

German Granddaughters, German Grandsons

1. In the Federal Republic of Germany, historical policy, i.e. the shaping of collective memory, is pursued by various bodies from the federal to local governments, political parties, newspapers, magazines and television broadcasters. With no single hub to arbitrarily control historical policy, the approach may seem diverse and driven by the particular interests of individual groups. Some of them may be particularly concerned with remembering the holocaust while others focus on East Germany's "peaceful revolution" or seek to commemorate "expulsions". The priorities are differentiated even further as some focus on blaming Germans while others insist on depicting them as "victims". Note that ignoring the subject collectively, which for decades has remained the popular approach in the "old" East Germany, is definitely a thing of the past. The faults of the Germans are not being forgotten. The treatment of the inconvenient past has become much more sophisticated and not devoid of a certain power of persuasion. By and large, the approach is to depict Germany as a "regular" state and a nation no different than France or the UK with its similar "perpetrators" and "victims", ups and downs, bright and dark sides of history. This precisely is the direction in which the "relativization discourse" is headed with its two distinctive currents rooted firmly in tradition: "the discourse of victims" and "the discourse of exoneration".

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2. The key components of “the discourse of victims” have been well recognized: the German nation was the first victim of Nazi terror, it sustained one of the greatest losses to its populace and property, it fell victim to pitiless air raids on civilian targets carried out by the Allied Forces, it was “banished” from its historically held land in the east and ultimately divided and subjected to “socialist party dictatorship” (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany) in the eastern part of the country. As German victims are shown in normative (rather than historical) as well as anthropological contexts (in descriptions of the misfortunes of individuals), the depiction is convincing enough and likely to evoke understanding and even compassion. While “the discourse of victims” takes on an array of meanings, the priority appears to be to boost Germans’ self-esteem, reconcile generations and rid the German nation of its troublesome stigma. What fits well into the discourse is the latest ZDF series “Generation War” (“Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter”). Its protagonists, paradigmatic by design, are all decent and likeable young Germans absorbed by a ruthless war machine which forces them to commit undignified or downright criminal acts. They are both victims and perpetrators. The *Wehrmacht* (Nazi Germany’s Armed Forces) soldiers depicted in the series are not repulsive but rather compassion-evoking while the true criminals are all secondary characters: a handful of self-avowed Nazis who are even disliked by the main characters. The overall message is that there was in fact no *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people) or collective succumbing to Nazi propaganda. Where there is no need to deny crime, committed by the Nazis of course, it becomes all too easy to paint a blurred picture of the past. What emerges is a universal “community of the victims” with a proper place in it reserved for Jews, Poles and also the Germans.

3. “The discourse of exoneration”, which constitutes an attempt to reproach or blame other nations for as many misdeeds as possible, is aimed primarily at downplaying the uniqueness of the German crime. The famous the-others-were-no-better defense has been invoked repeatedly since the end of World War II, particularly after the reunification of Germany as the Federal Republic of Germany continued to grow stronger internationally. As the “exoneration” of Germany by shifting the blame to others is a tricky operation with a potential to harm international relations, it is used rather selectively and carefully. The main target of discreditation are Poles and Czechs depicted primarily as exceptionally cruel villains who “banished” innocent German communities. For some time now, there is a growing effort to suggest a shared responsibility for the holocaust involving nations other than Germany without whose collaboration the Nazis are said to have been unable to have exterminated European Jews. Germans, who complain about the “stick” (M. Walser) of anti-Semitism being waved at them, have themselves begun to wave it at Poles. The “Generation



War” series fits well into the trend as the extreme anti-Semites in it are Polish, among them members of the Polish resistance movement. Although the Polish guerilla fighters in the series do not murder or mistreat Jews, their intentions are not very different from those of Nazi murderers. In doing so, the series does not refer to just any random guerilla troop but rather to an unambiguously and deliberately selected National Army unit portrayed as nationalistic and manifestly anti-Semitic. The series, as well as some commentaries which have appeared in the German press, delegitimize the Polish resistance movement with glaring premeditation. As a consequence, Poles are pulled into the universal “community of perpetrators”.

4. Externally, a state’s historical policy has two main purposes: one to serve as protection against incursions by hostile foreign standards of collective historical memory, another to bring its own standards of collective historical memory into international circulation. The German standards of collective historical memory with their “discourse of victims” and “discourse of exoneration”, are clearly hostile towards Poland and, what is worse, appear to be trickling into the Polish discourse. There is hardly any exaggeration in claiming that the Polish narrative is weak and watered down, to say the least. The Polish response is defensive at best and generally rather listless and ineffectual. Museums as well as movie and television producers perform well below par. Compared to Germany’s effort, the Polish response looks fairly pathetic. The only valuable contribution are certain history inserts appearing in weeklies. There are hardly any signs of bringing own standards of collective historical memory into international circulation to speak of as efforts of this kind have been given a very low priority in foreign cultural policy. The harm resulting from such neglect has little immediate effect whereas avoiding historical altercations appears to serve us well in maintaining good neighborly relations. In the long run, however, the consequences of such inertia will be horrendous and largely irreversible. What drives Germany to attach so much importance to internal as well as external historical policy is not its passion for the past but rather its determination to pursue vital national interests. This is a challenge which demands a proper response from Poland.

5. It is indeed difficult to fathom the intentions behind the decision of the Polish television to purchase and air the “Generation War” series, which is evidently aligned with Germany’s “discourse of victims” and “discourse of reproach”. I personally believe that the management of Polish television acted out of ignorance and incompetence and that perhaps there could be more to it as well. The consequences are fairly obvious. The series has received Poland’s blessing to be distributed in any country which shows interest. Germany succeeded again in defining the focus of historical controversy, pushing Poles into a defensive position of having to prove the obvious. The question is also whether some



viewers in Poland did not accept the production as a true and credible portrayal of German and Polish (and especially the National Army's) behaviors during World War II. This in fact is most likely the case. And yet, paradoxically, the release of the series appears to have backfired on the Germans. Note that even the case of the Center Against Expulsions has aroused interest in historical policy in Poland. The "Generation War" series had a similar effect. The general sentiment in the Polish mass media is that Germany has overstepped its safe boundaries gone one step too far, secure in its sense of impunity. Opinions on the misleading series and the decision to air it on Polish television should be supplied by scholarly institutions, not just journalists expressing their views in dailies and weeklies. Rather than waiting for ZDF to produce a documentary or a paradocumentary on Nazi occupation of Poland, Poland should launch its own production. The job of shaping Poland's views on history must not be entrusted to German granddaughters and German grandsons.

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