

## CHAPTER 1

### THE VAGARIES OF COLLECTIVE SYMBOLIC GUILT

Since the late 1940s, the historical culture of the Federal Republic of Germany has followed two closely intertwined but diametrically opposed trajectories. On the one hand, the political and cultural elite dealt with the Nazi past in order to leave it behind as quickly as possible. Many politicians, historians, and artists (mis)identified victims and perpetrators, settled claims for compensation, and sought explanations for the German catastrophe so that they could return to a world that no longer bore any sign of twelve years of Nazi rule. On the other hand, part of the elite did everything in its power to prevent such a return to a state of historical innocence and plastered reminders of Germany's original sin all across the media. The first mind-set invented antitotalitarianism and the economic miracle and integrated the Federal Republic into the capitalist West. This attitude was particularly pronounced among the conservative members of the war generations who had experienced the Third Reich as adults. The second mind-set reflects the historical taste of the liberal members of the postwar generations who were born during or after the war. Since the 1960s, they have continually reprocessed the Nazi past and later the Holocaust for purposes of education, remembrance, entertainment, and political gain.

The ideological and generational space between the adults of the Third Reich and postwar generations is occupied by a large number of "memory hybrids," people who have contributed to both trajectories of West German memory and who are particularly often found in the ranks of the Hitler Youth generation. Raised in the Third Reich but too young to have been perpetrators, they tend to shuttle back and forth between the desire to forget and the compulsion to remember.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, the conservative politician

Helmut Kohl, who tried to lay the Nazi past to rest by obsessively reinventing its cultural memory,<sup>2</sup> or liberal novelists such as Martin Walser and Günter Grass, who felt compelled to protect their “authentic” memories of German suffering from the destructive powers of commercial Holocaust memory.<sup>3</sup>

The first trajectory of German memory, the relentless pursuit of reconciliation and normalization, is easily understood. But the second trajectory, the sustained, collective focus on Germany’s crimes, begs explanation. Why would Germans spend so much time and effort investigating, representing, and consuming stories about their past misdeeds many years before publicly apologizing for collective injustices had become an international fad? This second paradigm is a West German invention; until shortly before the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), its political elite never strayed from the path of normalization and self-exculpation. Therefore, the following study focuses on developments in the Federal Republic and touches on developments in East Germany only to the extent that they influenced the West German scene.<sup>4</sup>

On an abstract, metaphorical level, the German focus on memory politics can be described as the result of an unusual phenomenon—the successful sublation of large-scale personal and political guilt into collective symbolic guilt. It is neither difficult nor original to identify guilt at the center of German efforts to come to terms with the past.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1946, Karl Jaspers neatly categorized German guilt after Nazism into four types—criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. After having identified the appropriate procedures and authorities for each category—ranging from the criminal courts to the victors of World War II to the individual’s conscience and God—Jaspers ruled that “collective guilt of a people . . . cannot exist.”<sup>6</sup> His honest yet defensive essay might have been an appropriate assessment of German guilt immediately after the war, but subsequent developments require a different evaluation. The Germans themselves, as well as their foreign partners, became actively involved in the construction of a new type of guilt related to the Nazi crimes—a type of guilt that was *accepted* by the West German elite and at least some segments of the population. But in contrast to past types of guilt, the new category of collective symbolic guilt was not defined in any concrete legal, political, or moral terms, and procedures of atonement and could be addressed *only* through symbolic politics and cultural memory work.<sup>7</sup>

The transformation of personal responsibility into transgenerational, symbolic guilt produced an exceptional historical challenge. In other cases in the first half of the twentieth century in which nations have found themselves pressured to acknowledge collective responsibility for past crimes—as happened with Japan and Turkey, for instance—the population and their representatives have largely rejected any criminal or symbolic liability.<sup>8</sup> In the case of World War II and the Holocaust, West German society—first through its representatives and then on a broader scale—has accepted long-term, collective moral responsibility for genocide. But for lack of precedents, the precise nature of this responsibility has remained unclear. Although standards and procedures for dealing with personal criminal guilt are well established, the process of dealing with symbolic collective guilt is uncharted territory.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, no one has been able to define the end point of this obligation. Many attempts to implement symbolic burials for collective symbolic guilt were based on the mistaken yet understandable assumption that symbolic guilt, like personal guilt, can be laid to rest after appropriate token punishment or atonement. This mistake informed, for instance, Helmut Kohl's and Ronald Reagan's staging of a German-U.S. reconciliation ceremony in Bitburg in 1985 that was intended to help end discussions about the Nazi past. Such attempts were motivated by the equally understandable error that unsettled symbolic charges, like unsettled criminal charges, undermine the system of (symbolic) justice and have negative effects on the integrity and self-image of the collective in question. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The ongoing, self-reflexive debates about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with, or mastering, the past), however seemingly counterproductive, have proven to be an asset for West Germany at home as well as abroad.

