HISTORY AT LARGE

Visitors to the Exhibition, Munich, 1997.

The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition ‘War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944’
by Hannes Heer
(translated by Jane Caplan)

‘Anyone who sets out today – half a century after the end of the war! – to investigate the path to mass murder in the Second World War and the role played by the Wehrmacht, will touch a nerve that is still highly sensitive for some Germans. To take up this dark chapter is to find oneself unexpectedly marked as the violator of a taboo.’

With these words Jutta Lumbach, the president of the Federal Constitutional Court, opened the exhibition ‘Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944’ in Karlsruhe on 10 January 1997. She went on to describe the pressure, the threats, the defamatory attacks and the special police protection that were prompted by her appearance at this inaugural ceremony. Events like this have become commonplace in the experience of the exhibition and are hardly worth mentioning. More important is the logic of this German nervous sensitivity: where it comes from and why it still persists after fifty years. Both the public debate and the private responses stimulated by the
exhibition offer us a means to explore these questions. They constitute a kind of microcosm of the structure of German society, what it embodies and lacks, and how it has changed.

The exhibition emerged out of a project on ‘Civilization and Barbarism’ launched by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, the purpose of which was to investigate the destructiveness of the twentieth century on the eve of the new millennium, and to explain the legacy it has bequeathed us as we enter the next century. In this context, the war conducted by the German state between 1939 and 1945 was an obvious subject for research, especially the campaign against the Soviet Union: this constituted a new type of unlimited warfare, in which the moral law was annulled and criminality became the norm. It has been common knowledge at least since the 1945 Nuremberg Trials that the Wehrmacht (the army) was both means and motor of Nazi policies of racism and conquest. Moreover, as an organization it represented the largest cross-section of the Nazi system and social order: thus it presented an ideal opportunity for a close investigation of the violent potential of Nazi society – its capacity to limit or to catalyze the process of barbarization.

The exhibition covers the period between 1941 and 1944 only; it is limited to a few sectors of the front, and presents its evidence through three case studies. It depicts the extermination of the Jews and the massacre of other civilians in the military occupation zone of Serbia in 1941; it surveys the role of the Sixth Army in assisting SS-Einsatzgruppen in the mass murder of Jews during the invasion of the Ukraine in the summer and autumn of 1941, and in subjecting the rest of the civilian population to ruthless terror; and it uses the example of occupied Byelorussia – specifically, the fate of prisoners of war, Jews and other civilians – to demonstrate what German occupation entailed. The documentation for the exhibition comes mainly from the Freiburg Military Archive (part of the German Federal Archives), along with additional materials from German and Soviet trials, and collections of letters and diaries. Apart from a few official propaganda photographs, all the photographs in the exhibition were taken by German soldiers, and were confiscated when they fell into the hands of the Red Army or Tito’s partisan units.

The exhibition first opened in Hamburg on 5 March 1995; by mid 1998 it had been seen by more than 550,000 visitors in twenty-six other cities across Germany and Austria. If all further requests in hand are met, it could be touring continuously until 2003. Put into perspective, these figures mean that it has undoubtedly been the contemporary history exhibition in the Federal Republic: the longest-lasting and the most visited. It became one of the most avidly discussed public events on the history of National Socialism, comparable with the widely-debated TV ‘Holocaust’ series. Originally a contribution to contemporary history, it has long since become an event in contemporary history, itself the object of research and investigation.

Initially, the exhibition met with unanimous approval. The major German daily and weekly papers greeted it as a remarkable contribution to the 1995
anniversary of the war’s end. ‘The most important historical exhibition for
many years’, wrote Die Zeit, and the same tone could be detected in the
almost identical headlines of other press reports: ‘Destruction of a Legend’,
‘The Big Lie’, ‘Myth Exposed as Mendacity’, ‘The Illusion of the “Decent”
Exhibition Exposes the Myth of the Honourable Soldier’. What was strik-
ing was the sense of relief conveyed by these reports – as if now, at long last,
room had been made for public revision and private reflection. As Die Zeit
put it, ‘the terrible truth has been revealed ... a truth that had previously
been unable to prevail against a wall of consensual public silence in
Germany’.

This wall had been erected very early, in 1945. Its architects were six
leading Wehrmacht generals, including Brauchitsch, Manstein and War-
limont, who stated in a deposition to the Nuremberg Tribunal that (a) the
relationship between the army and Hitler had always been cool and distant;
(b) they had rejected the pre-war persecution of the Jews as unworthy of
the German people, and during the war they had neither control nor know-
ledge of it; (c) the German generals had accepted the war against the Soviet
Union as a preventive war forced on the German people, but had reacted
with unanimous outrage to Hitler’s plan for a war of racial extermination;
and (d) they had waged the war according to the rules of international law;
the partisan war had been initiated by Stalin and conducted in deliberate
violation of the rules of war, and the German response had been both neces-
ary as a protective measure and carried out as a military operation.

