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The Hour of the Woman

MEMORIES OF GERMANY'S "CRISIS YEARS" AND WEST GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

ELIZABETH HEINEMAN

In a mid-1980s interview, an elderly West Berlin woman recalled a conversation whose contours would have been familiar to many in the Federal Republic. As the woman explained, she had once attended a talk in which a young historian had accused her and members of her generation of not having confronted the Nazi past more aggressively, starting right in 1945, at the end of the war.

I asked him, "When were you born?" [He replied,] "1946." I said, "You know, only someone who didn’t experience those times can utter such nonsense." I mean, after '45 no one thought about confronting the past. Everyone thought about getting something on the stove so they could get their children something to eat, about rebuilding, clearing away the rubble... But this is what one is told today, and strangely enough it’s all from people who didn’t live through those times.

By now, the exchange seems commonplace. A member of the younger generation, horrified by what he knows about the Nazi era and suspicious about his elders’ relative quiet on the subject, accuses his seniors of not having seriously confronted their past. The older German resents the younger man’s moralizing tone and his focus on the Nazi years at the expense of the traumatic period immediately following.

The older woman, however, does not simply propose a generational history. In casting her generation’s understanding of the past, she universalizes on the basis of stereotypically female experiences. "Everybody" was trying to get something on the stove to feed their children; "everybody" was clearing away the rubble. These are references to the activities of women, yet they have come to stand for the experience of the entire wartime generation— at least, that portion that had not experienced persecution at the hands of the Nazi regime.

This chapter will explore the universalization, in West German collective memory, of aspects of the stereotypically female experience of Germany at the end of the war and during the immediate postwar years. It will further examine the effects of this universalization on West German national identity and on the status of women in the Federal Republic. In doing so, it will explore the relationship among the "counter memories" of a subordinate group, the "public" and "popular" memories of a dominant culture, national identity, and gender.
Memories of three “moments” in German women’s history of 1943-48 were central to the development of a West German national identity. First were memories of female victimhood during the latter part of the war, which were generalized into stories of German victimhood. Second were images of women’s efforts to rebuild a devastated landscape and people. The “woman of the rubble” (Trümmerfrau), who cleaned away the rubble from Germany’s bombed cities, lay the groundwork for the Federal Republic’s founding myth of the “phoenix rising from the ashes”—a myth that did not inquire too deeply into the origin of the ashes. Finally, there were recollections of female sexual promiscuity. With this history of sexual disorder generalized to describe a much broader moral decay, Germans found the opportunity to view the military occupation—and not the Nazi period—as Germany’s moral nadir.3

These three “moments” told at least three different stories, and as they were transformed in memory, they continued to serve different functions. They did not describe a straightforward, uncomplicated West German national identity. Instead, they functioned within, and helped to shape, varying strands of this emerging identity. The Cold War, the economic miracle, the effort to achieve national and cultural sovereignty from the Western powers (especially the United States), and the need to explain the Federal Republic’s relationship to the Nazi past informed the development of West German national identity in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Yet memories of women’s experiences from 1943 to 1948 served all these facets of the emerging West German national identity.

Appropriating the female experience for the nation might seem surprising in the aftermath of a highly militarized society such as Nazi Germany. Yet a popular identification with selected aspects of women’s experience is in some respects not surprising. First, it is worth recalling the environment in which most Germans began to think of the Nazi era, and their part in it, retrospectively. These were the “crisis years” of 1943-48, framed by the defeat at Stalingrad (which marked the beginning of Germany’s military collapse) and the currency reform of June 1948 (which symbolized the beginning of the recovery in the Western occupation zones). During this period of prolonged crisis, Germans experienced death, dislocation, hunger, and uncertainty about the future, and women’s role in the community’s survival was unusually visible. In fact, these years came to be known as the “hour of the women.”4 Women’s prominence did not signal the beginning of a new, sexually equitable order.5 It did, however, provide potent images for popular representations of the recent past.

Second, Germany’s total defeat and the discrediting of the ideology for which the war was fought made the largely male military experience problematic. This did not serve to discredit men or their leading role in society; it did not even serve to discredit individual men’s military activities or the military as an institution. Given the prior importance of military imagery in national symbolism, however, it did create a certain representational vacuum.6 New symbols, often drawing from prototypically female experiences, would help to fill this vacuum.

The universalization of women’s experience, to be sure, represented only one aspect of a competition among ways of understanding Germany’s recent past. This competition coincided with the founding of the Federal Republic and the young state’s struggle to develop a uniquely West German identity. The specter of Germany’s recent past made the development of a legitimate national identity difficult. At the same time, the need to reject certain aspects of the past—however problematic in terms of West Germans’ ability to “come to terms with” or “work through” the crimes of the Nazi era—created something of an open playing field, a discursive space in which diverse narratives of German experience could compete for a role in shaping a new national identity.7 Refugees and evacuees from the eastern portions of the old Reich, Christians, those who had been adversely affected by denazification, those who considered themselves victims of Communism, veterans, former prisoners of war, women—all offered histories that claimed both to explain their unique situations and to represent in some way a characteristically German experience.8 At the same time, some Germans’ experiences were, correctly or not, understood a priori to have been exceptional and thus not particularly useful (or even desirable) in understanding the history of “ordinary Germans.” Jews and other racial or religious persecutees (except those who could claim victimization as Christians), Communists, Germans who had been persecuted as asocials, and Nazi activists—none seemed to represent the “average German.” Few wanted to identify with members of these groups, and members of many of these groups would have resisted having their identity claimed by the larger population of Germans. Oral histories attest to the ways nonpersecuted and nonactivist Germans recall a past of “ordinary Germans” that excludes the experience of the persecuted and the activists, who numbered in the millions. In focusing on the nonpersecuted majority, I do not intend to universalize that group’s history and thus further marginalize the experience of outsiders to Nazi society, many of whom did not live to recount their experiences. Rather, I intend to draw on those strands of experience that became part of the dominant collective memories of postwar West Germany—a society that included few members of racial and religious groups persecuted by the Nazis and that continued to marginalize members of most targeted political and social groups.9

During the formative years of a new West German state and society, some narratives of the past became marginal and others dominant; those that were assimilated into dominant discourses were transformed in the process. In focusing on the universalization of memories of women’s experience of the “crisis years,” I am not arguing that the development of West German identity was essentially a process of feminization; other stories linking past and present were too significant for the matter to have been so simple. I do hold, however, that the evolution of West German national identity cannot be fully comprehended without understanding the appropriation of women’s history for the nation as a whole.

In addition to incorporating many voices, the relationship between memory and national identity was hammered out in diverse locations: in “public” or “official” memory, articulated in such locations as monuments and official anniversary speeches; in “popular” memory, reflected in artifacts like novels, films, and magazines; and in “counter” memories of groups not well represented by the dominant
culture. Yet public, popular, and counter memories constantly challenged and revised each other. Memories of stereotypically female experiences, which might initially have comprised women’s “counter memories,” became the “popular memories” of West Germany as a whole. In some cases, they even entered the “official memory” of the West German state. This process profoundly affected the development of a West German national identity. It also played a role in West German women’s apparent inability to develop a group identity, based on their experiences during the crisis years of 1942–48, that could serve as a springboard to improved status.

In seeking links among gender, national identity, and social memory, I employ an eclectic collection of sources. Studies of one sort of social memory typically examine a range of themes within a well-defined, internally consistent source base: monuments for examining public memory, for example, or interviews among members of a subpopulation for exploring counter memory. Because my aim is to analyze the relationships among various forms of social memory, I focus on a limited number of themes through a wide variety of genres. In the pages that follow, counter memory may be revealed via oral histories, dominant popular memory via best-selling novels or widely circulating magazines, and public memory through commemorative speeches. In order to focus the investigation, however, I examine only references to the three stereotypically female experiences listed at the outset of this essay: victimization, rebuilding, and sexual disorder.

Neither West German social memories nor the group and national identities they helped to shape were static. Decades after the initial consolidation of a West German national identity in the 1950s, memories of women’s experiences of the crisis years would be revisited, now as part of the process of forging a feminist identity. Thus although this essay focuses mainly on the late 1940s and 1950s, when memories of women’s experiences of 1943–48 were initially universalized, it then turns the clock forward to the feminist challenge to this universalization in the 1980s—and to the implications of newly recast memories for West Germany and for West German women’s collective identity.

Women’s own narratives of the war rarely begin with 1 September 1939. Instead, the recollections of the large majority of German women who were politically and racially acceptable to the regime typically open with their husbands’ or fathers’ departures. They get going in earnest with the invasion of the Soviet Union, with its attendant casualties, and the air war against Germany. In general, women’s narratives emphasize their sufferings and losses and downplay their contributions to and rewards from the Nazi regime. The notion that ordinary Germans were innocent victims of forces beyond their control was a familiar motif in postwar representations of the Third Reich and was hardly unique to women. Before considering this theme in postwar retellings of the Nazi period, however, it is worth examining the ways it simultaneously distorted an understanding of the impact of Nazi rule and reflected significant aspects of women’s wartime experience.

German women were not, collectively, simply passive victims of a ruthless regime and a terrible war. Aside from larger questions about women’s role in the Nazi state, it is worth noting some of the advantages German women enjoyed with the outbreak of war. A generous system of family allowances allowed hundreds of thousands of working wives to give up their jobs; the war introduced war booty to the consumer economy; women found opportunities for travel, adventure, and a role in realizing the Nazi party’s aims; and Germany’s early successes allowed women as well as men to feel pride in their country’s military prowess (see figure
The war was begun with an intent to win, and German women stood to gain much by being on the victorious side.

Furthermore, insofar as tales of wartime suffering appear as evidence that German "bystanders" were among the victims of the Nazi regime, they distract attention away from the tremendous support German men and women lent the regime before it began the war—or, more precisely, before it began to lose the war. Finally, reminders of the suffering of "Germans" rarely force the listener to understand that suffering in relation to other traumas caused, facilitated, or at least tolerated by the very people who, by losing the war, eventually experienced pain of their own. To the contrary, stories of the suffering of "Germans" tend to displace reminders of the hundreds of thousands of (German) Jews, Communists, and Socialists forced to emigrate before the war; (German) "asocial" and disabled people killed in the euthanasia program or sterilized against their wills; and (German) criminals and political opponents who withstood torture and spent years in prisons or concentration camps, often to die there. They draw attention away from the millions of Poles evicted from their homes and villages in order to "Germanize" Eastern lands; the tens of millions of Europeans killed in Germany's aggressive war or imported into the Reich as slave labor; the tens of millions who died in German concentration and prisoner-of-war camps; and the hundreds of millions of weakened, displaced, and traumatized survivors of all of these aspects of the war.

Women's retellings of their war experiences usually omit such points, something that has raised a few eyebrows among women's historians. But such narratives are rarely intentionally disingenuous. Instead, they are self-centered reflections on events that demand a broader perspective. Women's recollections of the war focus on the events that most deeply affected their own lives: bombing raids, evacuation, widowhood, flight from the East, and rape. Whatever the shortcomings of typical "German women's" reflections, those reflections became the basis for important strands of postwar West German thought.

And German women's war stories are indeed dramatic tales, leaving little doubt that their tellers suffered genuine traumas. Of Germany's prewar population of eighty million, twenty million were removed for military or related service during the war, half of them before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. The cities hit by bombs and evacuation orders in the second half of the war were thus inhabited mainly by women, children, and the elderly. Night after night women woke to the sound of sirens, dressed their children, grabbed their belongings, and ran to the nearest cellar or bunker. After the "all clear" was sounded, and if no damage had been done, they returned home to soothe their children to sleep and salvaged what was left of the night for themselves. Germany's city women, even if they and their homes were untouched by bombs, lived the second half of the war with little sleep and shattered nerves.

Millions of German women, however, did lose their homes, members of their families, or their own lives. In a week-long raid on Hamburg in the summer of 1943, to take an extreme example, 40,000–100,000 died; fifty to sixty percent of the city was destroyed, leaving 750,000 homeless. By the end of the war, fourteen million Germans had lost their homes, and perhaps 600,000 their lives.

Those who emerged from the bomb shelters to find that their apartments had been hit set about extinguishing the fires, rescuing their remaining belongings and, if possible, making at least a portion of their apartments livable. If their apartments were uninhabitable, they might move in with relatives, but conditions would be cramped and tense. If they had no relatives or friends with extra rooms but worked in the city, they were assigned rooms with strangers who had rarely volunteered this living space.

Beginning in 1943, ten million people, mainly women and children, were evacuated from Germany cities. But sex did not qualify an adult for evacuation; rather, nonemployed status or responsibility for small children did. Employed women without children remained in the endangered cities; so did employed mothers unless their children were very small. Women who had seen their men off to war now remained in dangerous places themselves as they sent their children into unknown parts. Or they accompanied their children, leaving familiar networks behind and knowing that if their apartments were now hit, they would be unable to salvage any of their property.

The story of the Darmstadt family F. illustrates the cumulative effects of the separation of marriage partners, bombing raids, homelessness, and evacuation. In 1939, Herr F. was drafted, leaving his wife with their two children, three-year-old Gisela and one-year-old Willy. Frau F. worked as a letter carrier; her mother, who lived nearby, watched the children after the day care center closed.

In the last years of the war, Frau F. and her children spent many nights in air raid shelters. On the night of 11–12 September 1944, their shelter was hit. They ran to another, from which they also soon had to flee. Willy's clothes caught fire; as Frau F. beat out the flames, Gisela disappeared. She was never found. With burn wounds, Frau F. and Willy made their way the next morning to Frau F.'s sister-in-law, who, like Frau F., her mother, and two-thirds of Darmstadt's population, had been left homeless by the previous night's raid. The extended family had been able to save only a few linens and two suitcases full of clothing. The group spent the next three days in the open air and the nights in an air raid shelter. Then Frau F. took Willy and her mother to relatives in the countryside; Frau F. returned, as required by law, to her post in Darmstadt. She and her sister-in-law were assigned a room in an apartment with several other bombed-out families. With Herr F. at war, Gisela presumably dead, and Willy and Frau F.'s mother in evacuation, Frau F. lived out the remainder of the war in Darmstadt.

Despite Frau F.'s trials, she was spared two central chapters in many women's wartime experience: flight from the East and rape. The 4.5 million Germans who fled during the last months of the war and the chaotic period before official transports began in 1946 belonged mainly to female-headed families. For many, this was not their first move: they had gone to the East in order to "Germanize" Polish territory (thus forcing Poles onto their own refugee trail a few years earlier), or they had been evacuated to the East, out of the range of British and American bombers. More, however, were leaving their lifelong homes, indeed, the homes their families had inhabited for generations. With as many possessions as they could carry, they traveled by bicycle, horse-drawn cart, and foot. They faced roads
blocked for military use, crippled railroads, and, as long as the war continued, bombings. As they progressed westward, they arrived in badly damaged cities that already had sizable homeless populations. Their treks often lasted weeks.

