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Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community

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which would have to be paid. From the Serbian point of view, these credits are a chapter of history that has to be written down in the European archive of commemorations. The events of the last months have meant, of course, that the memory and the debt due will be denied to the Serbian state, as it 'compels' Europe to turn upon itself. More than ever, to accept or to deny the myth of Blackbird Field is the confession of one's faith. It means belonging to a Serbian 'us' or to a strange 'them', to be brother or enemy.

This inherent mechanism of inclusion or exclusion is one of the main reasons that foundation myths demand our attention, for this mechanism is used to transform national or ethnic ideologies into structures of political power. Myth is rarely a monologue, and while there is almost no possibility for an internal discussion or counter-position, there is often scope for external dialogues. The Serbian myth of their 'historical' territory has long ago provoked Albanian legends and stories that are now providing, under Serbian military oppression, arguments and legitimations for military resistance. There is, therefore, also a battle of myths, but we should not forget that it is only in the space of the myth, in the minds and heads of the people, that these opponents are fighting from near equal positions. Is this equality in the space occupied by opposing myths not one more argument against the fundamentalist claims of national or ethnic groups that try to present their identities as, so to speak, 'anthropological' ones?

My own answer to this question would be 'yes', although I am not sure if this position is really 'politically correct'. Some time ago, when I first read Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, it seemed to contain the typical confusion between cause and effect.⁵ What he described seemed to me not to be a clash of civilisations, but a clash of foundation myths that, each in its own way, try to fundamentalise the origins of their culture and religion. But that is a long story, and Huntington told us only the very end.

⁵ Huntington, 1996.

CHAPTER 12

National Identity as Trauma: The German Case¹

Bernhard GIESEN

No construction of collective identity can entirely dispense with memory. Memory supports or even creates the assumption of stability that demarcates identity in distinction to the incessant change of the phenomenal world. Triumphant or traumatic, memory marks the centre of identity and sets up a horizon that delineates the space of possible pasts. Identity is constituted by the very conception of the past as traumatic or triumphant: trauma and triumph are liminal experiences of individual as well as of collective subjects. There is no way to imagine a land beyond the liminal horizons, but memory strives to reach out for it, to cope with it and to relate and adapt the movement of history to it. It can be spoken out or silenced, but it is always there, enabling us to represent and present the past as our history.

Both issues, memory as well as collective identity, have recently attracted increasing attention in debates among historians, sociologists, and literary critics. They reconstruct and deconstruct lost paradises and promised lands, the traumas of defeat and humiliation,

¹ This chapter is further developed in a larger article by Bernhard Giesen entitled 'Lost Paradise, Failed Revolution, Remembered Victims' in Neil J. Smelser and Jeffrey C. Alexander, eds, *Cultural Trauma*, published by University of California Press, 2000. The article was written during a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, within the framework of the study group on Cultural Trauma which was established in the Center. The themes of the chapter are also developed in a book by Bernhard Giesen entitled *Triumph and Trauma*, University of California Press, 2000.

tales of founding heroes and triumphant liberations. But the trend of looking back on the past from an exclusive perspective and the preoccupation with challenges to identity have also been criticised for diverting attention from present problems and eroding the universalistic project of modernity.² This chapter, however, is based on a position that considers memory to be a path, and perhaps the only one, that leads toward a universalistic construction of national identity following the collapse of the great utopias and master narratives of modernity.

The historical paradigm case dealt with here is the construction of German national identity in the 19th and 20th centuries, with particular reference to the period after the Holocaust. Since the turn of the century, German national identity has been treated as the result of a *Sonderweg* to modernity, and this German exceptionalism, originally coined by German historians such as Meinecke, has been reaffirmed by recent publications pointing, although in a quite different way, to a primordial German national character that is seen as bound to the death camps.³ Like other constructions of national identity, the thesis of German exceptionalism stresses Germany's uniqueness and inimitability in distinction to other nations. The Holocaust represents this uniqueness in an exemplary way and has to be regarded as the traumatic reference for German national identity after 1945. In this chapter, the discussion of identity will be patterned by the typological distinction between primordial, traditional, and universalistic constructions of collective identity.⁴

Primordial identities refer to sharp and exclusive boundaries based on natural distinctions; they imagine the outsider as a superior demon that cannot cross the boundary and never should. Traditional identities insist on continuity between past and present and are based on the routines and practices of local life worlds. Their boundaries are gradual transitions between inside and outside; in principle they can be crossed, but it takes time and a certain cautiousness to approach the traditional community. The outsider is treated as a stranger who is neither superior nor inferior but difficult to communicate with. In contrast to primordial and traditional communities, universalistic

constructions open their boundaries for the inclusion of outsiders. Universalistic identities are based on the tension between the sacred and the mundane. They claim a special link between the community and the realm of the sacred and transcendental. They try to establish a radical discontinuity between the past and the future.