The acceptance of a powerful, symbolic moral duty in combination with complete ignorance about the precise nature of this duty has caused a flurry of activity. As artists, intellectuals, and politicians have sought to identify appropriate ways of dealing with the burden of Nazism in their respective fields of expertise and institutional contexts, they have set in motion a peculiar dialectic of routine and scandal.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1960s, most media, professions, and institutions involved in the representation of history have developed routines for depicting Nazism—for instance, the routine of television docudramas, of historical research and writing, or of political speechwriting and political ritual. But due to the high stakes of the symbolic game, the lack of clarity, and the

instrumentalization for political and aesthetic purposes, such routines are frequently punctuated by controversy when participants and commentators believe that a concrete contribution violates their understanding of Germany's historical obligation. Some of these controversies have reached national proportions and involved large segments of the West German population; the debate triggered by the miniseries *Holocaust* is one example.<sup>11</sup> Other scandals have concerned only the intellectual community, such as the debates about the alleged anti-Semitic inclinations of the playwright Rainer Werner Fassbinder that took place in 1976 and 1985 or the discussions about the uniqueness of the Holocaust that erupted in 1986.<sup>12</sup>

Describing the German obsession with mastering the past as a result of the transformation of personal guilt into collective symbolic guilt explains some of the contradictory impulses that have been expressed in Germany's historical culture. But that description hardly clarifies the historical causes of the unusual willingness to explore the nation's legacy of shame. One might be tempted to ascribe that willingness to the exceptional character of the Nazi crimes, although that explanation gives short shrift to postwar developments and hardly does justice to the highly unstable concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The rise of Germany's critical historical culture since the 1960s is better understood as a truly political phenomenon—as the result of a specific constellation of ideological convictions, political generations, and strategic options. In fact, the second paradigm of German memory politics that begs explanation developed in response to the first paradigm, which became a victim of its own success. Precisely because the conservative contemporaries of the Third Reich were so successful in managing the present, that is, the challenges of economic and ideological reconstruction, they forced their critics and younger competitors to return to the sins of the past and use them as political leverage. This process started in the late 1950s, when an eclectic group of memory dissidents exposed the cracks and internal contradictions of the postwar collective memory, and gained in intensity in the late 1960s, when the activists of the student movement appeared on the scene.

Thus, the origins of West Germany's critical historical culture date back to the immediate postwar period, as a closer look at West Germany's political scene illustrates. The first West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, pursued politics of history that combined "extreme leniency" for the Nazi perpetrators with general "normative distancing from National Socialism."<sup>13</sup> For

the purposes of social stability and integration with the West, he sought to settle accounts quickly with perpetrators and victims. But his pragmatic course lacked moral precision. Adenauer and the members of his administration acknowledged many victims of Nazism, including the vast majority of the German population, but recognized only a very small number of Nazi perpetrators. Therefore, their initiatives included embarrassing appeals for the release of war criminals from Allied prisons, as well as a genuine desire to make atonement and restitution to Israel.<sup>14</sup> This lack of moral precision is reflected in the official postwar language of memory. General and vague formulas about “unspeakable crimes” committed “in the name of the German people” and equally vague appeals to remember human suffering have informed countless official speeches directed at the citizens of the Federal Republic and foreign observers since the 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

The combination of communicative silence, leniency, and general acknowledgment of guilt worked wonders for the generation of Germans who lived through the Third Reich. They enjoyed social integration, stability, and renewed international recognition without taking their leaders’ commitment for remembrance and atonement too seriously. In fact, most contemporaries clearly understood that the appeals constituted an end in themselves and should not be considered encouragement for additional public memory work. This moral equilibrium was only occasionally disrupted by political scandals when continuities between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic became too obtrusive to be ignored.

But the historical culture of the Adenauer era had planted a time bomb. The blatant contradiction between the repetitive, seemingly self-critical incantation about the need to remember and the general unwillingness to engage in any serious memory work offered an easy target for dissidents of the Adenauer era and for subsequent generations as they struggled to distance themselves from the disgrace of Nazism and earlier generations that had embraced it. They took the phrases about remembrance at face value and turned *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* into a serious historical obligation, which, because of its indeterminate nature, proved to be an excellent tool for generational, political, and intellectual strife. Some of the initial steps undertaken to advance the self-reflexive process of working through the legacy of Nazism were eminently practical. Blatant deficiencies of the postwar period were addressed through renewed attempts to bring Nazi criminals to trial,<sup>16</sup> to

reform school education about the Third Reich,<sup>17</sup> and to research Nazism's historical origins.<sup>18</sup> These practical concerns have remained part of the process, but as subsequent generations joined the cause, more abstract questions about the appropriate representations, historical contextualizations, and political consequences of Nazism dominated the debates. From the beginning, however, these efforts were not directed at understanding and alleviating *personal* responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi period, which these generations did not share. Rather, they were intended to repair and maintain a sense of collective moral integrity for the future.