At the time, Telford Taylor, one of the US prosecutors in the Inter-
national Military Tribunal trials in Nuremberg and chief prosecutor in the
subsequent American Military Tribunal trials, realized that this claim would
be ‘the earliest germ of the myths and legends’ through which the generals
hoped to obliterate their tracks. In their memoirs the generals then added
two important terms to this construct: the words ‘duty’ and ‘victim’. Hin-
dered by Hitler in their operational decisions and virtually held hostage by
him, they had simply done their duty to lead the soldiers entrusted to their
command and to protect their fatherland from danger. In these honourable
efforts they were the victims first of forces more powerful than themselves,
and then of the merciless justice of the victors.

The exhibition swept away this tissue of lies. It revealed just how late in
the day ‘duty’ had been discovered as a substitute for morality: when the
fortunes of war changed and fears of the looming vengeance of the victors
began to percolate into daily life at the front. As one veteran says in Ruth
Beckermann’s film ‘Jenseits des Krieges’, shot in 1995 during the exhibition
in Vienna: ‘At first we acted from conviction, then from duty’. And before
the German army did in fact become victims, they were actors and perpe-
trators. Whatever quantum of truth these memories of victimization may
embody, they were also always and pre-eminently the screen memories of
perpetrators.
The exhibition thus forced its way into the heart of the legend, and exposed the ‘terrible truth’: that the Holocaust took place not only in Auschwitz, in Buchenwald, Majdanek, and the other ‘extra-terrestrial sites’ of industrial mass murder, but also in the territories occupied by Wehrmacht troops, and with their energetic participation: they gassed people in vans, they shot them in the neck, they kicked and beat them to death. The exhibition also showed that the attempted genocide of Russia’s other, non-Jewish population took place not only in PoW camps, but also through the war against the partisans. And it showed that this war of extermination was the work not only of the generals or a few fanatical Nazi officers, but of millions of soldiers, men with familiar faces and names, men who enjoyed love and respect. ‘They knew – our fathers and grandfathers, they knew what happened or they could have known’, wrote Die Zeit, adding the hope that ‘There is still time to remember’.

This was not a vain hope. The apparently impregnable collective front of ex-soldiers was indeed beginning to crumble. We heard from men who had found no forum for their voices in the post-war years, who had had to turn back before the wall of silence. Now, fifty years later, they came to the exhibition and the events associated with it, they announced themselves in letters and phone calls, and they bore witness: ‘It was exactly like the exhibition shows’; ‘It was even worse’; ‘I am ashamed that I was part of the crowd’; ‘I was an officer in the central sector of the eastern front and I accept my share of the responsibility’. Others sent in the notebooks and photo albums they had kept at the time, or the memoirs they had written for their children. People in public life stepped forward to speak at openings as the exhibition toured the country, or they began to set down their memories in book form.

What was remarkable in this outpouring was that it told just one story, described only one of the crimes documented by the exhibition. This narrative aimed to achieve a kind of agreement or treaty about the past with the next generation: it constructed a ‘text’ that simultaneously met the children’s desire for identification with their fathers and took account of the fathers’ fears that their stories would provoke their children to revolt. The agreed story that emerged was one of unburdening or discharge; a tacit censorship admitted only fragments of the real history. The stories and memories released by the exhibition revealed the same kind of compromise, they were the same tales of exoneration. But they also exceeded this framework. The tale that was told exposed an element of the real story; it demanded a revision of the narrator’s life. In looking back from the present on his previous life, in engaging in a kind of ‘research’ or cure of conscience, he was allowing morality to revisit his past under Nazism and was reintegrating this past into his present-day life. To declare the full history would have harmed the remembrancer and destroyed the social context in which he once lived and lives now. But to offer a part of it, as an example, expressed insight and solicited forgiveness from the next generation.
The reason this response is so important and deserves to be described at length is that it highlights the character prototype of the war generation. The historian Elisabeth Domansky has suggested that this generation lived through the post-war period as if Nazism could simply never have happened. The act that made this possible was the extinction, the destruction of the Nazi era. Into the vacuum this generated, new post-war standards of morality and civil discourse were projected, or rather were retrospectively extended. Historical events and individual deeds could thus be reconstructed in such a way that a different life, a different person would emerge. Of course, part of the normal relationship with the past is that ‘you have to forget, in order to remember’. But to forget does not mean to extinguish. In the case of traumatic experiences in particular, special devices are needed: ‘What is to be forgotten must not be “really” forgotten; mechanisms have to be developed to ensure that one does not forget the thing to be forgotten – otherwise it may erupt suddenly into the realm of memory and overturn the balance of an individual or a society.