Social constructions of national identity are never unanimous, nor are the modes of remembering the past. Instead, they are prone to conflicts and subject to public debates. They vary according to the life world of the social carrier group and are transformed by the turnover of generations. Rituals can bridge the cleavages of political conflicts and public debates, but they can also sometimes provoke public controversies. Although the perspectives may shift, evaluations may differ, institutional arenas may vary and the rituals may change, constructions of national identity cannot escape from an orientation toward the past, a past that, whether traumatic or triumphant, does not pass away. Traumas and triumphs constitute the 'mythomotors' of national identity. They represent liminal experiences and ultimate horizons for the self-constitution of a collective subject, just as birth and death provide the ultimate horizon for the existential experience of the individual person. Only by reference to the undeniable fact of birth and the inescapable prospect of death is the individual able to construct an encompassing identity beyond shifting encounters and experiences. In a similar way, by referring to a past as a collective triumph or a collective trauma, contingent relationships between individual persons are transcended and forged into a collective identity. Triumphs are moments of 'effervescence', to use Durkheim's expression, or of 'charisma' and '*Verzauberung*' (enchantment) in Weber's terms. Even if the event that is recalled as a triumph was not experienced as an extraordinary moment at the time it occurred, the collective memory glorifies it and imagines it in retrospect as a moment of utmost intensity. It is this lack of awareness and consciousness that has to be coped in the ritual re-enactment of the triumph, in annual celebrations and through mythologisation and narration. The trauma is constructed according to a similar logic. Traumas remember a moment of violent intrusion or a collapse of meaning that the collective consciousness was unable to perceive or to grasp in its full importance when it happened. Only later on, after a period of latency, can it be remembered, worked through and spoken out. Both these imaginations of a collective origin, triumph as well as trauma, refer mostly to an act of violence that breaks down and

² Maier, 1993; J. Butler, 1990; Gilroy, 1993.

³ Goldhagen, 1996.

⁴ Shils, 1981; Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, 1995.

reconstructs the social bond. Collective identity is never exclusively triumphant or traumatic; it is never based only on the imagined homogeneity of insiders or only on the otherness of excluded outsider; it is never driven only by Eros or only by Tanatos – it is always both, but the balance may be disturbed and the levels may differ.

The following remarks will outline a repertoire of German identities that respond to three predominantly traumatic moments of German history: the belated origin of the German nation-state, the lack of a successful revolution in Germany and – most importantly – the Holocaust.

Lost Paradises: Germany as *Naturnation*

Nations that cannot look back to a long political history as states, or that cannot ignore the discontinuities in their history, face special problems in constructing memories to support their identity. The emptiness or the evil of their recent history fosters an escape to a timeless mythical past in which culture and nature are merged and blended in harmony. This primordial unity of culture, nature, and community is usually considered to have been lost in the course of history – culture and community were alienated from their natural base, but the people kept a memory of their origins embedded in nature. Looking back to the primordial paradise fuels energies in present societies to overcome decadence, disease, artificiality and pollution, or it provides a claim on a homeland, thus bringing the community back to its natural roots. From this perspective, the continuity between the present and the remembered past is perceived as having been interrupted by a long history of alienation and opposition. Here, national identity is not constructed by reference to a recent historical past that is available in the form of witnesses' testimonies or written reports, but is formed by imagining a timeless past that is seen as the origin and source of identity, as the horizon of history, and as the ultimate goal, collective action.

Even more than other forms of memory, the representation of a lost paradise is a social construction of the present. It comes as no surprise that primordial conceptions of an ethnic identity resonated well with the new nations that emerged in Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. The old nation-states in Western Europe were not entirely immune to these primordial constructions of ethnic origins either, even if they could look back to a firmly estab-

lished republican tradition. Indeed, France, as well as England and the Netherlands, all had their own myths of ethnic origins, their own racism and their own anti-Semitism, however, the pre-19th century roots of their political traditions prevented these primordial ideas from becoming anything more than influential intellectual heterodoxies.⁵ In contrast to its western neighbours, the German national identity is frequently regarded as being founded upon natural or primordial structures.⁶ Indeed, Germany may be considered the paradigm case of a latecomer to political modernisation and nation-state-building.⁷ It was only in 1871 that – after centuries of fragmentation and division – the political mosaic of many small and two large princely states was replaced by the unified nation-state of Imperial Germany. Although the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been a major player in European politics for centuries, and Prussia had ascended in the 18th century to the status of a military superpower and a focal arena of European enlightenment, the German nation had been imagined as a cultural community rather than a political one. When the German nation-state was finally realised, however, the absence of Austria, an important element of the imagined German cultural community, meant that the new state was perceived as more of a political unit than a cultural one. But it was a political unit that lacked political institutions. This situation fostered the imagining and invention of primordial paradises.

These primordial constructions of a German identity are not immutable and nor are they invariably connected to the essence of the Germans; instead they result from a repertoire of societies' ideas about their relationship to nature as provided by history. Even nature, which is usually considered as objectively given, does not exist in a self-evident and socially unmediated way. Instead it is a cultural construction reflecting the particular setting of a society. Imagining the outside as a demonic threat that has to be fought or to be fled from; as a wilderness that requires taming and civilising; as a resource or a property that can be used and traded; as an object that can be investigated by the methods of science; as a bodily existence that is at risk of disease; and, finally, as a precious garden that has to be protected against pollution and destruction – all these conceptions hint at particular patterns of social interaction and community. Our idea of

⁵ Sternhell, 1996.

