

Promoting Democracy and Penance: The United States, Western Europe, and German Memory of the Holocaust

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"We Germans are indeed obliged without exception to understand clearly the question of our guilt ... What obliges us is our human dignity ... We cannot be indifferent to what the world thinks of us, for we know we are part of mankind – are human before we are German." – Karl Jaspers

Abstract

This research, using the writings of German and international intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, explores the late-twentieth-century German memory of the Holocaust and demonstrates the ways it was influenced by the international community. The path of this development was rocky and uncertain, with historical revisionism, denialism, and unchallenged taboo, but also sincere historical engagement. Reflecting a broader trend in the field of history, this work emphasizes the influence of the transnational in cultural shifts; rather than depict the German collective memory as static, or solely domestic, it seeks to demonstrate the influence of international actors, beliefs, and ideas at major inflection points throughout German history.

Keywords: German Memory, Collective Memory, National Identity, Intellectual History

1 INTRODUCTION

Collective memory and shared understandings of history help a people form a national identity. Germans understand themselves not solely by who and what they are today, but by where they have come from and what their shared history means to them. Thus, the past never really "passes." The past, instead, lives within the halls of museums, the pages of textbooks, and most importantly, the hearts and minds of those who collectively hold a shared history. In examining their past, Germans struggle to reckon, above all, with the Holocaust. As German historian Dan Diner has argued, the Holocaust is an "identity-forming foundational event" for Germany, and the memory of the Holocaust is "basic to Germany's moral and historical self-awareness"¹. The moment in history when Germans were at their most destructive and inhumane, is paradoxically the period most fundamental to contemporary German identity. The idea that the memory of the Holocaust is significant for German identity is not new. What is less understood is the role of the international community in shaping German reckoning with the past.

The Holocaust was, by design, a transnational genocide. This, and the Allied occupation of Germany after

the end of the war, ensured German memory of the Holocaust could not develop in isolation. The United States and Western Europe, from 1945 onward, exerted major influence in the development of that German memory. The decades running from 1945 – 2005 featured German and international leaders, intellectuals, and journalists in conversation about the Holocaust. International observers, especially Americans, expressed expectations on the formation of a German identity. This new forming identity, first in West Germany then in United Germany, entailed democracy and repentance for the Nazi past; these two factors were expected to function together. To international observers, the restoration of German democracy had to be connected to an honest engagement with their Nazi past.

German leaders, intellectuals, and journalists responded to this expectation. As German historian Jan-Werner Müller posited, West Germany and reunited Germany both used "history as a base for legitimacy," and that narratives about the German past helped to shape the "perception" of Germans in the present². Throughout the decades, at several key moments in West German and German history, international observers and German figures interacted over questions of

German repentance for the Holocaust and their embrace of democracy. As British historian Timothy Garton Ash has argued, West European states, and West Germany especially, committed to “parliamentary democracy, the rule of law,” and “market economy”³. The institution of these principles in West Germany was accompanied by frequent questions about the relationship between democracy and repentance for the Nazi past. In fact, international observers referred to these key moments as a “litmus test” for Germans to prove their repentance, democratic tradition, and historical consciousness. By addressing the international dimension of German memory, this study adds a fresh perspective to a rich historical literature.

2 HISTORIOGRAPHY

In recent years, scholars have greatly expanded our understanding of German memory. The 1990s experienced an explosion in memory studies and, as writer Nancy Wood argued in 1999, “[m]emory is decidedly in fashion”¹. Wood’s work, *Vectors of Memory* (1999) effectively demonstrates the ways “public memory” is shaped by the “will or desire of some social groups” to “select” and “organize” portrayals of the past as to influence others to embrace those portrayals as their own¹. The author explores memory in France and Germany and analyzes how “public debates” in both nations have become a defining “feature of political culture itself”¹. Wood investigates a series of “vectors,” or significant dynamics influencing public memory, such as historiography, survivor testimonials, trials, novels, films, and the media. Wood’s interest then lies in reflecting on the influence these “vectors” had on public debate.