Germans fleeing westward wanted to be in territory conquered by the Western Allies rather than by the Soviet Union. Germans could reasonably expect a harsher payback from the Soviets than from the Western Allies. Germans’ recent conduct in the East, however, was only one of many factors contributing to women’s fears of the coming Soviet conquest. German stereotypes of semihuman peoples of the East had a centuries-long history, and the Nazi party had made portrayals of “Red Hordes,” “Tartars,” “Huns,” and “Asiatics” part of its racial and political vocabulary. As the war drew to a close, the Nazi leadership urged Germans to fight to the last breath by depicting Soviet brutalities, and specifically rape.22

As the first refugees brought news of slaughter and rape to the West, they confirmed other Germans’ worst fears about the Red Army. Estimates of the numbers of Soviet rapes range widely, from the tens of thousands to two million. Whatever the precise numbers, rape was a common experience for women in eastern parts of the old Reich, and fear of rape was universal.23 Confronted with the conquering armies, German women were left largely to their own devices. When German men were present, they were rarely able to help, and they often seemed all too willing to trade women’s safety for their own.24

Women’s immediate reactions to rape varied widely. Some seem to have experienced rape as one problem among many: it was a horrible episode, but so were many other events of those months.25 For others, rape was an earth-shattering experience. The fact that rape was often accompanied by shooting—either of the victim, of others with her, or simply reckless shooting into the air—meant that women had to fear rape as a mortal danger, and not “just” as a painful and traumatic episode. Some families reacted with disgust even as women returned tattered and bleeding; others felt but could not express their sympathy.26 Where internal injuries, sexually transmitted disease, or pregnancy resulted, women’s feelings of lasting damage were confirmed.27

Bombings, flight, and rape: although these constituted only a portion of German women’s wartime experience, they came to define the “home front.” Women’s demographic majority in the civilian population meant that these were largely female experiences, and during and immediately after the war, they were typically described as such (figure 1.2).28 Reminders that the enemy was harming “innocent women and children” were, if nothing else, effective wartime propaganda. As Germans gained distance from these experiences after the war, however, such episodes of victimhood came to represent the wartime sufferings of a population of unspecified gender. In essence, they came to represent a German victimhood at the hands of Allied bombers, Soviet ground troops, and the Nazi party, which was increasingly portrayed as an alien element that had inflicted a terrible war upon an unwilling people.

To be sure, German men had their tales of woe as well, usually focusing on the Eastern front or on Soviet prison camps.29 Given the international fury at the destruction wrought by the German military, such narratives often expressed the desire to separate the teller from the collective. Aggressive war aims and inhumane actions taken “in the name of the German people” might have been criminal and brutal, but an individual veteran could point out that he had been an unwilling draftee. Or he could insist that he had been a member of a legitimate collective: a professional Wehrmacht, distinct from the SS and innocent of wartime atrocities. The mythology of the professional soldier had tangible ramifications for the development of the Federal Republic, helping, for example, to justify pensions for veterans and West German participation in NATO. Despite the larger significance of popular memories of male experience, however, the gendered nature of the original experience was not obscured. Even popular memories of an admittedly huge collective—the German military—remained just that: representations of the military.

The disproportionately feminine civilian experience and the almost exclusively female rape experience, by contrast, seem to have allowed Germans to consider their nation as a whole an innocent victim of war.30 Germans could remind themselves that not only Jews but also Germans, a category that implicitly excluded German Jews, had suffered wartime atrocities like the firebombing of Dresden.
The adult population of Dresden had been mainly female at the time of the bombings, but this no longer seemed so significant. Visual culture played a part in this transition, as the lunar urban landscapes were endlessly photographed both for their historic value and for their striking aesthetic quality. In this genre of photography, the inanimate victims of the bombings—the buildings—became the subject. Viewers who recalled that these buildings were once full of people could easily forget such details as those people’s demographic profile. In fact, they were striking in part because of their very sterility: they were, at least on the surface, utterly devoid of life.

Even representations of earlier moments, however—the years of the bombings themselves—increasingly described sex-neutral cities, or even German or Western civilization, as the victims of the bombings. Typical was the 1953 collection, Balance of the Second World War, a book promoted, in the words of its publisher, in order “that the survivors . . . not simply push aside this most monstrous event of world history [the Second World War], but confront it in a very basic way.” Presumably in the interests of such a confrontation, an essay called “The Air War over Germany” portrayed Germany as the innocent victim of a war against civilians, observing that “aside from Hiroshima, there has scarcely been a more terrible decision in the history of war than this one, which announced war and destruction to the way of life of a Western urban culture that had grown organically over a long period.” The essay is notably silent on the possibility that the German war against civilians might have embodied some of the most terrible decisions in the history of war. Less glaring, but also significant, is the fact that the largely female experience of the bombing raids has become war and destruction of a “Western urban culture.” To be sure, the destruction of urban infrastructure was significant by any measure. But by minimizing the human and emphasizing the cultural victims of the bombings, the author has obscured the degree to which this was a gendered experience. Germany, representing no less than Western urban culture, was the victim of the war.

Most remarkable was the appropriation of the female rape experience by the nation. Although discussion of women’s rapes became taboo a few years after the end of the war, references to the rapes hardly disappeared. In fact, they permeated the culture. But they ceased to be references to rapes of women, and instead turned into allusions to the rape of Germany.

Cold War-era references to the Soviet rapes explained them in political, national, or even racial terms, and not as gendered acts. During the military occupation, CDU and CSU campaign posters portrayed Asian-featured, red-tinted men lurking in the shadows, a visual reference to the warrior/rapist. Their outstretched hands, however, reached not for a woman but for a chunk of Germany (compare figures 1.2, 1.3). The image of a Germany raped by the Soviets made its way into official history when, in the mid-1950s, the Federal Ministry for Evacuees, Refugees, and War-Injured published a multivolume work on the flight and evacuation of Germans at the end of the war. The series testifies to the very real hardships of Germans who fled or were violently expelled from their homes. It also, however, endorsed a racial analysis of the rapes:

Figure 1.3: Political poster of 1949 appealing to fears of the “rape” of Germany. The poster portrays an endangered Bavaria and recommends a vote for the CDU’s Bavarian counterpart, the Christian Social Union (CSU). In the original, the face is red. Courtesy of the Münchner Stadtmuseum.
It can be recognized that behind the rapes stood a form of behavior and a mentality that seem strange and repelling to European concepts. One would have to trace them back in part to traditions and ideas that are still in effect, particularly in the Asian regions of Russia, according to which women, like jewelry, valuables, and the contents of apartments and armories, are the rightful bounty of the victor. ... The fact that Soviet soldiers of Asian origin distinguished themselves by a particular ferocity and lack of moderation confirms that certain strains of the Asian mentality contributed substantially to these outbreaks. 36

The notion that European Soviet soldiers conducted themselves better, on the whole, than Asian Soviet soldiers is not borne out by the several volumes of documentation that follow this analysis, and the ministry would surely have objected to a similar racial explanation for German atrocities—including widespread rape—in the East. 37 Especially notable in the present context, however, is how such an understanding of the rapes encouraged West Germans to recall the defeat in the East as the violation of Western civilization by a brutal Asian culture.

This rhetorical opposition of a violent East against a civilized West predated the Federal Republic by decades, even centuries. The reiteration of this opposition after the war, however, served the emergence of a discourse that insisted on the necessity of the German war effort. According to this narrative, the Western Allies had refused to recognize that the Germans had been on their side, protecting the West against the onslaught of the East. As the Wehrmacht had defended Western civilization against the "Red Flood," the Western Allies had stubbornly insisted on unconditional surrender. The results were the perpetration of "Asiatic horrors" on the East Germans and expanded Soviet power in postwar Europe. Not only German civilians, but Western civilization and all its carriers became the victims of the war in this retelling. 38

Ironically, as rape became a metaphor for German victimization, the government declined to recognize rape by the enemy or occupier as a form of injury deserving compensation. Insisting that rape was not an injury unless lasting physical damage had resulted and that children were the natural consequence of sexual intercourse, the Ministry of Labor turned down repeated petitions to recognize raped women under the Law to Aid Victims of War, or at least to contribute to the support of children who had resulted from the rapes. 39 Only in the late 1950s did the Finance Ministry award limited support to a small number of raped women. 40

As the experience of rape was degendered to apply to the nation, the state denied the possibility of a uniquely female experience of victimization by rape.

Conventions of delicacy provided a refuge for minimizing women’s rape experiences at the linguistic level and instead describing a national experience. The euphemism "Asian atrocities" typically replaced the word rape in the 1950s, thus substituting a racialized term for a gendered one. 41 As late as 1985, the head of the Christian Democratic faction to the Bundestag feigned inability to call the wartime rape of German women by its name in a speech to the Federation of German Expellees: "I ... express my solidarity ... with you, the expellees. With two million of your fellow countrymen who lost their lives while fleeing or being driven out of their homes and with twelve million who, at the end of the Second World War, lost nearly everything but their lives—their homes, their property, their families and their honor—I do not wish to describe what was done to the women." Three paragraphs later, however, the speaker proved capable of referring to the "rape" of a gender-neutral Europe by the Soviet Union: "The purpose of a constructive Ostpolitik by the free Europeans and the free West cannot be to legitimize the rape and division of Europe." 42

Stories of wartime victimization of women thus provided one important source for a popular, even official, version of German history that offered a sympathetic description of recent history. Allied bombers and the Nazi party could serve as the villains in tales of wartime victimization, but memories of flight and rape had an especially profound resonance in the formative years of the Federal Republic. In the context of the Cold War, stories of flight and rape helped to define a West Germanness that was based in large part on the threat from the East. But whatever the origin of Germans’ suffering, as stories of victimization came to constitute national memory, they functioned even less effectively in describing a female experience.

The next chapter of women’s history would be represented as one of heroism, sacrifice, and hard work. It, too, would provide material for the establishment of a positive national identity at the expense of fully recognizing women’s unique experience. This strand of West German identity, however, depended less on the existence of an enemy “other” and more on a positive understanding of West Germany’s human resources and economic success.

Upon the military collapse, Germany was left with a marked "surplus of women" (Frauentüberschuß). In October 1946, there were seven million more women than men in occupied Germany. The demographic imbalance was particularly stark among young adults: for every thousand men in the Western zones between the ages of 25 and 30, there were nearly 1700 women of the same age. 43 With men scarce, women pulled their families and German society through extraordinarily lean years, times so difficult they were called the “hunger years.” Millions had already lost their homes to bombing raids, and the homeless population grew by millions more as refugees poured in. The lack of food supplies was catastrophic. In May 1945, Berlin housewives could claim a daily ration of 11 ounces (300 grams) of bread, 14 ounces (400 grams) of potatoes, 1 ounce (30 grams) of grain, 2/3 ounce (20 grams) of meat, and 1/4 ounce (7 grams) of fat—a ration card popularly nicknamed the "Ascension pass." This starving, homeless population went on to face the coldest winter in generations in 1946–47. Thus harsh times persisted: in November 1947, the average weight for women was 93.5 pounds; for men, 92.3 pounds. 44 With few means for obtaining basic necessities, and with even those necessities in appallingly short supply, women almost literally had to make something out of nothing in order to feed themselves and their dependents.

They did so largely without men's help. Few men were around; they were either casualties of war or still in prison camp. Those who were present were often wounded, too weak to work, or psychologically shattered by their wartime and prison experiences. Amidst fantastic shortages, women worked the black market,
stood in endless food lines, trekked to the countryside to barter away their last belongings, made bread out of acorns and soap out of ash, stole coal from trains and wood from off-limits forests, and mended their families’ threadbare clothes when even needles were a precious commodity on the black market.

Just as women’s reproductive work became both more complicated and more vital for survival, a new, powerful symbol of women at the workplace emerged: the “woman of the rubble,” who cleaned away the piles of stone and brick that constituted Germany’s urban landscape. Rubble clearance was not an occupation women entered enthusiastically. The work was not only strenuous, it was dead-end. Women were prohibited from entering apprenticeships that might have allowed them to advance in the construction industry. Since volunteers were lacking, occupation authorities assigned men and women who had belonged to Nazi organizations, as well as dependents of those implicated, to work removing rubble. When this proved an inadequate labor pool, the authorities instituted mandatory labor for the general population. In addition to those performing compulsory labor, another group volunteered for the task, not for the poor pay, but for the better ration cards they received as heavy laborers. However mixed their motivations, women set to the backbreaking work of moving, cleaning, and sorting building material for reuse—the first step of Germany’s physical reconstruction. Women of the rubble peopled the streets of many German cities; they constituted five to ten percent of employed women in Berlin.45

Women of the rubble became a central symbol of the era.46 A single image linked women in rags and ruined cities on the one hand, Germans’ resilience and the promise of reconstruction on the other. The survival of ordinary German families and the recovery of Germany as a whole were united in one figure: a woman who devoted her days to cleaning bricks and her evenings to feeding her family. Occupation authorities emphasized the link between the Nazi past and the current devastation by assigning former Nazis and their families to rubble clearance; initially, women of the rubble endured the occasional taunt, “Nazi Broads” (Nazi-Weiber).47 Nevertheless, the woman of the rubble quickly came to suggest a story that began with the bombing of German cities, focused on terrible hardships, and promised renewal by the cooperative efforts of ordinary Germans. Nazi politics, aggression, and war crimes provided only the haziest of backdrops for this story. The woman of the rubble had no questionable past: she came from nowhere to clean up the mess others had left behind. In the words of a 1946 pamphlet:

There is no picture that characterizes the results of a catastrophic politics more impressively and graphically, but at the same time more movingly, than these uniting women working in the rubble in all weather. Of all the boasting promises that were once made to them, nothing remains but rubble and piles of stone, which they must literally clear away with their own hands so life can go on. They do not hide their disappointment over their fate, but whatever may happen, they want to put these hard times behind them.48

Rather than revisit the past, the women of the rubble wanted to “put hard times behind them” so “life could go on”—an attractive idea for most Germans.49 Popular metaphors such as “ruins of the soul” and “internal devastation,” which linked the physical destruction of Germany with the psychological destruction of Germans, made cleaning up even more essential to Germany’s renewal. “Ruins are a general phenomenon,” wrote a contributor to a social work journal in 1949. “Just as concretely as they lie on the street corners, so are they present inside people.”50

In addition to her lack of association with the past, the woman of the rubble had no complicated future. This became important as the mythology of the woman of the rubble developed in the 1950s—the decade of the “economic miracle.” During the 1950s, West Germany’s “economic miracle” became more than the measure of its recovery from the war. Given the difficulty of building a national identity on the troubled grounds of Germany’s past as well as the widespread disinterest in the political foundations of the new state, collective economic success became an important basis for the establishment of a distinctly West German national identity.51 By the mid-1950s, however, it was clear that this recovery had had a price tag, albeit one to which few objected. West Germany’s revival had required the quick denazification of technical experts, and it had involved an alliance with the West that some blamed for making reunification with East Germany impossible. Recovery had included rearmament and participation in military exercises, and it demanded an attitude of humility and gratitude toward the United States for Marshall Plan aid. But the phoenix had begun to rise from the ashes with the women of the rubble—women who projected an image of political neutrality, equality in sacrifice, and an ability to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.52 The woman of the rubble provided a symbol of rebuilding on a humble scale, innocent of the disputes that would mark later stages of reconstruction in the Federal Republic.