Thus, younger Germans joined Adenauer in the business of guilt management but could afford to pursue it with greater ruthlessness and rigor because the stakes and rules of the process had changed from the 1950s to the 1960s. In the postwar years, communication about the Nazi past served many purposes, including self-exculpation and political grandstanding, but the competition between different interpretations of the Nazi past was tied to a very practical benchmark, that is, the measure of economic, political, and psychological reconstruction that the respective strategies of representation helped accomplish. By the 1960s and certainly in subsequent years, that practical benchmark disappeared. Arguing about the Third Reich and the Holocaust remained a suitable venue for political and generational disagreements, but especially for the most committed memory activists, the struggle about the appropriate representation of the past became an end in itself. Given the indeterminate nature of this symbolic undertaking, this struggle was simply irresolvable and differed in that respect from the political competition of the postwar years, which had concluded with the creation of a widely shared antitotalitarian consensus.

In trying to understand the nature and shelf life of acknowledged collective symbolic guilt, many commentators have come to the conclusion that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is an ongoing, open-ended obligation. That position makes a good deal of political and didactic sense. Germans are, indeed, well advised to remember the political naïveté, lack of courage, and propensity for crime that their forebears exhibited in the Third Reich. Unfortunately, however, continued identification with the cause of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* does not make a lot of emotional sense for younger Germans, who are several generations removed from the catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust. With the exception of the relatively few individuals who find

employment in Germany's institution of cultural memory, Germans born since the 1960s probably have no compelling psychological reason to engage with the legacy of the Third Reich in an intensive, sustained, and self-critical fashion.<sup>19</sup> For the time being, this lack of motivation is counterbalanced by the enthusiasm of professional memory activists for whom *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has become a way of life and who decide how Germany's history is covered in the national media. But a closer look at Germany's political elite or Germany's media consumers illustrates that the quest for symbolic atonement has been transformed in the context of the second generational turnover since the war, even if the full effects of that turnover will become visible only in the media of the future.

As the intellectuals who grew up during the Third Reich conclude the most productive years of their careers, their distinct interpretations of National Socialism and the "Final Solution" are disappearing from the media that make up Germany's historical culture. The passing into history of the events of the Holocaust is not marked only by the disappearance of the voices of the survivors. Equally important yet far less frequently acknowledged is the gradual disappearance of a whole generation of intellectuals who have studied events that have directly touched their lives. By exploring the Nazi period, they have tried to understand the world that shaped their childhood and adolescence years, and in the process, they have also explained that world to all of us. Their specific vision of the past transcends different national cultures and even the divide between former bystanders and perpetrators of Nazi abuses. As arbiters of the cultural memory of the Nazi era and the Holocaust, they are leaving an impressive legacy of interpretation that is remarkable for its coherence and its emotional commitment, as well as its selective engagement with the history of the "Final Solution." This generation's pivotal role in the construction of German memories of the Nazi era is one of the conceptual foci of the present study.

The following chapters reconstruct the evolution of three key theaters of Germany's historical culture—history, television, and politics—each of which has developed very specific strategies for dealing with the challenge of collective symbolic guilt. Part 2 focuses on the memory microcosm of professional historiography. After offering a diachronic survey of academic Holocaust studies in the Federal Republic, I take the Historians' Debate of 1986 and 1987 as an opportunity to provide a synchronic cut through the different layers of

West Germany's historical culture and place the professional historical discourse within its larger intellectual and social context. Chapter 5 provides a piece of intellectual archaeology by taking a close look at the texts of a new cohort of scholars who reintroduced traditional formats of narrative continuity into the field of contemporary history in the 1980s and thus advanced the historicization of the Nazi past.

Part 3 deals with the representation of Nazism and the Holocaust in the television of the Federal Republic and begins with an analysis of the most important themes, formats, and strategies of avoidance that shaped the television discourse about the "Final Solution" from the 1960s through the 1990s. This diachronic survey is then augmented by a discussion of the empirical and conceptual problems of studying television reception, which is a particularly pressing concern if one tries to integrate media history and collective memory studies. The engagement with television concludes with an in-depth look at the career and works of Germany's most successful TV historian, Guido Knopp, who, together with his production team, revolutionized the representation of Nazi history in the 1990s.

Part 4 is dedicated to the arena of national politics. On the basis of the large number of monographs that have been written about German memory politics since the mid-1990s, this part presents a comprehensive survey of the political discourse and scandals that have shaped the image of Nazism at the highest level of government. Covering the evolution of political memory in West Germany from the first postwar years to the summer of 2005, the synthesis shows how elite memories of Nazism have evolved in response to international developments, generational transformations, and shifts in political power. This chronological survey provides the foundation for the concluding chapter, which maps out the history and sociology of German memories in a systematic fashion. Together with the methodological reflections in chapter 2, the conclusion illustrates what insights the German case offers to the field of collective memory studies.