Other scholars have documented significant aspects of German memory. For instance, German historian Ulrich Herbert’s “Academic and Public Discourses on the Holocaust” (1999) explores one major event that challenged German memory: the Goldhagen debates. Sparked by Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996), the book generated controversy and public debate in Germany. Herbert focuses on this controversy and analyzes responses to the book from German media and scholars. The author argues that the “course, form, and results” of the debates were influenced both by “decades-long” German public and scholarly engagement with the Holocaust and a “trap” set by American journalists⁴. Herbert argues this “trap” was set by American journalists, who stated that German reaction to Goldhagen’s book would be the “decisive test” for how Germany has dealt with the Holocaust⁴. German academics and journalists knew their reaction to Goldhagen was being gauged in a broader context than simply a reaction to a book.

Alfred Low’s, *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in German Historiography* (1994), impressively analyzes Ger-

man studies of the Holocaust with an “emphasis” on the works of “major” German historians⁵. Low then outlines the works and positions of German scholars, exploring how each engaged with the research of the Holocaust. With this context, Low opines that the “growth” of German democracy, “greater distance” from Nazi atrocities, and the growth of neo-conservative and nationalist groups precipitated greater discourse on the Holocaust into the 1980s and 1990s. Each factor in turn enabled questions about evolving reunified German identity to develop with reference to the Nazi past. Building on this literature, Caroline Sharples’ *Postwar Germany and the Holocaust* (2016) evaluates several factors in German memory, including trials, memorials, film, and prominent narratives, all of which shaped collective German memory. Sharples argues that the development of German memory of the Holocaust is fraught with “generational conflict,” “competing memories,” “silences,” and even “mythologies”⁶. All these works taken together contribute to understanding the development of German memory of the Holocaust. None of them, however, pay sufficient attention to one of the major dynamics that influenced German memory of the Holocaust: expectations from the international community.

This article will evaluate two key episodes in the development of German memory of the Holocaust from major periods of united German history and indicate how both were influenced by international actors. It first explores issues related to German remembrance and reunification after the fall of the Berlin wall, then dives into the disruptions surrounding the Goldhagen debates in the 1990s. In Germany, international observers played a key role in shaping German reckoning with Nazi atrocities.

3 A NEW GERMANY GRAPPLES WITH DEMOCRACY AND REPENTANCE

The reunification of Germany, which took place over several years after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, was a pivotal moment in German and European history. The decision to unify was not an easy one for Germans, who had for decades grown accustomed to the East/West division; nor was unification a popular idea on the international stage, as the four former allies – the US, France, the UK, and the USSR – all had to come to an agreement on how unification was carried out, if done at all. Nonetheless, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl proceeded with German reunification negotiations at a brisk pace. Throughout, Kohl and Germany were tested as the long shadow of Hitler remained in the minds of many. Kohl needed to demonstrate his commitment to democratic traditions and, most importantly, was expected to recognize the Nazi past in order to prevent a Nazi future.

The “German question” of whether or not to unify East and West Germany was one of the foremost problems of the Cold War period. The Cold War nearly turned hot several times over the fate of Germany, as evidenced by the Berlin Airlift of 1948 – 1949 and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. As Mark Gilbert has argued, had there not been the presence of thermonuclear weapons, “there likely would have been a war over Berlin”⁷. Further, the original purpose of NATO, according to the organization’s first Secretary General Lionel Ismay, was to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”⁸. The decision of West Germany to unite with the East after the fall of the wall was not received neutrally by the nations who, for decades, worried over the consequences of a potential reunification. It was far from a minor domestic affair between two sister nations. Reunification instead involved all the major international players, many of whom still painfully recalled the prior aggression of Germany. Therefore, the process to merge two states into one was undertaken both with constant international involvement and acute historical awareness.

