Grenzdgänge zwischen Politik und Religion

Festschrift für
CLAUS-EKKEHARD BÄRSCH
zum 70. Geburtstag

Wilhelm Fink
2009

Der Forschungsgegenstand der Religionspolitologie in Deutschland ist in erster Linie der Symbolwust des Nationalsozialismus mit seinen Folgen für die geistige Orientierung (Vermischung des Katastrophenals, kollektive Anmache, moralische Trägheit, etc.). Dass jede moderne Institution ein Gefühl für eine reduktionistische und philosophisch-anthropologisch oder poetisch verzerrte 'idee directrice' (Maurice Hauriou) werden kann, ist die erweiterte Forschungsperspektive der Religionspolitologie, wie sie Claus-Ekkehard Bärtsch entworfen hat.


32 Die Fähnle legte Mirea Elaide in: die Heilige und das Profane, (wie Anm. 20), S. 13.
33 Religionspolitologie ist ein Fall der Religionskritik, M.S.
34 Marcel Proust, Der Tod der Kathedrale, Frankfurt 1974.

MANFRED HENNINGSSEN (HONOLULU)

THE VARIETIES OF HISTORICAL MEMORY:

GERMANY AND THE REST OF THE WORLD

Since the beginning of the 21st century, books have been published in Germany that have, for some observers, created the impression that in Germany, the end of the intellectual consensus on the so-called Vergangenheitsbewältigung, the mastering of the past, is near. I do not agree with this assessment, though I recognize some changes in the way Germans are taking charge of their historical memory. Still, the fundamental consensus on the mastering of the past remains intact.

This consensus concerning the Nazi-past and its economy of evil was reached in the 1980s after decades of silence, denial, evasion, and controversy. The last confrontational debate on the past was the Historikerstreit, the historians' debate of 1986, when Ernst Nolte's claim about Bolshevik terror policies being the model for Hitler's extermination projects divided intellectual Germany. Daniel Goldhagen's book on Hitler's Willing Executioners (1996) received negative reviews but didn't create an uproar on the same scale. On the contrary, his book tour through Germany became a big success for the author and his work. Young Germans in particular greeted him as a refreshing new voice because he emphasized the generational incision and therefore the non-implication of the young in the criminal record of German history. However, what has changed over the more than a decade since, is that German authors have begun to speak about personal and collective experiences of suffering that had previously been mostly taboo.

The writer W. G. Sebald began this trend with his lectures in Switzerland, later published as Luftkrieg und Literatur (1999) and in English translation as Natural History of Destruction, 2003, which were received with surprise and some negative reason in England and the US. After all, in his lectures and essays, this German writer, who is widely admired in the English-speaking world, discusses the more than 600,000 German casualties of the British and American bombing raids and Germany's relative silence about living through these experiences. Nevertheless, neither Sebald's lectures nor Jörg Friedrich's...
book Der Brand (2002), translated into English as The Fire (2007), in which the author gives detailed accounts of the death scenarios in German cities, revived the mentality of resentment that was present immediately after the war. Günter Grass' reconstruction of the refugee ship Wilhelm Gustloff's sinking in January 1945 in his short novel Im Krebsgang (2002) was written in an equally empathetic tone. Even his massive soul-baring memoir, Beim Häuten der Zweibel (2006), did not deviate from this spirit of compassion. Grass' admission of his teenage membership in the Waffen-SS, however, did cause an international uproar.

In 2005, Dagmar Barnouw published a book on the German processing of the past, in which she attempted to discuss the maintenance of an enforced discourse on the Nazi period and World War II. Her book revisits the construction of the discourse in Germany, as well as the political function it has performed over the last forty years. Her critical analysis emphasizes the central role of the notion of the Holocaust's uniqueness, a concept which became established in the 1970's in the US and which was subsequently accepted in the rest of the Western world. Following Peter Novick's reconstruction of the Holocaust narrative in his The Holocaust in American Life (1999), Barnouw describes the genesis of the uniqueness principle in the US, culminating in its concrete affirmation with the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Barnouw then vividly traces the parallel evolution of the uniqueness principle in Germany, with its climax in the dedication of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial in 2005. In this essay, I raise the question of why Germans have embraced this discourse to such an extent that the world is using the German example as a paradigmatic model.