Even when, under the mounting pressure of photographs and memories, other voices from the past were raised in a chorus of defence and outrage, these mechanisms, or rather these features of the prototype, were clearly discernible. When, for example, Helmut Schmidt, the former German Chancellor, claimed that he had never even seen a Jewish star let alone a criminal act against the Jews, he used these telling words: ‘We were to some extent ghettoized [!], that was the situation of most German soldiers. . . . There were no Jews in the barracks, and when you got any leave you went straight home to see your girlfriend.’ Or take the ex-officer, a well-dressed Hamburg merchant, who came to our Institute to prove that his intervention had saved from destruction ninety Jewish children who had survived an SS massacre in the small Ukrainian town of Belaja Zerkow. In a 1963 trial in which he had been questioned as a witness, he had learned that these children had in fact been shot a few days later; at the same time, he heard about some other children who had been saved by a German. Fifty years after the event, he tells us a story that fits the present and his own identity, a story that he wishes had also been true of his own past.

As a final example, consider the veterans’ demonstration in the square outside the exhibition hall in Munich, to which Renate Schostack devoted a long and compelling article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung:

They stood there simply in the hope of escaping from the decades of self-imposed silence. . . . They were what Daniel Goldhagen has called ‘Hitler’s Willing Executioners’: petty henchmen who did things that the whole world now despises, but that were not punishable under the laws of a criminal regime more than fifty years ago. Hardly anyone had wanted to hear their stories till now, neither their families nor their friends. . . . Many of those who had spoken out in earlier decades had minimized or glossed over what they had done, or twisted it into its
opposite until they believed it themselves – perhaps because their consciences whispered that they should indeed have been rescuers, not killers. Some of these men – there are few of them left – stood in Munich’s Marienplatz and uttered defensive words that were also meant to invite conversation, perhaps even confession. It was almost always the same. The speaker points at himself or a photograph: ‘Look, do I, does my brother, look like a criminal?’ They await the answer, ‘No, you don’t look like a criminal’. Then they begin to talk hastily of atrocities that they had heard about or seen on TV, only to add, ‘We never did anything like that then’. And then the third step: ‘But we had no choice’. Only a father confessor could have asked them what they had in fact done. But no one would act this part and hear their confession. They found no comfort in the politicians’ declarations that the soldiers of the Second World War had not been criminals. The Furies shrieked something else in their ears. These men stood and waited for an absolution that no one could give them.19

At issue is not just the older generation, but also the next in line, the children of the perpetrators. The emotional impact is no less intense for them than for their elders. ‘What did you do in the war, daddy?’ – a sentence from the exhibition visitors’ book that condenses the full horror, the moment of appalled recognition, the desire not to know and yet the inevitability of knowledge that characterizes this group. We have to remember that the Wehrmacht was after all Nazi society in its organized form, it was the people under arms. As Jan Philipp Reemtsma has put it, ‘The crimes of the Wehrmacht are potentially the crimes of Everyman, the crimes of husband, father, brother, uncle, grandfather’.20 The search for these fathers and the role they played in the war of extermination is conducted in the exhibition hall, in front of the panels of text and photographs, often in tormented interrogations. ‘Please describe the fourth soldier from the left, what do you see in his face?’ – with these words a woman tugged the author towards one of the panels on which a hanging was displayed. At his reply – ‘He looks sad, as if he’s not really all there’ – she fell on his shoulders and said, ‘It’s my father, I knew he didn’t approve of the crimes he had to take part in’. From others came letters like this:

While visiting the exhibition . . . in Munich I think I recognized my father in one of the photographs. After going very carefully through my father’s war photos, I went to the exhibition again on Maundy Thursday, 27 March 1997. I brought a magnifying glass and some of my father’s photos with me. After examining the photograph again with great care, I am almost certain that it is my father. It’s the photo ‘Gallows no. 6, Welish, Smolensk’, no. 23 on p. 189 of the catalogue . . . I am sure you can imagine what a daughter feels when she makes a discovery like this; it is an enormous burden for me. I am therefore sure you will understand that I would like to have watertight proof that the man in the photo is actually my
father... I would be very grateful if you could provide me with further information about this photograph.

This kind of recognition is of course the exception. Yet for most of the perpetrators' children, not finding their father offers no relief. They are driven by the fear, the suspicion that he may be recorded elsewhere—in lost photographs or undiscovered military files. We have received hundreds of letters like this: 'I would very much like to know where my father was stationed in the Second World War, in which army unit. He died in 1990, and my mother does not know. His name was Josef Reise, born 30.5.1915. He was "in the Russian Campaign" and then "in Russian captivity"... I hope you will be able to help me.' Others sent us photo albums belonging to family members, letters from the front, fragments of memories, offering them to us to use as we wished: '... because I'm deeply concerned that the younger generation should learn more about our Nazi and war generation before it dies out, so that they will perhaps understand them better and above all learn the lessons of that time'.

