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»A Past That Refuses to go Away«:
On Recent Historiographical Debates in
the Federal Republic of Germany
About National-Socialism
and the Final Solution

Seit der Niederlage im Jahre 1945 befinden sich viele Deutsche in einer schwer zu handhabenden Zwangslage: einerseits ist die Nazi-Vergangenheit zu gewichtig, um einfach vergessen zu werden, andererseits ist sie zu abstoßend, um in das normale Erinnern aufgenommen werden zu können. Heute ist »die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will«, häufiger denn je im Gespräch, doch scheint sich das Erinnern der Deutschen an die Nazi-Zeit in einem bedeutsamen und zunehmend raschen Veränderungsprozeß zu befinden, wie sich an der von Jürgen Habermas ausgelösten Debatte führender Intellektueller zeigt. In diesem Aufsatz wird der Versuch gemacht, einige grundsätzliche Elemente dieser Debatte sowie ihre allgemeinere Bedeutung für die Entwicklung und Wechselwirkung des Erinnerns zu analysieren.

Over the last few years, a series of symbolic dates, such as 1983 and 1985, seem to have brought to the fore all the dilemmas of remembering and forgetting the Nazi era, for Germany and its victims, for the victorious Allies and the vanquished enemy, for those who lived through the war and those born after 1945: the second generation and, by now, the third. For Germans and Jews, more than anybody else.

Since the defeat of 1945, not a few Germans seem to have been caught in an intractable predicament: the Nazi past was too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the normal narrative of memory.

Although this predicament is still apparent, although »the past that refuses to go away« is mentioned more than ever, German memory of the Nazi era seems nonetheless to be undergoing a significant and increasingly rapid transformation. It is against the background of this transformation that a fierce debate suddenly erupted among leading intellectuals of the Federal Republic. This short essay will be an attempt to analyse some of the basic elements of this debate and its wider implications for the evolution and interactions of memory.

On 11 July 1986, philosopher Jürgen Habermas of Frankfurt University published a full-page article in the liberal West German weekly, *Die Zeit*, under the title: »A Kind of Settling of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German Historical Writing about the Contemporary Period« (»Eine Art Schadensabwicklung: die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung«, in *Die Zeit*, Nr. 29, 11. Juli 1986).

Habermas's article exacerbated what by now, in West Germany, is an ongoing controversy about the nature of German identity and possibly, indeed, about a new German nationalism. But this controversy can be considered on two different levels: the issue of nationalism puts conservatives in opposition to left-liberals; it involves historiography of the Nazi era. But, the revision of various aspects of the historical image of the Nazi era extends far beyond the traditional conservative circles: the »yearning for normality«, in the words of Günter Hoffmann in *Die Zeit*, the need for a relativisation and normalisation of the Nazi past, is present in wide sectors of German society.

In this essay, the recent shifts in historiography as such will be the main subject. Three examples (two of which are used by Habermas) will help to clarify the ongoing process. This process can be summed up in a key word: »historisation«. The authors whose recent texts will be considered, aim, each in his own specific way, for the historisation of National-Socialism.

What is meant by historisation?

Up to the end of World War II, German historiography was deeply rooted in the tradition of historicism, that is, a tradition aimed at restoring the historical complexity and specificity of each period or phenomenon under scrutiny, by considering it in its own right and by attempting to understand it both with the tools of analytic enquiry and with an empathy allowing for a kind of intuitive grasp of its essence.

It goes without saying that in relation to Nazism, historicism had to reverse itself. The Nazi era, because of its specifically criminal aspects, could not be considered in the same way as any other period. It could not be placed within the normal flow of historical development, and empathy had to be replaced by strict distancing. *»Historisation aims at cancelling this distance, at reinserting the Nazi phenomenon into normal historical narrative, that is, at minimising or abolishing what still makes it appear as singular.*

But, are all attempts to historise Nazism the equivalent of apologetic tendencies? The answer, I think, could be the following: nowadays, all apologetic tendencies use historisation; all historisation is certainly not apologetic. But one cannot grasp the problem in all its complexity without looking at several very different aspects of historisation. The first two

examples deal with general aspects of the problem: the cancellation of distance in a book by Andreas Hillgruber, on the one hand; the change of focus and the transposition between core and periphery in a text of Martin Broszat, on the other hand. The third example, that of Nolte's recent texts, gets us into the thick of the controversy: it is of a very different nature.

