Part III

Forgetting the Past: Redoing History
From Denazification to the "Historiker-Debatte": Reckoning with the Past in the Federal Republic of Germany

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In the immediate wake of the destruction of the fascist regime in 1945 a relatively broad consensus existed among all Germans, from the Christian Democrats to the Communists, with regard at least to the basic issues involved in fascism and its consequences. This antifascist consensus was evident in the early party platforms, in the state constitutions established in the years 1946–47, and in the denazification and punishment of war criminals undertaken together with the Allied Forces. In these early postwar years, the demands for a thorough process of democratization of government and all aspects of public life, for effective guarantees of broad political and social civil rights—including the right of civil disobedience in the face of unconstitutional use of government powers—and for socialist measures allowing democratic control of economic forces, had considerable political significance. It can be readily seen that these demands were based on definite views of the causes and beneficiaries of fascism. These demands were even incorporated into the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) of 1949, although by then in a weakened form, in Article 139 (Ban on Fascism), Article 26 (Peace Imperative), and Article 15 (Sanctioning Socialization), among others.

The antifascist consensus was gradually destroyed, however, as

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the United States began to (1) move toward a policy of confrontation with the Soviet Union, (2) view the class of former leaders under the fascist regime as allies, and (3) reestablish those leaders in positions of power in government, the economy, and society on a large scale. At the same time, all those who were suspected of sympathy for communism were pushed into sideline positions. Already by 1950 members of the German Communist party (KPD), the Association of Persons Persecuted during the Nazi Regime (VVN), and many other organizations were barred from the civil service through a resolution by the German federal government. These were exactly the same groups of people who had been sorted out and persecuted under the fascist system and who had made the greatest sacrifices during the fight against fascism.

On the other hand, the process of denazification was completely halted. Approximately 150,000 civil servants and employees who at first had been fired from their positions because of their activities during the fascist regime were rehabilitated in their jobs through the so-called 131 Law of 1951, associations for persons expelled or evacuated from former German territories were organized largely under the leadership of former functionaries of the Nazi party; and neofascist organizations and publications were again tolerated. Since the policies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the “Policy of Strength,” which according to Konrad Adenauer were aimed at the liberation of “all of the enslaved East European countries,” considered the enemy, in terms of foreign policy, to be the same as in the war against the Soviet Union up to 1945, there was a strongly felt need to rehabilitate that war and those who had been its leaders—namely, the military and the Waffen-SS (armed special forces), even though the Waffen-SS had been condemned by the Military Tribunal in Nuremberg as a criminal organization.  

Thus the armed forces of the Federal Republic were built up under the leadership of Hitler’s former generals. The Waffen-SS and the Gestapo were publicly rehabilitated through inclusion in the 131 Law. The SS veterans associations were thus not only accepted, but often even welcomed and lauded by representatives of the local authorities, the armed forces, and the Christian Democratic party when they held their meetings. Franz-Joseph Strauss praised the Battle of Stalingrad as a “meaningful sacrifice” and a “legitimate calculation” and emphatically rejected the thesis that Germany must shoulder the major portion of blame for World War II.  

As early as the 1960s Strauss interspersed his remarks on this topic with the claim that in view of the reparations made by the Federal Republic, it had earned the right to hear nothing more about Auschwitz.

In view of the international constellation of powers, the ruling right could go no further. Those who adamantly claimed—quite correctly
from their own point of view—that May 8, 1945, represented defeat and not liberation did not have an easy time of restoring their position of power at the outset, in spite of the prevailing hysteria of the cold war. The mistrust of the neighboring countries, even those in Western Europe that had suffered fascist occupation, was much too great. In order to achieve state sovereignty, freedom of economic development, and a new military power, certain concessions had to be made. The ruling classes had already experienced this after the defeat of 1918 and had successfully mastered the situation. Now, after World War II, it was held that a disassociation from fascism and its crimes as well as an acknowledgment of a certain degree of blame (which was expressed, for example, in the financial reparations made to the state of Israel) were necessary prerequisites for a new rise to political power. These steps were the price of admission to the circle of "free nations" and the "Western cultural community."

These were things the "recalcitrants" on the extreme right did not comprehend. The ruling right was forced by its own sense of political realism to keep a certain distance between itself and right extremists. At the same time, they saw to it that neofascism was able to formulate new, far-reaching position statements and thus generate and preserve a certain consciousness, which was on the whole beneficial to the consolidation of right-wing ideology. Since the beginning of the 1950s, neofascists have spread the idea that all accusations against the Third Reich that claim that it planned and conducted a war of aggression and perpetrated war crimes and mass murder are unfounded and based on lies that have been invented only in order to keep Germans in a state of intellectual and political subservience. Whoever accepts such tales has become a stooge of the enemy and a betrayer of his own nation's interests. Measured against this position, the ruling right could in fact portray itself as being "moderate" and part of the political "middle," while in cases such as the Deutschland-Stiftung (German Foundation), the associations for displaced persons, and the right wing of the Christian Union parties, the borderline is indeed quite thin.