⁶ Brubaker, 1994; Giesen and Junge, 1991.

⁷ Plessner, 1992; Bendix, 1978; Hobsbawm, 1990.

nature reflects our own situation and our longing for a lost paradise in which culture is connected once more to nature.

The constructions of German national identity have been influenced by four different models relating nature to the social community. All of them emerged in situations of crisis and rapid change and focus on the theme of alienation from nature. In these models, nature is perceived as an issue of identity rather than a field of resources to be used and exploited. A discourse about purity and pollution supports these constructions of a lost paradise, although the level of this discourse varies from ambitious philosophical reasoning to trivial novels.

The German Romantics conceived of national identity in an ambitious philosophical way. It was considered as an inalienable natural individuality exempt from ordinary communication and from the changing tides of history. Responding to the trauma of the French occupation, the Romantic intellectuals discovered a sublime essence, that is, a national identity of the Germans concealed and hidden by layers of foreign influences. This identity could be disclosed and approached only from an aesthetic point of view – for example in contemplating medieval ruins, which in their very deterioration reunited and merged culture and nature.⁸ Only art, or infinite longing that conveyed a radical distance from the realm of the ordinary and, above all, from the world of power and money, could provide access to the sublime primordial identity of the *Volk*. Particular rituals of discourse, like romantic irony and the exaltation of sentimental life (love, even craziness), reflected and reinforced the detachment from idle business and ordinary society and the orientation toward the sublime. This ambitious conception of national identity as the sublime, ineffable essence, set the stage for the subsequent imagining of German primordial identity, reducing *demos* to *ethnos* and politics to aesthetics.

In the second half of the 19th century the *völkische Bewegung* revived these romantic ideas in a trivialised way. Again, the movement was propelled by heterodox intellectuals who marked their distance from the centre of Imperial Germany. Like the Romantics, the *völkische* intellectuals, such as Dahn, Freitag, Lagarde and Langbehn, and their petit bourgeois audience, opposed the world of

art to the world of money. Instead of focusing on sublime essences, however, they had more tangible and earthly matters in mind. Between 1880 and 1910 Germany underwent a process of accelerated modernisation and mobilisation. Every third German changed residence, mostly from the rural areas to the expanding large cities. Germany became the leading military and industrial power on the continent, and even challenged Great Britain. The intellectuals of the *völkische Bewegung* reacted to the rapid social changes by depicting the idyllic life of free Germanic peasants and warriors, who were seen as sane, vigorous, and bound to the natural soil.

The lost ethnic paradise was contrasted to the decadent, unhealthy, and alienating world of the large cities. Criticism of modern decadence and disintegration was combined with a longing for a vanished primordial unity between body and land, blood and soil. Outside of intellectual circles, the attempt to shake off the decadence of modernity and the disruptive forces of industrialism led to particular forms of retreat and special patterns of ritual purification. New rural communities revived seemingly ancient Germanic forms of economy without money and worshiped the sun or other Germanic or natural deities; reform movements promoted vegetarian diets and so-called natural clothing; nudism gained followers and was practised with almost religious devotion; and youth movements like the *Wandervogel* sought to flee the cities and live in close contact with nature. Public discourse was preoccupied with sexual diseases and decadence, while the ambitious reform movements in music (personified by Wagner) and art (*Jugendstil*) gained widespread attention. All this was patterned by a discourse about purity and pollution that aimed at reconstructing indisputable boundaries in a society where traditional structures were blurred and dissolved.

In the third model, the merging of culture, community and nature was also based on a discourse about purity and pollution, but it was not moved by nostalgia for bygone folklore. Instead of pursuing the sublime, it was couched in the objectivist language of scientism. At its core was a quasi-scientific conception of racial differences. Distinctions between races had been quite common in intellectual discourse since the 18th century, but now they were based on biology instead of culture and were thoroughly medicalised.⁹ At the end of the

⁸ Giesen, 1998.

⁹ With reference to race, see also Sebastiani, 1999.

century, this new racism merged with anti-Semitism and the eugenic movement, and it attempted to organise societies according to the order of nature as revealed by science. Here, the recollection of lost paradises consists mainly of the statement of the primordial purity of the Germanic or Aryan race, which was endangered by migration and risked becoming lost in the increasing mixture of races.

The Nazi ideology blended this racism with elements of the *völkische* movement, particularly in the cult of the heroic warrior whose superiority and dominance over others was considered as natural, original and unalienated. Again, the everyday life of liberal capitalist democracies was seen as decadent and artificial and was contrasted with the natural harmony between the people and the land and with the primordial violence of the Germanic hero, a violence that invested the triumphant beast with sacred qualities.

A fourth model of a primordial harmony between nature and culture can be seen in the ideas of ecological fundamentalism, which has an extraordinary strong resonance in Germany (comparable to the wildlife protection movement in the US or the animal rights movements in Britain). Although the political orientation of its social carriers shifted from Right to Left, ecological fundamentalism clearly uses not only elements of Romanticism, but also motifs of anti-industrialism and radical 'retreatism' from the heritage of the *völkische Bewegung*. Evidently and understandably, any reference to this heritage is taboo in Germany. When Rudolph Bahro, one of the most interesting fundamentalist intellectuals, mentioned this heritage in an affirmative way, he provoked a public scandal and was immediately expelled from the Green Party.