The first example relates to the cancellation of the distance between the historian and the subject of study and the dilemma this creates. Let us take the recent (1986) book by Cologne University's most eminent specialist on the Third Reich, Andreas Hillgruber - »A Double Demise: The Destruction of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry« (*Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des Europäischen Judentums*, Corso bei Siedler, Berlin 1986). This book is one of the main targets of Jürgen Habermas's criticism.

The title of Hillgruber's book is unsettling, as it suggests two parallel and unrelated processes: on the one hand, the German Reich is fighting to the last, and the word *Zerschlagung*, expresses total military destruction; on the other hand, *das Ende*, is a neutral word and implies an almost natural process. In any case, although Hillgruber mentions the relation between the two in his Preface and several times subsequently, the title of the book does not convey the fact that it was the German Reich that destroyed European Jewry.

In the first and lengthy part of the book Hillgruber describes the last year of the war and the destruction of the Wehrmacht in its final battles against the Red Army. According to him, these events can be considered from four viewpoints: Hitler's viewpoint of resistance at any cost; that of the anti-Hitler resistance groups within Germany; that of the advancing Allies; and finally, that of the fighting units and of the population in the Eastern part of Germany itself.

Identification with the viewpoint of the advancing Russians seems to him hardly acceptable, as, according to him, only the inmates of the Nazi camps could have identified with this view of the war. He maintains only one possibility for identification: »With the concrete fate of the German population in the East and with the desperate efforts, so costly in human lives, of the German armies in the East and of the German Navy in the Baltic Sea«, which attempted to protect the population of the German East against »the vengeance orgies of the Red Army«.

Hillgruber's choice is astonishing: first of all, he disregards a fact which he himself mentions several times: the holding of the Eastern front allowed the extermination process to continue. In this case, shouldn't the point of view of the historian have been that of identifying with the victims of such a radical annihilation, one that Hillgruber himself deals with in the second part of his book?

Second, was the identification with the advancing Red Army the viewpoint of the camp inmates only? Wasn't the hope of hundreds of millions of people, throughout occupied Europe and much further afield, that the German Eastern front would crumble, and the Western front as well? At the time - Hillgruber looks for identification within the context of the time - even those who, outside of Germany, feared the Red Army, eagerly awaited Nazi Germany's collapse. Throughout occupied Europe, when in millions of rooms the BBC News was secretly turned on, every German defeat, be it in the East or in the West, was enthusiastically greeted. That this was not the case in Germany itself may well be understood, but it also may well be, as Heinrich Böll once remarked, the real problem of Germany's relation to its past.

In any event, by focusing on the viewpoint of the local units and of the local population, Hillgruber cancels the distance which traditional historiography would have imposed on him, and creates an empathy with the defenders of the Eastern front, otherwise impossible. Another distancing appears: from the extermination process and from the plight of the populations still under German occupation. No purely historiographical criterion indicates where the historian should take distance, but the choice made is certainly not insignificant.

Hillgruber was criticised on several other accounts: for his somewhat heroic style in describing the German resistance in the East, for his insistence on the crimes of the Red Army, for his hazy nostalgia for what he calls »die Europäische Mitte« and particularly for his strange interpretation of the Allied War aims: »the expulsion of the Germans from the East«, in other terms, that whatever Germany would have done, the aim was to dismember it. Was it so? The Poles may have had some such plans before the war but, as Hillgruber well knows, the war aims of Great Britain and of its Allies took concrete form, step by step, from 1941 on. Hadn't, by then, the German Reich offered some reasons and some justifications for such war aims?

This being said, the calling of Hillgruber's book a »Scandal« as did Habermas or outright apologetic historiography, is perhaps too strong, if one takes into account the second part which deals with the Final Solution, as well as the whole range of his work, including his 1984 study, »The War in the East and the Extermination of the Jews«, published in a collective volume on Operation Barbarossa and his earlier studies on this subject. Hillgruber's work does not escape contradictions, but these are the contradictions of a sincere attempt at historisation which, at the same time, does not avoid the centrality of Hitler's anti-semitism and of the extermination of the Jews. Hillgruber's empathy for the units holding the Eastern Front clashes with his knowledge about the Final Solution. The dilemmas posed by the historisation of Nazism come starkly to the fore.

The second example of historicisation chosen, Martin Broszat's »Plea for a Historicisation of National-Socialism« (Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus«), was published in the German monthly, *Merkur*, Nr. 435, in May 1985. It certainly has nothing to do with any kind of apologetic tendency. Habermas gives it high marks for being a convincing way of approaching the history of the Third Reich.