The woman of the rubble did not share the fate of the victim of rape; she did not disappear in order that a nationalized, genderless version of her experience might take her place. In fact, visual images of the woman of the rubble became a cliché, gracing countless dust jackets and journalistic references to the era (figure 1.4). At the same time, the appealing simplicity of the woman of the rubble could be removed from her person and could represent not just women’s extraordinary efforts but an entire era in West Germany’s history. Consider this idealization of the immediate postwar period and the physical work of reconstruction by a Social Democrat who served in the Bundestag during the 1960s: “After the total war and total defeat, we began to clean up the devastated landscape, to organize the rebuilding. . . . Back then, Conservative and Social Democrat, Communist and Liberal, Catholic and Protestant sat together without examining each other suspiciously, without mistrust.”53 Histories of the occupation era hardly support this portrayal of harmonious political life, however. Despite some promising developments, such as the establishment of an ecumenical Christian party to replace political Catholicism, divisions between Christian conservatives, Socialists, and Communists were bitter. The parliamentarian’s reference to cleaning up the devastated landscape, however, suggests that his mental image was not one of the smoke-filled rooms of political meetings, which were filled by men. Rather, his reference is to the scene on the streets, where women dominated.

Women of the rubble thus came to personify West Germany’s reconstruction. They lay at the heart of a national identity that emphasized hard work and eco-
nomic success, and they implied that 1945 was the “zero hour” that marked the beginning of the nation’s history. Women found themselves unable, however, to translate memories of their hard work during Germany’s hour of need into fairer treatment in the labor market. Memories of women’s heroic role in feeding their families and cleaning up the bombed cities had greater potential to contribute to improved status for women than did images of women as victims or as fraternizers; thus their failure to have this effect is particularly telling. The adoption of the woman of the rubble as a national symbol served at best to compensate former women of the rubble for continued economic and legal discrimination.

With the 1948 currency reform came a sharp rise in unemployment. Firms laid off workers, as labor paid with the new Deutschemark was much more expensive than that paid in the old currency. At the same time, millions who had supported themselves via the underground economy suddenly needed legitimate work. Registered male unemployment rose 42.5 percent and that of women 70 percent in the first month after currency reform.54 But women, whose ability to juggle paid employment with extended household responsibilities and underground work had made them heroines during the “hunger years,” now found their applications for unemployment compensation rejected on the grounds that their presumed household responsibilities made them unavailable to the labor market.55 As a result, jobless women found it much more difficult to collect unemployment compensation than did men.56

As the new state was formed, women found that their extraordinary efforts did not constitute grounds to alleviate discrimination against working women. The position of the Social Democrats and the Communists that the principle of equal pay for equal work should now be anchored in the West German constitution (the “Basic Law”) failed to gain a majority.57 The courts upheld separate women’s and men’s wage and salary classifications until 1955 and the thinly disguised alternative of “light” and “heavy” classifications thereafter. Age limits excluded adult women from practically all vocational training and from much employment at strikingly young ages. Women could have little hope that their government would challenge age discrimination: the federal ministry charged with addressing the problem turned down applicants for typing positions because they exceeded the cutoff age of twenty-five.58

As West Germany enjoyed its “economic miracle” in the 1950s, unemployment and poverty among middle-aged women reached critical proportions. In response, organizations of female employees did more than protest the general unfairness of age cutoffs and unequal pay. They also pointed out that such limitations hurt precisely those women who had contributed their labor during Germany’s hardest years.59 To no avail. Narratives that linked women’s hard work during the hunger years to a present in which the same women faced discrimination on the labor market did not resonate outside the circles of women’s rights and women’s labor advocates. The Woman of the Rubble became a profound symbol of West Germany’s economic reconstruction; but the women of the rubble themselves faced brutal discrimination in the labor force that fueled the recovery.

If the woman of the rubble provided a heroic, constructive identity for West Germans, other parts of women’s occupation-era history were less positively construed. Most subject to criticism was women’s sexual behavior: their fleeting relationships on the refugee trail, their cohabitation with men while they awaited word of their husbands, their use of prostitution as a strategy for survival. To many Germans, exploding rates of illegitimacy, sexually transmitted disease, and divorce indicated a terrible crisis.60

The harshest criticism, however, was reserved for women who associated with occupation forces. The “Yank’s sweetheart” (Ami-liebchen)—the “fraternizer” in
the U.S. zone, where fraternization was probably most common—came to be as deeply associated with these years as the woman of the rubble. Like the woman of the rubble, the Yank’s sweetheart eventually represented something much larger than herself. Unlike the woman of the rubble, however, the Yank’s sweetheart was no heroine. She became the symbol of Germany’s moral decline, a symbol that implied that the decline occurred with the collapse of, rather than during, Nazi rule.

When the Western occupation armies lifted their prohibitions on fraternization, a lively social culture featuring young German women and Allied soldiers, particularly Americans, began to flourish.61 By December 1945, most U.S. veterans—many of whom still had some reservations about Germans—were released from their duties. They were replaced by young men with no wartime experience, little bitterness against Germans, and eagerness for adventures abroad. Contact with German women became a routine part of their lives. Army investigators estimated that fifty to ninety percent of American troops “fraternized” with German women in 1946; one in eight married men had entered a relatively stable relationship in Germany.62

Women who formed liaisons with occupation soldiers sought emotional companionship at least as eagerly as they sought economic benefits. Occupation soldiers, quite simply, constituted a significant portion of the young, male population, and they often seemed more appealing partners than the demanding, wounded, and emotionally scarred German veterans returning from war. Insofar as women considered the economic advantages of relationships with foreigners, their behavior was consistent with traditions of women seeking suitors who could provide financial security. Relationships with the former enemy could be just as exciting, or just as drab, as relationships with Germans. But this perspective on fraternization would, at best, become material for “counter memory.” Few Germans who were not involved in such relationships considered them anything other than prostitution, and Germans quickly adopted the American nickname for fraternizers, “Veronica Dankeschina” (Veronica Thank-You-Very-Much, whose initials were “VD”).63

A “fraternizer,” who slept with the former enemy and sometimes crossed racial or religious boundaries, put her reputation at risk. In the discourse of occupation-era Germany, however, a fraternizer did not just prostitute herself; she stabbed her entire people in the back. She made a mockery of the sacrifices of German soldiers, now returning wounded and emotionally scarred. Forty years later a German veteran claimed still to be haunted by the words of an American serviceman: “The German soldier fought for six years; the German woman only five minutes.”64

Other Germans who had suffered during the war and its aftermath also found grounds to resent fraternizing women. Germany’s umbrella social work organization calculated the cost of treating STDs in Hessen in 1947 and duly informed its members that the sum could have paid the pensions of 17,800 war widows and orphans for a year.65 As fraternizers seemed to mock the sufferings of veterans and victims of war, contemporaries often felt that young women were sullying what they still believed was the good name of the German people. A twenty-two-year-old student and former Nazi wrote of fraternizers in 1946: “Have the German people no honor left? . . . One can lose a war, one can be humiliated, but one need not dirty one’s honor oneself!”66 Like many of her contemporaries, this young woman concluded that the sexual conduct of many of her peers—and not the previous regime—had cost the nation its honor.

During the military occupation, the entire German nation stood in the international spotlight, accused of an utter collapse of moral conscience. The Nuremberg trials were only the most prominent of many forums in which the world discussed German crimes. In this context, the appearance en masse of a familiar symbol of moral decline—the sexually promiscuous woman—made it easier for Germans to avoid thinking about much more troubling characters: the patriotic civil servant or soldier who had committed crimes against humanity in the name of his nation, or the upright housewife who had dutifully reported nonconformist neighbors to an unforgiving system of justice.

In the American zone, the scandal of sexual promiscuity and the insult to Germans who had sacrificed a great deal coincided with fraternizers’ apparent embrace of American material wealth and cultural modernism—wearing American nylon stockings, dancing to American music, and so on. This reinforced fraternization’s impact as a symbol of German decline. Even in the Weimar era, many Germans had feared that American consumer goods and cultural exports posed a threat to German culture and traditions. The extraordinary allure of this threat—American exports found enthusiastic markets in Germany—made it all the more dangerous.67 And although the Nazis had tried especially hard against American modernism, fear of American cultural imperialism was hardly limited to Nazi circles. Indeed, to many anti-Nazis as well as to Germans for whom Nazism had lost its appeal during the war, the challenge of the postwar era would be to gain recognition for what was good in German culture at the very moment when the international community busily sought aspects of German tradition that could help to explain genocide and military aggression. Germany’s military and political loss must not be compounded by a loss of positive cultural identity.68

Yet preserving, or restoring, a German culture worthy of admiration seemed an uphill battle. Not only did the Americans have all the money as well as legal control over German cultural production in their zone, but there was tremendous demand on the German side for things American. This was hardly limited to fraternizers’ legendary desire for stockings. American cigarettes, to name only one item, were not only a treasured luxury item but also black market currency, which meant that everybody wanted them. Nevertheless, ordinary black market consumers could believe that fraternizers were taking pleasure in what, for them, was a bitter necessity: not only acknowledging American military and political victory, but also bowing down before American commercial success.

Thus the popular obsession with fraternizers did more than shift attention from violent racial and political crime to sexual misconduct. It also redefined the national terms of Germany’s moral decline and, by implication, the possibilities for rehabilitation. Denazification and war crimes trials focused on a phenomenon that was not only homegrown but also associated with Germany’s years of greatest power and an ideological insistence on a unique national character. Although much
of the machinery of denazification was eventually turned over to the Germans, foreign control of the initial stages of the process made clear that rehabilitation, to some extent, would have to come from outside.

Fraternization pointed to a much more appealing relationship between Germanness, moral decay, and the possibilities for rehabilitation. The years when Germans had most insisted on their national uniqueness (and greatness) were not Germany’s low-water mark; they were, rather, the “good old days,” as evidenced by Germany’s strength, confidence—and sexual order.69 If fraternization symbolized Germany’s decline, then that decline was associated with a loss rather than with a surfeit of national strength. Rehabilitation would not result from excising what was uniquely German and learning from foreigners, especially the Americans. Rather, it would depend on a reassertion of German independence, uniqueness—even sexual, racial, and cultural purity. The official, international discourse of Nuremberg, which certainly shaped foreign readings of the relationship between German national identity and a specifically German loss of decency, was opposed by an unofficial, domestic, and popular discourse of fraternization, which described a very different relationship between Germanness and the loss of moral bearings.

This meant that statements like those of the twenty-two-year-old student, who blamed sexually delinquent women for “bringing down” their decent contemporaries, coexisted with a more complicated discourse in which fraternizers symbolized a larger degradation of Germany brought about by loss of sovereignty. On first glance, Erwin Oehl’s 1946 painting, *Fraternization*, seems to portray a villainous fraternizer and a victimized veteran (figure 1.5). The grinning young woman cruelly kicks the haggard veteran, who is already precariously balanced on a crutch. The woman’s leg, which unites sexuality and violence, takes the central position; the light coloring of the veteran’s and woman’s face, as well as of the woman’s sweater, make them stand out against the dark, indistinct background. But this interaction is in fact the making of a third character: the occupation soldier, painted in darker colors and positioned in the background, who manipulates the young woman like a puppet. Even the woman’s grin, so painful to the veteran, is only a mask, veiling her own distress. The sexual disorder is real enough, but it is only the tip of the iceberg: it is symptomatic of a much broader landscape of misery resulting from foreign occupation.

As West Germany emerged from the hunger years, several developments seemed to confirm the link between fraternization and loss of national sovereignty. The currency reform resulted in the quick decline of mass prostitution as a survival strategy.70 It also set into motion a series of events that in less than a year resulted in the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus in retrospect the association of fraternization with lack of national self-determination was cemented. Fraternization’s utility as a symbol for the larger degradation of foreign occupation was confirmed in the popular culture of the early Federal Republic. In a passage from a novel set during the occupation, which was an immediate bestseller upon its publication in 1955, a young prostitute who serves an American clientele contemplates suicide:

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Figure 1.5: Erwin Oehl, *Fraternization*, 1946. The fraternizer kicks the wounded German veteran; she in turn is manipulated by the American. Promiscuous female sexuality and foreign occupation combine to create an amoral order. The solution: restore both the national and the sexual order. Courtesy of the Münchner Stadtmuseum.
She felt no shame about being a whore; she was ashamed that everyone seemed to be a whore. . . . Whenever she walked past the PX, there were women outside, waiting for an obliging American. Whores. In the "Mieke" [a bar] the waiters would keep the Germans waiting but would dawdle about like wessels as soon as an American bawled at them. Whores. When ration cards were issued at the food office the officials would snap at the men and women who had queued up there for hours, but they would jump up obsequiously as soon as a conqueror entered the room. Whores. Sometimes she listened to her father's conversations with the neighbors when they assured each other and themselves that they had never been Nazis. Whores. The Americans who came to visit her would dodge along the walls when they left. Whores. And on the walls of the houses a new inscription was more and more frequently being chalked up: "Yankee Whore." Who then was a Yankee Whore, Inge wondered, when everybody was a whore?71

The degradation of the German landscape takes many forms: German women offer sex to American men, German men scramble to please American men. German men lie to themselves about their Nazi past; even American men hide in a cowardly manner after their visits to prostitutes. Prostitution is a metaphor for the entire society in which Inge lives, and a narrative that would sing her out for blame is rejected. As a prostitute, however, Inge does retain a certain symbolic value and, fittingly enough, her character is killed off shortly after the currency reform. The fraternizer Inge is buried with the prostituted society she represents.

Nevertheless, although Inge symbolizes the moral decline of her society, she is not to blame for this decline. Rather, foreign occupation is. In the final meeting of most of the book's central characters, an American officer who is one of the moral anchors of the tale admits that the military occupation was hypocritical and corrupting. "The occupation was a dictatorship, even if in democratic garb. . . . We arrived here with the Bible in one hand and the knout in the other. . . . We believed ourselves to be missionaries, but we did not love those under our charge. . . . Our efforts were marked by the motto: 'and unless you are willing I shall have to use force.'" When a German in the circle remarks that Hitler had employed a similar motto, the American responds that Hitler hadn't claimed democracy—and he hadn't been a foreigner.72 Neither the officer nor the author of the book are apologists for Nazism; this comparison of Hitler and the occupation government—to Hitler's apparent advantage—is thus astonishing. The message is clear: West Germany must attain national sovereignty and the Yanks must go home.