French president François Mitterrand worried that a unified Germany would no longer have any need for a unified Western Europe and would subsequently withdraw its support for European integration. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, meanwhile, was firmly opposed to reunification as she feared that a strengthened Germany would disrupt the power balance within NATO; thereby weakening the United Kingdom⁹. Despite these concerns, Germany was able to proceed with unification in large part due to the support received from American president George H. W. Bush. According to American historian William Hitchcock, West German chancellor Helmut Kohl and Bush “seized upon the historic opportunity offered by the collapse of the wall to press for a swift unification of the two Germanys”⁹.

In order to reunite and regain full sovereignty, Germany needed the assent of the four former allies. To assuage international fears and incentivize support, Kohl needed to face each concern directly. Kohl assured Mitterrand that in unifying, Germany would not seek to separate itself from the process of European integration⁹. Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR, who at first demanded Germany’s withdrawal from NATO, settled on accepting an “economic credit of 5 billion deutsche marks” and general realignment of NATO in Europe to “reflect the new relationships with the USSR”⁹. Some of the most substantial concerns were associated with memory of the Second World War and are best exemplified by the fears of Thatcher. She was concerned that “certain ‘German characteristics’ might soon reappear: ‘angst, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, and sentimentality ...’”⁹ To address these particular concerns, which were present in the

minds of many, Kohl found that once again, he needed to demonstrate German political and cultural character which was honed over the decades following 1945.

Throughout the negotiations, Kohl maintained a stalwart belief that unification should only occur so long as West Germany’s democratic institutions and free market were protected. Bush assured Kohl he had American support, as he “trusted the West Germans to handle the issue of unification while not endangering the Western alliance or harming the institutions of the European community”⁹. This indicates one of the fundamental characteristics of German reunification: namely that it could only occur if the new state maintained the democratic traditions it inherited, as shaped by the Western Allies, decades before.

These democratic traditions extended into the academic world and even to genuine recognition of their Nazi past. A draft treaty of unification, released to the public in August of 1990, referenced modern Germany’s responsibility to the Holocaust, saying “a unified German state would be conscious of the continuity of German history and the resulting special responsibility for human rights and peace”¹⁰. American theologian Donald Shriver Jr. argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that as the Germans united, they also “embrace democracy and repentance [for the Nazi past]”¹¹. To American journalist David Kantor of the *Jewish Advocate*, the somewhat vague statement in the draft treaty did not go far enough in acknowledging the genocide of the Jews. He argued the draft treaty not only failed to refer to the Nazi past, but such an omission was a cause for “sorrow and concern”¹⁰. There are two key ideas from these articles. First, upon unification, Germans were expected to embrace democracy and repentance for the Nazi past. Second, the international community watched and reinforced the demand for German recognition of the Holocaust throughout unification.

German repentance and democratic traditions were put to the test shortly after reunification. In 1995, worldwide celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of Victory in Europe Day provided the opportunity for Germans to publicly acknowledge their past. The flag of unified Germany flew in Paris alongside the flags of Russia, France, the UK, and the US, symbolically joining “the colors of the Allied powers” in a military parade¹². On the same day in Berlin, a group of world leaders including American Vice President Al Gore, Mitterrand, German president Roman Herzog, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, and British Prime Minister John Major gathered at the Schauspielhaus theater to celebrate and preach unity. Mitterrand declared “[t]he enemy of yesterday is the friend of today,” and the victory of V-E day “was a victory of Europe over itself”¹². Throughout the event, German recognition and repentance was clear. Herzog claimed “Germans today know very well – probably more clearly than 50 years ago

– that it was their government and many of their fathers who were responsible for the Holocaust and who brought ruin upon the nations of Europe”¹². Respectfully, the other world leaders recognized the accomplishments of the new republic. Gore recalled Dwight Eisenhower’s old declaration, “the successes of the war effort wouldn’t be known until the 50th anniversary of V-E Day. If Germany is a stable democracy, then we will have succeeded”¹². Gore confidently proclaimed, “I wish to report to Gen. Eisenhower: Mission fulfilled”¹². Leaders from formerly antagonistic nations stood together and recognized the growth Germany achieved, all while Germany demonstrated both its democracy and repentance for the past.