This foreign recognition is not a recent phenomenon. In as early as 1973, while the USSR was still in existence, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in the first volume of his The Gulag Archipelago: "What takes place beyond the Oder and the Rhine gets us all worked up. What goes on in the environs of Moscow and behind the green fences near Sochi, or the fact that the murderers of our husbands and fathers ride through our streets and we make way for them as they pass, doesn't get us worked up at all, doesn't touch us. That would be digging up the past! Meanwhile, if we translate 86,000 West Germans (the figure of investigations up to that point, M.H.) into our own terms, on the basis of comparative population figures, it would become one-quarter of a million. But in a quarter-century we have not tracked down anyone. We have not brought anyone to trial. It is their wounds we are afraid to open." He continued: "A country which has condemned evil 86,000 times from the res-

trum of a court and irrevocably condemned it in literature and among its young people, year by year, step by step, is purged of it. What are we to do?"4

More than thirty-five years after Solzhenitsyn's question and almost two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, not much has changed. On the contrary, according to surveys conducted in Russia, "...there is no stigma associated with Stalin in the country today. In fact, many Russians hold ambivalent or even positive views of him. For example, one quarter or more of Russian adults say they would definitely vote for Stalin if he were alive and running for president..."5 The authors of this article contrast their Russian findings with German experiences and emphasize the difference. This Russian syndrome, which spread under Vladimir Putin with a vengeance, is further reflected in accounts from other societies.

The constant comparison, for example, of the Japanese and German treatment of their respective macro-criminal records is anchored in the assertion that the Germans have succeeded in processing the past. As Yuki Tanaka writes in the introduction to his Hidden Horrors, Japanese War Crimes in World War II: "We Japanese, too, need to re-experience the crimes of our fathers and grandfathers as deeply and as viscerally as the Germans have re-experienced their past."6 This request for a re-examination of the Japanese past is repeatedly reinforced by Korean and Chinese complaints about school books, which in their view seem to glorify Japan's war-time past. In addition to the history book controversy, the repeated visits of Japanese Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine inflame the emotions. At the Yasukuni Shrine, convicted WWII class-A war criminals are honored, along with 2.5 million Japanese soldiers who died in wars that the Japanese empire has been involved in, if not single-handedly started, since 1853. The American author Iris Chang went even further when she indicted Japanese society for not having recognized the "forgotten Holocaust", as she called the "Rape of Nanking". She wrote: "Perhaps more than any other nation in history, the Germans have incorporated into their postwar political identity the concession that the wartime government itself, not just individual Nazis, was guilty of war crimes."7 Today, the Chinese use the rescue operation for hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens in December 1937 in Nanking by foreigners, led by the German businessman John Rabe, who was also a member of the Nazi Party, to shame

---

4 Ibid., p.177.

the Japanese. They are restoring Rabe’s house and turning it into a museum. As important as the German attempts at mastering their past may be, I do not believe in the uniqueness of Germany’s symbolic redemption, nor in the uniqueness of the macro-crimes they committed. Still, I do want to elaborate on the following question: Why Germans accepted the identity of being the pariah among nations, a nation that became, in Daniel Goldhagen’s view, the “willing executioner” of evil? Allow me to answer this question in two ways: first, by talking about the German response to the Nazi past; second, by commenting on the Jewish response and its tremendous impact on the way Germans tried to come to terms with their history.

Initially, Germans did not intend to atone for the evil that the Nazi regime had perpetrated against European Jews and other populations and which were targeted at the bio-political cleansing projects of the German body politic by the Nazis. The collective German answer after May 1945 was, as a German book title correctly captured it in 1989, “The Great Silence.” Born in 1938, I grew up in that “great silence” of post-war West Germany. I did not know why most of the teachers at the high school I attended in Flensburg from 1952–58 refused to enter into critical discussions about the Nazi period until 1993, when I received a Festschrift, a commemorative book of the school, in which I found pictures of all the teachers wearing Nazi party emblems in their jacket lapels. The Festschrift had been put together by young teachers who had gone through the transformation of historical consciousness that characterized the late 1960’s and the 1970’s. When Willy Brandt, once a political refugee from Nazi Germany, became the Federal Chancellor of West Germany in September 1969, there ensued a dramatic incision in post-war German political culture; the “great silence” became disrupted. Still, since Willy Brandt had always been on the “right side” of German history, namely the Left, he did not have to respond to domestic or foreign critics. In that respect, he was beyond the categories of “good and evil” – and was resented exactly for that reason by his conservative opponents. His famous genuflection in December 1970, on the steps leading up to the memorial in honor of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, was universally praised outside Germany, but was not in his country, though it contributed to his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize the following year.

