The Germans and Their Nazi Past: To What Extent Have They Accepted Responsibility?

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I

Few themes have preoccupied recent scholarship on postwar Germany as much as the nation’s long struggle to “come to terms with” its National Socialist past. The topic is, meanwhile, as important as the phenomenon of National Socialism and the Holocaust itself, and there is a strong indication that this trend will continue. The current boom of comparative research into different cultures of history has reinforced this trend and triggered a controversial discussion which fills almost whole libraries. For example, in just the few years between 2002 and 2007 more than 300 books on this topic or related themes were published in Germany alone.¹ Furthermore, two encyclopedias have been released dealing with the semantics and the history of public discourse on National Socialism in Germany since 1945.² Indeed, in the 1980’s a culture of public commemoration of the Nazi-era was established, promoting the construction of hundreds of memorials, museums, and memorial plaques.


² Thorsten Eitz/Georg Stötzel (Eds.), Wörterbuch der "Vergangenheitsbewältigung". Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch (Hildesheim, 2007); Torben Fischer/Matthias N. Lorenz (Eds.), Lexikon der "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Deutschland. Debatte- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945 (Bielefeld, 2007).
So the question arises whether such activities indicate not only the collective will of Germans to commemorate their Nazi past but also to take responsibility for it. When I say accept responsibility, I mean this in the figurative sense of learning from the Nazi chapter of German history and taking the appropriate actions.

Against this background, my presentation will focus on the different ways and modalities used over the past 70 years “to come to terms” with the historical legacy of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in Germany. To illuminate this phenomenon, I will use the example of Munich, the former cradle of the Nazi movement, and since May 2015, the site of one of the largest Nazi-Documentation Centers in the world. In the four decades after 1945, among all big cities in Germany, Munich has had arguably the most difficulties dealing with the burdensome legacy of the Third Reich. In common with the majority of Germans, the citizens of Munich preferred to evade the trauma of war, defeat, and destruction in the post-war era. The fact that Munich was the birthplace of a movement that brought death and genocide to Europe on an unprecedented scale probably increased the need of its inhabitants to forget the shameful recent past.

My historical review on the process of coming to terms with Nazism in Germany is divided into 5 sections. To start off, I will sketch the first phase of historical reappraisal, which set in around 1945. After this first advance of critical debate, a phase of collective silence followed, which lasted from the late 1940’s until the early 1960’s. In a third step, I will turn towards the period of legal reconditioning and academic historical reappraisal, which extended to the late 1980’s. Thereafter, I will consider the broad change of historical views on the Nazi past in the wake of the global transformation of 1989-1991 and the rise of a new culture of memory. Finally, I will return to the central issue of my lecture: considering the question of how much the Germans have taken responsibility for their Nazi past.
In May 1945, shortly after the German army’s unconditional surrender, the “Feldherrnhalle” (Commanders Hall) on Munich’s Odeonsplatz was painted with the words “Dachau-Velden-Buchenwald.” “I’m ashamed to be German.” These words referred directly to a poster on the side of the building, which documented the crimes carried out in the Concentration Camps. The US Occupation Forces responded immediately and used this spontaneously made statement for a re-educational and media campaign. On May 22, 1945, an image of the graffiti was published all over the world with the headline “A German regrets!”

With this example, I want to argue that the main push for investigating the Nazi Past came not from the Germans, but from the Allies. After the collapse of the “Third Reich,” Germany had no choice but to accede and adapt to the will of the four victorious powers of the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. In this connection, the Nuremberg Trials and the Allies’ fundamental human rights decisions paved the way for judicial categories of crimes against humanity and set the standard for comparable legal proceeding to come. This applies especially to the upcoming de-

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Nazification and democratization procedures. Apart from that, the external influence of the four victorious powers persisted well beyond the immediate post-war period and continued almost until the present day. Postwar Germany was – and still is – subject to constant surveillance by foreign countries and the international community. Therefore, many of the debates that later occupied the German public originated elsewhere. The trial against Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, who was captured by Israel’s Secret Service in 1960 in Argentina, provides an impressive example. Further examples include the US miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978 and the documentary *Shoa* by French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann in 1985.

As we have already seen, the process of reinforced historical reappraisal in Germany and Munich was decisively launched by the Allied de-Nazification campaign in May 1945. In spring 1946, German de-Nazification courts joined the Allied courts in classifying people in five categories based on their degree of incrimination ranging from “major offender” to “exonerated.” Thus, particularly in 1945 and 1946, public life was subject to a process of extensive monitoring and “cleansing.” Party members were removed from all authorities and offices and replaced by people who seemed to be trustworthy due to their proven or suspected opposition to Nazism. In Munich, for instance, by January 1947 more than 4200 people had been removed.

