

## 5. Truth and Post-totalitarian Narratives

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Telling the truth after the destruction of the world by totalitarian rule is more difficult and more extensive than simply naming the crimes. For the worldlessness is at the same time a speechlessness that necessitates the gradual recovery of speech. But it is not this problem that I want to address here<sup>1</sup>, but the social problem of truth. Not because truth, as Arendt notes, is resistant and resists action and the change of reality<sup>2</sup>, but because it is interpreted and discussed with all awareness of the facts and is therefore exposed to the ever-present danger of relativisation and concealment. There are many reasons for such relativisation: the defence against guilt and responsibility, or inopportuneness at a given point in time.

Thus, the position on the facts of the past is by no means only about memory based on the facts, but is above all about the narratives that are formed in the wake of dealing with these facts. Adding to Arendt's statement that we only understand an event when we clothe it in a story, the point here is that narratives are collective creations of meaning into which a wide variety of controlling interests influencing the narratives can enter.

Such meaning-making takes on further significance through the more recently discussed role of generations, i.e. intergenerational memory work. We know the important work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, which strongly influences individuals in their recollection. What is remembered is determined above all by social references. But which ones? According to recent research, they are above all family relations. Their role becomes particularly clear when one observes the change in memories over the course of three generations, while the historical facts remain more or less the same over this time.

I am concerned here with communicative memory, not with political or symbolically represented cultural memory designed for the long term. Three generations

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- 1 I have done this elsewhere, see Wolfgang Heuer: *Volver a hablar tras la muerte del lenguaje. Sobre los esfuerzos de aprender a hablar y la facilidad de perder el lenguaje de nuevo*, in: Camila de Gamboa / Maria Victoria Uribe (eds.): *Los silencios de la guerra*, Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario 2017, pp. 297–342.
  - 2 Hannah Arendt: *Truth and Politics*, in: *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin Group 2006.

are involved in such communication. Aleida Assmann calls this “three-generation memory” the “short-term memory” of a society, which after 80 to 100 years “naturally dissolves again and again, to make room for the memories of subsequent generations in fluid change”.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I will present this “three-generation memory” using Germany as an example. The Second World War ended more than 70 years ago, but the facts of the war of aggression and the Holocaust have been known since then, and the question of guilt was settled by the Nuremberg Trials. It has also been known from the beginning that the totalitarian regime did not want to wage a conventional war with victors and vanquished, but rather an ideological campaign of extermination in which there were only perpetrators and victims. I will present how the three generations have dealt with this reality in the following steps: the first generation's defence against guilt and the myth of the decent Wehrmacht in contrast to the SS; the second generation's struggle to name deed and the perpetrators and for remembrance; and thirdly, the dwindling knowledge of perpetrators, deeds, and victims among the third generation.

## Defence against Guilt

In her study of totalitarian rule as a new form of domination, Hannah Arendt emphasised that what distinguishes it from conventional dictatorships is its total control and mobilisation. “The totalitarian policy, which has completely destroyed the neutral zone in which the daily life of human beings is ordinarily lived, has achieved the result of making the existence of each individual in Germany depend either upon committing crimes or on complicity in crimes.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, at the end of the war, the population found itself in the contradictory position of being accomplices or complicit on the one hand, and having acted under orders of the Party and the government on the other. The crimes were state crimes, and so everyone could claim to have acted only on behalf of superiors and in ignorance of the entire course of the bureaucratic process. Similarly, Eichmann, who in a leading position organised the extermination of the Jews, declared in his defence that he had only been a small cog in a large machine.

The facts are known: about 50 million people died in the course of the Second World War, including about 6 million Jews, half a million Sinti and Roma, 3.3 million mainly Soviet prisoners of war and 5–7 million so-called partisans. Some 500,000

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3 Aleida Assmann *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Munich C.H.Beck 2006, p. 26.

