

Jacob Feldgoise
Germany and the European Union
February 27, 2018

Relentless Reckoning

Why Germany's past must decide its future

Last year, the German military police discovered a stockpile of Nazi military memorabilia when they searched a Bundeswehr barrack. Since then, the German government implemented more stringent security screening processes for Bundeswehr applicants, but this is only one facet of a much larger issue (Eddy). This is not the sign of a nation that has fully dealt with its dark past. Germany must continue to reckon with its Nazi past, but the nation should view *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as a source of national strength, not as a weakness.

Germany must continue to reckon with its Nazi past because the nation has not fully come to terms with the Third Reich and the crimes of the Holocaust. Today, many World War II and Holocaust scholars, such as the acclaimed academic Thomas Berger, view Germany as a “model penitent,” a nation that has done the utmost to atone for past crimes (Berger 36). However, Berger himself asserts that this was not always the case. In fact, from 1945 to 1960 Germans ignored the crimes of the Nazis. They did this due to three primary circumstances.

First, most Germans claimed to be unaware of the extent of the Nazis' crimes. Specifically, “few were aware of the full magnitude of what was taking place” (Berger 39). From their perspective, the deliberate classification of Jews, homosexuals, and disabled people may have seemed suspicious, but not so suspicious that it required vigilante investigation. When the war ended and the illusion was shattered, most Germans also claimed that had they understood the full extent of the Holocaust, they would have intervened.

Second, innocent German citizens also suffered during the war. This is perhaps best exemplified by numerous civilian casualties resulting from the Allied bombing of Dresden, but Dresden was simply an extreme example of what occurred all across Germany. Simply put, most German cities were leveled, destroying vast swathes of homes and economic capital. Therefore,

the immediate post-war concern for Germans was simply finding shelter, food, and water. The need to survive was perceived as vastly more important than discussing questions of justice and responsibility (Berger 41).

Third, most Germans led ordinary lives from 1939 to 1944. The Nazi regime was largely successful in keeping the German public in the dark about the existence of concentration camps and their true purpose. The Nazi propaganda machine led Germans to believe that they were engaged in a righteous war against the aggressors: Russia, France, the US, and the UK. Until the Allied powers succeeded in forcing the Nazis back into Germany, most Germans experienced relative normalcy (Berger 39).

As a result, most Germans felt little responsibility for the crimes of the Nazis. Germans collectively internalized the narrative that responsibility is contingent upon knowledge and discontinuous personal experience. Since most Germans claimed little to no knowledge of the Holocaust and experienced a period of relative normalcy, Germans believed that they could not be held responsible for the Nazis' crimes (Berger 40).

Although a deep generational change in the 1960s ended German silence about World War II and the Holocaust, the 1986 historians' debate showed that intense division exists in Germany regarding the role of the Nazi past in the nation's future. The historians' debate involved the writing of two primary figures: Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas. Nolte's position generally aligned with the conservative view of the CDU/CSU that the crimes of the Nazis were being kept artificially alive and that they should be allowed to become the past (Brockmann 180). Habermas's position aligned with the liberal voices of the SPD who argued that Germany must continue to reckon with the crimes of the Nazis in order to relieve German guilt and reestablish German national identity (Brockmann 182-183). This debate has even carried on to the present. Most of Nolte's position has been adopted by the Alternative for Germany party (AFD), while the rest of the country sides with Habermas. Clearly, this debate has not been fully settled.

The *Degussa* controversy with regard to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is another modern instance of unresolved feelings of complicity and responsibility. *Degussa* was the firm hired by the German government to apply anti-graffiti spray to the memorial. When the memorial was nearing completion in the early 2000s, it was discovered that *Degussa's* sister company had supplied Zyklon B to the Nazis, who used the chemical to gas Jews in their concentration camps. While *Degussa* was ultimately allowed to complete their work, the

controversy raised questions about the appropriate level of atonement for companies that were complicit in the Third Reich's crimes (Knischewski 35).

The complicity of the Nazi army in the crimes committed by the Third Reich is yet another ongoing controversy. When discussions of the Holocaust and World War II gained the German national stage in the 1960s, two primary competing narratives emerged with regard to the complicity of Nazi soldiers. Conservatives tended to portray most Nazi soldiers as misguided heroes, led astray by the evil Hitler (Berger 67). Liberals typically argued that German soldiers were direct murderers or murderers through inaction. Here, the extent of the average Nazi soldier's knowledge of the Holocaust became a huge point of contention. Could soldiers who were "just following orders" be held accountable? Ultimately, this debate has also carried on to the present. Questions still constantly emerge about Bundeswehr soldiers who promote Nazi ideologies. Furthermore, there are always protests during the public induction of Bundeswehr soldiers. Unsettled feelings about the modern Bundeswehr again clearly shows that Germany has not finished reckoning with its Nazi past.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung (reckoning with the past) should be seen as a source of German national strength because it has led to otherwise unachievable German unity. This is best evidenced by the successful reintegration of Jewish communities into German society. Jewish reintegration has created a stronger, united Germany that could not have developed without such a strong emphasis on coming to terms with the past. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has given German Jews a sense of security as they sought to reestablish their roots in Germany.