Despite such proclamations, reunification posed a serious challenge for Germany memory of the Holocaust. West Germans politically overseeing the process had to grapple with integrating the disparate experiences and memories of East Germans, who had lived under Stasi domination for decades. Reunification forced Germans to “integrate these disparate postwar experiences into a national historical memory and devise ways to recall the victims of the so-called ‘double past’ – that of the Third Reich and the GDR”⁶. As the Berlin Wall fell, many in the intellectual left were opposed to unification. They feared that with the integration of 17 million formerly undemocratic East Germans, Germany might again “suffer from a democratic deficit and see renewed nationalism”². Jürgen Habermas expressed alarm over the process, as he feared pursuing reunification signaled a return to conceptualizing the German people along nationalistic, rather than democratic lines. He felt Germans needed to not only “display but progressively internalize their commitment to constitutional patriotism,” and “Germany was once again short-circuiting the lessons of historical memory” [emphasis added]¹.

There were concerns among international academics as well. As Senior Associate for the US-based Endowment for International Peace Daniel Hamilton outlined, East Germans might have a “considerable impact” on their West German relatives¹³. His concern came from the fact that Communist-led East Germans had been unable to experience the “difficult process of digesting the Nazi past” due to Communist propaganda¹³. Unification, to observers domestically and internationally, may have posed a serious problem by enflaming right-wing nationalism. Despite these valid concerns, as historian Jan-Werner Müller argued, “there was no overall shift to the right” in the post-reunification years². Their concerns proved legitimate but not until long after reunification. Müller attributed this continuity of liberal democracy to Helmut Kohl due to his genuine commitment to European unity and to the vigilance of German public intellectuals. West German intellectuals played a key role in maintaining liberal democracy; however, a thriving “liberal and democratic” political culture most

helped to maintain the vitality of German democracy post-unification².

The completion of the final treaties of reunification signaled the genesis of a new nation. After almost five decades, East and West became one. Though young, the nation was founded on principles present in West Germany for decades. West German intellectuals, vigilant of West Germany’s place in the international order, contributed a great deal to the foundation upon which reunified Germany built itself. Remembering the Holocaust, embracing the past, and committing to principles of democratic traditions were all hotly contested throughout the previous decades. Reunification did not end these debates and in some ways amplified them. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) was a central part of contemporary German identity. It was inherited from the decades of West German engagement with the Holocaust but also inherited from the Western principles West Germans slowly embraced. The Germany that emerged in 1991 featured the legacy of West German intellectual engagement and integration into the Western world.

4 A CHALLENGE TO ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST: THE GOLDHAGEN DEBATES

The events that took place in 1996, only a few years after Germany’s reunification, set a new intellectual course for German memory of the Holocaust. In March, a little-known American political scientist named Daniel Goldhagen published *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Goldhagen, a professor at Harvard and son of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, recalibrated German academic discussion of the Holocaust. Where previously the *Historikerstreit* had brought academic attention to the Holocaust in West Germany and reasserted that the Holocaust should indeed be studied, Goldhagen questioned how the Holocaust should be studied. Goldhagen served for a short time as a conduit for international public opinion about the Holocaust and was effectively able to insert himself into German academic discussion on the issue. Within several months of the publication of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Goldhagen conducted a speaking tour throughout Germany, involved himself in several serious debates about the nature of the Holocaust, and had “monopolized public discussion”⁴. His study became so well known that, according to historian Ulrich Herbert, “the Holocaust and Goldhagen became virtually synonymous”⁴. Despite his popularity in the media and among the public, academic historians in Germany and around the world criticized Goldhagen’s work⁴.