4 Hannah Arendt: Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility, in: *Essays in Understanding*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1994, p. 124.

personnel were involved in the Holocaust, of which only about 6,500 were convicted in West Germany and just under 13,000 in East Germany.<sup>5</sup> The SS had 260,000 members, and at the beginning of the war in 1939, 50,000 of them were in their own administrative institutions, which were not only in charge of the concentration camps but also managed industrial enterprises.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the Nuremberg trials, 50 per cent of the population was in favour of these trials, later only 30 per cent; most thought the sentences were too severe.<sup>7</sup> In 1953, 40 percent of the staff of the Foreign Office were former Nazi party members, more than during the Third Reich. In the new secret service of the Federal Republic, about 20 percent of the employees were former NSDAP members, 5 to 8 percent had also been members of the SS, SD or SA. Among the 487 members of the second Bundestag, more than a quarter were former NSDAP members, and at times in the Ministry of the Interior two-thirds of the employees were former Nazis. Numerous perpetrators were able to work unrecognised or unprosecuted in West German companies, in some cases in management positions.<sup>8</sup>

These shameful figures reflect two things: firstly, the fact that large parts of the population were compromised but were needed in the economy and administration. Secondly, the failure of the denazification carried out by the Allies with the help of formal questionnaires, which moreover became increasingly unimportant in view of the Cold War between East and West.

What gave support to the young democracy in these circumstances was the fact that the Western Allies only allowed unencumbered persons to draft the constitution – democrats, resisters, exiles, and made sure that the first mayors had also been exonerated.

What was the attitude of the population of the time to the question of truth and narrative? The answer is: collective guilt defence. In detail, it is that one must distinguish between the decent Wehrmacht and the criminal SS, that one had been seduced by Hitler and was otherwise clueless and innocent, that one knew nothing

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5 Jörg Echternkamp *Die Verfolgung nationalsozialistischer Gewaltverbrechen*, ed. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2015, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/nationalsozialismus-zweiter-weltkrieg/der-zweite-weltkrieg/199413/die-verfolgung-nationalsozialistischer-gewaltverbrechen/> (2022/10/3)

6 Hermann Kaienburg *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, Berlin Metropol 2003.

7 Kim C. Priemel/Alexa Stiller (eds.) *NMT. Die Nürnberger Militärtribunale zwischen Geschichte, Gerechtigkeit und Rechtschöpfung*, Hamburg Hamburger Edition 2013.

8 Bodo Hechelhammer *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Über den Umgang mit SS-Personal in der Organisation Gehlen und im Bundesnachrichtendienst*. In Jan Erik Schulte, Michael Wildt (eds.) *Die SS nach 1945. Entschuldungsnarrative, populäre Mythen, europäische Erinnerungsdiskurse*, Göttingen V&R unipress 2018. – Frank Bösch / Andreas Wirsching *Hüter der Ordnung Die Innenministerien in Bonn und Ost-Berlin nach dem Nationalsozialismus*, Göttingen Wallstein 2018.

about the murder of Jews and had only been a member of party organisations to prevent something worse, that one had lost everything oneself, either through the bombing of German cities or through the expulsion from the German eastern territories by Stalin, and that finally not everything in Nazi Germany had been bad: Hitler had eliminated unemployment and built the autobahn. And of course, resisters were traitors. The state commemoration of the resistance group around Stauffenberg was accepted because they were members of the decent Wehrmacht. The end of the war was described as a collapse by the majority who had been involved. It was only in 1985, 40 years later, that the Federal President von Weizsäcker was bold enough to call this a liberation.