Most of West Germany’s functional elites could not have provided a life story comparable to that of Willy Brandt. Irrespective of whether they had to hide a criminal record or had simply, as the German historian Götz Aly suggests, benefited from the murderous policies of conquest and destruction by the Nazi regime, amnesia was the answer. Nevertheless, this is not a specifically German escape route from historical reality. In his famous 1878 Sorbonne lecture on “What is a Nation?”, Ernest Renan chose a similar approach when he reminded his Parisian audience, which had only recently endured a defeat by Prussian troops and ensuing Commune regime, that “forgetting” may be a necessary condition for the successful creation or reconstruction of a nation. At the end of his lecture, Renan even hinted at undermining a fixed notion of nation by discussing the possibility of a “European confederation,” which at that time would obviously have required amnesia on all sides. Today, this ‘amnesia principle’ is not limited in the Western world to Germany; it is very much alive in the Anglo-American world, as well.

Hurricane Katrina, for example, revealed some aspects of a deep-rooted racism whose traumatic presence in American life has not been completely purged by the extraordinary election of Barack Obama to the American Presidency. This syndrome has been present since the end of the Civil War, yet it is still surprising when its rawness becomes visible. Something is wrong with the state of memory in the United States when according to polls 71% of African-Americans believed Katrina demonstrated that race was a major factor in the priorities of rescue operations and 68% of White Americans did not. It seems that 140 years after the end of the Civil War Americans are still at a loss about the origins of the division, though they overcame one of the last hurdles when electing Obama to the Presidency. The fact that there is a Holocaust Memorial Museum and not a Slavery Memorial Museum or an Indian Removal Memorial Museum in the capital of the United States indicates that until recently, Americans have been more interested in processing European traumas than their own. The great divide in American society has not been narrowed by Holocaust memory, but made permanent. The American obsession with the Holocaust convinced blacks and Indians that the United States does not take their historical trauma seriously. According to this understanding of history, black Americans and Indians are not in the same league as European Jews.

14 Ibid., p. 20.
What can be said about the processing of historical traumas in the United Kingdom? English amnesia does not only extend to the semi-genocidal policies toward Ireland from the 16th to the early 20th century, but to the imperial legacy as a whole. Bhiku Parekh summarized in a TLS review of Paul Gilroy’s book, After Empire, the author’s thesis “Colonial rule, he argues, was brutal, involved mass destruction and extermination in America, Australia, parts of Africa, and elsewhere, and even prefigured, albeit on a smaller scale, many of the techniques of domination later perfected by the Nazis and others. It required a legitimizing ideology, which he argues, was provided by the widely accepted racist and hierarchical division of humankind. All the major political ideologies in Britain, including liberalism, developed within the unquestioned framework of the Empire [...] sprang from and nurtured the fantasy of omnipotence, encouraged narcissism and fostered the habit of laying down laws for and expecting unquestioning obedience of lesser breeds.”

Gilroy’s understanding of the imperial mentality clarifies why the English political and intellectual classes—and the mass media even more so—need the German imaginary as an ideological safety valve. Imagining a German Fourth Reich at every historical crossroad on the continent makes it unnecessary to process critically the English historical record. Imperial Britannia still rules the English mind and waves and prevents the United Kingdom from coming to terms with its own violent history. The British vision of politics also feeds off of the memory of the ‘Good War’ against Germany, which Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher would rather have kept divided after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The cultivation of the ‘Good War’ memory is monumentalized with a statue for Sir Arthur Harris, the Chief of Bomber Command and planner of the bombing of German cities, close to the site of parliament in Westminster, and became re-infused in September 2005 on London’s Embankment by Prince Charles’ dedication of a memorial for RAF pilots who had died in the Battle of Britain sixty-five years ago.

