Introduction

Dynamics of Memory in Twenty-first Century Germany

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Paradigm Shift?

As the inestimable Harold Wilson once put it, “a week is a long time in politics.” Certainly, the evolution of collective memory and scholarship devoted to it is much slower than the pace of day-to-day politics. Yet, there are periods of rapid change—of paradigm shifts even—where the landscape shifts rapidly over a relatively short period of time. This special issue, we think, captures one of these periods of rapid change. Compared to the last special thematic issue of *German Politics and Society* from 2005¹ and even compared to many books published in the last few years, the state of collective memory in Germany appears very different today. Most prominently, Holocaust-centered memory is foregrounded to a much lesser extent than previously.

Of course, there could be other explanations for perceived shifts. In contrast to the last special issue, for example, the contributors here overwhelmingly represent political science and history, whereas the last one brought together contributors predominantly from the fields of German literature and cultural studies. Moreover, most authors here are from or have been trained in Britain and Germany, as opposed to the more American background and especially training of the authors in the last issue. Despite intensive cross-fertilization between national academic cultures and disciplines today, differences in approach, perspective, and selected concerns persist—arguably accounting for the distinctive emphases of the two special issues.

We do not think, however, that these differences can be explained by cultural or disciplinary idiosyncrasies alone. The dynamics of col-

lective memory in Germany today have changed substantially from ten, or even five years ago. The Holocaust and Jewish victims have become much less prominent—other memories, such as that of German suffering or the now-historical period of division are increasingly prominent. Notions of victims are more inclusive, now encompassing Slavic civilians, Red Army prisoners of war, and, in many respects, Germans themselves. Jewish victims necessarily are relativized in this process of expansion. Of course, the burgeoning Jewish community in Germany is also a factor—the thriving community in the present is slowing marginalizing the memory of past traumas.²

On-going generational replacement also has made the events of the Nazi and World War II era much more remote and less influential. Indeed, “normalization” is well advanced and seemingly inexorable today. Effects are evident everywhere—perhaps most especially in renewed national pride (as revealed by the Soccer World Cup hosted in Germany in 2006) and in debates about the deployment of the Bundeswehr. Whereas Auschwitz and what it stands for used to prevent positive expressions of national identity in Germany, recent dynamics of memory have meant that this incompatibility has been resolved. Especially the Schröder governments between 1998 and 2005 have contributed significantly to a more inclusive approach that allows for a positive identification with the German nation and, at the same time, acknowledges historical responsibility. “Normalization” is particularly obvious in postunification Germany’s foreign policy. Whereas the evocation of collective memory of the Holocaust and World War II used to nearly guarantee support for a pacifist response to challenges in international affairs amongst political elites as well as society at large, Germany’s military participation in the Kosovo war showed that the “lessons learnt from the past” have changed. Rather than prescribing a non-military course of action, references to the past nowadays can be used to legitimize the use of military force.

Increasingly, there are also attempts to give German history before 1933 and after 1945 a more prominent place in German historical consciousness. Especially the period since 1945 (in the Federal Republic) is hailed as a huge achievement not only in terms of economic success, but also democratic practice. Political elites frequently juxtapose “the dark chapter” of German history between 1933 and 1945 with the “new Germany” that followed. There is also

more and more interest in German history that goes much further back than the twentieth century. The most recent television production by pop historian Guido Knopp, *Die Deutschen* (2008), testifies to this. Rather than focusing on the twelve years of what Hitler envisioned to be a “Thousand Year Reich,” as previous Knopp productions did, this ten-part series adopted a longitudinal perspective and looks at 1,000 years of German history. The fact that the first segment was watched by over six million viewers indicates the widespread interest in and appeal of this more inclusive approach to German history.

Finally, a persistent problem since unification has been the place of and importance afforded to the East German dictatorship. For a long time, this appeared to be an insoluble dilemma—too much attention to that regime would produce a false equivalence between the two postwar systems; too little would marginalize the period, lead to forgetting, and produce unhealthy psychological and behavioral reactions in the former East or amongst former East German citizens (*Ostalgie*, support for the PDS/Left Party). But, as is so often the case, authors and researchers have stumbled upon a solution and it strikes us that many, including several of the authors of this special issue, have discovered exactly the right balance.

Dynamics of Memory in Germany Today

The articles collected here stem from a conference, “The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the New Europe,” held between 13 and 15 September 2007 and hosted by Nottingham Trent University and Durham University, UK. This interdisciplinary meeting brought together scholars from all around the world, and the papers considered developments in the collective memories of a range of European countries, such as Austria, Britain, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, and the former Yugoslavia. By far the majority of the papers, however, focused on Germany, especially on patterns of German national memory in the postunification era. The purpose of this special issue is to bring together the most challenging and innovative of these papers, which, over the course of the last year, have been reworked by their authors in the light of their ongoing research.