Goldhagen argued that most ordinary Germans were willing, even enthusiastic contributors to the Holocaust as a consequence of a centuries-old, destructive form of

anti-Semitism innate to German culture. In its sweeping narrative and grand conclusion, many historians found far too much generalization, and far too little evidence. The differences between the academic fields of political science and history were relevant here. American political scientist Jack Levy identified these differences. Levy argued historians “describe, explain, and interpret” events. Conversely, political scientists “generalize” about connections between different variables and seek to “construct lawlike statements about social behavior.”¹⁴ As a political scientist, Goldhagen focused on one aspect of continuity in German society; the “antisemitism moved many thousands of ‘ordinary’ Germans – and would have moved millions more... to slaughter Jews”¹⁵. Goldhagen alleged the pervasiveness of one cultural attribute, antisemitism, determined the actions of every perpetrator of the Holocaust. Further, Goldhagen’s generalizations extended to each facet of his evaluation. He argued “every significant institution in Germany supported a malevolent image of Jews, and virtually every one of them actively contributed to the eliminationist program”¹⁵. Similarly, “Germany during the Nazi period was inhabited by people animated by beliefs about Jews that made them willing to become consenting mass executioners”¹⁵. Goldhagen emphasized centuries-long continuity over circumstances and contingencies, which are factors prioritized by historians.

Speaking on his motivation for writing the book, Goldhagen referenced a lecture about the Holocaust, where he remembered: “everyone was talking about why the order was given, but not about why it was carried out”¹⁶. He sought to outline what exactly about German culture and society could lead to the genocide of six million Jews. Goldhagen stated that postwar Germany was a “very changed country... [i]t’s very hard for an individual to maintain views the whole world is saying are wrong”¹⁶. Goldhagen was not attempting to address latent anti-Semitism in contemporary Germany, as he believed that Germany changed dramatically after the war. Instead, he sought a reformation for how Germans discussed, researched, and understood the perpetrators of the Holocaust. He argued his account raised “difficult issues that Germans need to address”¹⁶. His main thesis, “antisemitism moved many thousands of ‘ordinary’ Germans – and would have moved millions more... to slaughter Jews”¹⁵, attempted to demonstrate the apparent bloodlust of almost the entirety of German society.

Goldhagen removed the Holocaust from its context, even in how he examined the psychology of the perpetrators. As American historian Omer Bartov argued, Goldhagen’s empathy was shown exclusively to the victims rather than the perpetrators and he instead focused on “portraying them as sadistic murderers”¹⁷. Goldhagen was not interested in exploring the multi-

faceted motivation, or the contingencies surrounding the perpetration of the Holocaust, but rather explaining the Holocaust by focusing primarily on one major factor: centuries-old anti-Semitism rooted in most of the German public. The issue came from the simplicity of the argument. Most German historians believed anti-Semitism was one of the many factors that spurred on the Holocaust. Could a genocide really be entirely explained primarily by centuries-old anti-Semitism among the German public? As Herbert argued, Goldhagen divorced the Holocaust “from the German war effort and brutal extermination policy,” which included Jews, but also many other minorities⁴. Anti-Semitism did not help to explain the massacre of Russian prisoners of war, Poles, the Roma/Sinti, or those deemed as mentally or physically disabled. Goldhagen’s book was largely rejected in academia, where it was described as “evidentially inadequate and methodologically simplistic”⁴.

One of Goldhagen’s prime adversaries, historian Hans Mommsen, debated him largely on historical grounds. Mommsen was involved in the *Historikerstreit* and the debates between Functionalists and Intentionalists from the 1960s, and he was familiar with public debate over German memory and identity. He had long argued that Hitler was a “weak dictator,” which meant that much of the “Final Solution” was carried out by the compliance, apathy, and endorsement of broad segments of society¹⁸. German responsibility included many Nazis and Holocaust perpetrators but did not encompass the entire German society, as Goldhagen argued¹⁹. Mommsen felt Goldhagen rejected the cautiously constructed argument made by many German historians which emphasized “more complex understandings of what made the Third Reich tick”¹⁹.