Most Germans experienced the occupation as the time of their greatest physical hardship. With the phenomena of fraternization and mass prostitution, the occupation became, in the popular imagination, not only the material and political, but also the moral nadir of recent German history.73 Popular support for official attempts to "confront the past"—and for the government's choices of which "past" to confront—suggest that by the early 1950s most West Germans felt more traumatized by the years 1945–48 than by the years 1933–45. The young West German government, dominated by Christian conservatives who insisted upon the need for "moral renewal," neither rushed to make indemnity payments to victims of National Socialism nor was troubled by old Nazis' political prominence and readmission to the civil service.74 Instead, when focusing on issues they described as moral, the ruling parties responded to the legacy of the occupation era by working hard to "reconstruct the family" and to reinforce conservative sexual mores.75 Of all the striking images of women during the "crisis years," that of the fraternizer thus translated most directly into official attempts to shape the situation of women. Many political players argued that women's demonstrated competence, the demographic imbalance between the sexes, and the numerous single mothers constituted grounds for improving the status of women in family law. This position was defeated. The governing coalition countered that the apparent breakdown of sexual mores demanded a conservative family policy. In the founding years of the Federal Republic, the inferior status of illegitimate children was written into the Basic Law, husbands' legal advantage over their wives was confirmed, and discrimination against families with few children (including most female-headed households) in social programs was reaffirmed. Municipalities were even permitted to restrict the movements of registered, law-abiding prostitutes, a practice that had been outlawed during Weimar but re instituted during the Nazi period. As victims and as rebuilders, women's symbolic value was positive, and it was transferred to West Germany as a nation. Women, however, would reap no material benefits from their unique burdens and contributions as women, although they shared in the improved standard of living that characterized West Germany as a whole.76 As fraternizers, by contrast, women's symbolic value was negative. Although certain universalized lessons emerged from the history of fraternization—lessons emphasizing the need for national self-determination—the most tangible response to memories of fraternization reflected unambiguously that this was women's history.

The high profile of women during Germany's collapse and occupation—whether as saints or as sinners—was thus crucial in shaping West German national identity. Women did not only offer sympathetic images of victimization and rebuilding, generalizable images that provided alternatives to representations of mili taristic, genocidal Germans. They also prompted a discourse about a decline in sexual morality and the loss of national sovereignty that helped to deflect attention away from troubling moral questions about the Nazi past.

These popularized memories of women's pasts did not add up to a neat whole, a tidy package that equaled West Germans' national identity. The history from which these memories evolved was itself one of multiple identities: the same woman might have been the pitied victim of rape one month, a despised fraternizer the next. Furthermore, these aspects of women's history addressed different concerns during West Germany's formative years, and they worked in tandem with other factors shaping a new national identity. Stories that associated moral degeneracy with military occupation suggested that renewal could come only with national sovereignty. Generalized images of German victimhood countered accusations of German perfidy; reminders of rape at the hands of the Soviets helped to formulate a West Germanness that opposed all things Eastern. Recollections of rubble clearance, by contrast, associated West German well-being not with mem-
bership in the Western alliance but rather with hard work by members of the national community.

Although varied, these ways of connecting memories of the "crisis years" to the situation of West Germans in the 1950s did share something: they all reflected crucial concerns of the early Federal Republic. But these concerns did not remain constant. Many elements of West German national identity and West Germans' ways of "coming to terms with their past" were negotiated anew with the student movement of the late 1960s and the Federal Republic's turn to the left in the 1970s. Among these was the link between Cold War hostilities and the tendency to focus on German wounds suffered rather than German wounds inflicted during the war. The challenge to this link reshaped both public policy and official memory as Chancellor Willy Brandt, a Social Democrat, reconsidered foreign relations, instituting Ostpolitik, and the burden of historical guilt, kneeling before the Warsaw ghetto monument in 1970.

The first challenge to the universalization of women's history, however, came in the early and mid-1980s, when the feminist movement had matured adequately to produce a significant historical literature. Feminist explorations of the "hour of the women," which drew heavily on oral histories, reclaimed for women crucial aspects of Germany's mid-century history. In so doing, they illuminated counter memories specific to women. Bearing titles such as "The Forgotten Work of Women in the German Postwar Period" and "Housework as Survival Work," feminist writings pointed out that histories of the hard work of "Germans" following the war obscured the extent to which that work had been performed by women. In describing the bombings, evacuations, and flight, they insisted, in the words of an interview subject that were chosen as a chapter heading for a major work, that "we [women] lived with the danger" (emphasis added), thus reclaiming the civilian experience for women. A groundbreaking article on the rapes demonstrated that as Germany lost the war, women had been "doubly defeated," targets not only of military but also of sexual violence. Even the previously despised fraternizer was reclaimed and assigned a uniquely female pioneering role that had been forgotten as friendship with the Western Allies became a foundation of postwar life. "The first human contact with the Allies," readers were reminded, "was via us women" (emphasis added). In short, this literature, which was both scholarly and popular, attempted to reappropriate memories of women's experiences for women.

In the context of the feminist movement, this effort served two functions. First, it challenged a historiography that alternately overlooked women and discussed them on the basis of negative stereotype. In addition, it contributed to a new narrative strategy that, by retelling German women's past, struggled with the dominant female identities that had emerged since 1945—identities that troubled feminists. By noting that only women's hard work had made possible all Germans' survival, for example, younger feminists were able to pose questions of profound importance to their struggle: Why had the Federal Republic not been established along more sexually egalitarian lines? Why were the gendered roles of the 1950s so conservative? Why had their own mothers, who had proven their competence and independence, then embraced a domestic lifestyle that they, the daughters, would experience as a straitjacket?

At the same time that the new feminist historiography posed troubling questions, it also suggested promising alternatives. Women had demonstrated their strength during the hunger years; female victims had recognized the devastating effects of Nazism, militarism, and sexism; many women of the late 1940s had rejected traditional limits on their sexual expression. This knowledge provided an intellectual, emotional, and rhetorical basis for calls to rethink the gender roles that had become normative in the Federal Republic.

These images gained a hearing wide enough to allow them to enter mainstream—even official—discussions about the Nazi period and its aftermath. In his speech on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war, the West German president, Richard von Weizäcker, gave special thanks to women, drawing on images of victimhood and rebuilding (but not sexual promiscuity) and noting that women's contributions had typically been forgotten:

World history forgets their suffering, their renunciation, and their quiet strength all too easily. They worried and worked, carried and protected human life. They mourned fallen fathers and sons, husbands, brothers, and friends. In the darkest years, they preserved the light of humanity from extinction. At the end of the war, without prospects of a secure future, they were the first to lend their hands to place one stone upon another, the women of the rubble in Berlin and all over... Because of the war, many women remained alone and spent their lives in loneliness. But if the people did not crack inside under the destruction, the devastation, the horrors and the inhumanity, if they slowly came back to themselves after the war, then we owe it first of all to our women.

By enabling women to claim a laudatory past, the new historiography became an important source of identity for West German feminists.

At the same time, efforts to read women back into postwar history challenged certain strands of West German national identity, a national identity that had been built, in part, on the universalization of experiences that were now being reclaimed for women alone. If women were raped by men—and not Germany by the Soviet Union—this had implications for West Germans' ability to think of their nation as victimized (and continually threatened anew) by the superpower to the east. This was doubly the case if a feminist discussion of rape demanded that increased attention be paid to German men's rape of Eastern women during the war. If fraternization had been a form of emancipation for women unwilling to be bound by German men's demands—and not a moral decline associated with foreign influence—then this implied a reconsideration of the "moral order" of the 1950s, in which the reconstruction of the family had been linked to a recovery of national strength.

Even for feminists, however, such narratives of women's experience could be troubling as well as liberating. They emerged in the context of a feminist exploration of the Nazi era, an exploration that emphasized misogynist population policies, the restriction of young women's horizons, discriminatory employment policies, and women's resistance. To feminists who combined their abhorrence of sexism with criticism of German unwillingness to take responsibility for some of
the most horrible crimes in human history, the new historiography seemed
dangerously apologetic. It appeared to describe German women persistently as vic-
tims and heroines, and never as perpetrators.87 To be sure, women’s history artic-
ulated a new dimension of the perfidy of the Nazi regime: it was deeply sexist as
well as racist and militaristic. Nevertheless, this historiography seemed to fit in all
too well with a troubling new wave of representations of the lives of “ordinary peo-
ple” during the Nazi years, representations in which “ordinary people” experi-
enced good times and bad, but in any case were governed by forces beyond their
control.88 Profound suspicion of this trend in the historiography increased as
English-speaking feminist historians, who more often identified with refugees
from and persecutors of Nazism than with women of the rubble, became a signi-
ficant presence in the debate. The narratives offered by West German feminists had
barely made a significant impact on discourses of the past when they were roundly
challenged. That this challenge came not from antifeminists but from feminist
scholars attested to the dynamism of feminist scholarship, but this was small com-
fort to feminists who found their explorations of the costs of patriarchy and Nazism
countered by accusations of apologism. A second generation of feminist histories
thus emerged, emphasizing German women’s contributions to Nazi state and so-
ciety. The bitterness of the ensuing dispute echoed that of the almost contempo-
raries’ Debates and served as a reminder that this was not an ivory-tower
matter.89 The battle for German women’s past was not only a reexamination of
chapters of women’s past that had been universalized to apply to West Germany
as a whole—and thus a reinterpretation of a national history. Once joined, the
battle was also one for the identity of West German women and feminists.

The history of memories of women’s experience during Germany’s “crisis years”
shows that, in considering social memory, we need more than an awareness of the
distinctions between counter, popular, and official memory. We also need to un-
derstand their interconnections. First, these interconnections help to explain the
internal dynamics of social memory. Counter memories of a subordinate group, for
example, might evolve into popular or official memories of a dominant culture if
their group specificity can be reinterpreted to communicate a message with some
resonance for the larger population. Counter memories of women’s history of rape
gave way to popular and official memories of a degendered German history of
rape. Counter memories of relationships between German women and American
GI’s, by contrast, were not degendered, nor did they give way to a popular or pub-
lic history of good relations between Germans and Americans in general. Instead,
they were demonized to describe relationships devoid of moral integrity, still gen-
dered but bearing a symbolic value for understanding the demise of Germany as a
whole.

Such shifts in the “location” of memory are significant, and studies that focus
on official monuments or popular culture or counter memory run the risk of sys-
tematically missing large parts of the story. This is all the more so because shifts
in location do not follow a clear chronological sequence, with one “location” re-
placing another. Counter memories of ordinary relationships between German
women and occupation soldiers coexisted with popular memories of fraternizers
as the most obdurate symptom of a degraded society. Counter memories of a female
civilian life in the endangered cities coexisted with popular memories of cities in
flames that described a genderless Germany victimized by war. No single blue-
print describes the ways memories shift their location or when and how different
memories of the same history can coexist in multiple locations, serving different
functions in each.

The way that memories function in varying locations instead depends on the
second aspect of interconnections among forms of memory illustrated here: their
relationship to larger social and political problems. In the case examined here, two
such problems both played a role in the evolution of social memory and were re-
solved, at least partially and temporarily, by shifts in the location of certain mem-
ories. The first was the formation of a legitimate national identity in the aftermath
of Nazism and in the multiple contexts of the Cold War, the economic miracle, and
the desire to regain national sovereignty. The second was the distribution of power
and privilege between the sexes in light of women’s prominence during the “hour
of the women.” Through memories of women during the “crisis years,” the history
of women’s status in the Federal Republic and the development of a distinct West
German national identity were intertwined.

Whether memories of the woman of the rubble would contribute to increased
status for women or a positive image for West Germany, for example, could not
be determined by the image itself: it was open to multiple interpretations and uses.
Instead, the prospect of unemployed men in a poor economy worked against the
transformation of the women of the rubble into a population of well-paid and well-
respected working women. Thus the woman of the rubble became a symbol rather
than a member of the labor force. As a symbol, however, the woman of the rubble
was not merely reactive. Once the economic miracle was under way, she assisted
the formation of a legitimate national identity built on economic success. With
the woman of the rubble, the “economic miracle” could trace its origins to a time prior
to the Allied-initiated currency reform of June 1948, the Marshall Plan, or the
Korea boom. According to the history implied by the woman of the rubble, the
economic miracle had begun with “zero hour” and the hard work of Germans, who
pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. And as a cultural symbol, the woman of
the rubble’s message about women’s work was as powerful as her message about
Germans’ work and had tangible results for attitudes regarding women’s paid
labor. Women worked only under the most terrible of circumstances, according to
the story of the woman of the rubble. Their contributions in those times were laud-
able, but no woman in her right mind would want to return to such times, and no
society that wanted to treat its women well would promote women’s work if this
was what women’s work meant. Understanding the evolution of memories of the
woman of the rubble can help us to understand how those memories shaped both
national identity and women’s status.

Although this chapter has explored a case study, certain patterns may apply
more generally. One is the universalization of histories specific to subpopulations
in cases where those histories offer a positive identity to the whole. In the first
decade after the Second World War, the identity of victim was appealing to West Germans; women’s forms of victimization were especially fitting to the political context of the Cold War and the physical environment of destroyed cities. Likewise, a rags-to-riches story was attractive, and the woman of the rubble offered a version of this story that minimized the importance of the outside benefactor. Memories of fraternization, by contrast, offered scant material for the development of a positive identity for the larger community. Accordingly, they were more narrowly universalized to apply to the nation only as it lay subordinate to outside domination.

A second pattern is the relationship between the social position of the group to which certain memories initially refer and the extent to which the memories continue to have implications for that group. In the context of a culture that subordinate women, women were not able to profit materially or politically from their original “ownership” of images of victimhood and heroic rebuilding. They did, however, pay tangible penalties for memories of sexual disorder.

Finally, the feminist-inspired reexamination of memories of women’s experience during the crisis years illustrates both the fluid nature of social memory and the implications of this fluidity for national identity and social hierarchies. Feminist-initiated challenges to West German collective memory reflected changes in national identity and social hierarchies, as they emerged in the dual context of leftist challenges to West German national identity and feminist efforts to alter gender relations. Moreover, once under way, they helped to shape the further development of both phenomena.

This process will no doubt become yet more complex in coming years. Much has changed since the 1980s: the incorporation into the Federal Republic of the former Democratic Republic, which had a distinct narrative of the relationship between the Nazi era and East German national identity; the very process of unification, which has created its own discourses of victimization, rebuilding, and past moral failures; the divergent histories of women in the two German states; and the different lenses with which East and West German feminists view their pasts and contemporary situations. All call for renewed negotiation of national identity, feminist identity, social memory, and the German past.

Notes

1. A longer, more thoroughly referenced, version of this essay appeared in American Historical Review 101 (1996): 354–95; it is reprinted here with permission.


4. See, for example, Christian Graf von Krockow, Die Stunde der Frauen: Bericht aus Pommern 1944 bis 1947 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1988). On the use of the social-historical period 1943–48, see Martin Broschat, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, Hans Woller, eds., Von Stalin-
the rapes not culturally as Western civilization versus Eastern barbarity, but rather ideologically as Good versus Evil.


41. See, for example, Vertreiben, 61E; Lueddecke-Neurath, "Das Ende," 430.

42. Alfred Dregger, "For a Free Germany in a Free Europe," speech delivered to the Federation of German Expellees, Bonn, on 28 April 1985, in Ilya Levkov, ed., Bitter and Beyond: Encounters in American, German and Jewish History (New York: Shapolsky, 1987), 112.


44. Monthly Narrative Report for Land Hessen, November 1948 (trans.), Medical Division, Ministry of the Interior, Hessian State Ministry, Abt. 649 8/59–1/11, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (hereafter HHA). Men's health problems had been aggravated by their incarceration as prisoners of war. See Frank Biess's chapter in this volume.

45. Meyer and Schulze, Wie wir das alles geschaffen haben, 95.


61. Fraternization was most common in the American and British zones and least common in the Soviet zone (which never banned it); see also Norman Naimark, The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 92–96.