Nations who have committed crimes of similar scale to the Holocaust but have not reckoned with the past, have instead incurred lasting societal divisions. Since the end of the Armenian Genocide in 1917, the Turkish government has refused to accept any form of responsibility for the extermination. Turkey's refusal to reckon with past crimes has perpetuated and exacerbated Armenians' feelings of resentment and anger towards the Turkish people. Furthermore, Turkey's deliberate decision not to reckon with its past has prevented the normalization of political and economic relations between Turkey and Armenia, hurting both nations (Fanuli). If Turkey had chosen instead to fully come to terms with its crimes, the two nations would likely be close allies.

The failure of the United States to reckon with its past crimes against Native Americans has also caused societal division. Since the United States was founded in 1776, the US government

has incrementally separated Native Americans from their rights and their land. Today, the United States, both government and ordinary citizens, has utterly failed to deal with these past crimes. Native American activist groups continue to call for reparations, but they merely shout into the void. In some cases, this dynamic has caused Native Americans to understandably develop a strong resentment of non-Native Americans. America's failure to reckon with this crime has carved a deep, perhaps insurmountable societal barrier. Had Germany not begun this process of reckoning with its Nazi past, the same types of memory issues that plague the United States and Turkey would have compounded exponentially in Germany.

Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has also strengthened the nation's international relationships with the Czech Republic, Poland, France, and Israel, yielding close allies. During World War II, Germany invaded the Czech Republic, Poland, and France, while obviously also setting itself against the Jewish population that would later found the State of Israel. These four nations have better reason than any other to hate Germany, but now they are among Germany's closest allies. Since World War II, Germany has worked to establish itself as a strong economic and political partner with France. Today, this is best exemplified by the role that Germany and France have taken on as joint political leaders of the European Union. Germany has also worked to actively draw Poland and the Czech Republic into the EU as part of reckoning with the Nazi invasion. The three nations have explicitly stated their interest in maintaining tight political alliances: "Germany and the Czech Republic, together with Poland, recognized the 'key position' the three countries would play in the EU's future" (Feldman 58). The three nations are clearly committed to the EU and to each other. Finally, Germany and Israel have developed close economic, political, and intelligence ties. In the early 1960s, Frankfurt Attorney General Fritz Bauer worked with the Israeli Mossad to extradite the Nazi official Adolf Eichmann to Israel, where he was later tried and executed for his crimes. Germany has also paid billions of dollars in reparations to the Israeli state and to Jews who survived the Holocaust. The most recent payment of \$1 billion was distributed from 2014 to 2017 ("Germany to Pay 772 Million Euros to Survivors"). While German-Israeli relations will likely never be "normal," *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has given Germany a strong ally in Israel.

Furthermore, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has not damaged German national identity. One of the main criticisms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is that reckoning with the past has damaged German national identity. However, Germany's actions on the international stage show that this is simply

not the case. Germany has sought a permanent seat on UN Security Council since 1998 when the request was first made by Chancellor Schröder (Overhaus 35). Such a request is only made by a politically and economically powerful country with a strong sense of national pride. Thomas Berger agrees with this assessment when he writes that: “Germans have been able to rediscover a sense of pride in their nation...” (Berger 36). German national pride is not a crime, nor has it been damaged by reckoning with the Nazi past.

The most telling and relevant argument in favor of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the endorsement of Germans themselves. A majority of Germans support reckoning with the Nazi past, and only 44% of Germans say that the nation’s past “should not encumber contemporary Germany” (Feldman 67). This shows that most Germans see the benefit of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and take pride in how they have dealt with Germany’s Nazi past. National pride and reckoning are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Germans should continue to take pride in how they have reckoned with their Nazi past, but they must also recognize that the conversation has not ended and that it will likely never end. Reckoning with Germany’s Nazi past must define its future if the nation desires to maintain its core tenet of democracy and truly uphold the phrase *Nie Wieder Auschwitz*.

Works Cited

- Berger, Thomas U. "War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II." 2012, doi:10.1017/cbo9781139109437.
- Brockmann, Stephen. "The Politics of German History." *History and Theory*, vol. 29, no. 2, May 1990, pp. 179–189., doi:10.2307/2505224.
- Eddy, Melissa. "Pro-Nazi Soldiers in German Army Raise Alarm." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 May 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/world/europe/germany-military-far-right-extremists-terror-plot-nazi.html.
- Fanuli, Federica. "The Complicated Relationship between Armenia and Turkey." *Mediterranean Affairs*, Mediterranean Affairs, 7 May 2017, mediterraneanaffairs.com/the-complicated-relationship-between-armenia-and-turkey/.
- Feldman, Lily Gardner. *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.
- "Germany to Pay 772 Million Euros to Survivors." *Spiegel Online*, Der Spiegel, 29 May 2013, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-to-pay-772-million-euros-in-reparations-to-holocaust-survivors-a-902528.html.
- Knischewski, Gerd, and Ulla Spittler. "Remembering in the Berlin Republic: The Debate about the Central Holocaust Memorial in Berlin." *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2005, pp. 25–42., doi:10.1080/09651560500134644.
- Overhaus, Marco. "German Foreign Policy and the Shadow of the Past." *SAIS Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 27–41., doi:10.1353/sais.2005.0041.