Thus the conception of history that came to dominate political public opinion shows definite traces of revisionism. The methods used by this rightist form of revisionism have always been (and are still today) characterized by a combination of three factors. First, the crimes of fascism are made to appear innocuous and edged into the range of normality. Second, some of these crimes are portrayed as legitimate because they were committed for a good cause in a harsh but unavoidable set of circumstances. Finally, the causal structure of crimes that cannot be otherwise excused is shrouded to such an extent that, in the end, they can best be attributed to socialism and communism.

The ideas necessary for this kind of treatment of fascist crimes had to
a large extent already been developed during the fascist era itself. Ways of rendering acts harmless or innocuous had already been incorporated into the official vocabulary—with such terms as Sonderbehandlung (special treatment) and Endlösung (final solution). Ideological and rhetorical legitimation was characteristic of the overall policies of fascism. For instance, the machinery of terrorism was established in 1933 “to save the people and the state,” war was conducted “to save Germany” and, in 1943, to “save Europe” from Bolshevism. It goes without saying that others were responsible for terror, war, and mass murders. The Reichstag building was supposedly set ablaze by the Communists, and the Jewish people pushed Germany into war after actually declaring war on it in 1939. On January 30, 1939, Hitler made the following statement to this effect before the Reichstag: “Today I have another prophecy to make. If the international Jewish financiers in and beyond Europe should again succeed in plunging the nations into a world war, the result will not be the bolshevism of Europe and thereby a victory for Judaism, but rather the annihilation of the Jewish race throughout Europe.” The attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 was naturally declared a war of prevention which only in the last minute prevented the Soviet aggression that had been imminent, just as the attack on Poland in 1939 had been declared a war of self-defense, during which, to quote Hitler’s words before the Reichstag, Germany only “shot back.”

This method of argumentation was taken up and developed further in 1945–46 by the politicians, military leaders, and economic leaders who were accused of war crimes. Since the beginning of the 1950s the country has been inundated by a flood of memoirs, neofascist bro-
chures, pamphlets, and newspapers using such arguments. This defense has also been taken up, to some extent, by the right wing of such groups as the Christian Union parties, the associations of displaced persons, the Springer publishing conglomerate, the German armed forces, the German Foundation, and so forth.

This position is in marked contrast to the official image the Federal Republic has defined for itself. In order to be accepted into the Western European community, where the memory of fascist crimes was deeply ingrained, and to be able to acquire national sovereignty and new military power, it was essential to portray the Federal Republic as a country that had completely turned away from fascism: the Federal Republic stood in the tradition of resistance (civil and military) and opened itself unreservedly to “Western values” in its Basic Law (Grundgesetz).

Beyond this, the lessons to be learned from fascism encompassed nothing more than political institutions and ideology—the parliamen-
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tary and democratic form of government, the constitutional state, the
disavowal of a racial ideology, and, above all, the reconciliation with the
Jews and their state, Israel. The political segregation of Communists
and Socialists corresponded to the methodological exclusion of social
and economic causes from the analysis of fascism. The restoration of the
former leading elite class was also methodologically consistent with
foregoing the inquiry into the role of capital, the upper levels of civil
service, and the military establishment in fascist systems. The main
thrust of this “diminished” antifascist consensus was, of course, no
longer still aimed at fascism, but was governed instead by the total-
itarianism thesis, that is, against communism and socialism. As Rainer
Barzel of the Christian Democratic party aptly put it in 1965 in a
speech before the Bundestag: “Hitler is dead, but not Ulbricht” (Wal-
ter Ulbricht was at that time chairman of the Staatsrat of the German
Democratic Republic).

The scholarly debate over fascism is naturally embedded in the
general political and intellectual climate of its time, but it is not simply
identical with the prevailing political course. It so happened, however,
that the spirit of the cold war quite thoroughly coincided with the
traditions and the view of life held by historians themselves. Ever since
the time of the first German empire, history as the leading social
science has played a decisive role in forming the views held by the
educated elite. Historians legitimized the efforts to sidetrack the work-
ing-class movement, the socially privileged status of the bourgeois and
titled classes, and the militarism and wars of conquest by the German
empire. After 1918—since the revolution was not strong enough to
democratize the higher schools of learning—historians made signifi-
cant contributions to the conservative, reactionary, and militaristic
climate of opinion that flourished and even became especially strong in
the universities, and that in turn enabled fascism to prevail. Thus,
under the fascist regime the historical sciences did not need to be
subjected to purging measures; they were already clean of democratic
and socialist ideas. In the following years historians for the most part
were faithful, even enthusiastic adherents of fascism. Many even be-
came members of the National Socialist German Workers Party
(NSDAP).

The basic theoretical ideas on which the German historians founded
their apologetic for a powerful nation-state were developed by Leopold
von Ranke, and since the end of the nineteenth century, by proponents
of what is often called “historicism.” Among the tenets of this theory is
that the state is the determinant subject of the historical process, and
its activities are therefore the focus of historical study. The essential
nature of the state is power and the expansion of power, expressed
above all in foreign policy and in war. Since striving for power is its intrinsic task, the state cannot be considered to be wronging anyone by following its existential purpose. The state is not only an instrument of power, however; it is at the same time the representative of morality, and thereby superior to individuals and their interests, which is to say it is an end in itself.