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from the city administration. The judiciary, schools, and universities were also purged of Nazi Party members. Furthermore, some 80 percent of the staff at Munich University had been forced into retirement.

Nevertheless this process of “cleansing” was not restricted only to people, because national socialist symbols, names and other signs were also removed from public places. For example, the already mentioned “Feldherrnhalle” (Commanders Hall) in Munich, the site of the bloody suppression of Hitler’s “Beer Hall Putsch” in 1923, had been the prime sanctuary of the Nazi movement until 1945. Shortly after the Nazis seized power in Bavaria on March 9, 1933, a monument was raised on the east side of the “Feldherrnhalle” commemorating the bloody events of November 9, 1923. In the days after the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, this memorial was demolished not by US soldiers but by Munich residents.6

Apart from this act of ritual decontamination we have strong evidence for a broader critical examination of the recent past at that time. After intellectual exile circles took this path, long before spring 1945, many writers, artists, and journalists joined these discussions, which reached a temporary high point in 1946-1947. Moreover, not only licensed journals, books, and newspapers served as platforms for critical reflection, but also plays, audio dramas, and movies. A vivid example is provided by the movie “Between Yesterday and Tomorrow,” produced in 1947 by the “New German Film-Society” which received one of the first movie-making licenses issued in the US Occupation Zone. The film is set largely amid the ruins of post war Munich and tells the story of a man returning from the war to Germany. “Between Yesterday and Tomorrow” provides the perfect example of the so called “rubble film,” dealing with the experience of dictatorship and the questions of guilt and responsibility.

6 Nerdinger, München (see note 2), p. 308.
Nevertheless, this first wave of critical rethinking of the Nazi Past in the intellectual and media-discourse abated in the late 1940’s. On the other hand, a large majority of Germans preferred to keep silent and to forget right from May 1945. Doubtless, this was also a response to the reeducation campaign launched by the four allied powers shortly after their victory over Nazi Germany. Indeed, this campaign was initially accompanied by a strategy of deterrence, which tried to confront the German populace with the brutal nature of the Nazi Regime. For example, the Allies forced people who resided nearby the concentration camps to visit them and to bury the human remains. Some Germans responded by expressing shame, but a greater number simply denied any guilt and responsibility.

This phenomenon was also due to the fact that Germans themselves felt like victims even before the collapse of the “Third Reich.” Remarkably, this process set in one year before May 1945. During the nights of bombings, on the refugee treks from the eastern territories, and in the rubble landscape of the cities, many of them identified themselves as victims. Hence a change in their minds led to their distinguishing between the nation of victims on the one hand and the Nazi leadership on the other hand. “We and those at the top” was a very common phrase which passed the buck to the Nazi leadership for all the misery. “We,” of course, they claimed, had nothing to do with all their crimes, but now we are suffering from the consequences.

What they failed to point out, however, was their own loyalty to the


Third Reich over years and their own conduct towards the Jews and other victims of National Socialism.

Now with the rise of the cold war and the dramatic escalation of tensions between the USA and the USSR, the process of denazification bogged down. Since 1948 especially, the United States set new policy priorities in favor of a quick association of the three western zones of Germany to a new state and its fast integration into the western hemisphere. Simultaneously, their interest in the skills and the knowledge of German scientists, intelligence experts, and former army officers increased, regardless of whether they were convinced Nazis Party members or not.

Certainly the waning interest of the Allies in a radical replacement of former Nazi elites by committed democrats met a common need of the German populace. The majority of Germans wanted nothing more than a quick return to normalcy. At the same time, they wished to let the past be the past according to the motto "time will let the dust settle on it." A similar thinking dominated after 1945 among the authorities of the city of Munich, who made strong efforts to cover the tracks of the past in the cityscape. This applies especially to the broad architectural legacy of the Third Reich. A vivid example is provided by the so called "Konigsplatz" (King's Place) located just to the northwest of Munich's historical center. Originally created as a broad neoclassical forum in the early nineteenth century by King Louis I (1786-1868), the square was reshaped when Hitler decided to redesign it according to his own ideological purposes. In 1935, he replaced the squared green lawn with twenty-five thousand square meters of granite slabs in order to create a location for mass assemblies. Two years later he initiated the erection of two new monumental par-

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9 Gavriel David Rosenfeld, Munich and Memory. Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich (Berkeley, 2000).
ty buildings on the square and finally the construction of two central “temples of honor.” These temples housed the coffins of the so called “martyrs,” the sixteen Nazi-party activists who died during the failed “Beer Hall Putsch” of 1923.

