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German National Identity and the Nazi Past

In contrast to what the term ‘hour zero’ to describe the end of the Second World War tries to insinuate, in many ways the 8 May 1945 did not mark a new beginning for Germany. It marked a beginning in the midst of the total destruction brought on by a world war which had been started by Germany and had ended in its unconditional surrender, foreign occupation and eventually, the foundation of two German states which – as the Cold War evolved – became ever more tightly integrated into the respective spheres of influence of the two superpowers. In view of the crimes committed under Nazi rule, in particular the attempt to eradicate European Jewry, Germany also faced complete and utter moral bankruptcy. The result was that not only the immediate aftermath of the defeat but also subsequent decades were deeply influenced by the legacy of the Third Reich. This became particularly obvious regarding questions of national identity. In view of the centrality of the role of the past in any construction of national identity, the key question was how to integrate crimes as incomprehensible as those committed in Hitler’s Germany into the self-understanding of the German nation after 1945. As public debates or, at times, the lack of them have shown, at different times the two Germanies found different ways to ‘deal with’ this past.

In view of the unspeakable nature of the crimes, even the term coined to describe the debates about this historical legacy, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (‘coming to terms with the past’), was inadequate. Considering the scale and the nature of the crimes, what could or should any ‘coming to terms with the past’ possibly look like? And what would the end point of this process be? Would an
end point not mean that the Holocaust would be consigned to oblivion? And does the term itself not also suggest too much emphasis on, and maybe even empathy with, the perpetrators struggling with the memory of their crimes at the expense of a focus on the victims? In fact, does the term ‘a past that has not been overcome’ (unbewältigte Vergangenheit) not even suggest a role reversal of victims and perpetrators since its psychological use usually refers to people who have experienced trauma and who are trying to return to normal life after having overcome their traumatic experience, as Harald Welzer has suggested?¹

Notwithstanding this, however, both Germanies – observed by the international community – more or, more often, less adequately ‘dealt’ with a past that has – in spite of numerous attempts to consign it to history – not only remained very present in post-war German history but which – with increasing temporal distance and particularly since the 1990s – has also become part of global memory. Even though there has always been a broad consensus which supported Adorno’s dictum that Auschwitz should never be allowed to repeat itself, German history since 1945 was, at least until recently, characterised by disagreements regarding the role this historical legacy should play in the nation’s consciousness.

During the period of Germany’s division, the two German states responded in fundamentally different ways to this challenge. Whereas the GDR attributed a central role to the concept of anti-fascism and subsumed the historical legacy under this heading, the West German state – at least once it had started to face up to the past – was largely torn between two diametrically opposed forces consisting of those who wanted to make this chapter of German history a central component of German national identity and those who wanted to consign it to history. Even though nowadays there are what Olick has referred to as ‘glib references to the “German model” of transitional justice’,² the following section will show that for most of the lifetime of the two German states, the Vergangenheitsbewältigung practised was a far cry from what could be described as being of model character.

Reluctant regret: The two Germanies after the Holocaust

By employing the concept of anti-fascism, the official discourse in East Germany found a convenient solution to the question of the past.