It is perfectly obvious that these ideas originate in an authoritarian state; that they are directed against the principles of enlightenment, sovereignty of the people, and democracy; and, furthermore, that they help to justify any form of a government's political power over its society and toward all others. Moreover, since another tenet is that all historical events and personalities are solitary and singular occurrences, adherents of this theory can claim that Hitler and fascism were such unique events in German history that one does not need to look for moments of continuity with preceding stages of history. Second, it could be deduced that with the defeat of the fascist regime and the death of Hitler the problem has been taken care of once and for all. Third, it follows that there is no coherent historical process, but rather a wealth of individual cases whose meaning is not discernible. As Karl Dietrich Erdmann, chairman of the Association of German Historians (1962–67) and chairman of the German Education Council (1966–70), wrote: “There is no scientific basis for statements which explain where history is coming from or where it is going.”

Naturally it was clear to these historians after 1945—just as it was in other branches of research—that one had to distance oneself from fascism in order to solidify one's own position and come out of isolation on the international level. Thus the portrayals of fascism within the history profession at that time coincided to a large extent with the official image of the Federal Republic itself. The issue of totalitarianism dominated historical research. Racism, anti-Semitism, and concentration camps were condemned, as was the war of aggression the German Reich began in 1939. The interests of society that gave rise to these policies and the forces that supported and carried them out remained outside the range of investigation. That the working classes were deprived of their rights and that millions of foreign workers were made into slaves to be exploited by the German industrial economy was not even mentioned. One spoke of Machtergreifung (seizure of power) and by use of this concept from the arsenal of fascist propaganda, the question of who had turned the power over to the NSDAP remained shrouded. In much the same way, one spoke of “Hitler's tyranny” as being the product of a single individual. Whenever the leading echelons of the corporate industry, the military, the higher civil service, and the church were mentioned, they were portrayed either as
being all equally subjugated by the regime or as supporters of the resistance and representatives of the "better part of Germany." In this way they also acquired the moral qualities that were requisite for taking on leadership roles in the new German state. Responsibility for the victory of fascism and the success of its policies was shifted instead as much as possible to the new (and old) public enemy, the communists. The allegations ranged from the Weimar Republic's being throttled jointly by the National Socialists and the communists to the fascist movement's having a socialist or even proletarian character, from the suppression of a workers' resistance movement to a joint plotting of World War II by both "totalitarian dictators" via the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

Undoubtedly, this version of history contained some elements of historical fact. It admitted, above all, to those facts that corresponded to the images held by the Western Allies—namely concentration camps, war of aggression against Poland, racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, and dictatorship—and therefore acted, so to speak, as the admission ticket to the Western community of nations. These elements of fascist domination were described, but not given serious analysis. In other words, the causal interrelationships were not exposed. Thus the overall image that resulted did not allow fascism to be portrayed in terms of the conditions of its success, the underlying interest groups, and the forces that sustained it. The Führer, Adolf Hitler, was presented as the only relevant subject—as the lone culprit.

The legend of German history as an otherwise unscathed tradition was not shaken until the beginning of the 1960s, when Fritz Fischer and his followers proved that the German Reich had carefully planned and intentionally precipitated World War I with the goal of subjugating half of Europe. In the following years they even demonstrated that it was at that time the same ruling echelons who ruined the Weimar democracy and joined ranks with the NSDAP in order to stage a new war. Thus at the same time that the ruling forces were officially distancing themselves from fascism and attempting to legitimize their image of having been part of the bourgeois resistance, especially in connection with the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, and the established academic circles were admitting and portraying selected aspects of Nazi crimes, the belittling portrayal of fascist crimes and the partial rehabilitation of fascism were already in full swing in wide sectors of day-to-day journalism and politics.

Nevertheless, the collapse of cold war politics led to significant changes in the political climate of the Federal Republic. The politics of detente and the social-liberal hopes for reform gave the left such a strong stimulus that it was not only able to hold back the spread of organized neofascism, but also to weaken the entire right altogether
and keep it out of power for twelve years. Certain democratic improvements in the structures of the colleges and universities, an increase of entry paths to schools of higher education to the benefit of students from the lower classes, and a general liberalization of public discussions of political and intellectual topics served then to fortify antifascist modes of thought, particularly among the younger generation.

The historical sciences, still locked into conservatism, lost a considerable amount of prestige to the "new" political science, which had advanced considerably in the United States since 1945 and was being portrayed as the "science of democracy," and to sociology, which viewed itself as the science of emancipation par excellence. Under these circumstances a social-liberal tendency was able to develop within the left wing of the historical sciences. As a result, some attention was given to social and structural dimensions of the historical process. This new political context enabled research to take a critical view of topics that had previously been treated apologetically or avoided entirely. In particular, this included the role of capital in the destruction of the Weimar Republic, the erection of a fascist dictatorship, and the role of the military establishment in conceiving and achieving fascist policies—including mass murder. The resistance efforts of the workers' movement—even the Communist component—were no longer barred from consideration.

In the 1970s, however, the right again moved into the offensive. With considerable financial and propagandistic support, a campaign was started that has become known as the Hitlerwelle (Wave of Interest in Hitler). The entire country was flooded with brochures, newspaper articles, magazine articles, films, and television documentaries whose common message boiled down to the idea that Hitler and his regime also had their positive side—in particular in terms of achieving full employment and generating enthusiasm for collective causes—which indeed deserved reconsideration when looking for solutions for contemporary problems.