63. Veronika Dankeschön first appeared as a comic character in Stars and Stripes; comics including her initials were published on 9 and 20 July 1946.

64. The American veteran’s reference to the American soldier’s blackness—not quoted here—reflects Germans’ continuing anxieties about racial mixing; Hiether, 31. See also the chapters by Maria Höhn and Heide Fehrenbach in this volume.


70. On continuing “fraternization” and prostitution, see Maria Hoehn, “Glis, Veronikas, and Lucky Strikes: German Reactions to the American Military Presence in the Rhineland-Palatinate during the 1950s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995).


72. Habe, Off Limits, 432–33.


75. While memories of sexual promiscuity played an important role in the “reconstruction of the family,” they do not fully explain it; see Moeller, Protecting Motherhood.

76. References to women’s activities during the “crisis years” helped to attain a constitutional guarantee of equal rights for women. Moeller, Protecting Motherhood, 38–75; Antje Späth, Vielfältige Forderungen nach Gleichberechtigung und nur’ ein Ergebnis: Artikel 3 Absatz 2 GG,” in Freyer and Kuhn, eds., Das Schicksal, 112–69. Nevertheless, discriminatory family and labor law insured that women’s legal and material disadvantages persisted.


80. Meyer and Schulze, Wie wir das alles geschafft haben, 27. See also Gerda Szepszky, „Blitznadel. „Heldenmutter. „Kriegerwitwe!: Frauenleben im Zweiten Weltkrieg (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986).


82. Meyer and Schulze, Wie wir das alles geschafft haben, 67.


84. See note 5, as well as Heike Sanders-Brahms’s film, Deutschland Bleiche Mater, 1980; also the discussion of the film in Kaes, From “Hitler” to “Heimat,” 160.


Survivors of Totalitarianism

RETURNING POWS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF

MASCULINE CITIZENSHIP IN WEST GERMANY, 1945–1955

FRANK BIESS

Between 1945 and 1955, more than one million German POWs returned from captivity in the Soviet Union to West Germany. After having served as Hitler’s soldiers on the Eastern front where, as recent research indicates, many of them became bystanders, accomplices, and perpetrators of genocide, they faced a prolonged period of deprivation and forced labor in Soviet POW camps. While hundreds of thousands of sick POWs were released in the immediate postwar period, the bulk of German POWs were forced to contribute to the rebuilding of the Soviet Union through forced labor and did not return until the late 1940s and the first few months of 1950. The last 30,000 German POWs were convicted of war crimes by Soviet courts and were finally repatriated in two waves in 1953 and in 1955, the last ones after Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s visit to Moscow. When the mass of the POWs returned home during the late 1940s, they encountered a Heimat (homeland) that had radically changed since they had left it in order to fight the war on the Eastern front. Yet while the POWs met an environment that still bore the visible marks of total defeat, they also reentered a West German society that was undergoing a rapid transformation into a liberal-democratic and increasingly “Americanized” society.

This essay focuses on the way a changed and changing West German society received and treated returning POWs from the Soviet Union during the first postwar decade. By analyzing West German responses to returning POWs, the essay highlights the nature of West German society specifically as a postwar society. It seeks to demonstrate that as a result of the delayed return of the POWs, West German society was compelled to cope with the direct social, moral, and psychological consequences of the racial war of destruction on the Eastern front well into the second half of the 1950s.

The concept of “totalitarianism” was central to West German responses to returning POWs from the Soviet Union. Yet in these responses, totalitarianism did not primarily feature as an analytical concept signifying a political system. It rather appeared as a psychological force that threatened to destroy the moral and personal integrity of the individual. West German reactions to returning POWs consisted of two distinct yet related components: a process of disintegration through vic-
Chapter Three

Remembering the War in a Nation of Victims

WEST GERMAN PASTS IN THE 1950s

ROBERT G. MOELLER

In 1959, a decade after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, the philosopher Theodor Adorno sharply criticized West Germans for failing to accept responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism; he took them to task for their inability to "come to terms with the past." Adorno's own past no doubt contributed to his fears of the potential for the "continued existence of National Socialism within democracy" (original emphasis). National Socialism had driven him to the United States, a country where he never felt at home, and confronted him with a world of mass murder that brought him to reflect on the meanings of Auschwitz and the accident of his own survival. Through this lens, he critically assessed the processes of remembering and forgetting in the Federal Republic of the 1950s as West Germans sought to move beyond their "most recent history."

Fourteen years after the defeat of Germany, Adorno was angry and afraid because of the apparently willful inability of many of his fellow citizens to acknowledge their responsibility for the most devastating war in world history and a racist campaign to "cleanse" Europe of Jews and other groups considered subhuman. For Adorno, the past that West Germans should "come to terms with" was the past of a terrorist state they had brought to power, the past of Auschwitz and the mass destruction inflicted by Germans on the rest of Europe. Adorno concluded that "the much-cited work of the reprocessing of the past [Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit] has not yet succeeded, and has instead degenerated into its distorted image—empty, cold, forgetting."

Adorno's judgment has been echoed by countless others who have commented on the silence surrounding the past of National Socialism in the 1950s. Adorno's reflections, however, do not adequately capture how West Germans remembered and processed their "most recent history" (jüngste Vergangenheit) in the first decade and a half after the war's end; they came to terms with the past but not in ways that Adorno prescribed. There were many accounts of Germany's "most recent history" that circulated in the Federal Republic; remembering selectively was not the same as forgetting.

Although not in ways that satisfied Adorno, in the early 1950s many West Germans showed a willingness to acknowledge the horrors of what the first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, called the "saddest chapter" in their history. They took responsibility for making amends for crimes that had been committed "in the name
of the German people.” Defining the “path to Israel”—Adenauer’s pursuit of reparations for the state that had become home to many survivors of the German attempt to murder all European Jews—and programs to provide compensation for some others persecuted by the Nazi state established a crucial public policy arena in which West Germans accounted for the crimes of National Socialism.

In the debates over reparations for Israel, the German past was filled with faceless criminals who acted “in the name of the German people.” Pathbreaking work by Norbert Frei has shown how West Germans also explicitly addressed the past of National Socialism and war when they demanded that felons with faces—Nazis charged and sentenced by the Allies for particularly egregious offenses—be granted amnesty. They sought not to avoid or suppress the past but to rectify what they saw as the unduly harsh punishments imposed by the victorious Allies. Frei, Curt Garner, Ullrich Brochhagen, and James Diehl have also detailed West German attempts to rehabilitate and reintegrate former Nazis through legislative measures that transformed them into the victims of misguided postwar Allied denazification efforts, premised on assumptions of “collective guilt” and the equation of membership in the Nazi party with responsibility for the excesses of the Nazi state.

In other war stories from the late 1940s and 1950s, Germans were not innocent fellow travelers; rather, they had resisted the Nazi regime and provided evidence of another, better Germany even from within the depths of the Third Reich. West German discussions of the meaning and significance of resistance focused not on the opposition of Communists, a legacy claimed by those other Germans across the border in the East, but on the participants in the attempt on Hitler’s life on 20 July 1944, and groups with no specific political affiliation like the “White Rose.” This version of the last years of the war offered proof that Germans had demonstrated their eagerness to liberate themselves from the Nazi yoke before they were liberated by the Allies.

This article focuses on still other memories of National Socialism and the war’s end that were crucial to the self-definition of the Federal Republic. It examines how stories of the consequences of the war on the Eastern front became parts of public memory in the 1950s. In telling the story of the end of the war in the East, West Germans emphasized the stunning evidence of crimes committed not by Germans against others, but by others against Germans, crimes that, according to some contemporary accounts, were comparable to the crimes of Germans against the Jews. The most important representatives of German victimhood were the women, men, and children who left or were driven out of Eastern Europe by the Red Army at the war’s end and others in German uniform for whom the war ended with captivity in the Soviet Union. There were some 12 million expellees, nearly two-thirds of whom resided in the Federal Republic in 1950. According to contemporary sources, over 3 million German soldiers had spent some time in Soviet hands, and more than a million of them reportedly died in captivity. These groups were joined by their common experience of a direct confrontation with the Red Army; they were eyewitnesses to the war on the Eastern front, a front that moved steadily westward in late 1944 and early 1945. About the pasts of these victims, their relatives

Figure 3.1: In early summer 1943, some 52,000 German soldiers were marched through the streets of Moscow on their way into Soviet prisoner of war camps. According to contemporary estimates, over 3 million German soldiers spent some time in Soviet captivity. Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv Koblenz, 183/E0406/22/9.

and loved ones, and the victims next door, most West Germans were anything but “empty, cold, forgetting”; indeed, these were years that they recalled with tremendous passion and extraordinary detail.

Shifting the focus from what West Germans should have remembered to what they did remember reveals that a past of German suffering was ubiquitous in the 1950s. This article describes how in the first postwar decade the stories of expellees from eastern Germany and Eastern Europe and German POWs imprisoned
in the Soviet Union were crafted into rhetorics of victimization in the arena of public policy and in the writing of Zeitgeschichte (contemporary history). West Germans collectively mourned the suffering of these groups, and their experiences became central to one important version of the legacy of the war; their private memories structured public memory, making stories of Communist brutality and the loss of the “German East” crucial parts of the history of the Federal Republic. Focusing on German suffering also made it possible to talk about the Third Reich’s end without assessing responsibility for its origins, to tell an abbreviated story of National Socialism in which all Germans were ultimately victims of a war that Hitler started but everyone lost. In the 1950s, this was the past that most West Germans chose to remember.

Competing pasts of the victims of World War II pervaded public policy debates in the early history of the Federal Republic. When Konrad Adenauer first addressed the newly elected parliament in September 1949, the chancellor expressed his concern about nascent antisemitic tendencies in West Germany and his sense of profound disbelief that “after all that has happened in our time, there should still be people in Germany who persecute or hate Jews because they are Jews.” Just as troubling to Adenauer, however, was another past that lived on in the present, a past in which others were persecuted because they were German. Heading the list were “1.5 to 2 million German prisoners of war,” whose whereabouts were unknown but who were most likely in the Soviet Union or elsewhere in Eastern Europe; expellees, “whose deaths number in the millions”; and other ethnic Germans still held against their will by Eastern European Communist governments. Honoring the dead, bringing home the POWs and others unjustly held, and meeting the needs of all German victims of the war were essential parts of a just social contract in a new democratic republic.

The Bundestag, the West German parliament, addressed these multiple pasts in its first electoral period, the years 1949–53. In 1949 some critics were skeptical that Adenauer’s government would adequately meet the obligations of Germans to compensate those persecuted by the National Socialist regime. However, by the time the Bundestag ratified a treaty providing for the payment of reparations to Israel almost four years later, there was no question that the Christian Democratic chancellor was politically committed to reconciliation with Israel. In September 1951, Adenauer announced officially that “the Federal Government and with it the great majority of the German people are aware of the immeasurable suffering that was brought upon the Jews in Germany and the occupied territories during the time of National Socialism. . . . Unspeakable crimes were committed in the name of the German people, and these oblige [us] to make moral and material amends [Wiedergutmachung].” Adenauer’s passive construction carefully differentiated between guilt and responsibility; crimes had been committed, but no criminals were named. Nonetheless, the chancellor left no doubt that West Germans must squarely confront the claims of Jewish victims.

West Germany’s official overture to Israel met considerable domestic opposition from those who questioned the need for payments to persecuted Jews. Adenauer faced not only hostile public opinion but the resolute resistance of leading members of his own party, who claimed that reparations exceeded the means of an impoverished postwar Germany and that compensation for Jewish victims would spark resentment among Germans and a resurgence of antisemitism. The chancellor’s motives in overcoming these impediments to the reparations treaty and pushing through approval by the cabinet and ratification by the Bundestag in March 1953 are subject to more than one interpretation. There is much evidence that Adenauer was ultimately driven by his desire to convince the Western Allies that Germany would confront its moral obligations for the past in order to gain full acceptance as an equal partner in the postwar Western alliance. Negotiations with Israel ran parallel to deliberations over West German integration into a Western European defense alliance; they tied Germans’ “moral rearmament” to the military rearmament of the West German state. In his memoirs and other accounts, Adenauer’s actions expressed firmly held convictions, not a response to Allied expectations and pressure. Ultimately, whatever the balance between sincerely held moral beliefs and political realism, it is difficult to imagine that without the chancellor’s forceful intervention the Bundestag would have ratified the reparations agreement with Israel.

The West German state also acknowledged the “saddest chapter” in its history by addressing the demands for compensation from others persecuted by the Nazis and still resident in the Federal Republic. In the same year that it ratified the treaty with Israel, the Bundestag approved legislation that built on state initiatives, particularly in the U.S. zone of occupation, and established a national framework to address individual claims from these other victims of the Nazis.

Constantin Goschler analyzes and documents in detail the West German attempts to “make good” (Wiedergutmachung) the harm done by National Socialism and shows the clear limits most West Germans placed on what constituted “racial, religious, or political” persecution during the Third Reich. Victims not forgotten but explicitly excluded from these categories included gay men, subjects of forced sterilization, foreign slave workers, violators of racist laws against sexual relations between “Aryans” and “non-Aryans,” and for the most part Sinti and Roma (so-called “Gypsies”). These exclusions revealed a West German tendency to equate racial persecution exclusively with antisemitism and to collapse National Socialist atrocities into the mass extermination of the Jews. Even with these limitations, however, the law to provide compensation to the victims of Nazi crimes encountered substantial criticism from many West German citizens and state officials. Again, it was Adenauer’s intervention and the solid support of opposition Social Democrats that provided the majority sufficient to override popular and official resistance to the compensation scheme.

Public discussion of restitution for victims of National Socialism and reparations for Israel revealed how divided West Germans remained over their responsibility for the atrocities of the Third Reich. The treaty with Israel and the establishment of an institutional framework to acknowledge the loss and suffering of other victims of “racial, religious, or political” persecution represented the explicit
admission, however, that the Nazi state had committed crimes “in the name of the German people.” Particularly in the first four years of the Federal Republic, the Bundestag and Adenauer did not entirely avoid or repress this part of the past.

Acknowledgment of Jewish victims of National Socialist crimes was directed at an international audience, but it also made it easier for the Bonn government to acknowledge German victims of the Red Army and postwar Communism. In the process, the fates of these two victim groups were frequently linked. On the agenda of the same session in which Bundestag delegates debated the final form of the treaty with Israel were initiatives to address the problems of those fleeing from the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany and those expelled from Eastern Europe. The ghosts of victims, some Jewish, some German, often seemed to hover in the halls of the Bundestag, competing for recognition. Victims were also joined together under the word *millions*, a term associated with Jewish victims of National Socialism, prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, and expellees. In debates over compensation for veterans returning from prisoner-of-war camps, Margarete Hütter, a staff member of the German Office for Peace (Deutsches Büro für Friedensfragen) could group together the prisoner of war, the “representative of the sacrifice brought by all Germans,” with the “victim of the concentration camp.” These groups were the “most tragic figures of the politics of the Third Reich,” both victims of Hitler’s Germany.

