is a modified version of Eisenman's original proposal, combines a field of more than 2,000 stone pillars with a small documentation center. In the Bundestag debate, young deputies such as twenty-eight year old Michael Roth supported the Berlin memorial as a possible catalyst for finding a form of Holocaust commemoration that differs from that of their parents and grandparents.⁶ "For us 'youngsters' the debate on the memorial is not an end. With our active participation we would like to make sure also in the future that the Holocaust does not recede into the history books when the new century and millennium comes up."⁷ The honest and unpolemic tone of the debate gave the impression that the long and controversial debate over the Berlin memorial had finally contributed to a greater acceptance of different perspectives on the past and on different forms of commemoration.

The following articles offer a point of orientation and initial analysis of the debate over the commemoration of the Holocaust in unified Germany. These articles are based on a March 1998 workshop at the University of California, Berkeley⁸ that was conceived as a response to the controversial debate over the Berlin Holocaust memorial. The workshop aimed to provide a forum for a thorough, historically based exploration of the treatment of the Nazi past in post-unification Germany. Each article focuses on a particular aspect of this theme.

Jeffrey Herf (Ohio University) places the topic in a historical context, focusing on how the Holocaust has been publicly remembered in the two Germanys and how the traditions of "divided memory" still prevail after unification. Ulrich Herbert (Universität Freiburg) and Wulf Kansteiner (SUNY Binghamton) examine two particularly prominent examples of the public thematization of the Nazi past in the Federal Republic in the 1990s: the Goldhagen Debate and the controversy among German historians over the Nazi involvement of the founding fathers of the social history school in postwar West German historiography. Herbert considers the divergent reactions in Germany towards Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, and relates them to the existence of two distinct discursive fields. Within the historians' profession, Herbert shows, the book was eval-

uated and critiqued according to its scholarly merits, while the largely left-liberal public viewed the book as just another test in Germany's difficult history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and applied to it the rhetoric of the Historians' Debate of the 1980s. This led to the paradoxical situation in which left-liberal historians such as Hans Mommsen (who had devoted his entire academic career to the research of Nazism) were publicly accused of playing down the participation of "ordinary Germans" in the Holocaust. A similar constellation can be recognized in the 1990s' version of the Historians' Debate, which has taken particular aim at left-liberal historians, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, who presented the new approach of social history as an appropriate historiographical answer to Nazism. In this debate younger historians accused representatives of the older generation of misplaced loyalty toward academic mentors who had participated in the planning of the Nazi's ethnic policies in eastern Europe.⁹ As Kansteiner demonstrates, the debate turned Germany's historiographical landscape upside down. It put on the defensive those social historians who, in the Historians' Debate, had argued against their conservative opponents from a position of moral and academic superiority.

The combination of a general overview and concrete case study is also applied to the topic of architecture, monuments, and memory. Kathleen James (UC Berkeley) sketches the contours of the politicized debate among architects, critics, and architectural historians over cityscape, memory, and postmodern architecture. Next we present an analysis by James Young (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) of the Berlin Holocaust memorial and the controversy it inspired. This document, originally presented to the Bundestag in March 1999, was the product of Young's participation in the selection committee for the Berlin Holocaust memorial.

The articles presented here attempt to illuminate and analyze complex developments that have not yet come to conclusion. Indeed, when it comes to this topic, conclusive, irrefutable answers are at best difficult to come by. If a common factor could be found at all in unified Germany's debates on the Holocaust, it would be the impression of complexity and transition. To be sure, old patterns of dealing with the Nazi past, such as the traditions of divided memory and the rhetoric of the unmastered past, are still influential. But these patterns,

which emerged during the cold war and “authoritarian” 1950s and early 1960s, no longer serve their original functions and have thus become meaningless and artificial. Yet it remains unclear from today’s perspective if a basic consensus will ever be reached regarding the appropriate message and form of a Holocaust memorial in Germany. The acceptance of the Berlin memorial by the German people will therefore be a crucial indicator not just for the question of dealing with the Nazi past, but for the political and cultural identity of the new Germany in general.

Translated from the German by Matt Erlin

Notes

1. Quoted in Frank Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge. Antisemitism and Philosemitism in Postwar Germany* (Oxford, 1992), 297f.
2. See Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, London, 1997) and Herf’s contribution in this issue.
3. See Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München, 1992).
4. Martin Walser, “Die Banalität des Guten. Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede aus Anlaß der Verleihung des Friedenspreises des Deutschen Buchhandels,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 236 (12 October 1998), 15.
5. Ibid.
6. See Michael Roth, “Das Denkmal dient der Zukunft,” in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 26 June 1999.
7. Ibid.
8. The workshop was sponsored by the Center for German and European Studies (UC Berkeley) and co-sponsored by the departments of German and History and the Townsend Center for the Humanities (all UC Berkeley).
9. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “In den Fußtapfen der kämpfenden Wissenschaft,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no 2 (4 January 1999), 48 and Götz Aly, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (3 February 1999).