German ecological fundamentalism pushed the contrast between past and present even further than the *völkische Bewegung*: it is not only the primordial purity of a particular nation that is at stake, but the fate of humankind in its entirety, and it is not only the primordial paradise of pre-industrial life, but nature itself that is endangered and jeopardised by industrial society. As in earlier imaginings of a lost paradise, nature is here considered as the non-malleable fundament of identity. It will decay and lose its order when subjected to exploitation and instrumental use. Again, these fundamentals of identity are approached mainly from an aesthetic point of view, but in a trivialised form. The romantic wilderness is intentionally produced and carefully preserved in the suburban gardens of the ecologically minded

Bildungsbürgertum, the most important supporters of the German Greens.

The striking continuities between 19th century and contemporary imaginations of a lost paradise should not, however, blur a very important difference: although local, regional and, occasionally, even national boundaries show up in the discourse of ecological fundamentalism (when, for instance, foreign plants and animals are banned from the territory because they 'pollute' the original ecosystem), the national coding of the lost paradise is, in this last model, clearly replaced by a global horizon. Ecological fundamentalism is a global movement and aims at a global scenario; national boundaries appear only as differences of sensitivity with respect to ecological issues.

Failed Revolutions: Democracy Without a Triumphant Myth

More striking than these memories of a primordial paradise, however, are social rituals that try explicitly to revive the memory of a particular event in the historical past. These might take the form of days of remembrance and monuments, dates and places of memory visited and venerated by members of a community, pictures and narrations presenting the past for the following generations or the presentation of its relics in museums for the educated public. Even rituals that construct and continue a tradition emerge, not as effortless and evident remembrances of an unquestionably given past, but as social constructions that may, in principle, be objected to, debated, and questioned. Outsiders do not have to share these conceptions of the past, and their presence in rituals of remembrance is often seen as disturbing or even offensive – it is our own past, and we consider ourselves sovereign with respect to our common memories.

This is especially true with respect to the triumphant memory of past victories and acts of liberation by which a political community construes its own origin. Liberation from foreign domination, the birthday of the ruler or the enactment of a national constitution, are ritually remembered and celebrated. Monuments recall the victories of the nation over its enemies, poems and anthems praise the great deeds of the sovereign or the liberation of the country, and public marches

and rallies revive the triumphs of the past (on this theme, see also Arve Thorsen's chapter in this volume).

Even the seemingly unprecedented rituals of modern revolutionary movements that attempt to establish an entirely new society and set out, not to repeat the past, but to accelerate into an open and undetermined future – even these rituals are founded, consciously or unconsciously, on memories. The rhetoric of the great French Revolution recalled the republicanism of Roman antiquity, the European revolutions of the 19th century in turn took over the symbols of the French Revolution as well as the national traditions of citizenship and bourgeois self-consciousness, the Russian Revolution referred to the patterns of the preceding revolutions in the 19th century, and so on. After defeating the *Ancien Regime*, the revolutionaries strongly traditionalised their own historical success; the French as well as the American and the Russian Revolutions quickly spawned annual memorial celebrations.

Such highly elaborated rituals of remembering revolution are not mere folklore and remainders. Instead the triumphant memory of the revolution must be considered indispensable for the construction of a modern *demos*.¹⁰ A nation is constituted as a sovereign political subject only if the people can imagine themselves as rebelling and rising against the personal regime of the prince. Hence, remembering the revolution provides the ritual basis for a democratic identity. In order to create such a triumphant collective memory of revolutions, even relatively harmless insurrections and upheavals are hailed as heroic actions – the famous seizure of the Bastille by a large street crowd liberated only a dozen non-political prisoners. Consequently the French king could write in his diary on the evening of *quatorze juillet*, 'today nothing.'

Indeed, it is not the factual political success, but the collective memory that constitutes the triumphant origin of a nation. Only in exceptional cases like the American, Russian or Chinese Revolutions can the uprising of the people really establish a continuous and uninterrupted new government. The French Revolutions of 1830 and 1871 failed in this respect, and, strictly speaking, even the great French Revolution of 1791 cannot be regarded as successful. But their factual success and their uninterrupted continuity are less important

than the way they are perceived in cultural memory. The cultural memory of the French Revolution is marked by a deep divide between trauma and triumph that was at the core of French politics in the 19th century. The *gens de robe* and the upper *bourgeoisie* perceived the reign of the *Sans-culottes* between 1792 and 1793 as a trauma, whereas the *petite bourgeoisie* and the emerging working class remembered the revolution as the triumphant beginning of a republican tradition. This class coalition was the major carrier of the long-lasting Third Republic and could hence treat the return of the *Ancien Regime* as an interruption of its own successful tradition.