The rhetoric of German victimization and Soviet barbarism could be traced back to the last years of the war. New in the postwar years, however, was the explicit equation of the suffering of German victims and victims of Germans. Jews and Germans had experienced the same forms of persecution argued Adenauer’s minister of transportation, Hans-Christoph Seebohm, a member of the German party (Deutsche Partei), because “the methods that were used by the National Socialist leaders against the Jews and that we most vehemently condemn are on a par with the methods that were used against the German expellees.” German expellees became another category of victims driven from their historic homelands because of their “ethnicity” (Volkszugehörigkeit); Jews persecuted by Germans were one group of victims among others.

If compensation for Jewish victims was part of a West German strategy to gain favor with the Western Allies, measures to meet the needs of German victims were not. Indeed the Bundestag discussions of German suffering unified all political parties in sharp criticism of the Western forces of postwar occupation, which were depicted as doing nothing to meet the needs of these groups. The British and Americans were taken to task for viewing German losses through the distorted lens of theories of “collective guilt.” To be sure, in the early 1950s, descriptions of German suffering were more likely to portray the losses inflicted on Germans by the Red Army than cities destroyed by U.S. and British bomber pilots. It is not surprising that in the contest of the Cold War, attacking the Soviet Union—past and present—was far easier than recounting the sins of former enemies who were now allies. In some cases, however, criticism of the Soviet Union was also a medium for denouncing the postwar settlement and the Western Allies who had unquestioningly accepted it. West Germans charged that by endorsing the mandatory re-

moval of millions of Germans from areas in Eastern Europe seized by the Red Army and doing nothing to meet the needs of German victims of the war, the Allies had responded to Nazi injustice with unjust acts of no less consequence, leaving Germans “to dish out the soup that the military governments had prepared.”

In a host of federal programs aimed at meeting the needs of “war-damaged” groups, particularly expellees and veterans, and, among them, returning prisoners of war, the West German state set out to “equalize the burdens” of the arbitrary consequences of the war. A host of social-welfare measures sought to mediate the differences between the woman whose husband had come back from the war and the woman whose husband had not, between veterans who were permitted to return immediately after the end of fighting and prisoners of war, between POWs in the Soviet Union and those in the hands of the Western Allies, between POWs whose former homes were now “behind the iron curtain” and those who had lived in western Germany before the war, and between “new citizens” (Neubürger) driven from their homes in Eastern Europe and West Germans who had suffered no such dramatic displacement. Achieving some measure of social justice among those who had suffered little or nothing and those who had lost everything emerged as a key measure of the legitimacy of the West German state.

In the process of identifying the needs of war veterans and expellees, the West German state also allowed German victims to act for themselves, represent their own interests, and shape policy. After World War I, veterans and others who had suffered most from the war and the economic instability of the early postwar years had perceived themselves to be excluded from parliamentary deliberations of compensation for their losses; their resentment translated into loud attacks on the “Weimar system.” In the Bonn republic, mass organizations of expellees and veterans quickly emerged as important actors in negotiations over how best to meet their needs. Their interests were also represented in a cabinet-level office, the Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War-Damaged (Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsbeschädigte), and they spoke from the floor of the Bundestag as members of all major political parties.

Despite the broad consensus favoring payments to German victims of the war and the expulsion, no victim group received everything it wanted. Finance Minister Fritz Schäffer constantly reminded his colleagues that Germany was a poor nation, barely able to contribute to containing Communism in the present, let alone to pay for Communism’s past crimes against expellees and POWs. Discontent over a glass half-empty, however, did not lead to massive political opposition to the Bonn government as it had to the Weimar Republic. In part, this was because veterans and expellees, the two most effectively organized groups claiming compensation, had been asked to participate in defining solutions for their own problems and had achieved at least something of what they were after. As James Diehl has convincingly argued in his analysis of those policies aimed specifically at veterans, the West German government also won acceptance for its initiatives to “equalize the burdens” of the war and compensate the “war-damaged” by stressing that it had crafted programs that were singularly German, grounded in the best
tradition of the German social-welfare system and seen as the essential corrective to punitive policies imposed by the Allies in the years of postwar occupation.  

Defining the just claims and rights to entitlement of some and the moral obligations of others was part of establishing the bases for social solidarity in West Germany. The Germany that committed crimes against others was an aberration; it was succeeded by a Germany that helped to ease German suffering. All major political parties could agree on the version of the legacy of National Socialism that was embodied in Bundestag discussions of the victims of the expulsion and the survivors of Soviet captivity; the suffering of these groups remained outside the realm of political wrangling. The deep divisions between Social Democrats and Adenauer’s government were at least momentarily bridged by a shared relationship to the lasting consequences of a common past.

For the West German state, acknowledging the pasts of expellees and prisoners of war not only involved assessing material need, it also included ensuring that the testimonies of these groups would become part of West Germany’s public memory. In the case of those driven out of Eastern Europe, the Bonn government pledged to preserve the “cultural values” of the expellees by incorporating the history of Germans in Eastern Europe into West German school curricula and establishing a series of research institutes for the scholarly study of the Central European past and present. The state formally acknowledged that it would be essential to educate West Germans about the history of Germans in Eastern and Central Europe, who were now the “new citizens” (Neubürger) in a democratic republic.

West Germans were also constantly reminded of the soldiers for whom the war on the Eastern front had been followed by the battle to survive Soviet captivity; those German POWs still in the Soviet Union were never far from public attention. Newspaper stories describing “Graves and Barbed Wire: The Fate of Millions” evoked images of millions of German POWs, not millions of victims of concentration camps. Annual days of remembrance for POWs called attention to those Germans for whom the war was not yet over. Little more than five years after the war’s end, the Federal Republic was also calling on the United Nations to investigate charges of the violation of human rights, not of others by Nazis but of German POWs and deported ethnic Germans by their Soviet captors.

The state’s commitment to creating a detailed record of German loss and suffering was also apparent in its sponsorship of two projects that sought to collect the memories of POWs and expellees as sources for writing the “contemporary history” of the postwar period. A systematic effort to document the “expulsion of the Germans from the East” was formally initiated by the Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War-Damaged shortly after the creation of the office in Adenauer’s first government. Its editorial board was made up of eminent professional historians led by Theodor Schieder of the University of Cologne, who had lived and taught in Königsberg until the war drove him west in 1944. His co-workers included Hans Rothfels, who also had worked in Königsberg until 1938, when he fled the Nazis, who considered only his Jewish origins, not his Protestant baptism. Rothfels had returned from the United States, where he had spent the war years,

Figure 3.2: "Our Prisoners of War and the Deportees (civilian prisoners) Accuse." The German prisoner of war in Soviet hands became an important symbol of the postwar Communist brutality against Germans. In the early 1950s, West Germans had to defend themselves against charges of their own crimes against others during World War II, but they also played the role of the accuser, indicting postwar Communist governments that continued to imprison German soldiers and civilians. Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Plak 5/47/49.

to take a chair at Tübingen. Working on individual volumes was a team that included Werner Conze, the major West German proponent of social history in the 1950s, and a number of youthful assistants, among them Martin Broszat, who later went on to direct the Munich Institute for Contemporary History, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who in the 1960s would emerge as the leading advocate of a “historical social science.”

In eight volumes, including three full-length diaries, the Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa (Documentation of the Expulsion of Germans from East-Central Europe) described the experiences of Germans as they fled before the Red Army advance in 1944 and 1945 and as they left and
were driven from their homelands in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia and from the eastern parts of Germany that became Poland after the German surrender. At the core of the project was a massive collection of some 11,000 eyewitness accounts recorded by expellees themselves, frequently assembled with the cooperation of their interest-group organizations. The editors were aware of the problems inherent in such subjective testimony, but they guaranteed that the fraction of the reports ultimately published had been subjected to painstaking "authentication and verification" and constituted a completely reliable record of the "entire process of the expulsion in [its] historical accuracy."

The "documents of the expulsion" were, as one review put it, "documents of horror." Countless individual reports of terror, rape, plundering, the separation of families, forced deportations, starvation, slave labor, and death combined to give shape to the "mass fate" of Germans in Eastern Europe, the "German tragedy," "contemporary history in documents." Even those eyewitnesses who claimed to have been skeptical of the terrifying picture of the Bolshevik painted in Nazi propaganda conceded that they confronted a reality that often exceeded Joseph Goebbels's predictions.

The federal government complemented the volumes on the expulsion with an extensive collection of testimonies from prisoners of war. Although its work was not completed until the 1970s, the POW project also had its origins in the 1950s and was seen explicitly as an essential continuation of the effort to capture the eyewitness accounts of expellees. Detailed descriptions of the conditions in Soviet camps had been collected since the late 1940s by veterans' associations, the German Red Cross, and church organizations, which had taken the lead in tracing the fates of German POWs. After 1953, much of this documentation was collected by the Bundesarchiv. In 1957 the West German state appointed a "scientific commission" to assemble these eyewitness accounts and other forms of evidence in order to provide a complete "documentation of the fate of German prisoners in the Second World War," an initiative that in the words of one newspaper account would create the opportunity for "Prisoners of War [to] Write Contemporary History." The documentation should serve "for the present and future of our nation to secure the suffering of the prisoners, which has already begun to fade from public consciousness," a record that could meet the most demanding criteria of "objectivity" and "exactitude."

Heading the project was Erich Maschke, a chairholder at the University of Jena under the Nazis, a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union until his release in 1953, and in the 1950s a professor of social and economic history at the University of Heidelberg. Maschke and his co-workers ultimately sifted through thousands of written and tape-recorded accounts. Of the twenty-two books published by the project, thirteen described the areas where German POWs had been most numerous, their treatment had been worst, and they had remained imprisoned the longest—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and particularly the Soviet Union, which alone filled eight volumes; the testimonies assembled were more evidence of Communist atrocities in Eastern Europe. This emphasis on the East corresponded to the contemporary assessment that the differences in the treatment of
German POWs by Western Allies and Communists were ones of kind, not degree.\textsuperscript{47}

For POWs, no concerns loomed larger than malnutrition and starvation, and they described the dangerous balancing act of remaining sick enough to avoid forced labor but well enough to avoid death.\textsuperscript{48} Work rebuilding the Soviet Union was sometimes remembered as a source of pride and accomplishment, but it was more frequently equated with slave labor, as one POW remarked, a form of direct retribution that represented the “payment of reparations.”\textsuperscript{49} Particularly for the period of the late 1940s, reports were filled not only with tales of death from malnutrition but also with accounts of mass shootings by Red Army troops and Communist partisans and the dumping of the dead into unmarked graves.\textsuperscript{50}

The experiences of POWs in the Soviet Union diverged from those of expellees in important respects. The POW camp was a world without women, a sharp contrast with the westward “treks” of expellees, in which women outnumbered men. In addition, for at least some of the students in the “barbed-wire university,” as POWs ironically called the camps, the school term ended only in the mid-1950s, while for most expellees the return “not to home [Heimat] but at least to the Fatherland” was complete by the late 1940s.\textsuperscript{51} Despite these differences, the accounts of expellees and POWs also provided much evidence of the ways in which they had experienced the end of the same war. As the Red Army moved westward in late 1944, the line between front and home front dissolved. In the words of Margaret Schell, a German actress from Prague and the author of one of the full-length diaries published by the Schieder project, Germans in Czechoslovakia had lived “a soldier’s life . . . only much worse.”\textsuperscript{52}

The history of National Socialism and the war that both expellees and POWs told began only at the moment when the Red Army appeared, reaching the outskirts of the village or capturing the soldier. In neither documentation project did the editors elicit testimony about Germany’s war of aggression on the Eastern front or German rule in Eastern Europe; both projects recorded and sanctioned silence and selective memory. In both cases as well, victimization by the Red Army followed victimization by benighted, fanatical Nazis who postponed evacuation in the face of the Red flood or insisted on fighting to the bitter end. This was the same history that was told from the floor of the Bundestag in debates over measures to meet the material needs of expellees and returning veterans, a history peopled with innocents in which a handful of zealous Nazis had deluded good Germans. Victims of Germans were not completely absent from these accounts, but when those who testified acknowledged the suffering of Jews at the hands of Germans, it was most frequently in order to establish a measure for the horror of their own experience.\textsuperscript{53} In some cases, POWs, expellees, and the editors of the documentation projects claimed that what Germans had suffered under Communists was comparable in its horror only to what Jews had suffered under Nazis.

History had repeated itself concluded Maria Zatschek, an expellee from Czechoslovakia who remarked, “What a bad comedy all this is: nothing is original, a copy of the Hitler regime, again and again we have to hear: ‘Just as you have treated the Jews.’”\textsuperscript{54} It was this similarity of suffering reflected Wolfgang Schwarz, author of the volume on “cultural life” among German POWs in the Soviet Union that made the POWs “brothers of the prisoners in the concentration camps.”\textsuperscript{55} In their assessment of the expulsion from Czechoslovakia, the editors of the documentation expressed similar views. They pointed out that the analogy between German and Jewish victims was unmistakable when Germans took the place of Jews in former Nazi concentration camps: “In some of these camps, particularly Theresienstadt, only the victims had changed: where Jewish prisoners had suffered from the National Socialist system of oppression, Germans were now tortured and maltreated.”\textsuperscript{56} Both POWs and expellees depicted themselves individually and collectively as victims of an ideology no less irrational than National Socialism; like the Nazis, the Soviets had reduced identity to ethnicity, singling out their victims only because they were Germans. The standard of measurement of the sufferings of Germans thus became “the horrible crimes committed against the Jews in Hitler’s concentration camps,” the goal of the Communists, nothing less than the “cleansing” and “de-Germanization” (Entdeutschung) of Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{57}

In Bundestag debates over restitution for victims of the war, Germans and Jews were rhetorically lumped together. In the accounts provided in the documentation projects and in some of the editorial commentary that framed eyewitness stories, the overwhelming similarity of the treatment of all victims and the moral equivalence of their suffering were stated even more explicitly. Some German eyewitnesses could claim to know what Jews had experienced, not because they themselves were guilty of crimes but because what Jews in concentration camps had endured “could not possibly have been worse” than what Germans had suffered at the hands of the Communists.\textsuperscript{58}

There is no way to assess how many West Germans read the testimonies recorded in the documentation projects. The POW project only began publishing its findings in the 1960s, and the final installment was not issued until 1974. One reason for this delay was that by the time all volumes were completed the West German government had become far less intent on sustaining memories of Communist atrocities. In an age of “peaceful coexistence” between East and West, some pasts were best allowed to slumber or to circulate at most in small editions, distributed to research institutes and university libraries.\textsuperscript{60} The expellee project completed publication by 1961, but its considerable bulk doubtless also limited its accessibility. However, for the tens of thousands of POWs and expellees whose experiences were documented—and the millions more they represented—the invitation to bear witness and the assurance that their memories would be preserved as part of an official chronicle made it easier, as Maschke expressed it, for these German victims to “overcome the destiny of painful and terrifying memories.”\textsuperscript{61} Public recognition and individual catharsis were parts of the same process.\textsuperscript{62}