Many of the central topics brought up then have since been consolidated into a new view of history by right-wing conservative historians. Joachim Fest developed the thesis that Hitler's error lay in his not mobilizing all his European forces in the war against the Soviet Union, instead of conducting war against the West too. Fest cast his vote for a new assessment of the war and for using anti-Bolshevism as the decisive criterion in judging Hitler's policies. Sebastian Haffner described Hitler as eine Leistungskanone größten Kalibers (powerful mastermind of the highest caliber), who was able to abolish unemployment through his Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracles). As far as the war was concerned, this should be considered a perfectly natural event
as long as there are so many sovereign nations and should in no case be considered a criminal act. War criminals ought to be treated as “phenomena which inevitably accompany those extraordinary circumstances, under which citizens and family men have accustomed themselves to killing.”

The positive reviews the Fest and Haffner books received from their colleagues and in various publications of right-wing conservative historians (such as Klaus Hildebrand and Andreas Hillgruber) reflected a trend toward the right within established historical scholarship that, in spite of sharp criticism from the left, was hardly noticed by liberal sectors of the general public. Ernst Nolte was even able to publish his thesis regarding the connection between political developments in Russia and Auschwitz in the face of the Bolshevik menace in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (July 24, 1980), without a stir of protest. Disappointment over the abandonment of reform policies by the Social Democratic government, the economic crisis resulting in mass unemployment and the destruction of hopes and dreams for many young people, and the obvious inability of the governing politicians to deal with this crisis led to the dissipation of the potential for further reforms and prepared the way for the new and once again attractive version of a right-wing ideology as well as the formation of a conservative government.

New Qualities in the Government of the Wende (Turnabout)

Thus in many diverse ways the path had already been paved when conservative historians appeared on the scene in the summer of 1986. Nonetheless, since their opponents, as described above, had been able to garner a considerable measure of influence since the end of the 1960s, one could count on a stronger resistance.

Since the beginning of the 1980s there have been ever louder proclamations regarding the need for a new feeling of nationalism, of self-confidence, in order to stimulate the higher levels of performance required to participate in international competitive markets and to exercise a leadership role within Europe—including a new level of military preparedness. National self-confidence and stamina are also needed to keep open the unresolved question of the reunification of Germany. Since 1982 this version of national identity has been an essential characteristic of the “intellectual and moral turning-point,” the slogan under which the Kohl government came into power.

From the beginning the complaint was that the complete development of the economic and military capacity of the Federal Republic is
heavily handicapped by the memory of fascism and its enormous crimes, which so deeply affected the peoples of this world and had such a great influence on the mentality of the citizens of the Federal Republic themselves. It was thus time for the Federal Republic to finally free itself from the “curse of the years 1933–1945,” in the words of historian Michael Stürmer, and “step out from the shadow of Hitler,” in those of Franz Joseph Strauss. These views were proclaimed by conservative historians and political scientists as well as the leading politicians of the right. 20

Michael Stürmer, historian at the University of Erlangen, advisor to the chancellor, and editorial contributor to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, has expressed the basic ideas of this new view of history in the following words: “If we do not succeed in agreeing on an elementary lesson plan for our culture, in setting forth our work with continuity and consensus throughout the land, and in rediscovering the moderate middle-path of patriotism, then it could just be that the best years of the Federal Republic of Germany have already gone by.” The political effect of statements such as these is more important than the historical truth: “The future belongs to whoever supplies memory, shapes ideas, and interprets the past.”21 The Federal Republic needs “that high-minded insight, which next to religion, has only been achieved through national identity and patriotism.”22 To substitute history for religion as the means of achieving national political consensus—this is the platform on which the ideological offensive of the ruling forces was based. The historian takes on a primarily political, even quasi-military task: to occupy the battlefield and fill it with meaning—politically generated meaning.

A distinctively new step in the direction of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) was taken during a widely publicized conference held in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler’s appointment as imperial chancellor in the Reichstag building in West Berlin. One of the main addresses, which received considerable coverage in the German newspapers read by the upper classes, was given by Hermann Lübbe, now a professor of philosophy in Zurich, who had previously resigned his post as minister for cultural affairs in the state of North Rhein-Westphalia after a law allowing greater democracy in the affairs of the state’s colleges and universities had been passed. Here he stated reasons for “communicative silence about the Nazi past as a citizen’s duty.” Keeping silent about fascism is a prerequisite for political consolidation and necessary for internal reconciliation within the Federal Republic; “a certain degree of stillness was the social-psychological and politically necessary means of
transforming our post-war population into citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany.”

Lübbe also made it clear that a certain ideological opponent was threatening the domestic peace, was preventing the lifting of the curse of the years 1933–45, which would enable Germany to achieve a more active political basis, and was getting in the way of a new national ascendancy. The opponent is antifascism, whose precise task it is to keep awake the awareness of fascism and its crimes. At the same time, Lübbe set himself the task of really revising the current view of history and, in particular, of repainting the picture of fascism, which is still bound up with images of blood and terror, of war and mass murder, in lighter tones.