And these younger ones, the grandchildren? Their sense of the Nazi past is assembled from books, films, bits and pieces of memory; it's not part of their own real life. Young people aged fifteen to twenty share the same, characteristic response— they draw a series of absolutely concrete lessons for their own lives:

- They express outrage at the human race: 'It's atrocious to me what people are or were capable of.' 'I wish I did not have to go any further and see all this misery that really happened. I thought people had more morality than this. Terrible. One lie after another.' 'I am still speechless—to think that there are still people who control others through brute force.'

- They show anger at those who will not learn: 'The worst thing in my view is that there are young people today who think it's stupid to bother about the past.' 'I hope that many people... will see this exhibition and learn from it.' 'Nazis, I hate all of you.'

- They declare a determination to prevent repetition of past crimes: 'This should deter people from ever going to war again.' 'We must all work together to make sure that this never happens again, instead of smugly assuming that we're safe from it.'

- They commit themselves to take personal responsibility for this: 'Anyone who excuses these crimes or relativizes or denies them would be ready to commit them again tomorrow. From now on I will speak out even more strongly against ideas like that.'

- They hope that insight into the past will be of practical use: 'We should not let the past be; we should apply it e.g. to Kurdistan, where people may also be facing genocide.'

- But they doubt that this will happen, they fear that the past may already have become the present: 'It seems to me that nothing will ever change, see Yugoslavia, Chechnya.'
In sum, these individual responses across three generations can only be described as a damburst. 'Because of the exhibition people who are total strangers and from every generation fall into conversation about these historical events – a conversation which till now has failed to take place', said the Munich moral theologian Johannes Gründel, in astonishment. But the question is why it has taken fifty years for this to happen finally. For this there are numerous reasons, all the effect of the passage of time and generations; we will cite only six of them.

1. The wartime generation that dominated public life and the politics of memory in the Federal Republic has grown old and is on its way out. They no longer have the power to prevent the victory of history over memory. The leagues of soldiers and of 'victims' (that is, Germans expelled from non-German territories after the war) can no longer mount more than a ritual defence.

2. The power bloc system of the post-war era no longer exists – the 'hot war' of 1941–45 can no longer be seen as the first campaign of the Cold War. As the demonized enemy has vanished so too the veto on certain ways of thinking has been lifted.

3. The Bundeswehr, the army of the Federal Republic, is no longer the personified successor to the Wehrmacht, the Nazi army. Its officers have grown up in the Federal Republic and their legitimacy derives from this state, not from the great defensive battles of 1941 or the final efforts to turn the tide of the war – the operations ‘Typhoon’ and ‘Citadel’, the retreat to ‘Buffalo’ or the ‘Panther line’. And they do not have to freeze at the sound of ‘Babi Yar’ or ‘Tarnopol’, ‘partisan war’ or ‘scorched earth’.

4. Talking about the crimes of the Wehrmacht is no longer tantamount to patricide. 'What did you do in the war, daddy?' was first asked by sons in 1968. Posed as an accusation, the question was met with a declaration of war. Today the grandchildren frame their questions differently: 'Where were you all? How did you get there? Who had you become when you returned?'

5. Since 1968 at least, the group of military historians around Manfred Messerschmidt at the Freiburg Armed Forces Historical Research Office (MGFA), and other historians such as Helmut Krausnick and Christian Streit, have drawn increasing attention to the Wehrmacht's role as an instrument of Nazi race policy. At the same time there has been a turnover of generations: the historians researching National Socialism are no longer its contemporaries. They can approach the crimes of the Nazis with more freedom, and can at last begin to shed light on the organization of terror and the physiognomy of the perpetrators.

6. A final point is that this exhibition was both preceded and accompanied by other important debates. The film 'Schindler's List' (1993), the publication of Victor Klemperer's diaries (1995) and the controversy about Daniel Goldhagen's book (Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, 1996) represent variations on the exhibition's
own themes, and have also reinforced its implications – for example, with regard to the choices available to every German under National Socialism, the question of how people responded to their freedom to decide for or against the moral law. The subtitle, 'Crimes of the Wehrmacht', pointed to the importance of reinserting morality into history.