After 1945, local officials did their best to erase the Third Reich’s presence from the Königplatz. After the “temples of honor” were demolished in 1947, the remaining six-foot-high foundations were planted with bushes and gradually disappeared from public view. On the other hand, the two party buildings have not been torn down but given new postwar functions. In the long term, they even became accepted as normalized buildings in the local cityscape.

Now at this point let us return from architecture to people. Certainly the politics of damnatio memoriae shortly after the Second World War paved the way for the return of many former Nazis into civilian life. Since 1949 the parliament and the government of the new West German state fostered the reintegration of former officials of the Nazi-regime into postwar society. In April 1951 the West German parliament passed a key law, which laid the foundation for a re­nazification of the civil service. This meant that officials who had been dismissed by the Allies for political reasons, but who had not been categorized as “major offenders” or “offenders,” could return to the civil service.

Nevertheless this politics of counter-denazification already started with the new German government’s first Amnesty Law in 1949. Due to the broad consensus of all political parties, there was a strong tendency to end, and in part even to reverse, the political cleansing that the Allies had implemented in 1945. The short-term

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10 131er-Gesetzgebung”, in: Torben Fischer/Matthias N. Lorenz (Eds.), Lexikon der "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Deutschland. Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945 (Bielefeld, 2007), pp. 94-96.
impact of this legislation was almost the complete reintegration of the National Socialists, including their top personnel, bar a few exceptions. This applied especially to the political establishment of the young West German Republic. For instance, after the elections of 1953, 129, or more than 26 percent, of all representatives of the West German parliament were former members of the Nazi party.

IV

Although over time some of the former Nazis in politics, industry, administration, and judiciary accepted the idea of western democracy, they prevented a broader critical examination of the recent past. Nevertheless, they could not suppress entirely corresponding initiatives which came mainly from the former victims and opponents of the Nazi regime. These gained further support from some intellectuals and artists while they found hardly a foothold in society and politics. Therefore new, strong impulses from abroad were needed to reinvigorate the debate on the broad legacy of National Socialism. In this respect the capture of Adolf Eichmann, the chief bureaucrat and administrator of the Holocaust, by Israeli Secret Service officers in 1960, reverberated like a bang that shocked the whole international public. In April 1961, the trial opened in Jerusalem, accompanied by a worldwide media echo. 112 victims and witnesses told their story in special detail, while the judges presented previously unpublished images of concentration camps and ghettos. The great significance of the proceeding was reflected less in the final death sentence for Eichmann and more in its impact on the German and global public. Thus the Eichmann trial sensitized millions of people to the horrors of the Holocaust.

11 Gouri Haim, Facing the Glass Cage: Reporting the Eichmann Trial (Detroit, 2003); Peter Krause, Der Eichmann-Prozess in der deutschen Presse (Frankfurt a. Main, 2002); Deborah E. Lipstadt, The Eichmann Trial (New York, 2010).
In Munich the capture of Eichmann caused a similar stir and triggered a series of initiatives. Already in the run-up to the trial a privately organized exhibit in Munich addressed the Holocaust under the headline “Mass Murder under the Swastika.” Furthermore, the Eichmann-trial and the new medium of television provided strong and sustained impulses for a broader intellectual and literary reflection on the recent German past. For example, panels and discussion forums such as the Catholic Academy in Munich or the Protestant Academy in Tutzing started to discuss the involvement of the Christian churches in National Socialism. At the same time writers, philosophers, and journalists like Karl Jaspers, Peter Weiss, or Jean Amery reinvigorated the debate on German fault and atonement. Moreover, the Eichmann trial inspired new attempts for legal actions against the Nazi perpetrators in Germany. Indeed, such initiatives came not from the political establishment of Western Germany, but generally from victims and former opponents of the Nazi regime. Among them was the state attorney general Fritz Bauer, a democratic reformer of German judiciary, who made strong efforts to obtain justice and compensation for victims of the Nazi regime. Above all, he was the driving force for the Auschwitz trials, which opened in Frankfurt/Main in December 1963 and lasted until August 1965. Until then no other German trial applied itself to such a detailed and comprehensive reprocessing of the Nazi crimes as this one, which was based on the statements of 356 survivors of the concentration camps. Just as unique was the media presence, providing a stunning echo in the German and international public. Nevertheless, among the large majority of Germans the trial, which finally led to the conviction of 22 perpetrators, did not evoke a collective awareness of blame and responsibility. Instead, many of them still put the blame for the mass murders on the alleged small minority of sadistic SS henchmen.