This is the point of departure for the “Historiker-Debatte.” Such was the state of affairs when the fortieth anniversary of the liberation from fascism—May 8, 1985—drew closer and groups from every position in the political spectrum felt compelled to issue a statement concerning this event. The ritual ceremony performed by Chancellor Kohl and President Reagan in the German town of Bitburg was a public rehabilitation of the Wehrmacht forces and the Waffen-SS by the German government as well as by a leading member of NATO. They thus committed themselves to a position that was already being called for by Alfred Dregger and that fraction of the Christian Democrats known as the Stahlhelmflügel (Steel Helmeters). A direct connection was made between the battle of the fascist German army against the Soviet army at the end of World War II and the necessity of establishing defenses against the same enemy today. In other words, these fronts were considered identical.

This view of the significance of May 8, which although always held by the extreme right-wingers, had been supported in the past by only a small number of voices in the mainstream right, was now taken up by a strong fraction of the ruling right-wingers and aggressively advanced. May 8, 1945, was by no means the day of “liberation,” but much more a “devastating defeat, almost a catastrophe” for Germany—if not indeed for Europe. Thus, with this event all of the key views had been put forward, which were then taken up and consecrated as scientific findings a year later by conservative historians. In other words, all of the essential ideological statements had already been expounded. They only needed—and found—support from the scholarly world.

At first this path proved to be untenable. Even among the ruling forces there was apparently no consensus on these issues. The opposition was most clearly and impressively articulated by the president of the Federal Republic, Richard Weizsäcker, in his speech on May 8 in
the Bundestag. Even the simple sentence "the 8th of May was a day of liberation" can be seen as a clear rejection of the right-wing views. The following statement was directed against the ideology of compensation: “The end of the war should not be viewed as the cause of evacuation, expulsion, and bondage. It is to be found at the beginning. We should not separate the 8th of May, 1945, from the 30th of January, 1933.” Then, as the president counted up the victims of that regime and those who took part in the resistance, he also recalled the “innumerable citizens of the Soviet Union and Poland” and the “hostages who were executed”; among the resisters he specifically named “the resistance among the working classes and in the labor unions,” the “resistance of the communists,” and the “resistance in all of the countries which we occupied.”

*The Debate*

This was the starting position for the next stage of the offensive venture which the conservative right began in the summer of 1986. Once again the upper-middle-class newspapers served as a platform, and the leading politicians of the ruling right provided the general ideological backing in the form of ever more acrimonious statements. The demands for a revision of the current view of history were now indeed presented as the outcome of scientific research and endowed with the prestige of recognized historians.

The offensive concentrated on three main themes. Andreas Hillgruber, a Cologne historian who is often a guest at panels and interviews and supplies political catchwords for Strauss and Kohl, declared that a historian must identify with the battles of the German armies on the Eastern front in the years 1944–45. Decisive for him was the fact that this was a “defensive” struggle against the Soviet Union and the chance to maintain Germany’s position as a major power. In view of these dominating concerns, Hillgruber held that the oppressed peoples of Europe and the tortured and murdered victims of concentration camps should take a subsidiary position. Every form of antifascist resistance, even that of the upper-class military circles involved in the assassination attempt on July 20, 1944, was considered by Hillgruber as being actually in the interest of the Bolshevik enemy. The lesson to be learned for the present day from this interpretation of history was quite obviously that when it comes to erecting defenses against Bolshevik threats, certain things must be put up with—if need be, even fascist terror.

Gillessen, of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and Hoffmann, at
the Research Office for Military History in Freiburg, attempted to make credible the idea that even by 1941 the war against the Soviet Union was at least understandable, because it was a war of prevention against Soviet aggression. Just before this, the Christian Social Union (CSU) had given considerable publicity to a book by Ernst Topitsch, a social philosopher, in which Hitler and World War II were described as being tools of Stalin from the very beginning. The lesson to be learned from this thesis of a war of prevention was quite obviously that a war of aggression against the Soviet Union is then justified when signs of preparation for attack can be detected. What this thesis can lead to is not hard to imagine.

Finally, Ernst Nolte, a historian in West Berlin, defined Auschwitz as an "Asian act," as a reaction to the "Asian" Bolshevism that had made Hitler so afraid that he had to commit mass murder as a preventive measure, so to speak. The Bonn historian Klaus Hildebrand, a member of the advisory board for Kohl's Bonn Museum, and Joachim Fest, co-editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, gave the Hillgruber and Nolte theses flank protection in his paper and swept the critical objections that began to crop up resolutely under the carpet.

With the adoption of these three theses the image of the Federal Republic that had been officially presented up to that time was in effect cast onto the rubbish heap. The new image no longer consisted of an aversion to fascism, of the tradition of a civil resistance and the unconditional allegiance to liberalism and democracy in the Western sense, but rather of a far-reaching justification of fascism and its policies. "The consensus was revoked from the right." The new view of history is politically characterized by the assertion that the German Reich, on the whole, was already at that time oriented toward the correct foe, fighting the right war, and even defending the interests of all of Europe—in contrast to the Western Allies, who were at that time on the wrong side. In view of the danger coming from the East, the crimes of fascism appear to some extent reasonable and to some extent less serious. For these reasons, the Federal Republic has no reason to have scruples today about developing its full potential as a major power.