The picture just sketched conceals the hopes and illusions of many who became members of National Socialist organisations during the Nazi era, whether out of opportunism or conviction. After 1945, people concealed membership in the NSDAP, and even more so membership in the SS. Truth and narrative fall apart, and the narrative was once again divided into a justifying narrative for the outside world, used against critics at home and abroad, and an affirmative narrative for the inside world, which was used to come to terms with the experience. Since all perception has a clearly visual aspect, there is a strong pictorial element in the construction of meaning and the foundation of memory. But the lack of images in the justifying narrative is striking. The affirmative narrative, on the other hand, was cultivated among like-minded people, e.g. among former comrades with repeated descriptions of experiences. An impression of these affirmative conversations, which are about wartime adventures, is found in the recordings of conversations of German prisoners of war in Great Britain and the USA, which were recently published.<sup>9</sup>

The first ten years were accompanied by a public silence. During a visit to Germany in 1949/50, Hannah Arendt observed that people claimed to have no time for the past because of the reconstruction of the destroyed country. The government of Adenauer, a Catholic and anti-Nazi, focused on reconciliation, not by coming to terms with the past but by keeping silent and integrating the incriminated officials. It was not until the mid-1950s, when a growing minority had a television, that numerous war films were shown. In these films, the Nazi era and the Second World War were not specifically addressed, but instead general human themes of guilt and atonement, power and resistance, and interpersonal entanglements. The war was thus trivialised and transfigured and appeared as a test of young men's mettle.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Harald Welzer / Sönke Neitzel *Soldaten Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*. Frankfurt/ M. S. Fischer Verlag, 2012.

10 Knut Hickethier *Kriegserlebnis und Kriegsdeutung im bundesdeutschen Fernsehen der Fünfziger Jahre* in Ursula Heukenkamp (ed.) *Schuld und Sühne? Kriegserlebnisse und Kriegsdeutung in deutschen Medien der Nachkriegszeit (1945–1961)*, vol. 2, Amsterdam/Atlanta Rodopi 2001, pp. 759–775. – Irmela von der Lühe *Verdrängung und Konfrontation – die Nachkriegsliteratur*, in

Even in the film *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are Among Us) by the critical director Wolfgang Staudte, the narrative is retained. The film had been shot in 1946 in the destroyed Berlin and portrays the functionaries of the post-war period as murderers and opportunists, which made the film topical and therefore unpopular at the same time; however, the Wehrmacht and the common man remain decent in this film and undamaged by the Third Reich.

In reality, those who survived the cruel war in the Soviet Union were severely traumatised. Two million soldiers returned from Russian captivity over the years, the last in 1955. If they spoke, it was to former comrades, otherwise they remained silent and burdened their families with their behaviour.

Novels in glossy magazines such as *Quick* and *Stern* vaguely hinted at links between the Wehrmacht and SS crimes, portrayed the Nazis in the Wehrmacht as harmless, and described atrocities on the side of the Allies and partisans, but not on their own side.<sup>11</sup>

From 1957 onwards, the weekly *Landser* magazines, about life as a foot-soldier, appeared on every new stand for a total of 2,800 small-volume and 1,300 large-volume issues, until their publication was discontinued in 2013. Their titles were *Overrun by the Invasion*, *Fight until the Last Hour*, or *Parachutes over Crete*. They described war scenes in which good soldiers do their duty, perform great feats and defend the homeland. The war is hard and cruel, but nothing is said about reasons and backgrounds. In the 1950s and 1960s, the circulation was half a million per weekly issue.

Bestsellers were based on the same myth, e.g. *Strafbataillon 999* (Penal Battalion) by Heinz Konsalik (1959), in which even party members in the army were decent soldiers, while SS members were the bad guys.

In all these affirmative portrayals, in which the former Wehrmacht soldiers see themselves exonerated and appreciated, there is no discussion of the National Socialist regime, nor of the expulsion and murder of the Jews. It was not until the end of the 1950s that the senselessness of the war and the personal attitude and responsibility of the individual were addressed,<sup>12</sup> and for the first time mass shootings of Jews by the SS were depicted in a TV feature film.<sup>13</sup> But it was not until more than 20 years after the end of the war that the non-Jewish writer Alfred Andersch in 1967 described the events from a Jewish perspective in his novel *Efzaim*.

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Peter Richel et al. (eds.) *Der Nationalsozialismus – die zweite Geschichte*, Munich C.H.Beck 2009, pp. 243–260.