12 Nerdinger, München (see note 2), p. 366.
This may be one of the reasons why the global wave of student protests in the late 1960’s had such a strong impact on West Germany. Many students wanted to break the silence of their parents and to know much more about the generation of the perpetrators. Consequently a large group of academic youth erupted in protest not only against the parents’ generation but also against their professors, especially those, who had a dark Nazi past. Therefore it is not surprising that the debates, discussions, and protests on West-German campuses in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s centered significantly on the historical legacy of the Third Reich.

Although the student-movement gave a strong impetus for an intensive historical research of National Socialism in the 1970’s, the majority of Germans still lacked of a respective knowledge, especially with regard to the Holocaust. This may be illustrated by a media event which shocked the German public in 1979 as never before. While many scholars criticized the US miniseries Holocaust as a touching soap opera, millions of spectators had a completely different experience. The story about a Jewish family during the Third Reich and the Second World War was perceived as an authentic portrayal of the Nazi atrocities and stirred the emotions and feelings of millions of spectators. All in all, the movie had an educational and informative impact, while many professional historians had to ask themselves whether their endeavors had been responsive to public concerns and aspirations.

V

The global rise of a culture of memory and particularly the shift from the war- to the post-war generation in German politics and

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14 Doering-Manteuffel, Gründe (see note 7), pp. 544 ff.
media around 1990 favored a more impartial view of the Nazi past.\textsuperscript{15} In addition, the temporal distance from the Third Reich increased both in reality and in the minds of the people, especially in the minds of the younger people.\textsuperscript{16} The global historical transformation between 1989 and 1991, particularly the German reunification in 1990 certainly advanced these tendencies. Generally, a broader awareness of the historical dimensions of the Nazi era arose. The final outcome was a broad change of historical perspectives which also supported a wider debate on the historical legacy of the Third Reich. The willingness to accept the full weight of Nazi experience increased, while the former inclination to shift the responsibility to an allegedly small minority of SS-killers waned.

Furthermore, this trend was accompanied by a gradual process of rethinking among wide sections of the populace finding an equivalent in new forms of commemorative culture.\textsuperscript{17} In larger cities like Munich, Berlin, Nuremberg, or Cologne this process was characterized by numerous public debates and by the activities of ordinary citizens in various initiatives, history workshops, and district committees\textsuperscript{18}. Suddenly, not only former victims of the Nazi-Regime showed


\textsuperscript{18} Wette, Vergangenheitsbewältigung (see note 1), pp. 18 ff.; Nerdinger, München (see note 2), pp. 375-383.
a strong inclination to fight forgetting but also ordinary citizens. Their interest focused especially on those places that had been associated with the perpetrators—for instance, the former Nazi-party district around the Königsplatz in Munich. In this connection a private initiative promoted in 1996 the installation of an informational plaque about the former party district in front of the foundation of one of the two former “temples of honor.” Indeed, this action reflects also a rising interest in clarifying the local past. “Track down our history” was both a new motto and a new approach, which systematically brought to light new insights about the Nazi period in the familiar local sphere.\(^{19}\)

While tracing the history of their familiar environment, many historians noted a continual expansion of the circle of victims and perpetrators. Little by little they came to realize that the story of exclusion, discrimination, and persecution of Jews, political nonconformists, and ethnic minorities started on their own doorstep and ended in the concentration camps. In Munich, for example, these efforts led to the commemoration of the two Jewish camps in the city districts of Berg am Laim and Milbertshofen in the 1980’s.\(^{20}\) For the city’s Jewish residents before 1945, these camps were the gateways to the Holocaust before they completely disappeared from the city’s memory for many decades.

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On the other hand, many people noticed that the positive remembrance of resistance against the Third Reich could not be limited to well-known circles like, for example, the “White Rose” or the conservative “Kreisau circle.” Instead, they traced groups and individuals in their home town who were victims of persecution due to their latent or open rejection of the Nazi regime. So they increasingly realized that the unprecedented crimes of this era, but in several respect also the anti-Nazi resistance, affected German society as a whole.

All in all, the willingness of Germans to confront the more painful aspects of their past grew in the 1990’s. Germans today have become more willing to accept the reality that Nazi perpetrators came from their own midst and committed unprecedented crimes. Simultaneously the proportion increased of those who accepted the obligation to meditate on the significance of these facts for the foreseeable future. This observation includes also the city of Munich, where this process of rethinking nevertheless set up later than in other major German cities like Berlin, Nuremberg, or Cologne. This may be illustrated by the long discussions on the establishment of a Nazi Documentation Center, to which I will refer in my final remarks.

