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Denazification and Discourse in Post-War Germany

The Holocaust is widely recognized as the most horrific crime against humanity in the 20th century. All of Germany was blamed for letting Hitler rise to power and perpetrate these crimes. After the war, Germany scrambled to rebuild and recover from the social, political, and economic destruction caused by years of violence. An integral part of the post-war recovery process was coming to grips with the horrors of the Holocaust. As the first country to face up to perpetrating a genocide, Germany's example can and should be seen as a sort of roadmap for recovery for others to look to, learning for Germany's mistakes and building on its successes.

Before delving too much into the details of Germany's post-war triumphs and tribulations it is necessary to note the country's unique situation. First of all, unlike Rwanda, Cambodia, or Bosnia, Germany is a major Western European country, meaning it was more prominent on the world stage and other powers such as the United States and Great Britain had more ties to Germany than to a small African country like Rwanda. Germany was, and still is, a major trade partner of other Western powers making the Allies more invested in Germany's future. As a "civilized" Western nation, Germany and the world could not pass off the crimes of the Holocaust as an ancient tribal feud or civil war as in the cases of Turkey, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia (Jørgensen, 10/25/11). Secondly, intervention in the case of the Holocaust was possible because Germany had invaded several sovereign nations, opening the door for outside intervention. Ending the Holocaust was not the primary interest of the Allied powers, which saw war with Germany as the fight

to end fascist reign in Europe rather than a humanitarian intervention. Furthermore, supranational institutions, which did not exist during the Holocaust, such as the United Nations, make it harder for countries today to intervene in situations of mass atrocities (Jørgensen, 10/27/11).

The involvement of foreign nations made it impossible for the government of Germany to officially deny the Holocaust. Because Allied forces liberated Germany and saw, first hand, the destruction in the concentration and extermination camps, there was no way the crimes of the Holocaust could be officially ignored, such as in Turkey and, to some extent, Rwanda. In short, World War II and a lack of international roadblocks to intervention make Germany's situation distinct and should be taken into consideration when comparing coping with the Holocaust to subsequent genocides.

The end of World War II really set the stage for the rebuilding of Germany. The liberation of Germany by Allied troops had a profound impact on the trajectory of the recovery process. In the immediate aftermath of the war Germany was divided into British, American, French, and Soviet zones; each occupying power's military was to be responsible for the administration of their respective zone (Hayse, 138). One of the "primary goals of the military occupation" was "denazification" or the removal of Nazi's from positions of power in German society (Hayse, 138). Although denazification was an essential part of rebuilding, several factors complicated this process. Firstly, around eight million out of the eighty million Germans at the time had either been members of the Nazi Party or an associated organization (Hayse, 138). With ten percent of the German population subject to denazification, the process was destined to fail. Removing one in ten Germans from their

respective posts would have been not only been an impossible task, but it also would have been counter to the ultimate goal of getting Germany back on its feet as quickly as possible.

Secondly, because Germany was carved into four different zones and each zone was composed of various states, there was no uniform policy for this process (Hayse, 138). Each occupying power went to varying lengths to remove “former” Nazis from power. Michael Hayse notes that the Soviet Military Administration:

Removed, arrested, interned, and in many cases deported as slave labourers [sic] former NSDAP [Nazi Party] members from key institutions. The purge was greatest in education, the civil service, the judiciary, and big business. In other sectors, the purge was less systematic and thorough, and in any case the mass of 'small fry' and technical specialists were left in their posts. As early as August 1947, former Nazis who were not highly tainted by activities in the Third Reich were restored full citizenship rights (138-139).

In the French zone, however, the process of denazification was less systemic and has been described as a “highly arbitrary purge” (Hayse, 139). The Brits and Americans realized early on how impossible a goal complete denazification of Germany was leading the Brits to set up “special denazification courts...to try the more heavily implicated former Nazis,” while the Americans eventually shirked this responsibility altogether and left the process up to the individual states within its occupation zone (Hayse, 139). Even though all of the states in the American zone enacted the “Law for the Liberation from National Socialism and Militarism,” denazification in these states was doomed to fail.