Up to this point, the exhibition may appear to have been a resounding success. But the reaction to it in Munich shows that this is only half the story. It has also cast a shadow, and not only in Munich. The veterans' associations were alone in having mounted a campaign against the exhibition from the start, when their isolation appeared even more total given the defection of their natural ally, the Bundeswehr. The Defence Ministry responded positively to the exhibition both in an internal memorandum, and in an article in the major army newsletter.24 The minister, Volker Rühe, evidently saw it as an opportunity to revise the relationship between Bundeswehr and Wehrmacht. The most striking evidence of this sensational switch was the decision to rename barracks that had been named after known war criminals, which brought decades of controversy to an abrupt conclusion. Even more significant was Rühe's promulgation of a new 'Edict of Tradition' for the Bundeswehr: 'As an organization of the Third Reich, the Wehrmacht was implicated in the crimes of National Socialism from top to bottom, from its leadership through its units down to its soldiers. It therefore cannot be the source of an institutional tradition.'25 Rühe’s moves marked the apex of the consensus about the exhibition, and also the turning-point. The exhibition had overstepped the boundaries of historical documentation and was determining policy. On its own this might not have been enough to alarm the conservative camp. For this a further realization was necessary: that the exhibition would continue to tour Germany for two or three years after 1995. In other words, it was no passing nightmare, but over this time was likely to transform the politics of memory of the Federal Republic.

The counter-attack was initiated by an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Under the headline 'Witnesses to a Wandering Sense of Guilt' Günter Gillessen issued a declaration of war. He asserted that, quite apart from the fact that no new evidence had been presented, the exhibition undertook to assign guilt unilaterally to the Wehrmacht with photographs that were not clearly identifiable. This was doubly unjust, because it took no account either of how the omnipotent SS had restricted the room for manoeuvre, or of how Stalin’s brutal conduct of the war behind German lines had forced the army to engage in a counter-terror. According to Gillessen, the exhibition was not a scholarly contribution to knowledge but a 'pamphlet' that fed a 'need for emotional expression' and an addictive 'sense of guilt'.26 At about the same time the ex-TV reporter Rüdiger Proske published a polemic with the title 'Against the Misuse of the History of German Soldiers for Political Purposes'.27 This intensified the attack by 'exposing' the exhibition organizers as old communists and 68ers who, with the help of the 'Red Brigades' of the Freiburg Armed Forces Historical
Research Office (i.e. academics like Messerschmidt, Förster and Wette), were aiming to prevent the long overdue rehabilitation of the Wehrmacht soldiers that was beginning to emerge, and thus to discredit the Bundeswehr as their successor.

Both these publications gave a new sense of direction to the hitherto aimlessly floundering veterans’ associations and the chorus of rightwing extremists on the margins; but they also led to the first counter-measures in the conservative camp. The Ministry of Defence banned any public contact between Bundeswehr units and the exhibition organizers, and forbade any public statements of opinion. Christian Social (CSU) mayors in Bavaria began to refuse to participate in opening ceremonies for the exhibition in their towns. In Bremen the Christian Democrat (CDU) members of the state government precipitated a coalition crisis on account of the exhibition. However, the attempt to stop the exhibition and to force supporters and allies into retreat was not successful. Rather the reverse: the speakers engaged for the opening of the exhibition in Karlsruhe and in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt – respectively Jutta Limbach (president of the Federal Constitutional Court) and Friedrich Kahlenberg (president of the Federal Archives) – demonstrated the high public esteem that the exhibition by now enjoyed. At this point the Bavarian CSU and the nationalist wing of the CDU slammed on the emergency brake. Peter Gauweiler, the chair of the Munich CSU, challenged Jan Philipp Reemtsma, the head of the Hamburg Institute of Social Research, to devote his ‘tobacco fortune’ not, as one might put it, to the memory of murdered Jews, captured Red Army soldiers and civilians suspected of being partisans, but to the victims of cigarette smoking. The Bayernkurier pilloried the exhibition as an ‘extension’ of the sentences passed by the Nuremberg Tribunal. By depriving millions of German soldiers of their honour, the organizers had mounted a ‘campaign of moral annihilation against the German people’. When a wreath was laid by the Munich CSU at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, when the Bavarian education minister recommended schools against visiting the exhibition, when a 5,000-strong neo-Nazi demonstration was, if not supported, then at least countenanced by conservatives, and when the number of visitors reached 90,000, including 20,000 schoolchildren – all this finally made the exhibition into a national event.

The great but underrated German novelist Wilhelm Raabe observed almost exactly a century ago that ‘As soon as science makes any new and surprising discovery, the first words of the philistines are “it isn’t true”; then comes “it’s against religion”; and finally, “we already knew”’. We only need to adapt this slightly to convey the public arguments that raged round the exhibition: first, ‘the sources have been falsified’; then, ‘it’s against eighteen million Wehrmacht soldiers, against the Bundeswehr, against public order in Germany’; and finally, ‘we knew it all long ago’. If the exhibition project had been only a contribution to an ongoing process of academic research, we might have left this kind of polemical attack unanswered.
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and simply waited until its new findings were accepted among scholars. But, as we have already suggested, this was not the point. Six months after his initial volley, Gauweiler took stock in a way that indicates what the initial counter-attack had intended and achieved: ‘It is not only the 80,000 visitors in Munich who have confronted the issues, but eighty million Germans. . . . Fearless reflection about the past and the future is an integral component of a free democracy.’ In other words, the exhibition was represented as a problem of national identity, as a massive provocation.