In contrast, the German revolutionary uprisings failed not only to establish a lasting regime, but also to engender a memory of a triumphant constitution of national identity. The short lived Weimar Republic and the Bonn Federal Republic were both the result of defeats in devastating wars that had claimed millions of victims. The beginnings of democracy were thus remembered as traumatic rather than triumphant. In this respect they continued a tradition of traumatic origins that had started in the first half of the 17th century with the devastating Thirty Years War. One third of the German population died in this confessional war, and the unity of the Holy Roman Empire of German nations, always fragile, was shattered into a multitude of princely states, the most important of which being Austria and Prussia. So it was that, while England and France emerged out of their bloody confessional wars as powerful nation-states based on the dominance of one confession, the same decision by the ruler to adopt monoconfessionalism, the same expulsion or repression of religious minorities, and the same legalist modernisation of the state, occurred in Germany on the level of small princely states.

Therefore, in 1848, the revolutionary constitution of a national *demos* was not framed by an existing nation-state that simply had to decapitate its ruler. On the contrary, it had to create the nation-state by itself. In a desperate attempt to make up ground on the western lead, the German Revolution of 1848 even considered establishing a national monarchy. It was therefore the creation and not the decapitation of a king that was debated as one of the solutions in the German parliament in Frankfurt. The radical Left opposed this return to monarchy, and instead suggested replacing the traditional rivalry between Prussia and Austria by embedding the German nation in a European conflict between the culture of the West (which included

¹⁰ Eisenstadt, 1999.

Poland and Hungary) and the barbarism of the East, that is, Russia. A century later, new national mythologies would once more make reference to this opposition.

Overly burdened by the task of simultaneously establishing the state and forging the identity of the nation, the revolution of 1848 collapsed, and its radical continuation in Baden was crushed by Prussian troops. More important than its factual breakdown, however, was its failure to give rise to triumphant memories. Disappointed and traumatised by their political failure, the carriers of the revolution, the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, left the country or converted their former enthusiasm into cultural oblivion and even into contempt for the idea of revolution (see Marta Petrusiewicz's chapter in this volume for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies after 1848). In contrast to 1848 and 1918, the wars of liberation against the Napoleonic occupation could well be regarded as a successful revolt of the people, and could have become a powerful foundation myth for the German national movement. Although its initial impact was limited, it nevertheless precluded the military defeat of the French Emperor some years later. The democratic potential of this movement faded away, however, in the course of the 19th century, and the final realisation of the German nation-state by Bismarck could dispense with any kind of democratic legitimation.

In imperial Germany, the myth of the wars of liberation fuelled hostility against the *Erbfeind Frankreich* rather than lent support to democratic constructions of identity, and this hostility was reinforced by defeat in World War I. It was therefore difficult to establish a connection between the first German democracy in 1918 and the revolution that had failed 70 years earlier. When the *Arbeiter und Soldaten* movement entered the stage in 1919 as a new carrier of the revolutionary project, the educated *bourgeoisie* refused to join the ranks of the revolutionaries – the class that had achieved 1848 felt that it had lost control over the project of revolution. The democratic uprising of *les classes dangereuses* did not give birth to a triumphant founding myth, but was, instead, held responsible for a military defeat ('*Im Felde unbesiegt...*').

In addition to this change in the carrier group, the frightening example of the Russian Revolution, with its turmoil and chaos, deterred even Social Democrats from supporting a radical revolutionary course. Finally, the level of economic, social and even political

modernisation which Germany had reached at the turn of the century alleviated the fundamental tension that is at the core of successful revolutions. Whereas in 1848, the lack of the nation-state prevented the revolutionary constitution of the *demos*, in 1918 it was the existence of a relatively modern state that deprived it of its thrust. The revolutionaries could only extend already existing institutions by establishing the right of women to vote, and seek to radicalise the revolutionary project according to the Russian example and opt for a global revolution – a turn that not only diminished its support, but also failed to construct a specifically German *demos*. The revolution collapsed and was remembered as a failed local rebellion instead of a triumphant uprising of the German people against reactionary imperial rule.

There was only one German 'revolution' that could lay claim to having established a new regime that endured for some years: national socialism. The Nazis – like the Italian Fascists before – presented and remembered their seizure of power as a '*völkische Revolution*'. They considered their regime as the reconstruction of the free German nation, constituting itself by violence and heroism, triumphantly rising over the forces of decadence, money and foreign repression. The Nazi Revolution claimed to reverse the defeat of World War I and to abolish 'the shame of Versailles'. Consequently, its rituals of remembrance focused on the triumphant rebirth of the nation out of the sacrificial death of the heroes of the past.¹¹ The rituals of the Nazi Revolution did not only remember the fallen soldiers of the World War I and the casualties of their own early years, but also reached back – especially towards the end of their rule – to the wars of liberation against the Napoleonic occupation (see, for example, the film *Kolberg*). Because of its close connection with Nazi cults, the memory of the wars of liberation disappeared with the collapse of the Third Reich. The very fact that the Nazis could claim that their regime was a revolutionary uprising of the people contaminated the idea of a triumphant self-constitution of the nation. This was particularly the case after the defeat of 1945, when a new democratic state was founded. The establishment of democracy from outside by the Allied forces ran counter to the conception of a people determining its own fate, empowering its own government and defining its own identity. Obviously, the new German democracy did not result from a revolu-

¹¹ Mosse, 1991.

tionary upheaval of the people, but was decreed by the Allied forces. Indeed, only a small part of the German population considered their military defeat to be a liberation from repressive rulers.