11 'Harmlose Idealisten und draufgängerische Soldaten'. Militär und Krieg in den Illustriertenromanen der fünfziger Jahre. In Hannes Heer / Klaus Naumann (eds.) *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*, Hamburg Hamburger Edition 1997, pp. 634–650.

12 Die Brücke, 1959; *Das Dritte Reich*, WDR/SDR 1960.

13 Das Tagebuch des Jürgen Wilms, NWRV-Fernsehen Köln 1960.

## The Struggle of the Second Generation to Name the Crime and the Perpetrators and to be Remembered

The second generation comprises those born between 1939 and 1948; a minority of about 30,000 made up the later student movement of 1968. They grew up in the post-war period with parents who responded to critical enquiries from their children with the terse stereotypes of the justifying narrative.

The past remained alive in the public eye through trials: the Ulm Einsatzgruppen trial in 1958 against police officers who were active at the time and some of whom continued to be active, who had murdered over 5,000 Jewish people, the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961, and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1968. The trials brought the Holocaust into focus and the fact that “the murderers were among us”. At the Nuremberg Trials, in addition to Nazi functionaries and some economic functionaries, doctors had also been convicted for their experiments on human beings, but the civil service apparatus, in particular the lawyers, was left out. The fact that hundreds of former Nazi judges and prosecutors were in office was a scandal that was only uncovered by a group of Social Democratic students in Berlin. In an exhibition entitled *Unpunished Nazi Justice*, they published incriminating material about one hundred people. However, politicians and the public perceived the exhibition as a scandal that threatened to disrupt peaceful coexistence with the murderers among us. The Social-Democratic Party SPD expelled the students; they were suspected of working for the GDR – a popular argument, also later against the student movement, to defame criticism as unjustified.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the exhibition hampered Willy Brandt’s election campaign.

The politicians wanted to avoid any legal dispute and instead offered incriminated lawyers the possibility to retire early while retaining their full salaries. 147 judges and prosecutors took advantage of this option. This policy of silence and financial compensation for perpetrators not only meant that not a single judge in the Federal Republic was legally convicted of judicial crimes committed in the Third Reich, but that the second generation got the impression that the defence against guilt favoured the “murderers among us”.

And in the population, the demand for an end became louder, favoured by the statute of limitations for murder after 20 years, in 1965. One had atoned enough, one could not talk about it endlessly. In several memorable parliamentary debates, on the other hand, the time limit was first extended twice, then lifted altogether in 1979. The parliamentary debate was memorable because of the political and moral level of the contributions, e.g. that of the Social Democrat Adolf Arndt:

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14 Kristina Meyer Der SDS und die “Ungesühnte Nazijustiz”. In Kristina Meyer *Die SPD und die NS-Vergangenheit 1945–1990*. Cöttingen Wallstein 2015, pp. 217–227.

The essentials were known. I had to tell the young people: If your natural mother lies on her deathbed and swears by God ... that she did not know, then I say to you: The mother just can't bring herself to say it, because it is too terrible to have known or to be able to know, but not to want to know. I know that I am partly to blame. Because you see, I didn't go out into the street and scream when I saw the Jews being taken away from our midst by the truckload. I didn't put on my yellow star and say: Me too! I can't say that I did enough. ... You can't say: I wasn't born yet, this heritage is none of my business. ... It's about not turning our backs on the mountain of guilt and disaster that lies behind us.<sup>15</sup>

The general elections of 1966, saw the former Nazi war judge Kiesinger become Federal Chancellor, which for many of the second generation was a consequence of the silence, denial and glossing over of the past, the complicity or even identity of members of the first generation with the murderers. This image was complemented in the mid-1960s by uncritical support for the USA's war in Vietnam and Israel's behaviour towards the Palestinians. Yesterday's accomplices were today's accomplices, and while they concealed their misdeeds of yesterday, they praised all the more their merits as representatives of the economic miracle today.