The careful distance that the English ruling class keeps from the continent is also maintained by the sentimental expectation that the American political class will invite them to participate in the imperial governance of the world. Tony Blair already experienced a rough awakening during the Iraq war, when it Britain’s minimal influence became clear. During the Obama presidency, this influence may suffer from unexpected memories, as New York Times editorial writer, Maureen Dowd, pointed out in a commentary during Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s recent visit to the USA (March 2009). She reminded her readers that the rather detached treatment of Brown may have had something to do with the fact that Obama remembers the fact that his grandfather was “beaten by British colonial troops in Kenya.” Obama has written about this in his book, Dreams from my Father. The British press even included even Michelle Obama in its surprised coverage of the cool reception that the Brown couple received in Washington. Dowd quotes a journalist from the Telegraph: “Her broad brush view of history associates Brits with the wicked white global hegemony responsible for the slave trade.” Whether these speculations about the Obamas’ treatment of the Browns are accurate or not, the fact that they are printed indicates that the world is starting to realize that American power suddenly has a black face. Barack Obama’s African and Michelle Obama’s black American roots suddenly make British journalists understand that Great Britain has still a lot of suppressed historical memory to process. For Kenya, an American anthropologist has already performed this intellectual action, by writing a Pulitzer-Price winning book about ‘The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya.’

Allow me now to move on to the question of why Germans have accepted the characterization of being the pariah nation for so long. Between the founding of the two German republics in the fall of 1949 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Germans never volunteered to accept the pariah label as core feature of their society. This negative identity was only one feature of the West German self-understanding. The East German regime had unilaterally decided that West Germany was the heir to National Socialism and therefore in charge of processing its memory. To that end, the East German regime had dedicated a monumental national memorial site near the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in 1958, which commemorated an anti-Fascist alliance that did not mention or depict Jews. On a handbill distributed to visitors, one could read: “Remember that German anti-Fascists were the first victims of national socialist concentration camps, that they had contributed in international cooperation with anti-Fascists of all countries to the liberation and thereby laid the foundation for a Nazi-free, democratic Germany.” The Holocaust played no role in the regime-sanctioned memory of the GDR. Under the East German Government, the museum of German history, once called the Zeughaus, and now known as the German Historical Museum, on Unter den Linden, Berlin’s main boulevard, had installed an elevated cubicle with photographs of scenes related to the Holocaust. This mini exhibition within the museum was meant to fill the obvious gap in the overall exhibition of German history. Visiting the museum in late November 1989, shortly after the fall of

---

17 B. Parekh, Times Literary Supplement (September 9, 2005).
18 "Monument Marks Battle of Britain", BBC News (September 18, 2005).
writes, "one rehearsed the catastrophes of old and set times in the liturgical calendar, according to fixed rites of mourning and penitence." Secular intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to revisit the archetypal situations in short stories, poems, songs, plays, and novels. But the sacred and secular narrators of catastrophe created a false sense of security. Their audiences felt reassured that archetypal features of catastrophe would repeat themselves and that history would subsequently follow its normal pattern. The unexpected mega-catastrophe of the Holocaust did kill millions of people who had anticipated a catastrophe scenario along the lines of familiar archetypes of the sacred narrative. Yet the events of the Holocaust have also destroyed for many the meaning of the archetypes on which the narrative relied. It is the uniqueness of the Holocaust in the Jewish history of destruction that ended this history almost completely and made it nearly impossible to continue to think of future destruction within the framework of ritualized images of sacred memory. The Holocaust challenged this memory and therefore unleashed attempts to replace it with the memory of the Holocaust itself. This memory transcends the history of destruction that is captured in the apocalyptic literature because it appeals to Jews who believe and also to those who are agnostics and atheists. Still, attempts are made to use the Holocaust for the purpose of reenergizing American Jewry.