The federally sponsored publication projects that chronicled the fate of German expellees and POWs also corroborated other accounts of German suffering at the war’s end that circulated in West German politics and popular culture in the 1950s. Expellees’ and veterans’ organizations encouraged their constituents to record their experiences and to publicize the enormity of their suffering; interest-group publications provided a forum in which it was possible to foster group identities.\textsuperscript{63}
Memories of POWs in the Soviet Union and expellees also resounded in the arena of foreign policy. The record of German loss was cited as evidence in support of demands to revise the postwar settlement that had extended Poland’s boundary westward significantly into territory once part of the German Reich.54 The last remaining POWs in the Soviet Union also remained a national preoccupation until Adenauer negotiated their release in September 1955. When the 9,626 POWs began to leave the Soviet Union the next month, West German press accounts used the occasion not only to celebrate these survivors of Communist captivity but to rehearse endlessly the horrors that they had experienced.65 As late as 1967, shortly after Adenauer’s death, 75 percent of those questioned in a public opinion survey placed the release of the last POWs from the Soviet Union at the top of the list of the first chancellor’s accomplishments.66

Themes of expulsion and the experiences of soldiers on the Eastern front were also the stuff of novels and movies. Between 1951 and 1959, some 19 million viewers saw Grün ist die Heide (The Heath Is Green), a movie that tells the story of a Pomeranian laddie who flees westward at the end of the war, leaving everything behind. Only the generosity of new friends in the Lüneburger Heide and the natural beauty of the forest allow him to “forget what I have lost.”67 An entire genre of “expellee literature” told similar tales but focused less on the successful integration of expellees into West German society than on the terror they had experienced before reaching their new home.68

Numerous as well were popular novels, memoirs, and movies that described the war on the Eastern front and the long march into Soviet POW camps from the perspective of the common soldier, victimized first by zealous Nazi leaders, then by the Red Army. These were epic dramas of suffering, inner strength, and quiet courage stemming not from ideology but from common decency and tales of adventurous schemes to resist Communism by whatever means possible.69 Such accounts were part of the general tendency in the 1950s to see the returning German veteran as a noble survivor, unjustly branded by the victors as a militaristic criminal; they contributed to a conventional wisdom according to which the Wehrmacht had dutifully carried out orders, scrupulously following the established rules of warfare.70 The same general themes gained credence among West Germany’s Western allies, particularly as the United States increased its pressure to see West Germans once again in uniform, essential recruits in the battles of the Cold War.71

The imposing bound volumes from the POW and expellee documentation projects did not circulate nearly as widely as these other accounts in the popular media, but they told the same stories. They sanctioned and substantiated fictionalized tales and individual memoirs, blurring the line between fiction and fact. As one reviewer of the first volumes published by the Schieder project noted, this authorized record should dispel completely whatever skepticism had greeted other dramatic presentations of the experiences of expellees in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The documentation delivered “irrefutable proof of the accuracy of those descriptions” as well.72

The debates over material compensation for Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis made clear that these “racial, political, and religious” victims of National

Figure 3.4: “We Admonish: The Prisoner of War Camp as Experience and Lesson.” This poster advertised a traveling exhibition sponsored by the Association of Returning Veterans in 1953. The image also appeared on a 10Pfg stamp issued by the West German government in the same year. It indicates the way in which shaved heads and barbed wire were associated in West German popular consciousness not with victims of Nazi concentration camps but rather with German prisoners of war in Soviet captivity. Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz. Pfalz 5/477/50.
social systematic efforts to record Jewish voices that could have told other stories of Germans who until the spring of 1945 called that city Litzmannstadt. For the most part, victims of Germans remained objects, not subjects, of their own history, a history never told from their perspective.

In 1955, Hans Rothfels, a coworker on the expelled documentation project and editor of the Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte (Quarterly Journal of Contemporary History), the most important new postwar German historical periodical, illuminated the "profound paradox" of the war's end by drawing up a balance sheet called "Ten Years After" ("Zehn Jahre danach"). He effectively summarized how competing pasts had become part of the history of the Federal Republic. Rothfels recalled both the "horrible things that took place in occupied areas, particularly in the East" and what was done "to real and imagined opponents in concentration camps," even as he described in far greater detail the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe and the last-gasp attempts of the German army and navy to hold off the Red Army. The way to remember May 1945, Rothfels concluded, was with an "hour of commemoration" for all victims, including those killed by Germans as well as those Germans "murdered after the end of hostilities, those who drowned or perished in the snow as they attempted to flee, who froze or starved, who did not survive the forced marches or forced labor camps [Zwangslager] ... and also those women, who after the deepest humiliation took their own lives, or their husbands, who resisted this disgrace," an unambiguous reminder of the literal rapes that heralded the symbolic rape of eastern Germany and Eastern Europe by the Red Army. Mourning these German victims should not, Rothfels warned, diminish memories of the suffering of others. A complete tally could, however, only be one that captured "reality in its horrifying totality."

West Germans were by no means silent about the "horrifying totality" of the past in the first decade after the end of the war, but their memories were selective. They had less to say about the parts of that totality in which some Germans were perpetrators than about the parts that encompassed their own experiences as victims. With this past—the past of what they had lost—they literally filled volumes.

Remembering the end of the war and memorializing their own suffering was part of the process by which West Germans came to terms with one set of pasts and created the bases on which it was possible to found the postwar order. The Basic Law (Grundgesetz), adopted in 1949, the constitutional basis for the Federal Republic of Germany, defined the institutions that would shape a democratic political system in those parts of Germany occupied in 1945 by the French, British, and Americans. The formal act of founding the Federal Republic did not, however, establish collective identities that could bind West Germans together socially and politically, creating an "imagined community," the phrase used by Benedict Anderson to describe the "deep horizontal comradeship" that forms the basis for the social and political solidarity that can unify a nation. Anderson analyzes cases in which an "imagined community" was largely shaped through an ideology of nationalism. The problem for Germans after 1945 was not how to create a conception
of the nation, but rather how to establish a sense of collectivity that did not draw on a nationalist rhetoric contaminated by its association with National Socialism. A revolution from above, imposed by the victorious Allies, provided no adequate framework, and in the Western zones of occupation, Allied programs of democratic reeducation were deeply resented by most Germans and largely abandoned by the late 1940s as the military powers that had crushed the Third Reich changed course and sought to accelerate the conversion of erstwhile enemies into allies in the battles of the Cold War. The de facto division of Germany and the Federal Republic’s forced march into the Cold War Western alliance solidified geographic boundaries determined by the victors, but in the 1950s, it was left to Germans, West and East, to create themselves.

An “imagined community” in the Federal Republic was shaped in part by stories of the “economic miracle” (Wirtschaftswunder), West Germany’s rapid exit from devastation to prosperity. Currency reform in 1948 marked the end of the “war and postwar era” (Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit) that began in 1943 with the German defeat at Stalingrad and the intensified bombing of German cities and ended five years later when the money they carried in their wallets, the goods offered in their shops, and the economic systems that structured their lives distinguished Germans in East and West. In the next chapter of this tale of West Germany’s emergence from the rubble, American loans and the Marshall Plan sparked European economic recovery, but, so the story goes, it was ultimately uniquely German determination, hard work, and Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard’s model of a “social market economy” that permitted the Federal Republic to bask so quickly in the warm glow of economic prosperity. Writing in 1967 and echoing many of Adorno’s concerns about the West German unwillingness to confront the Nazi past, psychologists Alexander and Margarate Mitscherlich saw in self-congratulatory accounts of postwar prosperity and economic recovery a clear indication of West Germans’ “inability to mourn” their complicity in National Socialism. Leaving behind this difficult history was made possible by a massive self-investment in the “expansion and modernization of our industrial potential right down to the kitchen utensils.” In the psychic economy that the Mitscherlich’s described, creating for the future was a way to avoid the past.

Neither Adorno nor the Mitscherlchs fully understood that in the 1950s, selective memories of the war’s end also shaped the basis on which a new West Germany was erected. Shared values in the Federal Republic were not only created by celebrations of present prosperity and predictions of uninterrupted economic growth. One of the most powerful integrative myths of the 1950s emphasized not German well-being but German suffering; it stressed that Germany was a nation of victims, an “imagined community” defined by the lasting consequences of the devastation of the Second World War. Remembering what had been lost was of great significance for assessing postwar accomplishment and envisioning what still should be restored.

In the 1950s, the stories of expellees and POWs in the Soviet Union became the stories of all West Germans; in the categories used by contemporaries, the fate of these groups came to represent the fate of postwar Germany. The Red Army’s rape of German women as it moved westward in the spring of 1945 became the rape of the German nation. The loss of homes and belongings in the East represented the eradication of a German Heimat, a sense of rootedness and belonging that had existed for centuries in central Europe. The literal loss of property and the sources of livelihood by expellees became a metaphor for the displacement of other Germans, driven from their homes by falling bombs, and the flight of Eastern European Germans into West Germany was a constant reminder of the division of the national Heimat between East and West. The detention of German POWs by the Soviets long after the release of most German prisoners in the late 1940s was universally condemned by West Germans as a case of arbitrary injustice, based only on a desire for vengeance. A violation of international law, Soviet treatment of German POWs allowed West Germans to claim that the Red variant of totalitarianism was just as capable of crimes against humanity in the 1950s as the brown variant had been in the 1940s. POWs, presumed innocent, were doing penance for all Germans. And self-congratulatory accounts of the successful social and economic integration of expellees and returning POWs into West German society were tales of the Federal Republic’s ability to overcome and move beyond the ravages of war, creating homes and a livelihood even for Germans who had lived elsewhere before 1945.

The “imagined community” that emerged in West Germany in the 1950s was a community that acknowledged and overcame loss and suffering; its success was measured in its ability to affirm German victims—the representatives of a victimized Germany—and to assist them in “coming to terms with” their pasts. In the late 1960s and 1970s, West Germans came to a much more critical understanding of National Socialism. Memories of German victimization, dominant in the 1950s, were challenged by accounts in which Nazi crimes and the victimization of others by Germans were central. Still, this complication of public memory never meant the complete silencing or forgetting of another version of the past in which Germans had suffered as much as Jews and others persecuted by National Socialism. Seen against the background of the history of certain forms of public memory in the 1950s, it becomes apparent that when themes of German innocence and victimization surfaced in the mid-1980s in the “Historians Dispute” or even more recently in May 1995 when Germans were exhorted not to forget “the beginning of the terror of the expulsion,” they represented nothing particularly novel but rather the return of the (never completely) repressed. In the sixth decade after the war’s end, “coming to terms with the past” must involve not only the continued study of National Socialism, European Jewry before the Holocaust, and the “final solution,” but also a clearer understanding of how Germans came to terms with other pasts—their own pasts as self-identified victims—in the early history of the Federal Republic.

Notes

This is a revised version of my article, “War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany,” American Historical Review 101 (1996): 1008–48. I have recast the
introduction and conclusion to conform to the general themes of this volume, and I have incorporated relevant literature that has appeared since the first publication of the article. Research for this article was supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the Global Peace and Conflict Studies Program of the University of California, Irvine. My thanks to Lynn Mally, who commented extensively on this revised version.


2. Ibid., 124.


6. The chief advocate of this position that Adenauer had little to gain from the Allies and acted out of genuine moral convictions is Michael Wolfsohn. See, for example, Wolfsohn, “Globalbündnis für Israel und die Juden? Adenauer und die Opposition in der Bundesrepublik,” in Herbst and Gschosser, *Wiedergutmachung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 171–89. Most other interpretations place a far greater emphasis on the international context in general and American pressure in particular. See, for example, Jelinke, “Political Acumen.”


15. See, for example, Richard Reitzenzener, *VDVT*, (1.) Deutscher Bundestag, 254. Sitzung, 18
March 1953, 1234. Czechoslovakia had been active in the Czech Social Democratic party until its abolition in 1953. In general, the party’s raison d’être was to promote the interests of the Czech working class, particularly in the areas of labor rights, social welfare, and democratic reform. The party was known for its strong opposition to the communist regime and its commitment to democratic values and social justice.

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23. Representative of the ambiguous charge that the Provisional Agreement had created the enormous executive problems are the comments of Eugen Kugener, VDZB, 48: 5, 1952, March 17, March 17, 1952, 167.


54. “Erlebnisbericht der Frau Maria Zatschek aus Brünn” (no date), Tschechoslowak, IV/ 2:439; see also, for example, “Bericht des Studienrats Dr. rer. nat. Hans Enders aus Saaz . . . 15. November 1946,” ibid., IV/2: 300.

55. Schwartz, Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen, 34.

56. Editor’s Introduction, Tschechoslowak, IV/1: 81; see also editor’s introduction, Oder-Neisse, 1/1:111 E. See also, “Bericht des Kaufmanns E.M. aus Saaz . . . November 1945,” Tschechoslowak, IV/2:313, and note 2, ibid.


62. On the importance of this recognition, which was denied other groups of victims, see William G. Niederland, “Die verkannten Opfer: Späte Entschädigung für seelische Schäden,” in Gschosler and Herbst, Wiedergutmachung, 359; and Ulrich Herbert, “Nichtentschädigungsfähigkeit? Die Wiedergutmachungsansprüche der Ausländer,” in ibid., 302.


64. See Schieder, “Gutachten über eine Dokumentation,” 1 October 1951, BAK B150/4171/


82. These topics are treated at greater length in the original version of this article. See my “War Stories,” 1008–11, 1034–48.
Creating a Cocoon of Public Acquiescence

THE AUTHOR-READER RELATIONSHIP IN POSTWAR GERMAN LITERATURE

FRANK TROMMLER

No Miracles in Literature

Redesigning the 1950s as the “miracle years,” as this volume suggests, is a tough proposition for a literary historian. There was no literary miracle, not even the expectation of one that could compare with the shining reflections of the economic miracle in the popular mythology of the newly founded Federal Republic. The only motto that seemed to have a common ring among businessmen and publishers was “Return to Normalcy.” But what was normal for writers who came out of a war that had not only killed millions but also destroyed the belief in the power of the word? This question made for wrenching debates that usually ended in the mutual assurance that the power of the literary word was not gone. As proof, one pointed to the great authors of world literature whose books were still read and whose plays were still seen by millions. For contemporary authors it was harder to prove the power of the word because they believed that the reality of war, death, and suffering was too overwhelming to find expression in fictional works. And yet, they also thought they had to return to these realities because only they guaranteed some legitimacy for new literary endeavors. In the course of the 1950s, the direct calls for such a return subsided; the question whether the literary word was able to sustain its drawing power was relegated to a variety of references and to new novels and poems.

Miracles were not among them, neither in the works of Heinrich Böll or Alfred Andersch nor in those of Wolfgang Koeppen, Arno Schmidt, or Ingeborg Bachmann, to name just a few authors who were lauded as the voices of a new, postwar literature. They were single voices, sustained by a growing network of contacts with radio stations, journals, and publishing houses. Compared with the flourishing productions in the theaters, however, which were rebuilt with the help of public budgets and the occupation powers, they were hardly visible. So were the attempts to create a certified avant-garde that was able to claim that German writers, with their experimental techniques, were catching up with international modernism. On book-selling lists, the new authors occupied the lower end. For publishers, return
to normalcy primarily meant reaccessing established popular titles and old copyrights. On a list of the most successful books that in 1958 assembled more than one hundred titles, only thirteen books were originally published after 1945 and eight of these were school textbooks. The first postwar book of fiction in the list, Vater unser bestes Stück by Hans Nicklisch, appeared in forty-ninth place.²

In literary histories this period is usually presented as a time of an impressive ascent of a postwar, post-Nazi literature in which the stages are clearly marked from the realisms of the immediate years after 1945 toward more symbolic-modernist structures in the 1950s and a successful public manifestation of the power of the oppositional literary word in the early 1960s. How does this ascent, closely connected with the activities of Group 47, fit within the return to normalcy? Did authors like Andersch, Böll, or Hans Werner Richter find new readers who did not want such a return or did they resume patterns of normalcy on their own turf of writing and reading?