The narrative of the second generation described their parents' generation as insincere and opportunistic, characterised by authoritarianism, national arrogance and anti-Semitism, and materialistic thinking about success. This narrative was highly moralistic and promoted the alternative of solidarity, self-realisation and alternative models of life.

But given the scale of the crimes of the Nazi era and the menace of the Cold War, there were also violence-oriented reactions in which the differences between totalitarianism and democracy were seen only as a new façade of a late capitalist economy of exploitation and imperialism, so that an armed struggle for liberation was justified. One of the members of the terrorist organisation RAF, Karl-Heinz Dellwo, said much later in an interview: "When you start to realise these things, you also become aware that you don't like those people, that they actually embody everything you hate. You realise that you don't want to have anything to do with them and that if there's any prospect of creating a new, better society, these people must simply leave."<sup>16</sup> This narrative of hatred as the justification for extreme violence, with 34 murders, several kidnappings and numerous bank robberies, as well as a multitude of injured people, is marked by the same arrogance as that of the moral condemnation of how the first generation behaved in the face of a totalitarian system. The

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15 *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*. 4. Wahlperiode. Stenografische Berichte Band 57 170. Sitzung vom 10. März 1965, pp. 8552/8553. (Translated by WH)

16 Karl-Heinz Dellwo / Gabriele Rollnik / Marek Seckar: It was impossible to live in this world... A conversation with Karl-Heinz Dellwo and Gabriele Rollnik, in: *Eurozine*, 15 Jan. 2014.

behaviour of the second generation would have been morally and politically impeccable.

With the screening in Germany of the American television series *Holocaust 1979*, not only did the victims come into view, but also Jewish life there. The victims became subjects. In the cities, something called the search for traces began, imaginary spaces of past Jewish life emerged. The Cologne artist Gunter Demnig began to lay “*stolpersteine*” (stumbling blocks) in the pavements in front of the homes of murdered Jewish fellow human beings, showing their name, date of birth and how, where and when they died. The prerequisite is that the current residents are in agreement. By 2018, 70,000 of these stones had been laid in Germany and 24 other European countries.<sup>17</sup> The murdered are given back their names and biographies, they are no longer numbers but people.

Overall, in the 1970s and 1980s, as the first generation grew older, there was a slow change in the focus of the second generation: from the perspective of the perpetrators to that of the victims, then to that of the bystanders. The question of the bystanders came to the fore because since the 1970s a broad civil society had emerged with numerous citizens’ initiatives and NGOs based on the autonomy and self-responsibility of the actors and whose values include taking social responsibility. This is where the previous discourses come in. When it came to the perpetrators and the victims, the question had been: What did you know? Why didn’t you help? Now that the first generation has retired and become grandparents, the discourse was applied to the present: How do I behave? How do we behave when neo-Nazis appear and when racist acts occur? The film *Schindler’s List* expresses the interest since the 1980s in the importance of bystanders. Here, as with the victims, it is about individuals, their destinies and responsibility.

Parallel to this change, there was a fierce academic controversy about the historicization of National Socialism, the so-called *Historikerstreit*. Four leading conservative historians of the first and second generation put forward theses in 1986 that provoked vehement response, their main opponent being Jürgen Habermas. They argued that Hitler had followed Asian models, the Soviet Gulags had set a precedent for Auschwitz (Nolte), today’s historian had to understand the perspective of the Wehrmacht soldiers and fleeing Germans of the time, in this respect one could not speak unreservedly of a liberation of Germany (Hillgruber), and Germany had become dangerously ahistorical (Stürmer). There is still no conclusive assessment of this dispute, but it can be said that these views have not prevailed in main-stream historiography.<sup>18</sup>

17 <https://www.dw.com/de/ns-gedenkprojekt-z%C3%A4hlt-jetzt-70000-stolpersteine/a-45997346> (2022/10/3)

18 Rudolf Augstein et al. (ed.) *Historikerstreit Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, Munich Piper 1987.