The themes developed by these historians did not go entirely unheralded. First of all, when German fascism and all of its political activities are viewed as deriving mainly from Hitler's ideas and intentions, and Hitler is made into the sole person responsible for all that happened, then it would seem obvious that all other parties involved must be found guiltless. This goes as well for the Wehrmacht, the fascist party and its branch organizations, and the Waffen-SS. In point of fact, this very Führertheorie has been one of the dominant approaches to explaining that period of history right up to today. Hill-
gruber and Hildebrand, in particular, have never tired of speaking of “Hitler’s war” and “Hitler’s regime.” The only new development has been that Hillgruber now draws certain explicit conclusions that serious historians had not yet drawn, but that fit in well with current political trends. Hillgruber assures us, indeed, that he wants to identify himself not with Hitler, but with government and Nazi party officials and with the military establishment that organized the “defensive struggle.”

Second, when it as been stated for decades that National Socialism and communism are essentially equivalent phenomena, and the totalitarianism thesis has been elevated to an official state ideology as well as to a major scientific tenet, then it is natural that all questions concerning the specific interests and power constellations that brought fascism into power and determined its policies will become negligible. Class struggle and racial struggle can be declared equivalent. When leading politicians are forever bringing up the idea that one form of totalitarianism is now part of the past, while the other is quite alive and extremely dangerous, historians have no reason not to consider the relationship between the two forms of totalitarianism and, wherever possible, to make the Soviet version, which is at present still a threat, responsible for Nazism, which belongs to the past but is still so burdensome. In this way the political enemy of German society can also be charged with the crimes that totalitarianism committed in Germany and in Europe forty years ago. Nolte has in fact emphasized that he intends to help bring the theory of totalitarianism again into the forefront and to determine more exactly just what kind of qualitative difference exists between the two forms of totalitarianism.31

Finally, when one views as given that all states attempt to expand their power beyond their own boundaries, then it is quite clear that the struggle of the fascist empire and the defense of its position as a great world power in 1944–45 be considered legitimate and the interests of those peoples who were oppressed or locked up in concentration camps be considered subordinate to the former. By following these tenets, one can also justify the new power politics in the Federal Republic. These conclusions, which the conservative-right historians have drawn on the basis of long-standing, academically influential theoretical approaches, are not imperative. Other historians whose research is based on the same types of approaches certainly have not made the same claims. It is possible to draw these conclusions, however, and it has happened now that the ideological climate has changed as a result of the political Wende.

Since these three historians are not concerned to exclude fascism from the continuity of German history, but rather to integrate fascist
crimes into the normal course of historical process, they have gone to some trouble to obscure distinctions in political and historical phenomena. Not only has fascism taken its place within a series of tyrannical regimes from Stalin to Pol Pot, but modern history generally speaking can be seen—as in an article by Hildebrand of this title—as the “Age of Tyrants.” In keeping with this new view of history, questions about the particulars of fascist crimes, not to mention questions about their perpetrators and beneficiaries, are merely bothersome.

Critics based their criticisms on political and moral considerations, although the debate often appeared to be a purely methodological one. Thus, it was asked whether or not it is meaningful to even talk of historical events as singular and whether or not historical comparisons are viable and meaningful in the case of fascist crimes. Significantly, the methods of argumentation used by the conservatives, when measured against all standards of the historian’s craft, were exposed as unsound and absolutely untenable. Of course, it was primarily historians specializing in social and structural history, namely the leftist minority in the guild of historians, who voiced their views in this matter. Among such methodological critics, Jäckell—a Stuttgart historian—was most articulate. From his point of view, Hitler’s ideas and aspirations were the most important factor in the political activities of German fascism.

All critics agreed, however, that this conservative revision of history was quite sufficient to reawaken the dangerous rightist traditions of Germany’s past, thereby endangering the democratic tendencies within the Federal Republic itself and the development of peaceful relationships with other nations. United in this view were not only historians and social scientists connected with the Social Democrats, but also liberal editors (such as Rudolf Augstein of the weekly news-magazine Der Spiegel), Marxist scholars in the Federal Republic and in the German Democratic Republic (such as Ulrike Hörster-Philipp, Georg Fülberth, and Kurt Pätzold), and Jewish intellectuals (such as Walter Grab, Michael Brumlik, and Dan Diner). This broad spectrum shows clearly what it was and is all about: a controversy being debated with the tools of the historian’s craft, but substantially political in nature. At stake is the political path to be taken by the Federal Republic, its internal political structure, and the direction of its foreign policy.

The Standards of Criticism

Critics in general object to the attempt by rightist historians (and politicians) to place fascist crimes among the events considered normal
in the “Age of Tyrants,” arguing that they can be shown to be of a singular nature. In reply these writers argue it is by all means valid to draw comparisons between evils and test the viability of these comparisons. Here is a remarkable reversal of fronts. It was precisely the thesis of singularity in the historicist school that for decades served to justify removal of the fascist period from the continuity of German history and to prevent the building of any social science concepts at all. Even today it is still an absolute requirement for any historian who wants to gain recognition among his peers to speak of “National Socialism,” or better yet “Hitlerism,” but not of “fascism.” (Nolte developed the other variation of the apologetic in favor of using the term “fascism” by viewing it purely in intellectual terms as the idealistic product of the Führer, and then declaring the “Era of Fascism” as having ended with his death, but this view has not prevailed.)