In September of 1996, Goldhagen actively debated several German historians, including Mommsen, on a stage in Berlin. Several of the historians accused Goldhagen of “simplifications and abbreviations”²⁰. Mommsen argued “[t]he specific killing of the Jews was that it was not spontaneous, emotional killing... to reduce it to a bloodlust among ordinary Germans is inadmissible”²⁰. Goldhagen saw his work as accomplishing more than pressing the specific conclusion he endorsed. Alan Cowell, journalist for the *New York Times*, indicated that Goldhagen was “credited with... transferring the Holocaust debate from the groves of academe to a broader public.” While Cowell neglects the influence of the *Historikerstreit*, the point confirms what Goldhagen believed he was accomplishing. The value of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* was not derived from its academic merit, but instead came from bringing the debate about the Holocaust into the limelight of public thought in Germany and internationally.

The relationship between German identity and history, even after reunification, was not relegated to the

boundaries of the Federal Republic alone. Throughout the Goldhagen debates, public opinion was heavily influenced by the perspectives of the international community, particularly in the United States. The New York Times published five pieces on the topic in the span of a few days, and throughout them is a clear tone, insisting that “the German reaction to the book would be the decisive test for its dealing with the Holocaust”⁴. American journalist Richard Bernstein argued that *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* “is one of those rare new works that merit the appellation landmark”²¹. Michael Ackerman argued that “[t]he issues raised by [Goldhagen] must be explored by students of history, regardless of how uncomfortable this proves for Germans”²². The German press picked up on this and echoed many similar concerns, with German historian Volker Ullrich in *Die Zeit* saying “[h]ow his provocative and disturbing piece is received – by that measure, much will be gauged about the historical consciousness of this republic”⁴.

The reception of Goldhagen in Germany was thus not only explicitly linked to the decades of historical debate over identity but was further influenced by the expectations of the international community.^[58] These international expectations established what Herbert called an “intellectual trap” from which Germans could not easily escape. To the international community, especially American news media, Germans failing to praise Goldhagen sufficiently might be connected to not only denying the conclusions of Goldhagen’s book, but denying the impact of the Holocaust itself. Germans themselves expressed awareness of this “trap,” and some went so far as to argue that the theory of collective guilt was reimplemented into Germany with Goldhagen as the vessel and the international public as the force behind it. This trap could be read in *Der Spiegel*, noting that “Goldhagen has revived” the Allies’ use of collective guilt theories to persecute post-war Germans.

Some German figures, however, recognized the value of bringing an international public into the debate about the Holocaust. In March 1997, the German magazine *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (Pieces on German and International politics) awarded Goldhagen its Democracy Prize¹⁹. Jürgen Habermas waded once again into public debates. Unlike many other senior scholars, however, he did so in defense of Goldhagen. Speaking at the award ceremony where Goldhagen was given the Democracy Prize, Habermas argued that through the “urgency, the forcefulness, and the moral strength of his presentation, Goldhagen had provided a powerful stimulus to the public conscience of the Federal Republic”²³. Habermas managed to both recognize and praise the social accomplishments of the study without praising the book’s academic merits. In doing so, Habermas left room for figures like Mommsen to uphold their scholarly disagreements with it.

The success of Goldhagen in effecting change in Ger-

many, while largely attributable to the reception of the public at large, was most prominently furthered by his popularity among German university students. As Herbert indicated, “*Hitler’s Willing Executioners* fulfills an understandable desire on the part of younger Germans: by agreeing with his book, they can stand on the side of the accusers rather than that of the accused”⁴. Thus, part of the positive reception Goldhagen experienced came from the younger generation wanting to be perceived as aware of their nation’s past but ready to face the future as a changed society. They wanted to “show the world” that they had learned from the decades of debate, and from Goldhagen, and that they were, in fact, a new people.

On a deeper level, however, reception among younger generations, especially among college students, demonstrated the perceived inadequacies of German academia in handling the Holocaust. While the *Historikerstreit* managed to bring the Holocaust to the fore of German discussion, and reshape the way many Germans conceptualized their past, it did not change the way German academia researched or taught issues related to the Holocaust. Effecting this change was one of the major triumphs of the Goldhagen debates. Previously the Holocaust was lectured on in a “theoretical and detached” manner, concerned with issues such as “totalitarianism, bureaucratic rule, and a fragmented decision making process,” as seen in the functionalism/intentionalism debates of the 1950s – 70s¹⁷. German college students then longed for an open, provocative discussion of the Holocaust, which they largely found in Goldhagen. Despite his scholarly missteps, Goldhagen reintroduced more personal and honest topics to the discussion of the Holocaust, such as the largely ignored “question of guilt and responsibility” as well as the horrors of genocide; this differed greatly from the distanced, bloodless interpretations that were so commonplace among German academics¹⁷.