No doubt, Martin Broszat's approach to the historicisation of National-Socialism is particularly stimulating, but the solutions he proposes are possibly not as unproblematic as presented by Habermas.

The main thrust of Broszat's argument is indeed that, side by side with the criminality of the system, much of life under the Third Reich was non-ideological and determined by ordinary social processes, common to other western societies. Broszat wants to do away with the black-and-white picture of the Nazi regime, whether in relation to such momentous events as the »seizure of power« (he shows that on the local level, the changes thus caused were neither ideological nor dramatic), various aspects of German resistance (sporadic at best, and ideologically ambiguous, as in the case of the Leipzig mayor, Karl Goerdeler, who expressed anti-Semitic views until the end of the thirties), or even Nazi social planning (not very different, in some respects, from what was envisioned in Great Britain during the same epoch).

Martin Broszat aims at showing that some aspects of life under the Third Reich were no more than a continuation of social trends which had started before 1933 and which one can perceive in present-day German society, too: the political periodisation of »1933-1945«, established by traditional historiography dealing with contemporary German history, should be relativised.

According to Martin Broszat we have a considerable number of monographs about the Nazi era which show the complexities and contradictions of the regime and the society during those years. But, we don't yet have a »history of the Nazi era« which would describe these contradictory aspects within an overall narrative. This is certainly true. The question is, however, whether recognising the existence of these contradictions and complexities in itself offers a conceptual framework for writing such a global history. Possibly not: which would mean that the historian may have to look at the Nazi era from a specific vantage point. The historian of the Third Reich either chooses to consider this period of German history as primarily determined by ideology, politics, bureaucracy and terror or chooses to stress the non-ideological and non-political domain, the social processes and daily life. According to the chosen vantage point - notwithstanding all the juxtapositions and the stress on contradictions and complexities - the resulting global image will be very different. Nobody denies the weight of ordinary life: the question is one of emphasis.

In a way, Martin Broszat's approach presents the same dilemma as that posed by Andreas Hillgruber in the first part of his book. In both cases, one can speak of a shift from the traditional core to the traditional periphery and vice versa. Again, there can be no intrinsic historiographical argument against such a shift, but by focusing on the bravery of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front instead of on the murderous core of the system, by following the common pace of daily life in a small town in Bavaria rather than the already »well-known« decisions taken in Berlin, the core is left empty and relegated to the area of antiquated questions, too obsessively studied in the past. The new focus substantially changes the landscape and something - possibly the essential - becomes blurred.

One may agree or disagree with Andreas Hillgruber's or Martin Broszat's approaches to the historicisation of National-Socialism: the various interpretations belong to an ongoing scientific dialogue. The impression left by Ernst Nolte's recent work is different. In the words of Jürgen Habermas, Ernst Nolte »is made of other stuff«.

In two successive publications - »Between Myth and Revisionism: National-Socialism from the Perspective of the 1980s« (in H. W. Koch, *Aspects of National-Socialism*, Macmillan, London 1985) and »A Past that Refuses to Go Away« (»Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will«, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), 6. Juni 1986) - Ernst Nolte has given us an updated version of his historicisation of the Final Solution already apparent in his earlier writings, such as the 1974 study »Germany and the Cold War« (*Deutschland and der kalte Krieg*, R. Piper Verlag, München 1974).

»The fundamental question,« writes Ernst Nolte in »Between Myth and Revisionism«, »must [therefore] be: is the history of the Third Reich, forty years after the war, in need of revision, and if so, what form should this take?«

Nolte rejects the possibility of changing the core of the negative picture, which would mean denying incontestable facts or renewing the National-Socialist ethos, but a new perspective is nonetheless possible which could be summed up as follows:

- a. The industrialisation process has produced a long tradition of annihilationist theories (that is, theories which consider the annihilation of entire human groups as a possible way of solving basic social problems created by modernisation and industrialisation). For Nolte, the Bolshevik revolution was the first complete application, on the most massive scale, of such annihilationist theories.