Yet the concept of fascism does cover all of those essential features shared by the various movements and systems in different countries. It does not deny the existence of special national characteristics or the fact that these peculiarities can take on enormous proportions. It does open the way for viewing social-economic structures and interests, the connection between property and forms of political power—questions that historicism’s thesis of singularity does not take into view.33 It is therefore important to consider the insistence on the methods and the singular extent of the crimes committed during German fascism as absolutely justified. Additionally, only a social-scientific concept of fascism can clarify the conditions under which fascist developments can still exist or develop following the fall of the fascist regime in 1945. A second point of concern relates to the new direction taken by the Federal Republic after 1945. Liberal and social liberal critics (Jürgen Habermas, Jürgen Kocka, Kurt Sontheimer, Heinrich August Winkler, and others) have reproached conservative historians in particular for endangering that most singular historical achievement by the Federal Republic which has in fact given it a special role: the unrestricted opening toward the West.

The so-called Öffnung zum Westen after 1945 was, however, also connected with the restoration of capitalism, with rearmament, and with integration into the military alliance headed by the United States. The Kohl government reasons exactly along these lines whenever it makes reference to the commonality of values between the Federal Republic and the United States or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Habermas, on the other hand, wishes to make a distinction between the opening of the Federal Republic to “the political culture of the West,” which he considers a major achievement, and to the “philosophy of NATO,” from which he disassociates himself. In
reply, Andreas Hillgruber asks whether one can separate culture and politics in this manner and whether the "aversion to NATO which the left loudly asserts does not usher in and accelerate exactly that political and cultural process which Habermas supposedly wants to prevent."\textsuperscript{34}

Liberal historians and political scientists project, in fact, a certain idealism when speaking of the origins of the Federal Republic and its "opening to the West." This is evident when references are made to the structure and politics of Western powers, as well as to the conditions under which the Federal Republic was founded and the goals related to that process. By comparison, Hillgruber can really portray himself as a "realist" when he points to Britain's (imperialist) war plans or to the fact that the Federal Republic is militarily integrated with the West.

The fact that the objections of the liberal historians are much more pointedly aimed at Nolte, while Hillgruber's theses have been treated fairly benignly, may also be related to this idealistic Westorientierung. More specifically, Nolte broke the very taboo that has officially symbolized the Federal Republic's renunciation of fascism. He has portrayed Auschwitz as an insignificant matter and dispensed with any admission of guilt in connection with the genocide of the Jews. By doing so, he robbed the Federal Republic of a certain amount of the credibility it had gained in the West. Hillgruber, however, has turned his attention primarily toward the Soviet Union and declared the war conducted by the German Empire in 1944-45 to be legitimate and necessary. In this way, his thoughts, at least, are in principle in line with those of the postwar Western Allies. While Marxist historians have been quick to challenge Hillgruber's theses, sharp criticism among liberal historians has come only from Habermas; liberal historians for the most have been very guarded in their remarks.

So it is necessary to differentiate between various versions of the notion of an unreserved opening to the West. It is undoubtedly correct that this notion is implicitly distinct from all ideologies concerning the deutsche Sonderweg (Germany's unique course) or the conception that the Prussian-German tradition—with its code of virtue based on the belief in the authority of the state, military power, obedience to superiors, and willingness to work hard for the benefit of the whole—represents something especially valuable, relevant for the future, and even exemplary for other nations (Modell Deutschland). In point of fact, the idea is again in vogue among conservative historians and politicians that the Federal Republic of Germany may acquire certain leadership functions (for instance, because of its location in middle Europe) that could be carried out only if "well-tried" German traditions are revived.

Another problem in the arguments of liberal critics relates to the
question of who was responsible for the crimes of fascism. The idea that “we Germans” are responsible and therefore, even today, have every reason to be ashamed is the leitmotiv in their criticism. Morally this is an absolutely respectable position and, insofar as it refers to the overall responsibility of the German nation and its state as an object of international laws, it is no doubt correct. Nonetheless, I have my doubts whether this is in keeping with historical reality and whether it is sufficiently effective to counteract the ideological offensive from the right.

First of all, it must be made clear that the phrase “we Germans” is logically equivalent to phrases such as “the Germans” or “the French,” and so forth. It supposes the existence of shared interests and a uniformity in thinking and doing that, in reality, does not exist, not even under fascism. This phrase ends up, explicitly or not, quite near the conservative ideology of Volksgemeinschaft (the distinctive identity of a people) and, more specifically, the thesis of collective guilt.

But who would contend that those who fought fascism from the underground or the antifascists who were condemned to prison and concentration camps share in this guilt? Who would expect them to be ashamed of their actions? Of course, they made political mistakes by not having found the right way to put a stop to fascism. In this sense one could also speak of a joint guilt (as did the appeal of the German Communist party on July 11, 1945). The joint guilt of the victims, however, is obviously on a different level from that of those who were actively involved in initiating and carrying out the policies of fascism. Thus it is necessary to name more precisely the forces and interest groups responsible for fascism. Even the thesis of collective guilt, which at first (for instance, in the American press) was an expression of the inability to grasp realistically the social characteristics of fascism, eventually became one of many ways in which the real power structure behind fascism became shrouded. With this thesis the entire period of fascism is viewed so nebulously that it is no longer possible to tell the difference among the fascists, the antifascists, the leading decision makers, those who followed their orders, and those who were hoodwinked by them.