Most notable in Gauweiler’s article is the mobilization of a line of defence manned in the first place by the eighteen million German soldiers of World War Two who, it was implied, had been defamed as war criminals by the exhibition. This image has been fabricated ever since the inception of the exhibition, in newspaper articles, in a flood of readers’ letters and in writs, despite the exhibition’s own quite explicit aims. It depicts only a narrow segment of the war; its subtitle (‘Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944’) made it quite clear that its subject was not the individual foot-soldier but the Wehrmacht as an organization; and its introduction explicitly stated that it was not intended ‘as a blanket indictment of an entire generation of ex-soldiers’. Nevertheless, the accusation that it presented a ‘sweeping judgment’ and thus criminalized eighteen million Wehrmacht soldiers was able to create the platform on which further victims of ‘demonization’ (Verteufelung) could then be paraded. Alfred Dregger, a former captain in the Wehrmacht and today the honorary chair of the CDU Bundestag fraction, gave a quintessential demonstration of this when he accused the exhibition of ‘hitting Germany in the heart’: it had ‘a negative effect on our Bundeswehr’, ‘drove a wedge between the generations’, and destroyed ‘the solidarity of our nation’.

Claims and language of this kind evoke unpleasant but all too pointed memories: as Max Horkheimer pointed out long ago, the German Volksgemeinschaft, the ‘national community’, survived the chaos of defeat in 1945 unscathed: ‘The main thing was to preserve this collective “we”’. In his brilliant study Vergangenheitspolitik, the contemporary historian Norbert Frei has shown how, in the hysterical clamour around the release and amnesty of war criminals in the 1950s, this ‘we’ represented ‘a barely secularized Volksgemeinschaft’; he suggests that the extent of this desire for amnesty actually expressed an indirect admission of guilt, that it was an ‘unconscious recognition . . . of the thesis of collective guilt’. This is true, but in order to fully understand the process one should also add that at the end of the war the surviving German nation recognized itself in the fate of the Wehrmacht, so that the struggle to rehabilitate the handful of convicted generals was also a struggle for self-rehabilitation. The final act of the Nazi regime, after all, in the long process of Germany’s military and army history, was to change the army from a closed caste to a people’s army, first during the years 1933–8 and then through the war itself. No other institution under National Socialism was as apt to represent the history both of Everyman
and of the community, or to figure in its collective fate the meaningfulness of each individual’s own life. Without this identification of post-war German society with the image and fate of the Wehrmacht it is impossible to understand the early history of the Federal Republic. Its founding myth – that the German people, seduced and then terrorized by Hitler, had not known about the Nazi crimes yet was bitterly punished for them by the bombing, the expulsions and the division of the country – this founding myth is only a more dexterous variation on the formula devised by the generals in their 1945 deposition, cited above.

In its documentation as in its various publications, the exhibition project aimed directly at demolishing this myth. The major German newspapers recognized this immediately, and – by contrast with the professional historians – gave the exhibition due credit for its path-breaking achievement. As Die Zeit commented, ‘It has inserted the term “holocaust” into the history of the war’; or, as the FAZ put it in an early and still positive article, it threw ‘a new light on the “partisan war”’, and established ‘a new and richly revealing source for the history of mentalities’. The ordinary troops not only knew about the massacres, they not only took part in them, but they also photographed the atrocities with their own cameras for their family albums’, observed Die Woche, and added, as a commentary on the state of mind of these amateur photographers, ‘The shutters clicked as if it was the director of “Natural Born Killers” with his finger on the button’. It is not surprising that the more sophisticated arguments of the exhibition’s opponents did little more than defend the old image of the Wehrmacht against the new evidence, in an effort to prevent an uncontrollable damburst. Their spokesman, Gillesen, absolved the Wehrmacht of responsibility for the extermination of the Jews, represented the genocidal project of the anti-partisan war as a sectoral military operation, and, in order to rescue the army as a whole, declared that the photographs of its participation in mass crimes were faked or misleadingly displayed.

In 1985, Ernst Nolte’s bid to extract the history of the holocaust from the history and responsibility of National Socialism was repudiated in the course of the Historikerstreit. Kohl’s attempt at Bitburg to make the racial war disappear from memory failed in the face of public protest in the same year. Ten years later, the Wehrmacht exhibition has not only confirmed this public consensus in Germany, but has proffered a new version that is closer to historical actuality than what emerged out of the earlier process of reassessment around 1968.

The conservative camp construes this long overdue revision and replacement of an outdated self-image of the early Federal Republic as an assault on fundamental values and convictions: this is what explains the intensity of their reaction. This defensive stance has also been strengthened by some specific factors in the current political situation.