VI

While the discussion of whether the Germans have taken responsibility for their Nazi past is still very controversial, the city of Munich provides an example for some progress in this area in the last 25 years. As already stated, accepting responsibility is understood here in a figurative sense of learning from the Nazi chapter of German history and taking the appropriate actions. This may be illustrated, for instance, by the way a community deals with the persistent

21 Gavriel David Rosenfeld, Memory and the Museum: Munich’s Struggle to create a Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, in: Gavriel David Rosenfeld/Paul B. Jaskot (Eds.), Beyond Berlin: Twelve German Cities confront the Nazi Past (Ann Arbor 2008), pp. 163-185.
challenge of racism and xenophobic attacks against aliens, immigrants, and refugees today. Indeed, shortly after the reunification in 1992-1993, Germany experienced the hardest wave of xenophobic rioting in the recent past. It coincided with the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc and the war in former Yugoslavia, triggering the largest migration wave since the end of the Second World War. The attacks on apartment blocks and hostels for aliens, refugees, and asylum seekers had a great shock effect on the German public, especially the citizens of Munich.

Residents of Munich responded to the new challenge with the "Chain of Lights" demonstration, which was staged for the first time on December 6 1992. Almost 400,000 people took to the streets in Munich to show their support for peace and tolerance. The specific impetus was a right-wing terrorist fire-bombing in the northern German city of Mölln, which claimed the lives of two Turkish girls and their grandmother. Five years later almost 15,000 Munich citizens turned out to oppose a demonstration by some right-wing extremists against the exhibit "War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944" in Munich’s city hall. With such statements against neo-Nazi attacks, the people of Munich demonstrated clearly that they have learned from the Nazi era. Furthermore, they signaled their willingness to keep a watchful eye on similar tendencies in the present and to defend the idea of tolerance and democracy. Finally, all these actions produced strong evidence for the rise of a new consensus that Munich should face up to its past.

Apart from these initiatives, there were no further references to the city’s Nazi past in the public space until the 1990’s. This changed in spring 1993, with the opening of the first exhibition dealing with Munich’s role as “capital of the Nazi-movement.” The special significance of that retrospective was also due to that fact that it

22 Nerdinger, München (see note 2), pp.364 ff.
triggered a whole series of similar exhibitions addressing topics like “Munich Architecture in the Third Reich” or the “Nazi Party Headquarters at the Königsplatz.” Besides, it provided crucial impetus for the development of plans to turn the site of the former party headquarters of the so called “Brown House” into a Nazi Documentation Center. Finally, the activities of many citizens and some politicians gained so much weight that the city authorities had no choice but to respond. In November 2001, the Munich City council agreed to construct a plaza of learning and remembrance on the location of the former Nazi party headquarters close to the Königsplatz. Nevertheless, the project remained on hold because of budget constraints and wrangling over responsibilities. The project was kept alive largely by the citizen associations, which had joined forces to establish the documentation center. This had certainly also to do with the fact that only gradually a broad cross-party and cross-faction consensus began to form. So it took a relatively long period of time until the foundation stone could be laid in 2012. With the opening of the “Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism” in May 2015, the people of Munich finally fulfilled a long cherished wish. Thanks to their commitment the city of Munich has meanwhile faced up to its historical responsibility – “late but probably not too late.”
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“The Germans and their Nazi Past: To What Extent Have They Accepted Responsibility?”
4:00 p.m. Tuesday, September 22nd
205 Bernhard Center
Martin Hille, Associate Professor, History, University of Passau
Co-Sponsors: Haenicke Institute for Global Education, Department of History, Department of World Languages and Literatures, WMU

“The Necessary Tablet: The Healing Power of Creative Expression”
4:45 p.m. Thursday, September 24th
Putney Auditorium, Fetzer Center
Stacy Nigliazzo, RN, Memorial Hermann Hospital, Houston
5th Annual WMU Medical Humanities Conference

“Between the World and Me”
8:00 p.m. Tuesday, November 3rd
Miller Auditorium
Ta-Nehisi Coates, National Correspondent, The Atlantic
University Center for the Humanities’ Reimagining Community Speaker Series

“Sources of Ethical Commitment: Finding Your Ground for Finding Your Way”
6:00 p.m. Thursday, November 19th
205 Bernhard Center
Nelson Miller, Associate Dean, WMU Cooley Law School (Grand Rapids campus)
Co-Sponsor: WMU Cooley Law School

“Flip the Flipping Switch! On Lesser Evil Justifications for Harming”
5:30 p.m. Friday, December 4th
157 Bernhard Center
Helen Frowe, Director, Stockholm Centre for the Ethics of War and Peace
9th Annual Graduate Philosophy Conference
Co-Sponsor: Department of Philosophy, WMU