Ten years later, when everyone had long since come to terms with the first generation's denial of guilt and silence, a group of historians comprehensively destroyed the myth of the 'innocent' Wehrmacht with a major exhibition entitled *Vernichtungskrieg. Criminal Power 1941 to 1944*, which had 900,000 visitors and was shown in numerous German cities from 1995 to 1999.<sup>19</sup> It had four main focuses: "Serbia. Partisan War 1941", "The 6th Army. On the way to Stalingrad. 1941 to 1942", "Belarus. Three years of occupation 1941 to 1944" and "The images of the post-war years". The narratives that legitimised the crimes were presented in three aspects: "the Red Army soldier" as the insidious Asian beast, "the partisan" as proof of the crimes of the others and "the Jew" as the "mastermind and profiteer of the events".<sup>20</sup>

The exhibition demonstrated numerous crimes committed by the Wehrmacht, with a shockingly high number of victims (5 million civilians, 1.5 million Jews, 3.5 million prisoners of war, more than all the victims of the SS combined) and provoked public discussions, as well as protests and counter-demonstrations by members of the Wehrmacht and right-wing radical organisations, with threats of violence and a bomb attack, controversies in the city parliaments and a debate in the Bundestag. Because some of the statements were too sweeping, implying a collective guilt of the entire Wehrmacht, the exhibition was revised and shown again from 2001 to 2004. The co-creator of the first exhibition Hannes Heer strongly criticised "the disappearance of the perpetrators",<sup>21</sup> because in the revised exhibition the names of individuals had been omitted in favour of events and structures.

Even more than at the time of the student movement, a fierce debate had broken out, but this time it was more factual, rather than ideological and moralising. But just as after the war, when the first generation declared that they had known nothing about the murder of the Jews, there was now a struggle to save the image of a decent Wehrmacht. The silent images, which at least partially proved the opposite, provoked a silent first generation. Accusation and defence were loud, but silent. There were still no conversations between the generations. Who wanted to tell of their errors, of being enthusiastic about Hitler in their youth? Who wanted to simply question the older generation and listen?

Even the writer Günter Grass, who liked to present himself as a left-wing, moralising public intellectual, only revealed in 2006 at the age of 79 that he had volunteered

19 Hannes Heer et al. (eds.) *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944* Ausstellungskatalog. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Hamburg Hamburger Edition, 1996. – See also Gehorsam bis zum Mord? Der verschwiegene Krieg der deutschen Wehrmacht – Fakten, Analysen, Debatte. In *ZEIT-Punkte* No. 3, 1995.

20 Hannes Heer / Ruth Wodak Kollektives Gedächtnis. Vergangenheitspolitik. Nationales Narrativ. Zur Konstruktion von Geschichtsbildern, in Hannes Heer et al. (eds.) *Wie Geschichte gemacht wird. Zur Konstruktion von Erinnerungen an Wehrmacht und Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Wien Czernin 2003, p. 21.

21 Hannes Heer *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*, Berlin Aufbau 2004.

for the Wehrmacht as a 15-year-old and had been drafted into the Waffen-SS when he was 17. He had previously seen no way to talk about it without being tarnished.

## The Disappearance of the Perpetrators among the Third Generation

The disappearance of the perpetrators from the Wehrmacht exhibition corresponds paradoxically to the disappearance of the perpetrators among the third generation, the grandchildren. In the early 2000s, the social psychologist Harald Welzer wanted to know how the past is present in young people who have both rational factual knowledge and emotional family knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