From such a vantage point the thesis of collective guilt is hardly different from the Führer theory (although it is usually based on entirely different moral reasoning). Whether one claims that everyone has to carry the same amount of blame or that everyone is equally free of guilt (since only the Führer is guilty), there is no significant difference in these views. I would even dare to claim that the appeal to finally close the books on the past will prevail all the more easily if the right succeeds in convincing the general public that the question of
guilt applies to “the Germans.” Thus, to champion the thesis of collective guilt is likely to help further the right—even though the advocates of this thesis are acting with honorable intentions.

Second, one must take into account those who grew up after 1945 or were not even born until the 1950s or 1960s. These groups now comprise the majority of the population. They are encountering traces of the fascist past everywhere. There is hardly a town in the Federal Republic that did not have a field station of a concentration camp or a camp for forced labor, hardly a village where some inhabitants whom everyone knew were not murdered or deported. Local histories—often researched by volunteers or school classes—have uncovered many things the adult generation of that time had already pushed out of mind and believed forgotten. It was and is their own grandfathers and grandmothers who lived through those years and whom the students can consult as Zeitzeugen (contemporary witnesses).

We are dealing here not with crimes that are as distant to us as the crimes of Nebuchadnezzar or Genghis Khan, in spite of what the conservative ideologists would have us believe. The extent and the methods of these crimes are, by all means, so singular in character that they force us to make penetrating inquiries about how they could have happened. Yet the fact is that the effort of conservative historians to integrate fascism into the “normal” course of modern history is already part of the lesson plans in the schools of most of the federal states (by no means only in those governed by the Christian Union parties).

There has been a struggle over the correct view of history ever since the rise of class society and the consequent need to maintain the privileges of power by means of, among other things, ideology. This struggle has reached a new level since the ruling class has been confronted with organized forces in the form of a workers’ movement, which represents not only a social-economic alternative, but also an intellectual and moral alternative that has developed its own world view, giving the struggle a goal and a sense of direction. The fact that it was possible for the ruling classes to defend their ideological hegemony over the correct interpretation of history until 1918, and then after 1919 gradually to win it back, contributed to fascism’s ability to establish itself and achieve its political goals.

This struggle over historical questions did not, of course, come to an end in 1945. It has also represented for the history of the Federal Republic a significant impulse for the wide-ranging altercation over the interpretation of the world and humanity and over the path the Federal Republic should take. Conflict over history is thus a political conflict. It is taking place whether we are conscious of it or not. It is better to be conscious of it, because only they can we effectively intervene in it.
For anyone who is at all interested in historical questions—and there are many, not only in academic circles—the question as to which side of this Historikerstreit is correct is highly relevant. Here the conservative historians have obviously been unsuccessful. Their critics have been able to show conclusively that, for one thing, they have disregarded the most basic ground rules of historical craftsmanship in order to arrive at their results. Second, it is not the case that new scientific results are under examination; these are simply new assessments, which have been reached, in part, by means of abstruse speculation. Finally, these new assessments are in reality quite old, namely, the ones propagated by neofascism for decades.

While the untenability of its scientific claims has never been a reason for Germany's guild of historians to revise its position, the defeat of the conservative historians is nevertheless significant. Not only the established left, but also the liberal and perhaps even some of the conservative sectors of the general public will be much more skeptical from now on when “recognized historians” present their “scholarly” judgments about German fascism. Democratic and liberal historians must nevertheless confront the revisionists with ever more careful research and analysis of the past to enable a new generation to shape the present and the future to their own liking.

Notes
1. For this and following points, see Th. Doerry, Antifaschismus in der Bundesrepublik (Frankfurt: Roederberg, 1980), esp. pp. 5ff.
8. Excerpts quoted in ibid., chap. V. 1b.
12. According to Gerhard Ritter it was "the masses in the modern industrial regions," and according to Röpke, "the proletariat proper," that formed the fascist masses. Cf. G. Ritter, Europa und die deutsche Frage (Munich: Munchener Verlag, 1948), p. 188 and p. 19; and W. Röpke, Die deutsche Frage (Erlenbach/Zurich: Rentsch, 1948), pp. 48 and 64.
19. I have described in detail the argumentation and the goals of this new nationalism, as well as the needs on which it capitalizes, in my book Nation, Nationalismus, nationale Frage (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1986).
20. Documented in ibid.
22. Ibid.


31. Nolte's comments at a conference sponsored by the Social Democratic party, "Erziehung—Aufklärung—Restauration," were cited in the German newspaper Deutsche Volkszeitung/die Tat, October 17, 1986. The degree to which government leaders of the right still feel obliged to employ totalitarianism as a value criterion is evidenced in the answer given by the chairman of the parliamentary group of Bavaria's Christian Social Unionist Party, Theo Waigel, to a question posed to a different prominent public figure every week in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. To the question "Which historical figures do you despise most of all?" Waigel gave the straight stereotypical reply: "Hitler and Stalin." The U.S. ambassador to Germany, Richard Burt, could afford to be more ingenuous. He answered quite simply "Josef Stalin." See FAZ-Magazin, January 9, 1987, and January 23, 1987.


33. I have discussed the question as to whether National Socialism was a form of fascism in my book Der Faschismus: Ursachen, Herrschaftsstruktur, Aktualität (Heilbronn: Distel, 1983), pp. 97-113.