To Ulrich Herbert, the reason for the public/academic division, came down to the different spheres in which the work appeared. Historians regarded the book as a scholarly work and evaluated it as a study, whereas the public interpreted the piece as a crucial moment in the decades-long debate about German memory. The effusive public praise Goldhagen received, then, must be connected to this context. The German public demonstrated the importance of engaging with the Nazi past in their acceptance of Goldhagen. Goldhagen’s damning generalizations and models, despite their rejection in German academia, were incredibly effective. Conclusions like his, that all ordinary Germans were responsible or willing contributors to the Holocaust, demanded change from the German academia, which was regularly stuck to a specific model of engaging with the Holocaust through a theoretical, distanced lens. Goldhagen brought the perpetrators to the forefront of research

on the Holocaust. As Herbert argued, he demonstrated “the necessity of returning to the face-to-face killing” and helped to move research on the Holocaust away from its detached approach¹⁷.

According to Eley, the “Goldhagen effect” did not merely come down to the scholarly conclusions of the book. Instead, the success of Goldhagen was in his contributions to “a long-running public struggle to ground the ethics of democratic citizenship” in Germany, where the Nazi past seemed to prevent the use of the national past as a “source of inspiration”¹⁹. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* then ought not to be taken merely at face value, as its importance lay in its effecting change in German society. As Bartov argued, the implication and impact of the Goldhagen debate on academia in Germany were tremendous. The debate forced German academics to recognize “the centrality of” the Holocaust and to “change the methodology of research on” it¹⁷. The reception of Goldhagen among the German public managed to demonstrate that “Nazism ... remained a crucial issue in German political, intellectual, and scholarly discourse”¹⁷.

Further, Bartov identified a compelling distinction between the scholarly reception of Goldhagen by German and American academics. While German historians had largely criticized Goldhagen throughout his speaking tour, they slowly began to recognize the social value of reconsidering how the Holocaust was researched; American historians largely did not. In America, Goldhagen’s “long-term impact on the scholarship of the period” was not “particularly significant”¹⁷. Similarly, the reception of Goldhagen was largely positive in American media, but in Germany it was critiqued by academics. Jewish American author Burton Hersh argued in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* that Goldhagen used an “ant’s-eye view,” which reflected “a very limited sense of the character of the complex, multilayered culture” of Germany since 1914²⁴. Furthermore, the book generated “only limited intellectual interest” in France and Israel, demonstrating some degree of solidarity among historians across national divides¹⁷. Thus, Goldhagen’s significance was only clear among Germans, and even there it was initially deeply challenged.

The key legacy of Goldhagen and the Goldhagen debates will not be the use of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in German classrooms. According to Herbert, by 1999, three years after the book’s publication, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* did not “appear in the syllabi of university courses on the Holocaust” in Germany⁴. Instead, Goldhagen’s influence has resulted in a recalibration of the collective German perspective on the Holocaust. Where the *Historikerstreit* enforced the idea that the Holocaust should be discussed, the Goldhagen debates forced German historians to reconsider how the Holocaust is researched. In the following decade,

public debate shifted again through another vector: the construction of a memorial.

5 CONCLUSION

These case studies demonstrate that the international community played a key role in shaping the memory of the Holocaust. The international community was yet another factor that influenced the development of German memory. German scholars, leaders, and journalists conversed with international figures, changing the way Germans memorialized, researched, and discussed the Holocaust; these discussions, in turn, impacted questions about what it means to be German, post-Auschwitz.