On the evidence of the articles collected here, the “dynamics of memory” in the German case have been shaped since unification by an acute and perhaps irreconcilable tension—or better—by a set of tensions. These tensions can perhaps best be visualized by formulating them as questions. How can unified Germany integrate the very different experiences of former East and West German citizens into its collective memory? How can today’s Germany build forward-looking self-confidence on the basis of a past history of political crime and dictatorship? How can Germany reconcile this past with the history of German suffering, for instance during the bombing war or in the course of flight and expulsion from the (former) eastern territories? Can memory of perpetration and victimhood, where perpetrators and victims are Germans, be reconciled without the risk of relativization, however inflected? How might the credibility of its democratic model be undermined by memory of its erstwhile role as fascist dictatorship—not least in the eyes of a neighbor such as Poland? Such questions might be easier to answer if such a thing as a united collective German memory existed. Reality is infinitely more complex, given divisions and different “memory constituencies” within German society.

As intimated above, the tension that has been at the heart of media and political discussion in Germany in recent years is that between Holocaust-centered memory and memory of German suffering/victimhood. That tension has arisen, or found expression, through what can truly be described as a spate of literary and historiographical works, as well as of television productions and feature films, focusing on German suffering during the war (and during the years of East German dictatorship). Several contributors to this special edition focus their analysis on aspects of this tension. In her article on the politics of memory as practiced by Germany’s current chancellor, Ruth Wittlinger shows that Angela Merkel has retained the central focus on memory of the Holocaust, and strengthened relations to Israel. Yet, as Wittlinger argues, Merkel also has pledged her full support to the establishment of a Center against Expulsions (*Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*) in Berlin, pushed by representatives of expelled Germans and highlighting their plight.

Alexandra Kaiser, in her article on the People’s Day of Mourning (*Volkstrauertag*) and Germany’s Holocaust Remembrance Day, also

points up a certain bifurcation in Germany's politics and culture of memory. While the German parliament now remembers the victims of the Holocaust on 27 January (since 1996), government representatives also lay wreaths at Berlin's Neue Wache (New Guardhouse) on Volkstrauertag (since 1993) in honor of the "victims of war and tyranny"—a well-worn phrase that implies an equivalence between the suffering endured by Germans and Jews, and indeed may even prioritize the memory of military casualties.

Eric Langenbacher, too, in his article comparing memory regimes in Germany and Poland, suggests that there has been a marked shift in recent years towards memory of German suffering. While he does not go so far as to argue that this has displaced the Holocaust-centered memory hegemonic in previous years, his analysis of survey data indicates that the memory of German suffering increasingly is accepted among Germans. For Langenbacher, this may be traceable to the influence of elite-validated perspectives. In the Polish case, he shows, elite perspectives play a significant part in shaping the frequently hostile or at least critical response among Poles to Germany's preoccupation with past victimhood (although as elites change in Poland, so may the nature of this response).

Certainly one important influence on contemporary German memory of wartime suffering has been the series of two-part television films shown on public Second German Television (ZDF) focusing on the bombing of Dresden (*Dresden*, 2006), flight from the eastern territories (*Die Flucht*, 2007) and the sinking of a ship filled with German refugees (*Die Gustloff*, 2008). In his article on *Die Gustloff*, Bill Niven explores the way the film absolves civilian Germans of culpability for their fate, while pinning blame on the German military. Memories of German perpetration and German suffering do not just run on parallel tracks, they also interact. As it becomes harder to accept that the German military can be conceived of in terms of victimhood—harder not least since the hard-hitting "Crimes of the Wehrmacht" exhibition—so victimhood discourse crystallizes around the concept of the victimized civilian.

Interaction between "perpetrator" and "victim" discourses is not restricted to the internal dynamics of German memory of World War II, but also operates across borders. The dynamics of memory in Germany and contemporary Poland are especially intercon-

nected. Any shift in Germany towards a greater focus on German suffering/victimhood is likely to trigger a degree of memory entrenchment in Poland, with Polish politicians emphasizing the need to remember German crimes (and Polish suffering) and evincing reluctance to heed those voices—either at home or abroad—that call for acknowledgement of German and Jewish suffering at the hands of Poles. As Christian Gudehus informs us in his article on memory discourse in Poland and Germany, in 2007 the name of the Auschwitz Memorial Site was changed from “Auschwitz Concentration Camp” to “Auschwitz Birkenau: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945).” Whatever other reasons there might have been for the wish to spell out and highlight German responsibility, one was certainly a reaction to recent German trends towards implicit or explicit criticism of Poland for its part in the expulsion of ethnic Germans.