In both his texts, Nolte considers Nazi annihilation policies as a copy of the Bolshevik original and as a result of the anxiety caused by the Bolshevik original: »He who does not want to see Hitler's annihilation of the Jews in this context [communist annihilationism - S. F.],«

writes Nolte, »is possibly led by very noble motives, but he falsifies history. In his legitimate search for the direct causes, he overlooks the main precondition without which all those causes would have remained without effect. Auschwitz is not primarily a result of traditional anti-Semitism. It was in its core not only a >genocide<, but was above all a reaction born out of the anxiety of the annihilating occurrences of the Russian revolution ...«

Nolte does not deny that the copy was more irrational, more horrifying and more repulsive than the original, but he then adds: »All this constitutes singularity but it does not alter the fact that the so-called annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy and not a first act or an original.«

In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* article, Nolte writes: »Didn't the National-Socialists, didn't Hitler, commit an >Asiatic< act, possibly only because they considered themselves and those like themselves as potential or real victims of an >Asiatic< act?« Nolte ventures the suggestion that Hitler's only innovation, in the context of the annihilationist thinking of the twenties, was a technical one: the use of gas .. .

- b. The readers of the *FAZ* article may have wondered at some sort of *non sequitur* why should Hitler have annihilated the Jews when he felt in danger of being annihilated by the Soviets? This *non sequitur* is never clearly solved, but the answer is hinted at in »Between Myth and Revisionism«, where Nolte writes: »It can hardly be denied that Hitler had good reason to be convinced of his enemies' determination to annihilate him much earlier than when the first information about Auschwitz came to the knowledge of the world. The 1940 pamphlet, >Germany Must Perish<, by Theodore N. Kaufman has often been mentioned in the literature, but I do not remember seeing in any of the more important German books I have read, about Weizmann's official declaration in the first days of September 1939, according to which Jews in the whole world would fight on the side of England. Anyway, I have to reproach myself for not knowing of this statement in 1963 [when Nolte published his well-known *Three Faces of Fascism* – S.F.] and not having made use of it, although it can be found in the *Archiv der Gegenwart* of 1939, and it might justify the consequential thesis that Hitler was allowed to treat the Jews as prisoners of war and by this means intern them.«

In the text just quoted, we find two different elements: in the first part, Nolte stresses that Hitler had *good reason* to be convinced of his enemies' determination to annihilate him, and he quotes Kaufman's pamphlet. The implicit corollary, which is not mentioned, however, would logically be that Hitler did react to Jewish annihilation threats

by annihilating the Jews. The second argument links Weizmann's declaration to the internment of the Jews (»Hitler was allowed to treat the Jews as prisoners of war ...«, etc.). In any event, the reader may get the impression that Jewish threats and provocations significantly contributed to Hitler's acting as he did against the Jews.

It would not have been necessary to comment upon such arguments had they remained confined to the radical right fringe literature where one finds them practically since 1945. But, here they are, in the very midst of the West German academic establishment.

By the way, the completely insignificant Kaufman pamphlet, which the unknown author published in a press he established himself for that purpose, was discovered by Goebbels and became a central piece of Nazi propaganda from mid-1941 on, after the extermination of the Jews already had started in Russia. These details are presented in an exhaustive study published in 1981 by Wolfgang Benz in the most widely-read German historical journal dealing with contemporary history and particularly with National-Socialism, the *Vierteljahrsschrift für Zeitgeschichte*. Could it be that Ernst Nolte was not aware of this study?

Since the end of the war, on the other hand, as was just mentioned, the Weizmann-Kaufman argument reappears systematically in the literature denying the existence of the Final Solution, such as in the German classic of that literature, Wilhelm Stäglich's *Der Auschwitz Mythos*.

- c. These various facts and arguments were not sufficiently brought forth until now, according to Nolte, because of »the limitations arising from specific circumstances«. The time has now come for a reassessment of the historical picture. This reassessment according to the author, which would put the past to rest, is opposed by the interests of the generation of the »sons«: (that is, the left-wing rebels of the sixties) in their fight against the »fathers«, and »also by the interests of those who were persecuted and their descendants to keep their permanent exceptional status and their privileges«.

Nolte's historical reasoning is illustrated by a metaphor. In »Between Myth and Revisionism«, he points to the implications of history written by the victors. Imagine, he writes, that Israel had been annihilated by the PLO and its allies; then, for decades, possibly centuries, in the classrooms of Palestine, nothing positive would be mentioned about the history of Zionism and only the negative aspects of Israel would be dwelt upon; Zionism would be remembered only as a »racist, oppressive, and even fascist« movement.

The interesting aspect of this metaphor is not only that, among the many examples of history written by the victors, this hypothetical

example came to Nolte's mind, but that whereas Germany was *defeated* in the war, in this example, it is the *annihilation* of Israel, not its defeat, that is imagined. In fact this metaphor presents a strange sequel to the fate of the European Jews.