Oren Baruch Stier presents the study of a movement that is actively pursuing the transformation of the Holocaust into primarily Jewish memory. He writes in the preface:

"My interest has been marked by a desire for a critically informed public memory of the Holocaust, one that nonetheless remains sensitive to the power and reality of the mythic and mythic forces undergirding that remembrance. That interest parallels the dedication of those countless individuals — survivors and others — who are themselves absolutely committed to furthering the memorial request."  

Throughout his study, Stier is driven by the American Jewish desire to partake of a European experience. This lack of American experience is overcome by the "March of the Living," a pilgrimage-like tour to the designated sites of the Holocaust by a Miami-based group to evoke "...a transformation in its participants as it seeks to change them from schoolchildren with no profound investment in the Jewish community and its future to adults who are active participants in that future." Stier quotes one of the founders of the "March," Gene Greenzweig, speaking of the next twenty years: "[...] ninety-percent of Jewish leaders from all over the world will have been on the March of the Living [...]"

and will have a common memory." Though he recognizes critical Jewish voices, he basically affirms the "March" as a way to form post-Holocaust identity: "[...] such a myth is very effective not only in integrating American Jews [...] but also in helping them to legitimate their world view...and mobilize their activities [...]." For Stier, "the events of the Holocaust may have permanently 'sacralized' the sites of mass death visited by marchers during their week in Poland [...]." The imagined new identity of Jews from all over the world only indirectly connects with the spiritual meaning of the narrative of ancient Israel. In effect, the Holocaust has become the new core of meanings.

The memory of the Holocaust that is represented in Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem and Washington’s Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, is not sacred in a spiritual sense. There are sacred spaces in both memorial sites, but the memorials themselves are not traditionally consecrated places. They are also museums and places of research that reach out to the non-Jewish world at large. In that regard, the new German Holocaust Memorial in Berlin fulfills a similar function, but with a more dramatic aesthetic design and with an even more dramatic backdrop of the German capital’s historical environment. But how does the Jewish memory of the Holocaust relate to the German memory that has now found its symbolic representation in Peter Eisenman’s walk-in sculpture of 2,700 concrete slats of different height and size?

In 1997, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann questioned whether the Holocaust had become symbolically processed in Germany. In Moses the Egyptian, first published in the United States, he writes: "In spite of an immense number of works and the intensity of the scientific historiography devoted to that period in Germany, there are only a few futile attempts at cultural commemoration. Cultural memory still seems paralyzed in Germany." Assmann’s questions about the Egyptian origins of Jewish monotheism were influenced by Sigmund Freud’s essay on Moses and Monotheism, which was partly published by the author in 1937 in Vienna, one year before Austria’s annexation by Nazi Germany, and finished during his London exile in 1939. Freud was aware that he raised disturbing questions about Jewish identity in troubling times when he stated at the outset of his essay:

"To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly – especially belonging to that people. No

Freud’s truth quest about the historical Egyptian Moses and the memory of him as God’s messenger to the Jews as his chosen people squarely confronted the issue of how history and symbolic memory are connected. Freud wrote before the Holocaust about the difficulties of the ancient Jews: “It might not have been easy for that people to reconcile their belief in their being preferred to all others by an all-powerful God with the dire experiences of their sad fate.” Freud alluded to the themes of the apocalyptic literature of destruction when he wrote: “If there was wonder that he allowed ever new tyrants to come who subjected and ill-treated his people – the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians – yet his power was recognized in that all those wicked enemies were defeated in their turn and their empires destroyed.” For Freud this contradictory history of destruction and recurring triumph, however, confirmed his Egyptian thesis:

"In Egypt monotheism had grown ... as an ancillary effect of imperialism: God was the reflection of a Pharaoh autocratically governing a great world Empire. With the Jews the political conditions were most unfavourable for a development away from an exclusive national God towards that of a universal ruler of the world. Whence, then, did this tiny and impotent nation derive the audacity to pass themselves off as the favourite child of the Sovereign Lord?"

In Freud’s reading of Egyptian and Jewish history, symbolic meaning trumps historical data and transforms that data into the narrative of meaning in which God repeatedly destroyed the imperial enemies of Israel. The Egyptian Moses "stamped the Jewish people with this trait, one which became so significant to them for all time. He enhanced them their self-confidence by assuring them that they were the chosen people of God; he declared them to be holy and laid on them the duty to keep apart from others.”