In spite of this shameful situation, the representatives of the new democratic Federal Republic tried to establish a people's foundation myth by concentrating on the actions of the German resistance against Nazi domination. The resistance of the students around the Scholls, of the Kreisauer Circle, and most prominently of the *coup d'état* of July 1944, was used as a substitute for a people's revolt against Nazi tyranny. In this way, the German nation, which – at least in the western Federal Republic – tried to enter the political arena as a sovereign democratic subject, could uphold an image of innocence. This image said that not all Germans had collaborated with, or tacitly accepted the criminal regime, indeed, more than this, the good people of Germany had been forced to keep their mouths shut by the Nazi tyrants.

In this construction of a substitute resistance, it was widely ignored that most of the heroes of the German resistance against Hitler (e.g., Stauffenberg and Moltke) did not have democratic ideas in mind when they planned the new Germany to come following the successful overthrow of Nazi rule. It was also ignored that the good people of Germany had voted Hitler into power by democratic elections and that a majority of them had supported the Führer 'in *Treue fest*', even when the prospect of military defeat was becoming real.

The Denial of the Trauma: Nazi Demons and Timeless German Virtues

The defeat of 1945 and the disclosures that followed resulted in the most profound trauma of recent German history. First, there were the obvious and catastrophic German losses – more than ten million Germans lost their lives as soldiers on the battlefield, in prison camps, as casualties of the Allied bombing raids, or as victims of ethnic cleansing in the lost eastern provinces after the war; hundreds of thousands of women and girls were raped; twelve million refugees were displaced in the wake of the Russian invasion or expelled from their homes in the eastern provinces; and most German cities were devastated. All these experiences were traumatic in their own right, but as horrible as defeat and death in war may be, their atrocity would have been alleviated by the moral triumph of a collective project – a

heroic war of liberation and independence, for example – that could have persisted even after a defeat and could have even earned the tacit respect of the victors. However, moral justification of the war was entirely and radically denied to the Germans. The aim, the form and the circumstances of the war were criminal and were labelled as such by the victors. The shame connected with the German name from then on was a matter of collective identity. The ultimate trauma of 1945 resulted not only from ruin and rape, death and defeat, but also from the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity. The utmost barbarism had taken place in the nation that had based its identity on *Kultur* and that could claim to have furthered and supported Jewish emancipation more than most of its European neighbours. The triumphant notion of a German *Kultur* was replaced by the traumatising disclosure of the Holocaust. As Adorno wrote, faced with Auschwitz, there was no place left for poems.¹²

Traumas result from a sudden, unmediated inversion of inside and outside, good and evil, security and destruction. In the Freudian tradition they are defined as violent events that, at the time they occurred, were ignored or disregarded – the individual mind cannot perceive the possibility of its own death.¹³ In a similar way, collective consciousness tends to reject any perception of the actions of its own community as barbaric in the moment when the barbaric violence occurs. Therefore collective traumas, too, require a time of latency before they can be acted out, spoken about, and worked through. Postwar Germany responded to the disclosure of the Holocaust by an 'inability to mourn' or a 'communicative silence'.¹⁴ Nobody could bear to look at the victims. *Hitlerjungen* could detach themselves from their former involvement and consider it a mistake born of immaturity, but adults who had devoted the most formative and active years of their lives to a movement whose members now had to consider themselves as collaborators in a mass murder could not repair their ruined moral identity even if they had been ready to confess their guilt. There would be no second chance, life was spoilt. The trauma is insurmountable; as a moral subject the person is dead. He or she can only remain mute, look away, turn to other issues, and hope that nobody will ask the wrong questions. It was thus a tacitly

¹² Adorno, 1992.

¹³ Caruth, 1996, pp. 60 ff.

¹⁴ These expressions come, respectively, from Mitscherlich, 1994 and Lübke, 1981.

assumed coalition of silence that provided the first national identity after the war. Everyone assumed that the others, too, had supported the Nazi regime and would therefore agree to remain silent about their common shame. No one mentioned his or her relationship to the Holocaust in informal communication, even if they had only been involved as bystanders of history who had never known exactly what was happening (this muteness and silence concerning the Holocaust contrasted with vivid informal communication about other aspects of the war: the escapes from the eastern *Heimat*, the nights in the bomb shelters, and the struggle on the *Ostfront* during the last month of the Third Reich). There was a moral numbness with respect to the horror, and very few spoke of their responsibility as bystanders, collaborators or party members. If those who had been enthusiastic followers of National Socialism could not avoid the unspeakable issue in informal conversations among Germans, they could sometimes only cope with the trauma of total defeat and their involvement in the horror by simply denying obvious facts: they considered the documentary evidence to be faked by the Allied forces. Others tried to separate the programme of National Socialism from its realisation, or insisted that 'der Führer' did not know about the Holocaust. The vast majority, however, maintained that they had not known anything about the mass murders or that they had been too concerned with mere survival to care about the monstrous rumours. 'Wir wussten von nichts...'