But Gudehus’s article actually casts a somewhat different light on German memory discourse. On the basis of numerous group interviews, Gudehus comes to the conclusion that German memory of the war may well be moving in a meta-narrative direction. Rather than arguing over the past in terms of whether memory of perpetration or victimhood should be prioritized, the interviewees seemed more concerned to distance themselves from attempts to “win them over” to particular understandings of the past. More and more Germans, it seems, are becoming aware of the constructed nature of the past as presented through the media, and more skeptical of historical representation as a result. Interviews with Poles about the war, as Gudehus also shows, produced a different result—much more preparedness to accept officially validated versions of the past. Could it be, then, that the perpetration-victimhood binary so characteristic of German memory is giving way to a deconstructivist distrust of representations of the past—to a kind of superior indifference?

In her discussion of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, Inge Manka draws our attention to the complex history of a contaminated site. Increasingly, the Nazi history of that site is being rendered visible—not least through the new exhibition and documentation center. Yet, five Soccer World Cup matches were held in 2006 at the Nuremberg Stadium, situated within the former rally grounds. The World Cup also saw a resurgence of German

(soccer) patriotism. One might see here an attempt to “overwrite” the narrative of perpetration with one of Germany as an innocently patriotic, friendly host—one also committed to the protection of human rights, a commitment for which, as Manka shows, Nuremberg also now has come to stand.

The final two articles in the special edition focus on other, crucial, yet often overlooked aspects of memory dynamics in contemporary Germany. In the case of Claudia Lenz and Kirsten Heinsohn’s discussion of the gendered order of memory of the Third Reich, it is clear we are dealing with a long-established problem—namely the tendency in interpretations and representations of the Hitler period to imagine women as passive figures, as essentially rooted in the private sphere, or as victims. By contrast, the role of men during the Third Reich is conceptualized in much more active terms. Lenz and Heinsohn argue that while historiography has tried to explode this long-held, polarizing myth, it is constantly reinforced in the popular media by television series such as Guido Knopp’s *Hitlers Frauen*. The issues here revolve around repressive dynamics, where an ongoing male hegemony over memory serves to reinforce depoliticized concepts of womanhood. The final article, by Nina Leonhard, explores another area of what might be termed a repressive dynamics of memory. Her discussion of the manner in which some of the German Democratic Republic’s military personnel from the National People’s Army were taken over into the (West) German Bundeswehr makes clear that this adoption happened at some cost, such as a reduction in rank and salary. Leonhard also shows how the Bundeswehr, for all the stress on the ideal of an “Army of Unity,” categorically refused to consider adopting elements of East German military traditions. Even in acts of commemoration, no reference is made to the National People’s Army. Leonhard’s article shows, however, that memory of the GDR’s “National People’s Army” still exist especially in private—even if these are marginalized and excluded from official discourse.

The dynamics of memory in contemporary Germany, then, are also dynamics of forgetting, as attempts are undertaken to consign the institutions and traditions of the GDR to the dustbin of history, and to idealize those of the former West Germany. Overall, the eight articles collected here show that the process of remembering the past in Ger-

many is truly “dynamized” by an ongoing struggle—or, put more gently, a “negotiation”—between what often seem to be incompatible views of history: “Germans as perpetrators” on the one hand, and “Germans as victims” on the other; women as passive, women as possessing agency; the GDR as utterly forgettable, the GDR as an integral part of united German memory; Germany as the country of Nazi crimes, Germany as a football-loving, commodious democracy.

Ultimately, perhaps, these views only appear incompatible. Certainly in the “perpetrators” versus “victims” debate, the incompatibility is more assumed than actual. Indeed the very either-or dichotomy is itself a discursive construction upon whose maintenance the absolute positions of both camps depend. In fact, what we are witnessing is the rather rapid eroding and new synthesis of these distinctions—Hegel and Marx would not be surprised—in ways that we are only beginning to understand. But, the articles collected in this special issue are promising first attempts to do so—and at the least, they show just how much has changed in twenty-first century German memory regimes.

Notes

1. Friederike Eigler and Eric Langenbacher, eds., “Special Issue: Trans/Formations of the Past in Contemporary German Politics and Culture,” *German Politics and Society*, 23, no. 3 (2005).
2. See Jeffrey M. Peck, *Being Jewish in the New Germany* (New Brunswick, 2006).