The historiographical debate analysed here, may well be in its first stages only; as already mentioned, this debate exacerbates ongoing controversies within German society; they interact of necessity with different trends taking place in the Jewish world. It remains difficult to evaluate the true importance of such trends and interactions. However, before concluding, some perceivable developments may be mentioned, be it in a few paragraphs.

As the yearning for normalisation of the past is becoming stronger in Germany, over the last few years a very different process has become apparent in the Jewish world: the growing centrality of the Shoah among Diaspora Jewry, particularly in the United States. The Shoah is almost becoming a symbol of identification, for better or worse, whether because of the weakening of the bond of religion or because of the lesser salience of Zionism and Israel as an identification element. All this has often been noted, but the corollaries usually have not been spelled out. If the trends apparently taking place on the German scene have been correctly interpreted, and if in contrast, the Shoah is becoming central to Jewish identity in the Diaspora, then we could be facing a growing incompatibility of memories. This incompatibility may be expressed in a simple formula: those who yearn for a normalisation of the past are partly impeded from doing so by the urge to remember of those who wish to keep the past alive. Symbolically, Bitburg was such a clash of memories. (For a good documentation on Bitburg, see Geoffrey H. Hartman (ed), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986.) The Fassbinder affair, indirectly, was another example, as was, more starkly than anything else, the Waldheim controversy in Austria.

This incompatibility of memories has found one of its most telling recent expressions in a non-political domain. In an interview given in Paris when the TV series »Heimat« came out, its producer and director, Edgar Reitz, explained why the annihilation of the Jews was mentioned only in passing: »The question of the Jews under National-Socialism is a theme which has been treated in an infinite number of stories and if I had included this aspect, the whole story would have taken a different turn.« Actually, according to another interview given by Reitz, »Heimat« was meant to be an answer to the American TV series, »Holocaust«: »The most fundamental process of expropriation,« Reitz declared, »is that which robs human beings of their own history. With >Holocaust<, the

Americans have taken history away from us.« But then, what kind of an answer was »Heimat«?

As the film critic, Gertrude Koch, very pointedly remarked: »Reitz actually puts his finger on the problem, i.e., that in order to tell the myth of >Heimat<, the trauma of Auschwitz has to be bracketed from German history ... Unmistakably, >Heimat< concords with a political climate which is distinguished by certain semantic slippages, from Auschwitz over Stalingrad into Hunsruck [the district in which >Heimat< takes place - S. F.] by a shift in paradigms of historical interpretation from >everyday fascism< to >fascist everyday life<.« (For the various quotes, see the excellent special issue on »Heimat« of *New German Critique*, Number 36, Fall 1985.)

Two years after the showing of »Heimat«, »Shoah« came out. By dealing only with the destruction of the Jews, Claude Lanzmann was, in a way, answering Edgar Reitz.

German memory of the Nazi era remains divided, notwithstanding the trends described. For other reasons, Jewish memory is divided, too. On a symbolic level, however, one may speak of a Jewish memory of Auschwitz and of a German one. Although the incompatibility between these memories may be growing, they are helplessly interwoven in what has been called a »negative symbiosis« by Prof. Dan Diner of Essen University. Any re-elaboration of one memory directly impinges on the other; any neutralisation effort casts an overall shadow of oblivion. Neither Jews nor Germans can relate to their own memory without relating to the other's as well.

For a while longer, the elaboration of collective memories of the Nazi era will remain linked to individual recollection. On this level, too, a gap seems to be widening. As years go by, the echoes of the past seem to become louder for a majority in the one group, fainter for a majority in the other. On the one side, the slightest sound reawakens the past; on the other, the insistence on the weight of the present tense is growing.

The »historically sensitive and morally anguished Germans«, in the words of Timothy Garton Ash, have found an exemplary spokesman in President Richard von Weizsäcker. Within the intellectual community, the voice of Jürgen Habermas has been among the most straightforward and the most unflinching on those issues, over the last years.

But, indeed, the present controversy, among other signs, indicates that the majority expresses »eine neue Unbefangenheit« in an increasingly outspoken way. Some arguments which belonged to the radical right only, now appear on the academic scene.

The debate is - and must remain first and foremost - a debate among Germans. The outside observer can but recognize with disappointment

and sadness the (hopefully temporary) decrease among some highly respected German intellectuals of a sense of historical insight, historical judgement and historical responsibility.