Today, Germans continue to engage with memory of the Holocaust. In recent years, the rise of the German far-right political party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland/AfD*) has again forced Germans to grapple with memory of the Holocaust. As contemporary commentators on German reunification feared, many *AfD* voters and party leaders come from East Germany. Lower relative prosperity provoked a sense of being “second-class citizens” in many East Germans²⁵. On a more subconscious level, however, eastern German support for the *AfD* is likely also rooted in the difference in Holocaust education during the Cold War. For decades, West Germans reinvestigated what it meant to have a national identity in the shadow of Nazism. East Germans, however, did not experience such development.

There is, in fact, still a sense among many Germans and international observers that Germany is not doing enough to address recent shifts to the right. Peter Eisenman, architect of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, argued in 2016 that because of the “growing hatred and anti-Semitism across Europe” his memorial project “wouldn’t be built today”²⁶. German-Jewish writer Max Czollek, in his 2020 book *De-integrate Yourself*, argues that Jewish Germans symbolize the “German narrative of not being Nazi anymore”²⁷. He goes on to say, that despite having many Jewish Germans, Germany is failing to reckon with the recent “rise of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism,” symbolized by the popularity of the *AfD*²⁷.

Nonetheless, German politicians frequently reference the German past to international audiences. On May 8, 2020, the 75th anniversary of V-E day, many public figures connected Germany’s Nazi past with responsibility to the present. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas proclaimed in a memo to all German diplomatic missions that Germany’s commitment to “human rights,” and “international cooperation,” stem from the knowledge of “the unparalleled crimes... that found their most monstrous expression in the Holocaust”²⁸. He went on to say that German history reveals the threat

of “revisionism that replaces rational thinking with national myths”, addressing revisionism and the recent rise of nationalism in Germany²⁸. Maas argued there is no question that “Germany alone unleashed the Second World War,” and that people who seek to revise this sentiment “do injustice to the victims, exploit history for their own ends and divide Europe”²⁸. Similarly, in celebration of V-E day, the German Delegation to NATO proclaimed in a tweet that “Germany accepts full responsibility for the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany.” Indeed, as Nancy Wood suggests, it may be better to conceptualize grappling with the past, not as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which implies that the past can be definitively overcome, but instead as *Aufarbeitung* (to grapple with something), which instead indicates a never-ending engagement with the past¹.

I have argued that the international community, explicitly, through occupation policies in the early post-war years and, subtly, later through diplomacy and proclaimed expectations, shaped German memory of the Holocaust. Throughout the decades, as Germans found new ways to engage with memory of the Holocaust, they once again forged a new national identity in the wake of Nazism. Just as the Western Allies originally hoped, the business of recreating a nation was not done in the old political and ideological framework of radical nationalism. Instead, it was done within the framework of the expected “Western” ideals, with a commitment to pluralism, democracy, and academic freedom. Thus, German memory of the Holocaust ought to be understood not as the product of isolated scholar opinion, but as the culmination of factors, internal and external, that shaped the identity of a nation. This memory-work lived and breathed in public debates over the decades, and shaped a national identity fundamentally committed to questioning the legacy of the past.

6 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The opportunities for historical research in German memory are vast, despite the expansive literature that already exists on German history and the Holocaust. Historians are, in recent years, attributing greater and greater influence on issues that span borders and cross cultures under the umbrella term of Globalization. Perhaps this article demonstrates an early, and unconscious, reflection of the significance of non-national narratives in the field of history²⁹. Such work analyzing the non-German sources of German engagement with memory of the Holocaust has great potential, whether emphasizing new populations or new theoretical models of approach. In the field of history, post-structural theorists emphasize the sources of power in language. A post-structuralist approach could be applied to the language used both by Germans and international commentators, analyzing the origins of power in Holocaust

memory discourse. Similarly relevant is the intricate relationship between Israel and West Germany. How might Israelis have contributed to memory construction? Likewise, how might memory construction in East Germany be influenced by Soviet regulations and more indirect expectations? The relationship between international figures and domestic memory construction offers many potential directions of study.

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