Most of the horrors certainly were concealed from the German public.¹⁵ But even if the Holocaust was declared to be '*Geheime Reichssache*', tens of thousands of Germans participated, rumours were spread, and questions could have been asked even by those who were not directly involved in the deportation and killing. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, most Germans avoided focussing their attention on the disappearance of the Jews from public life. They did not want to get involved in piercing moral questions out of fear, negligence or resentment. In this way, what was later to become the crucial challenge for the German self-consciousness was removed to the diffuse and dim periphery of awareness and perception. In some

¹⁵ Himmler's famous Posen address to the SS leaders shows his attempt to hide the genocide from the German public; the members of the *Sondereinheiten* had strict orders to keep the terrible secret (Laqueur), the foreign governments did not respond to the secret reports about the Holocaust because they did not believe it, and even the people in the Ghetto of Lodz did not know their fate some weeks before their deportation to the death camps. Cf. Laqueur, 1996; Diner, 1995.

respects, the silencing of the past after 1945 continued the ignorance and disregard prior to this date.

The coalition of silence was not limited to informal communication in intimate spheres, shielded from public control. It also left its traces on the political rhetoric of Germany's public discourse.¹⁶ The German chancellor Adenauer mentioned the Holocaust only rarely in official speeches. On the few occasions that he did address the Holocaust, he referred to it in the passive mode as 'the immense suffering of the Jewish people', thus avoiding making reference to the perpetrators. The judaeocide was, of course, not denied, but it ranked among other losses, like fallen soldiers and refugees (*Vertriebenen*) who had lost their *Heimat*. Instead of mentioning the crimes directly, the political rhetoric referred to the events as the 'dark times of the recent past', the 'time of unfathomable barbarism' or the 'catastrophe of German history'. The crimes and their perpetrators were thus removed into a realm of unreal nightmares beyond conception and description. Like the period of latency in the case of an individual trauma, the Holocaust was removed from the collective consciousness and shifted to the level of haunting dreams which occasionally found their way to cultural representations. For example, popular movies about Doctor Mabuse, who used men like string puppets in order to commit horrible crimes, hinted at the collective nightmare but never uttered aloud its direst reference.

Not everyone, however, consented to the coalition of silence. Some intellectuals raised their voices and posed the inconvenient question, 'where have you been, Adam?' (Böll). Some situations required an explanation to outside observers, to schoolchildren, foreigners, and those Germans who never supported the Nazi regime. Faced with these outside observers who could not be co-opted into the coalition of silence, Germans required a new exculpatory narrative. Postwar Germany constructed this narrative by primordialising the opposition between oppressors and the people. In this narrative, the Nazi rulers, and Hitler in particular, were depicted as insane barbarians, as wild beasts, as satanic seducers who had approached the good and innocent German people from outside and deprived them of their common sense like a drug, a disease, or a diabolic obsession. The criminal domination was represented as inescapable and fatal, whereas

¹⁶ Dubiel, 1999; Herf, 1997.

the people were imagined as seduced into blindness, unsuspecting and completely ignorant of the atrocities of genocide. Demonisation of Nazi rule removed the nation from the realm of moral responsibility and culpability, while intoxication, seduction, and blindness allowed Germans to regard the German nation as the true victim of Nazism.

In this new exculpatory narrative, primordialisation was again used to exclude the outsider, but its direction was radically reversed: before 1945 anti-Semitism rejected Jews as poisonous demons secretly invading and seducing the German nation. Now the same primordial exclusion and its rituals of purification and decoupling (*Abspaltung*) turned on the Nazis themselves. Hitler, once the charismatic redeemer and saviour of Germany, was converted into a devil, a crazy epileptic, a monster, the immense misfortune of German history, an alien demon seducing the innocent German people. This pattern of radical conversion was given its most extreme form by Nazis who tried to change their personal identity. They assumed new names and, after several years, re-emerged in public life as faithful and respected democrats, supporting social democracy and assuming important public offices before their concealed identities as SS officers were disclosed.¹⁷

Faced with the collective trauma, even public communication in postwar Germany insisted on the strict separation of the few unquestionably criminal perpetrators from the majority of seduced citizens and soldiers. Of course, the position of the boundary was debatable. The Social Democrats, in their oppositional role, were keener to include a larger group of higher officials into the circle of perpetrators and in particular targeted Globke, the previous commentator of the *Rassengesetze*, who had become a member of the government. In contrast, the chancellor, Adenauer – himself unquestionably an anti-Nazi – and his conservative coalition insisted that, although the criminal perpetrators should be punished, there should be no distinction between the two large classes of Germans: those with blemishes and those without.¹⁸ Sometimes even leading generals of the *Wehrmacht* who had been sentenced to prison were included in the community of abused people.¹⁹ Despite dissent and

debate, most politicians of the new democracy agreed with the denial of the collective guilt of all Germans and supported the new narrative of demonisation. The parliamentary debates about denazification, wearing military decorations in public, parole for mass murderers, the end of prosecutions for Nazi crimes, and even about the Auschwitz trial in the early 1960s, were aimed at demarcating a clear boundary between the majority of normal and 'decent' Germans on the one side, and the few criminal Nazi monsters on the other.²⁰ This demarcation not only allowed for a new construction of national identity, but stressed, by expulsion and oblivion, the radical newness of the political system and the departure from totalitarian rule. Expelling the condemned perpetrators from civil society and ending prosecutions for newly discovered Nazi crimes simply represented two different aspects of the same drive to get rid of the past.