Assmann discusses in his book the dual Moses that Freud introduced in his famous essay, the Moses of Egyptian history and the Moses of Jewish memory. His book reflects, as he says,

"[...] my situation as a German Egyptologist writing fifty years after the catastrophe which Freud saw approaching, knowing the full extent of the genocide which was still unthinkable in Freud’s time, and having turned to ancient Egypt thirty-five years ago with questions that are all too easily forgotten as soon as one enters an academic discipline [...] In this book I try to remember and recover the questions, not to answer them. I attempt a memoirhistory of religious antagonism insofar as this antagonism is founded on the symbolic confrontation of..."
Israel and Egypt. In this respect, I hope to contribute to a historical analysis of anti-Semitism.33

For Assmann, the roots of anti-Semitism had nothing to do with the ethnic or racial identity of Jews, but with the Mosaic distinction, the break with a mythical understanding of reality. This break with myth was also Egyptian, as Freud had seen it. Assmann critically restores the historical Egyptian background of the Akhenaten revolution without dismissing the transformation of this history into the memory of Moses. In a way, he affirms Freud’s final work. Yet at the same time, as a post-Holocaust German, he also wanted to know how this mega-catastrophe in the series of Jewish destructions would affect German imagination. He himself has no answer.

German intellectuals have accepted the thesis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The thesis has become a cornerstone of their intellectual self-inter pretation as Germans. The acceptance of the thesis is not based on a critical and comparative understanding of the range of macro-crimes in modern history. Neither Western slavery and colonialism, nor the killing regimes of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot have undermined the self-confident identification of many German intellectuals with the uniqueness thesis. Most of them have demonstrated no interest in comparative questions; they often rejected them as attempts to deny Germany’s unique criminality. For the younger intellectual Mandarins, it goes without saying that their identification remains in the realm of symbolic abstraction. After all, they were too young or not even born to bear any responsibility for the criminal behavior of Germans under the Nazi regime. Yet even for historically sensitive Germans who are now in their seventies, such as Jürgen Habermas and Benedict XVI, and who did not participate in any criminal activities, though they had worn German uniforms as teenagers, the temptation is great to embrace the notion of belonging to an apocalyptic nation. Though the aura of evil provides extremely negative markers of exceptionalism, being a German intellectual still means that you belong to a special people. It is unclear how long this production of meaning will last. The frequent occurrence of genocidal regimes of terror in the post-Holocaust years has confronted this ‘exceptional’ identity with major challenges and recommended new departures.

During his visit to Poland in May 2006, Pope Benedict XVI visited Auschwitz. Afterwards, the German Pope was criticized by some German commentators for having delivered a speech in Auschwitz-Birkenau that did not endorse the Holocaust consensus about the German people, his people, as “willing executioners of the final solution.” Benedict alluded to the theme of a grand seduction of the German people by Hitler and the Nazi movement. Some critics disapproved of his speech for not having mentioned the role of

33 Jan Assmann, Moses, p. 6.

the Catholic Church in the teaching of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic attitudes over the centuries. Whatever his reasons were for not following expectations about the statements a German Pope should make in Auschwitz, Benedict went beyond this ethnic guilt confession when he expressed, in German, his spiritual anxiety about a silent God: “Where was God in those days? How could he tolerate this triumph of evil?” His answer was not comforting when he said that “we cannot look into the mystery of God” and suggested a humble cry to God: “Wake-up! Don’t forget your human creature.”34