1. Neo-Nazi groups have proved increasingly attractive to unemployed and disoriented youths, while many members of the older generation have
been unnerved by social dislocation and increasing violence, and this has prompted mounting ideological concessions to these extremist groups. The CDU/CSU can hardly stand aside when far-right parties flaunt electoral slogans like ‘Forget Reemtsma & Co. – we’re proud of our soldiers’ or ‘Our soldiers – not criminals, but the best army in the world’. The past few years have seen a disappearance of the taboo on extreme right-wing positions, which makes this an effortless strategy.

2. The Bundeswehr is part of a new politics of global security. But it is under public attack for taking part in operations in places that were once Wehrmacht theatres of war, while at the same time the number of voluntary recruits is falling. Public controversy about its Nazi past and its own origins only make things worse. The exhibition happened to coincide with the acquittal of a citizen charged with having a bumper sticker on his car that read ‘Soldiers are murderers’ (a quotation from Kurt Tucholsky): the reactions this provoked have revealed the level of sensitivity and the attempts to exploit it politically.

3. The ‘divided memory’ of the two Germanies is supposed to be effaced after unification: the West German memory construct is the one that is to prevail, and an excess of anti-fascism will damage this process. And in the period between German unification and the next stage of European unity, there is a special value in anything that diminishes the idea of the German Sonderweg, that reinforces German normality.

4. Concurrently with the exhibition, long-running debates in the Bundestag about the rehabilitation of deserters and the level of compensation to victims of Nazism in eastern Europe have been reaching their climax. Both of these debates impugned core principles of the conservative camp in post-war Germany. To rehabilitate deserters would amount to acknowledging the bankruptcy of all the talk about Wehrmacht soldiers’ ‘sense of duty’; it would put a serious question-mark against their moral integrity. To offer restitution to victims would mean seeing the individual suffering behind the abstract figures, by contrast with the collective compensation paid to the state of Israel; it would imply begging forgiveness from those who had survived.

5. The Süddeutsche Zeitung ran an article by its editor, Herbert Riehl-Heyse, under the headline ‘The Fear of What Lurks Inside Us’, a theme that Jan Philipp Reemtsma picked up in his inaugural speech in Frankfurt. Perhaps, he asked, a fantasy lurks behind both the objection that only a few men were involved and the charge that the exhibition did not show the whole picture: the fantasy that ‘because so many were involved, everyone could have been involved’, and the fear that ‘at some point the whole truth may be brought to light’.

A survey of popular reactions, public and private, allows no firm conclusions. Many old certainties and assumptions that had become more or less automatic have been toppled. New knowledge, new attitudes, new ways of looking have emerged. Some of these have become embedded in popular
culture — for example in soap operas like ‘Lindenstrasse’ or TV crime series like ‘Tatort’ (Scene of the Crime) — or they have been incorporated in school textbooks. But the situation is ambivalent. Nothing illustrates this better than the debate in the Bundestag on 13 March 1997. According to the next day’s press reports, ‘There were unusual scenes in the Bundestag on Thursday evening: suddenly members were talking about fate — the fate of those who lived in the Second World War’.49 ‘Some members fought back tears of emotion; the debate suddenly became honest, courageous, conducted in quiet, highly personal and sympathetic tones.’50 What had happened? Instead of the expected fistfight, the human face of war was suddenly present in the chamber, named as ‘my wife’s father’, ‘my eldest brother Peter’, ‘my uncle Fritz’, ‘my grandfather’. And the victims too were there on the benches — twenty million Soviet citizens, five million Poles who had starved to death or been killed in labour camps, six million Jews. In this context, the four million dead German soldiers could also find a place, and Dregger’s aggressive insistence that they too be mourned met with no opposition. There was a palpable sense of despair on behalf of the dead comrades; Heiner Geissler’s challenge to approach the exhibition ‘with humility’ as an opportunity ‘to face the truth about ourselves’ was no less credible than defence minister Rühe’s call to look ‘the whole truth’ in the face or Otto Lambsdorff’s laconic comment that ‘This exhibition is the right thing to do’.51 Bundestag members talked about themselves and their families; telling their stories was more important than exchanging opinions;52 the theatre of remembrance and commemoration was abandoned, and for once the usual actors on that stage became part of a grieving, heartsick collective that was struggling to maintain its composure.

A few days later, however, politics returned to its own. On May 15, the same Bundestag reached a decision in the debate about the surviving deserters. They accepted that the Second World War was ‘a war of aggression and extermination’, and that the sentences imposed on deserters by the Wehrmacht were ‘unjust by the standards of the rule of law’; yet they also confirmed that for many deserters the decision to flee was criminal in character or motivated by cowardice and fear — hence that it would attract punishment under today’s rules too. Material compensation was therefore refused.53 Three months later, the federal government declined to offer compensation to holocaust survivors living in central and eastern Europe, on the basis that the payment of ‘more than a milliard DM’ to foundations in these countries had superseded all individual pension claims.54 (We should remember that ex-SS men had received their pensions from the Federal Republic since its foundation.)