The law court was the institutional arena where the demarcation was staged, ritually constructed, and re-affirmed. Although the imprisonment of Nazi criminals at Landsberg and the related trials was still much criticised by the conservative Right in the early 1950s, there was no way to avoid the trials if discontinuity between past and present was to be constructed. Here, the roles of the accused perpetrators and the accusing public, represented by the prosecutor, were strictly separated, just as the rules of law on the one hand, and the criminal action on the other, were clearly distinguished. Both these oppositions supported the demarcation between an innocent nation and treacherous criminals.

Denying any collective responsibility, the ritual of trials confined the question of guilt strictly to individual acts, in particular with respect to formal decisions within organisations. But even if it was beyond any doubt that crimes were committed, the perpetrators tried to relativise their guilt by referring to the inescapable nature of military orders: *Befehlsnotstand*. Even the commanders of Auschwitz and Treblinka tried to present themselves as acting strictly within their formal competencies. They emphasised that they had never participated personally in cruelties (this was a lie). Acts of cruelty,

¹⁷ Leggewie, 1998.

¹⁸ Dubiel, 1999.

¹⁹ See H. J. Merkatz in the parliamentary debate 8.11.1950 'Männer wie Manstein und Kesselring und andere, die in Landsberg und Werl einsitzen, diese Männer

und wir, wir sind doch eines. Wir haben doch das mitzutragen, was man stellvertretend für uns auferlegt' cited in Frei, 1996, p. 202.

²⁰ Dubiel, 1999. This demarcation was even shared by some Jews, such as Victor Klemperer, cf. Klemperer 1995.

they argued, were committed by subordinate *Kapos* from Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. In passing the blame, they adapted their contempt for the Slavic *Untermenschen* to the new situation.

Demarcating the perpetrators and denying one's own involvement and guilt was not only the Federal Republic's way of coping with the past. It was also used in the new socialist German Democratic Republic, where the founding myth of the new state focused upon the idea that the repressed German people, assisted by the glorious Red Army, had succeeded in overthrowing the Fascist regime. The boundary between the past and present was declared to be radical and insurmountable, '*der neue sozialistische Mensch*', the new socialist human being, had nothing in common with Hitlerism and Fascism. Any traces of continuity between past and present were shifted across the border to the 'revanchist and fascist' FRG in the west. The Federal Republic, indeed, could not deny being the legal successor of the Nazi state, because it had to provide a legal basis for the citizenship of refugees and for its claim to represent Germany in its entirety. The new, socialist GDR considered the Federal Republic as a Fascist society in bourgeois disguise. This demarcation between the good, anti-Fascist and socialist east, and the fascist and capitalist west was also used to deny any responsibility to the survivors of the Holocaust – hence no restitutions and reparations were paid. The public rituals of the GDR focused upon the Fascist barbarism of the past and the heroism of the anti-Fascist resistance, while the judaeocide was rarely mentioned. Based on the anti-Fascist ideology and the constitutional rupture between past and present, the politics of the GDR occasionally even took an anti-Semitic turn: the Stalinist wave of purges in the early 50s were centred upon Jewish communists like Paul Merker and Leo Zuckermann who, after returning from exile in the west, had tried to merge anti-Fascism and socialism in the new Germany. Like leading Jewish members of the Communist Parties in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, they too were accused of 'cosmopolitanism' and secret espionage in collaboration with imperialist and bourgeois forces.²¹

In a similar and even more self assured way, Austria also tried to rid itself of its Nazi past. The foundation myth of the Second Austrian Republic was one of victimisation. It turned the '*Anschluß*' of 1938 into a military occupation by foreign forces, and tried to position itself

among liberated nations like Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands and Denmark. Here, too, responsibility and guilt for the Holocaust was simply pushed across the border and the perpetrators were defined as non-Austrian outsiders, while the Austrians were seen as the innocent victims. And here, too, decoupling the new nation from the history of the perpetrators weakened its alertness with respect to new manifestations of anti-Semitism.

But the thrust to shift the guilt across the border and to turn collaboration into victimisation was not limited to German-speaking nations. Italy rapidly forgot its Fascist complicity with Nazi Germany and presented itself as a nation of resistance heroism, and the Flemish, Slovakian and Croatian participation in the *shoah* was blurred because they were parts of new nation-states that emerged out of anti-Nazi resistance movements.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that the process of coping with a traumatic past by expelling the perpetrators was once more acted out in Germany, half a century after the Holocaust: the 'de-Stasification' that took place in the former GDR after German unification in the early 1990s shows a striking similarity to the de-Nazification of the late forties. Again the issue was to demarcate the line between the perpetrators and the majority of the decent Germans who had suffered from repressive rule, but this time it was even more difficult to turn the filthy greyish web of collaboration into a clear-cut black and white picture of guilt and innocence: almost a third of the entire population had been involved in Stasi activities, and the system of surveillance and control had expanded during four decades to reach a degree of perfection the Gestapo had never achieved.

²¹ Herf, 1997.

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