The whole purpose of denazification was to remove those Germans associated with the Nazi Party from any position of authority. However, allowing individual states to take charge in removing Nazis from power essentially let Nazis denazify Germany. For the most part, the people in charge of these states were somehow enmeshed in the Nazi Party

otherwise they would not have gained power. What the American zone states of Hesse, Baden- Württemberg, Bremen, and Bavaria ended up doing was requiring citizens to fill out questionnaires and those deemed “‘nominally’ associated with National Socialism” came under review by a state tribunal (Hayse, 139). The tribunal would then classify a citizen as a “‘major offender’”, “‘offender’”, “‘minor offender’”, “‘fellow traveler’”, or “‘exonerated’”, but the American occupying forces reserved the right to veto tribunal decisions (Hayse, 139). The political climate of the Cold War and the division of Germany into East and West eventually led to all those jailed in the West to be released by the early 1950’s (Hayse, 139). Many Germans were critical of denazification and the favorable public opinion of Western Powers was seen as a key piece to outlast the Soviet Union. For the most part, denazification was successful in removing those high-ranking Nazis that did not flee before the end of the war, many of whom were prosecuted during the Nürnberg Trials, but many mid-level officials were left alone.

Because genocides are so often state sponsored, a key piece of rebuilding in the aftermath of mass atrocities is replacing any and all perpetrators, especially those with power. In the case of Germany, we see how impossible a task this may be, particularly when such a large segment of the general population is involved. It becomes even harder when there is no outside intervention and all responsibility is left to the state. However, the nation cannot move on until the perpetrators are ousted from any position of authority. Germany was fortunate enough to have outsiders doing much of the reviewing, but in cases where review is left up to the state, cleaning house becomes more difficult, which is just another reason why international involvement is so critical to recovery. While

denazification was by no means easy and was certainly not completed successfully, this process exposed many issues a state can, and probably will, encounter in the immediate aftermath of genocide.

While Germany's occupiers failed to completely denazify the country, it is important to note in talking about rebuilding. Germany's successes are just as important to discuss. The economic rebound of Konrad Adenauer's West Germany is certainly noteworthy, the biggest success is much less tangible. Collective guilt in the wake of the Holocaust still haunts countless Germans. It has been, in my opinion, the driving force behind much of Germany's progress and has forced very public conversations about the genocide.

Personal experiences with my own family have shown me both the personal and collective guilt of the German people. In the months after the war ended, my grandparents were living in a small Bavarian village that was also home to a small labor camp. In seeing the terrible condition of the remaining Jewish workers my grandparents suddenly felt compelled to help even though, during the war, they both worked on a naval base. My grandfather used his fluency in Yiddish to help three of the survivors find jobs in the village and stayed in touch with one of them until he passed away. Like the vast majority of the German population, my grandparents did not directly perpetrate a genocide, but in doing nothing to stop it while it was occurring, they were complacent. This complacency is the basis of collective guilt.

For some, the guilt of crimes committed proved crippling. My great uncle had volunteered for the Waffen SS and was so scarred by what he had seen and done committed suicide in 1951. Germany could easily have succumbed and allowed this

overwhelming sense of wrongdoing to stall all progress, and for some individuals it was impossible to live with the guilt. However, in Germany following the war, more and more information about the Holocaust was becoming available to citizens and education became an integral part of making “never again” a reality in Germany.

By the early 1970’s teaching about the Holocaust became a key part of the history curriculum in high schools (Leo, 3/31/11). When my father was in 10th grade in 1972, the entire year of history class was spent on the rise and fall of the Third Reich with a special emphasis on cause and effect (Leo, 3/31/11). Some schools even took class trips to France where students helped maintain the graves of French soldiers killed in action, helping to quantify the destruction of war (Leo, 3/31/11). Education opened the doors for the next generation of Germans to speak publicly about the Holocaust. Openness in the classroom has translated into public discussion about memorials.

How do you memorialize the Holocaust? How can an entire nation that is seen as the perpetrators of these crimes honor the victims of the Third Reich? These questions were central to the debate surrounding the creation of a “Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin, which was first proposed in 1988 (Young, 187). Two design contests, a public colloquium, and eleven years later, the German Bundestag finally voted to build the memorial in the heart of the capital (Young, 186). Throughout the selection process, arguments raged in the German press over how the design would be chosen; whether the selected design was appropriate, and whether or not an educational element should be included were just a few of the topics that were discussed (Young, 217). The German

public's involvement in the decision-making process and sensitivity to issues surrounding memorializing the Holocaust demonstrates just how far Germany has come since 1945.

Germany's return to prominence on the international stage is certainly the greatest rebound of any country in which a genocide has occurred. Germany's situation is definitely unique, especially because of the high amount of international involvement in the years just after World War II. However, countries such as Rwanda and Bosnia can look to Germany as a model upon which they can build and improve. Hindsight allows us to see the problems underlying inconsistent denazification policies, but in looking to Germany we can also see the importance of educating youth and allowing the past to permeate the public discourse. The recovery process has by no means been flawless and is certainly not over, but Germany's example shows that healing is possible through acknowledgement of the crimes, education, and a candid openness about the past.

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