After the war, members of the British army had been astonished to find that the German general-staff officers in their custody ‘showed not the slightest sign of regret for the misery that Germany had brought upon the world and itself’.55 In 1950 Hannah Arendt observed a ‘lack of emotion’ and an ‘apparent heartlessness’ that were ‘only the most conspicuous outward
symptom of a deep-rooted, stubborn and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened'. The cold heart of the Federal Republic has lost something of that paralysis as a result of this exhibition; it has become more open. Yet, as the decisions of the Bundestag and government have shown, it is still not beating normally. Only when this heart is able to confront the terrors it has imposed on itself and to achieve empathy with the victims will the war truly be over.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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8 Ruth Beckermann interviewed visitors to the exhibition in Vienna in 1995 for her film, 'Jenseits des Krieges', which has won numerous international prizes.


10 C.f. interview with Wolfgang Benz, Frankfurter Rundschau, 12 April 1997, p. 10.


12 For example: Klaus von Bismarck, ex-officer, later director of WDR (West German radio), then president of the German Goethe Institute; Erhard Eppler, soldier from 1944, federal minister in the 1960s and 1970s and longtime member of the executive committee of the Social Democratic Party (SPD); Iring Fetscher, officer on the eastern front and professor of political science at the University of Frankfurt; Augustus von Kageneck, tank-corps officer and longtime Paris correspondent of Die Welt, in his book Examen de conscience, Paris, 1996.


14 Elisabeth Domansky, ‘“Kristallnacht”, the Holocaust and German Unity: The Meaning of November 9 as an Anniversary in Germany', History and Memory 1, 1992, p. 73, n. 19; on this process of derealization, see also Schneider and others, Das Erbe der Napola, pp. 207 ff.

18 Heer, Bittere Pficht, p. 118.
19 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 April 1997.
20 Inaugural speech in Munich, 24 February 1997; quoted from Mittelweg 36:2, 1997, p. 56.
22 Comments in visitors’ books in Mönchengladbach, Bremen and Munich.
26 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 6 February 1996.
29 Quoted in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 15 February 1997. [Reemtsma, the former head of Germany’s largest tobacco company, who currently runs the Hamburg Institute of Social Research, made the present exhibition possible.]
30 Bayernkurier, 22 February 1997.
32 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10 July 1997.
33 A very early voice in this chorus was that of Ulrich de Maizière, onetime General-Inspector of the Bundeswehr and still a grey eminence: see ‘Man kann nicht 19 Millionen deutsche Männer . . . zu Verbrechern machen’, Die Welt, 12 November 1995.
34 Exhibition catalogue, p. 7.
35 ‘Verteufelung’ was the title given to the leaflet and other materials distributed by the council of the veterans’ associations since 1995.
39 This role as a figure of identification for the defeated community was more important than Klaus Naumann’s suggestion that it functioned as a successor and representative of the extinguished state; see Naumann, ‘Nachkrieg’, p. 23.
40 This is Domansky’s description of the myth in ‘Die gespaltene Erinnerung’, p. 184.
41 For examples of criticisms by historians without research expertise in military history, see Lothar Gall, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 18 May 1997; Horst Möller, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 6 March 1997; Eberhard Jäckel, on German radio, 4 March 1997.
43 Die Woche, 3 March 1995.
44 [This historians’ controversy was a public and highly politicized debate in the 1980s about the political and historical status of Germany’s Nazi past. It turned on two issues: the uniqueness of Germany’s history, given Hitler and the Holocaust, and the question of whether it could be made into a ‘usable’ past – usable, that is, in the construction of a sense of national continuity and historic German identity. For discussion of the controversy, see Richard Evans, In Hitler’s Shadow. Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past, New York, Pantheon, 1989; and Charles Maier, The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust and National Identity, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1988.]
45 Dan Diner has argued that an acknowledgment of the holocaust as an event that occurred beyond the responsibility of the majority of Germans has become the equivalent of the Federal Republic’s unwritten constitution. If this is correct, then the Wehrmacht exhibition amounts to a violation of this constitution.
46 [Sonderweg – special path of development – refers to the argument that Germany’s...
modern history has diverged from the developmental pattern common to other bourgeois industrial societies; it is discussed critically in David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*, 1984.]

48 Frankfurter Rundschau, 14 April 1997.
50 Kölner Stadtanzeiger, 14 March 1997.
51 [Geissler and Lambsdorff are well-known politicians in the CDU and FDP respectively.]
52 On this all-important distinction between fact and opinion for the politics of memory in the Federal Republic, see Jan Philipp Reemtsma's inauguration speech in Frankfurt, in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 April 1997.
54 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 21 August 1997.
55 Hamburger Nachrichten-Blatt, 31 May 1945.