One of the major arguments in support of the uniqueness thesis in Germany has been the notion that the Holocaust represented a fundamental break with civilization (Zivilisationsbruch). This Zivilisationsbruch, which was committed in Europe by Germans against Jews, took on universal features, whereas the European destruction of pre-Columbian America and the enslavement of Africans never attained any serious attention by German intellectuals as manifestations of a Zivilisationsbruch. In their perspective, Indians and Africans had no civilization that could have been broken.35 This Eurocentric fixation prevented them from ever considering the colonial conquests and African slavery as comparative experiences of genocidal terror. That they overlooked for a long time the mountains of skulls Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot had left behind, was partly a reflection of their leftist prejudices and partly a result of the syndrome of internalized collective guilt. Although German intellectuals reject the notion of collective guilt as violating the principle of individual responsibility, they can’t escape living it, because they accept the Holocaust-centered reading of modern German history. They constantly reinforce a kind of trans-generational pact of identity that is anchored in the profundity of evil in the crimes committed by Germans. The American “March-of-the-Living” that takes Jews to Auschwitz because it was “sanctified” by the evil perpetrators against Jews, is the trans-generational Jewish equivalent of the German identity pact. In both pacts, people are taken prisoner by history. They are not free human agents who have managed to transform the traumas of history into a memory that helps them to navigate in the world of the living.

The peculiar role that the former sites of terror play in these experiments of reenactment and mystical identification was pointed out by Aleida Assmann in her study of monumental spaces of memory. She commented on the impossibility of preserving the authenticity of the sites of terror:

Only a small part of the material stock can be preserved as representative and even here deteriorating substance has to become renewed and replaced. In the course of time authenticity will withdraw from the relics to the sheer "here" of place. Who emphasizes too much the force of memory of sites is in danger of confusing the reconfigured place of memory, the place of visitors, with the historical place, the place for the inners.

Eiseman’s Holocaust Memorial in Berlin transcends this sense of misplaced concreteness, even though the visibility of the Reichstag building and the Brandenburg Gate, and beneath the ground, the knowledge of the intact Nazi bunker world, including the bunker in which Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, 1945, are reminders of history. Still, the German process of memory is hampered by the uniqueness thesis.

The most recent German expression of the thesis was presented by the philosopher Rolf Zimmermann in his well-received book Philosophie nach Auschwitz. He left no doubts about the thrust of the book when he formulated the subtitle: “A new definition of morality in politics and society.” From the outset, Zimmermann clarified why Auschwitz was more unique than all the other regimes of genocidal terror in the 20th century and prior history by writing:

“The protagonists and bloody agents of the total regime of Nazism have crossed a boundary, which lies beyond a reenactable concept of general moral comparison among humans and destroys therefore traditional concepts of punishment and redemption.”

This formulation reveals the historical ignorance of the philosopher concerning the record of genocidal terror in the 20th century and history. It does not advance the understanding that was reached in the debate twenty years earlier by German historians in the Historikerstreit of 1986, when Ernst Nolte’s suggestion of Soviet primacy in genocide and the Nazis as their imitators launched an academic and public debate about the “uniqueness of the national socialist destruction of the Jews.” This quotation is the subtitle of the most inclusive documentation, which was published one year after the controversy erupted, with a rebuttal to Nolte by Jürgen Habermas. The overall result of the debate was the acceptance of the uniqueness thesis in Germany, which became sensationaly updated in 1996 by Goldhagen with his book.

On the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday in 2004, former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt declared that Germans had learned from their history. Even if certain things become submerged in memory, “the genocide and Auschwitz are so ingrained that they will remain as long in memory as the Babylonian captivity in the time of Nebuchadnezzar.” Whatever Schmidt wanted to say when he connected Auschwitz with the Babylonian captivity, he understood the role Germany had begun to play in Jewish memory. This is the difference between Germany and Japan. Japanese Prime Ministers can repeatedly visit the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, proclaiming as did one of them, namely Koizumi, that: “Every country wants to mourn their war dead, and other countries should not interfere in the way of mourning.” He may provoke angry protests in the countries in which the Japanese military behaved in the 1930s and 1940s, but the Japanese military behavior in the way the military of all societies, including the United States, frequently behaves. But he does not enter any ancient narrative of meaning relating to an Asian “chosen people.” In that respect, the uniqueness of the Holocaust is based on the meaning narratives of the Jewish people and not on the events themselves. The events can be compared with other phenomena of that nature, but they lack the meaning identity of the victims. Once the comparative nature of the regimes of terror becomes recognized, they must all be seen as regimes that perpetrate macro-criminal terror against all of humanity. That level of understanding, however, has not been reached and that is why the German story remains different from the stories of the rest of the world.

39 Ibid.