The results of 40 group discussions in families are surprising. The Holocaust only occurs as an abstract disappearance of the Jews, it is, according to the authors of the study, empty speech as “a diction that shapes the intergenerational conversation about the Third Reich like no other. Actors – and these were mostly the perpetrators – remain vague figures, historical events are only described in outline, so that it remains unclear what it is actually about, and the events seem almost harmless.”<sup>23</sup> There is a great need to put the grandparents in a favourable light. Everyday conversations and feature film scenes dominate their own world of imagination, set pieces of narratives of Jewish fates such as escape and the threat of concentration camp imprisonment are used for the family history, and reproduced narratives of supposedly autobiographical experiences of the grandparents partly come from fictitious sources. Images of memories and imaginations, especially films and documentaries, flow into each other.<sup>24</sup> In 26 of the 40 families interviewed, there was a heroisation of the grandparents by the children, which was then reinforced by the grandchildren. 50% of the stories were victim stories, 15 per cent were stories of everyday resistance and heroism. In other words, two-thirds of the stories were about an attitude of rejection towards National Socialism. Nazis and Germans were two separate groups, i.e. the view of guilt defence since the end of the war, the alleged ignorance of the crimes, not only lives on unbroken in the third generation but is even intensified. According to a survey conducted in connection with this study in 2002 in Bielefeld among members of the third generation, 49 per cent overall (and 56 per cent of those with an Abitur or a university degree) believed that the attitude of their own relatives had been negative or quite negative towards National Socialism, 26 percent believed that their relatives had helped persecuted persons, and of those

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22 Harald Welzer et al. “*Opa war kein Nazi*”. *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, Frankfurt/M. S. Fischer Verlag 2002.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

24 Aleida Assmann: *op. cit.*, p. 148.

with university degrees 30 percent believed this, 13 per cent that they had resisted, and only one per cent that they had participated in crimes.

Family stories falsify events by excluding the uncomfortable from what is remembered, and by jointly shaping the past in conversation, whereby what is hinted at is added to by the grandchildren in their own interest.<sup>25</sup> “What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.”<sup>26</sup> The result: Grandpa was not a Nazi.

## Conclusion

This brief overview shows that the “three-generation memory” is not static and homogeneous, but moves and changes with the generations. Even if it seems as if there is a successful policy towards history in Germany today, with memorials, days of remembrance, speeches in parliament and corresponding teaching materials, it can be seen that family memory is different from written history and is of considerable importance. Even the dictatorial politics of history in the GDR could not change this, as Welzer’s study showed.

This overview also shows that the perception of the facts depends on the interests of the generations – first to the perpetrators, then to the victims, then to the spectators.

To take up the aspect of images that I mentioned above – the imageless defence against guilt. In the third generation, those who did not want to present images have consequently also completely disappeared from view. The criticism of the student movement was also imageless in its rationality, and the pictures of the Wehrmacht exhibition are mute photos of deeds, not narrative pictures.

The reason for this lies in a double message after 1945: anyone who reports positively about their life during the Hitler era is guilty. And Nazi propaganda is still dangerous, so it is not shown publicly; for a long time *Mein Kampf* was not available in German, and only recently has an academic version been published with a very detailed commentary; the films about euthanasia as well as the films of Leni Riefenstahl are not shown, and colour films of Nazi marches were not shown for a long time.

Family memory has failed to open up to concrete stories as it does with regard to the individuality of individual victims. The Hungarian-Jewish writer and theatre director George Tabori declared:

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25 Ibid., p. 196.

26 Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Penguin Books, 2004, p. 76.

What must memory be like so that we can finally feel free? ... There is in this country, it seems to me, a great need ... to find factual reasons to explain these murders. I mean, these murders have become possible because of this very “objectivity” that turns people into objects. Objects are not there to be identified with, and when one no longer needs to identify with them, the way is open to destruction. What theatre could teach the sciences is that true memory is only possible through sensual remembering: it is impossible to come to terms with the past without reliving it through skin, nose, tongue, buttocks, feet and belly.<sup>27</sup>

Written in 2019. First published: *Verdad y narración: la lucha por la memoria en Alemania después del Holocausto*, in: Camila de Gamboa/Cristina Sánchez (eds.): *Cartografía del mal*, Bogotá: Ed. Siglo del Hombre 2019, pp. 231–249.

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27 George Tabori *Unterammergau oder die guten Deutschen*, Frankfurt/M. Suhrkamp 1981, p. 201. (Translated by WH) – Cf. chapter 10 in this volume: Horror and Laughter – Arendt, Tabori, Borowski.