In view of the narrative energies of the story of their ascent, it is hardly surprising that the side of the readers has been neglected for a long time. It was not until 1961 that the first representative study on the book in contemporary society appeared (Emnich’s Das Buch in der Gegenwart) and not until 1965 that the DIVO Institut researched the social composition of readers and nonreaders in Germany (Buch und Leser in Deutschland).³ A full research program focusing on reading patterns and the book market did not unfold until the 1970s.⁴ Except for what was called “Lesergemeinde” (reading communities), the reader had remained a quantité négligeable until the takeoff of book market research and the academic field of literary sociology. This does not mean that the book market did not modernize during the 1950s. Paperback (Taschenbücher) and book clubs, in particular Bertelsmann’s Leserings, displaced commercial lending libraries (Leihbüchereien) and expanded the market for books, not to mention the explosion of cheap popular novels in fiction magazines. Still, the traditional organization of book trade, especially for highbrow literature, was being preserved at least until the 1960s, with minor adjustments to the expanding influence of media and film.⁵

This article has been sparked by the astounding indifference among authors and critics toward reading as a crucial cultural activity in West Germany in the 1950s. These authors and critics seemed to assume that the public was a known factor and reading was an ingrained habit that had made it through the doldrums of dictatorship, air raids, and black markets and could be counted on whenever necessary. The following observations focus on the attitudes of writers and critics toward their readership, reflecting their relationship with the addressee of the literary work together with the practice of reading. Reception aesthetics comes into play, though not with specific theoretical devices. It is at least as much a part of the historical scenery, especially in the late 1960s, as it is a guiding perspective. While literary sociologists began generating interesting data about the reception of contemporary writers like Böll in the 1970s,⁶ they have been less helpful for the analysis of what reading means both for the author and the reader in their understanding of their period and least helpful for an understanding of the sociopolitical and psychological implications—reasons and consequences—of a changing relationship between authors and readers.⁷

Against the clichés concerning the 1950s as a period of political and cultural restoration and writers like Böll, Enzensberger, Bachmann, and Grass as the only bright lights of a literary awakening, this article should help the reader understand the ways in which the continuities in everyday cultural practices contributed to the rise of a literature that was meant as an opposition to them. By providing arguments that are based less on the production aesthetic than on the perception and reality of reading, this contribution attempts to illuminate long-term trends that originated long before 1945 and came to an end in the cultural transformation of the 1960s.

GROUP 47 IS NOT ALONE

Although literary historians, myself included, have created the impression that the writers who were connected with Group 47 can be considered the only active force in the literature of the 1950s, this decade did not “belong” to this group. Presenting literary developments through their most professional discourse—professional in the sense of working toward the production of literary texts—is one operation; reconfiguring their intellectual and cultural energies within the larger continuum of twentieth-century literature is quite another. On closer analysis, the reports on Group 47’s activities, including the reviews of individual works, are surprisingly exclusive, visibly dominated by the ethos of productivity at the expense of more complex reflections on the status of literature in the postwar world.

These reflections were extensive and widespread, full of nuclear anxieties and philosophical warfare, poetic idiosyncrasies and cultural pessimism, clearly meant to coagulate a spiritual response to the challenges of bureaucratic modernity that West Germany’s economic recovery generated with a vengeance. They were artistically most refined in the poems of Gottfried Benn, which set the lyrical tone for aspiring young poets and intellectuals; rhetorically most densely charged in Walter Muschg’s jeremiad Die Zerstörung der deutschen Literatur (1956), which was followed in 1966 by the jeremiad of another Swiss professor, Emil Staiger, concerning the end of literature as a moral force;⁸ intellectually most presumptuous in the conjurings of the modern writer as poet, or doctus that Walter Jens assembled in statt einer literaturgeschichte (1957); stylistically most refined in Friedrich Sieburg’s Feuilletons, which coalesced in the most elegant and cynical assessment of Germany’s “miracle years,” Die Lust am Untergang (1954); and theoretically most successful in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s grotesquely layered plays, in particular Der Besuch der alten Dame (1956–58), to which the author added a widely discussed discourse on the question of why only comedy was able to cope with the incredible mess of the present-day world. These reflections were simultaneously dead-serious and witty, full of cynicism and self-pity. While musing about the needness of literature, they confirmed the sovereignty of the writer. They also included Bertolt Brecht with his response to Dürrenmatt’s question of whether the present-day world could be reproduced through theater. Brecht expressed how much this problem concerned his whole work, his epic dramaturgy as a device for the scientific age, when he answered: “The present-day world can
only be rendered to present-day mankind if it is represented as a changeable world.”

As these discourses, both in refined and popular versions, formed the core of innumerable Feuilletons, essays, reviews, books, conferences, and lectures, it would be more appropriate to state that the decade “belonged” to the debate whether literature was still able to cope with the contemporary world, its devastation and terror, its chaos, exploitation, and mediocrity. Hans Erich Nosseck, a particularly somber observer and the author of an impressive description of the bombing of Hamburg in which he lost his manuscripts, summed it up in a speech under the title “Die schwache Position der Literatur”: “At the end of the last century the word was: ‘Does it hold its ground, your work, vis-à-vis the vast land and at the shore of the sea?” Fifty years later the question is: ‘Does it hold out, your work, vis-à-vis the ruins of our cities and the killing fields?’ Nosseck added in 1965: “Should one ask today: ‘Does it hold out, your work, vis-à-vis the possibility of total destruction?”

Focusing on the beleaguered status of literature—“high” literature—was of course, also a reassuring activity. It enabled a swarm of critics, among them journalists and academics, to direct the discourse back to the author as the guarantor of poetic wisdom. Thus the threat to literature was rarely seen in its loss of communicative function. The possibility that the reader could question the authority of the author was hardly included in the contemplation. Although Jean-Paul Sartre was widely credited with exerting a strong influence on these reflections, especially with his 1947 essay, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? his insightful analysis of the interaction of author and reader as the basis for a literary work remained largely unused. Sartre says it clearly:

Since the creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language.

In Germany this was understood as a description, not as an agenda, let alone a warning. Although authors addressed readers, played with their attention, and asked them for patience and forbearance, they rarely challenged the traditional sender-receiver relationship. When Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass assumed in the early 1960s their role as spokespersons for the increasingly vocal opposition against restorative politics under Adenauer’s government, they still made the case on the basis of this traditional relationship. Their appeal to the public emanated from their hard-earned respect as writers, not (yet) from the opening of a reciprocal communication with readers and listeners.

SIEBURG’S SEARCH FOR A LITERARY LIFE

Sartre’s definition of littérature engagée helped German writers stand their ground against the accusation that they betrayed literature to the trivia of political life when they conceptualized their activities as resistance. Sartre’s treatise Qu’est-ce que la littérature? established a reference within the literary realm. His explanation of the relationship between author and reader, however, fell by the wayside. In his comment on the concept of literature that accompanied the German translation of Sartre’s treatise in 1958, Wolfgang von Einsiedel pointed to the fact that German literature, unlike the French, was “not a continuous dialogue” but had remained “the ever-renewed monologue of an ingenious self that tries to engage and come to terms with himself, not with the world.” These variations on an old topic might serve well in the attempt to understand the specifics of the author-reader relationship in the 1950s.

In the case of Group 47, Sartre’s treatise played an important role for the discussion of the notion of commitment. Otherwise, the much debated ritual of quality selection that Hans Werner Richter instituted and maintained in the meetings of Group 47 was based on listening to short pieces or excerpts that were scrutinized in a fast-paced sequence of oral criticism. The focus was on the performed texts whose strength or weakness reflect literature as production for critics. Reading the work, reviewing and reflecting were not more than a reference, almost a second thought.

It has often been said that this workshop approach to raising the quality standards of literature was ingeniously conceptualized by Richter as an answer to the lack of public literary standards in postwar Germany. It was meant to substitute for a viable literary life that literary observers had called for as soon as paper and printing licences became available after the war. It was implemented through an unusual esprit de corps of young men who had been soldiers or members of youth organizations of the war machine and were ready to internalize the rules of the game. While it was successful, the substitution factor should not be overlooked. What appears in hindsight as a practice of aesthetic refinement, based on the performed and scrutinized half-hour text-bite, also reveals an almost brutal display of intellectual hazing whose focus is on the text, but whose telos is authority and legitimation. The dynamics of regular meetings fostered a perception of aesthetic achievements more in tune with the sense of production that permeated society in the 1950s and 1960s than with the rich body of German literature that had originated since Expressionism and had, to a large extent, been exiled by the Nazis. Although the rigorous selection process seemed to correspond with the criterion of formal refinement that older, more established or traditional writers were used to apply, it defied their plea for the critical resumption of traditional literary modes of being, reading, and reviewing. Thus, the criticism that Friedrich Sieburg, the most influential critic of the 1950s, mounted against the writers of Group 47 always had the undertone of taking offence at not being the model for their brand of literary reconstruction (whose general intent he did not reject).

Sieburg, literary editor of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, also referred to the French as models for the commitment to literature when he took issue with the narrowness of the current attempts of German writers to produce a viable literature. He did it often, also in Die Lust am Untergang. In Nietzschean fashion—though less explicitly artistic than Gottfried Benn—Sieburg carves himself a place above the melee of politics, bureaucracies, and cheap entertainment, as portrayed on the
cover of the book, with Max Ernst's collage Quiétude on a yellow ground: a gentleman, in a reclining pose in an armchair, hedonistically overlooking the demise of the world. In provocative self-stylization, Sieburg makes himself part of the picture: "The whole German calamity is mirrored in the lack of communality that shapes our literary life, in this self-hatred of the writer, in his low pride and his inability to be living in literature. ... Living in literature! Is it possible that only one German writer, clearly focused, has this ambition? Yes, me, for example!"

Was this just a nostalgic revival of a role played by Oscar Wilde long ago? A role it was, a writer's role, and it was accepted among the educated middle class (die Gebildeten) because it fed their need for self-elevation that literature was able to satisfy after National Socialism, war, and postwar years. This image of the writer in an armchair, in stark contrast to the nervous young man in Richter's electric chair, as the hot seat was called in Group 47, also expresses a different approach to the public. Sieburg, unlike younger authors, did not hide his vanity from his readers, yet he made sure they could share in it. In fact, Sieburg, while laying out the territory of the missing literary life, brought writing and reading together as related acts of distinction and appreciation. Nur für Leser (1955) is the seemingly redundant title of a collection of his reviews. He counts on the reader who shares Nietzsche's condescension toward "the masses" that pose an obstacle to great art.

In this kind of role-affirming treatment of the reader, Sieburg followed a practice that can be traced back to earlier critics who cared about the vivacity of literary life. In Die Last am Untergang, Sieburg refers to Hugo von Hofmannsthal as one of the last representatives of German Bildung and spirituality. Hofmannsthal, who ascribed to literature the duty of sociability (eine "gesellige Pflicht"), would have surprised Sieburg, asserts contemporary German writers who oriented themselves toward the masses but did not extend themselves to their fellow men. In the 1950s the reference to Hofmannsthal united older and younger critics in their efforts to reaffirm German literature after National Socialism within a spiritual notion of Germany. In his speech of 1927, "Das Schriftum als geistiger Raum der Nation," Hofmannsthal had indeed spiritualized the concept of the German nation to an extent that it could be made useful even after its terrible abuse by the National Socialists. As an Austrian, Hofmannsthal appeared beyond reproach in such a venture. Walter Jens, one of the chief critics of Group 47, was as eager to reconnect with his poetic modernism as were other critics who, like Max Rychner, distanced themselves from Group 47. Some literary scholars followed Richard Alewyn's lead and appropriated Hofmannsthal as a guide for Germanists in the treacherous terrain of modern literature. Hofmannsthal's work is indeed marked by a cautious, yet ongoing dialogue with the reader for whom, in his words, "dead poets perambulate in the midst of the living and lead their second life." Using the title "Lesen als Begegnung" for an essay on Ernst Robert Curtius, the literary scholar and author of Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter (1949), Rychner, the Swiss critic and literary authority, followed Hofmannsthal's lead closely.

Rychner put his finger on the problems inherent in the self-isolating work strategies of younger writers who did not refer to literary traditions but rather drew legitimacy from being contemporaries of the war and its aftermath. In an influential essay, he expressed his frustration about this mode of producing literature:

The creative writer is not just placed "vis-à-vis life," but rather within an artistic tradition the awareness of which enlivens him in a more significant sense and makes him creative. The older ones know this still: Thomas Mann; Benn; Schröder; they have organized themselves into the existing whole of German literature and the surrounding world literature, receiving, rejecting in constantly critical processes. Similarly Proust and Joyce, Valéry and Eliot. It is equally important and necessary that the younger German writers acquire again, through thinking, that is, critically, a notion of literature as an effective phenomenon.

Rychner's use of the term effective (wirksend) does not reflect Sartre's littérature engagée but rather highlights the effects of the author on the reader, with whom he shares the perception of the special qualities of literature that distinguish it from the media as mere means of communication. Critics like Rychner and Sieburg built their hopes for a more broadly based literary life constructed on an increasingly narrow perception on the educated reader who once had assumed the position of the universal addressee of classical literature and now was perceived in the same function for modern literature. In contrast, younger writers expressed the loss of this constellation. And yet, by orienting their writing toward a supposedly like-minded public that had gone through the same experiences of war, destruction, and recovery, they also reinforced the cocoon that enclosed writers and readers in their unquestioned sharing of roles.

The Missed Dialogue Between Writers and Readers

In one of the most enlightening essays on the 1950s, Jean Améry, the great cultural critic and commentator on German literature, discusses his observation that in Germany a great many people read, though primarily magazines and newspapers. Améry, an exile living in Belgium who used his visits to Germany for a review of the question of how much the period of National Socialism was still influencing the present, gave a sobering account of everyday reading practices. Well aware of the deeper side of reading habits in this country of Bildung, he joined Erich Kuby—another sharp observer of the German postwar recovery with Das ist des Deutschen Vaterland (1957)—in the assessment: "The reader does not wish for more. He only wants to be present; he does not want to know what really happens. . . . He sees a lot but he understands nothing." As a visitor to Germany, Améry was amazed by the dominance of the Illustrierten, the weekly picture-report magazines (Stern, Quick, Münchner Illustrierte, etc.) whose reports (Tatsachenberichte) had only the slightest connection to facts. He was appalled by the magazine version of facts, especially when they reached back to the Third Reich and combined moralizing condemnation with tongue-in-cheek reference to the "little people" who supported the Reich. Améry's analysis of reading as an exercise in being there (Dabeisein), not as a means of engaging in a critical dialogue...