

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire = Rivista storica svizzera
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte
Band: 57 (2007)
Heft: 1: La revanche des victimes? = Die Revanche der Opfer?

Artikel: A German Trauma?
Autor: Stargardt, Nicholas
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-98956>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

A German Trauma?

Nicholas Stargardt

Summary

This article explores the ways that German civilian suffering during the Second World War has become the focus of a culture of victimhood. After the 'hard' claims to the literal equivalence of German victimhood made in the 1950s have come 'soft' claims of psychological and emotional equivalence of all those traumatised by war during the last four years. The article then goes on to explore what meanings German civilians gave to their suffering and sacrifices during the war itself, showing how they actually helped to brutalise German society and bring more Germans closer to the murderous policies of the regime than ever before.

When Germans gathered to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in May 2005, the talk everywhere turned to the suffering of German civilians. Perhaps understandably given their age, it was the generation of war children which took centre stage, as journalists, psychotherapists and historians tried to interpret what it meant for those aged between 65 and 75 to have mass bombing and mass flight amongst their earliest and deepest memories.

In all wars, children are victims. The Second World War differed in the unprecedented extent to which this was true. At least one million Jewish children perished in the 'final solution', and we still do not know how many of the 216,000 victims of medical killing were children. Children were shot by German soldiers and militia men in droves in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union. Starvation and disease killed the elderly and the very young throughout occupied Europe, but especially in the East. And children were incinerated with their mothers in the fire-

storms of Hamburg, Dresden, Hildesheim, Darmstadt and a host of German cities, or froze to death in the mass flight of German civilians along the snow-bound roads from Silesia and East Prussia in 1945. And still greater numbers of children suffered in the war, losing their homes and belongings, their parents or older siblings.

But being a victim of war carries many different possible meanings, and those who want to extend this status to German civilians in general, and to the generation of 'war children' in particular, are treading on morally and politically cluttered ground. In the 1950s, the West German government published a multi-volume compilation of German eye-witness accounts of flight and expulsion from Eastern Europe. Much of this had a deliberately self-exculpatory purpose: in these accounts, the 'golden age' of normality ended, not with the German invasions of 1938, 1939 and 1941, but only with the approach of the Red Army in 1944 and 1945. And this matched a West German diplomatic stance which anticipated using German suffering to counter the claims of its East European neighbours in eventual peace negotiations. That this did not happen, probably has more to do with the fact that no peace treaties were negotiated than with the moral and political stance of West German politicians in the postwar decade: certainly, in the event of the treaty Adenauer did sign, in Moscow in October 1955, much was made in the West German press about the suffering of the last 10,000 German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, who were now released¹.

The child's perspective appealed to West German writers like Heinrich Böll in the early 1950s as they looked for symbols of hope and regeneration in the post-war world. But as the literary critic and survivor of the Warsaw ghetto Marcel Reich-Ranicki remarked in an acid review of Böll's early work, the limited horizon of the child could also provide

1 R. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berkeley, 2001, chapters 3 and 4; L. Niethammer, 'Privat – Wirtschaft. Erinnerungsfragmente einer anderen Umerziehung' in his (ed.), *Hinterher merkt man, daß es richtig war, daß es schiefgegangen ist. Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, Bonn, 1983, pp. 29–34; M. Beer, 'Im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Das Grossforschungsprojekt "Dokumentation der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa"', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 49, 1998, pp. 345–89; F. Biess, 'Survivors of totalitarianism: returning POWs and the reconstruction of masculine citizenship in West Germany, 1945–1955', in H. Schissler (ed.), *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968*, Princeton, NJ, 2001, pp. 57–82, and his *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany*, Princeton, 2006; H. Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur*, Hamburg, 2001, pp. 314–23.

an excuse for avoiding all the broader issues of the Nazi war of annihilation waged in the East².

The current revival of public discussion of German suffering in the war has a different vocabulary and carefully eschews the relativisation of the Holocaust and the *ressentiment* which underscored so many contributions during the 1950s. Indeed, the one group of Germans strikingly absent from these new chronicles is the overwhelming majority of the Third Reich's war dead – soldiers. Some 400,000 German civilians were killed by Allied bombing; an unknown number, perhaps over one million, died in the mass flights and post war expulsions from Eastern Europe. But 4.8 million German soldiers died in the war. Whereas Andreas Hillgruber was all too happy to invoke the memory of their sacrifice in the *Historikerstreit* of 1986 to hold out against a Holocaust-centred interpretation of the Nazi period, and whereas conservatives condemned the exhibition on Wehrmacht 'atrocities' in the 1990s for slandering military honour, now these voices have fallen silent. With them died the hard talk of moral equivalence of Nazism and Stalinism, or of killing Jews and resisting the Red Army³.

What we find now is something different, a soft talk of emotional equivalence through a general emphasis on innocence, victimhood and trauma. This is the talk not of the destruction of nations but of the suffering of individuals. And this has set the tone for the handful of works which have now appeared based on interviews with war children. For the first time, interviewers have wanted them to tell their stories. Amid talk of 'breaking the silence', the new emphasis has been on the worst moments of their wars, on bombing, flight and hunger. Seeking to give voice to the suffering of the innocent is not unfamiliar: for the same means have been used to present the memories of Holocaust survivors, in the process 'empowering' the victims by according them high moral standing and political recognition⁴.

2 H. Böll, *Haus ohne Hüter*, Cologne, 1954, and the critique by M. Reich-Ranicki, *Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost: Prosa seit 1945*, Munich, 1963, p. 133; on this see also D. Reed, *The Novel and the Nazi Past*, New York and Frankfurt, 1985, p. 55; D. Pinfold, *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature: The Eye among the Blind*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 27 and 149–50.

3 Numbers of German military dead, R. Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Munich, 1999, pp. 238–246 and 316–18; A. Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*, Berlin, 1986; on the Wehrmacht exhibition, see O. Bartov, A. Grossman and M. Nolan (eds), *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 2002; on the *Historikerstreit*, see the original collected volume: R. Augstein et al., *Historikerstreit*, Munich, 1987; more recently, W. Wippermann, *Wessen Schuld? Vom Historikerstreit zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse*, Berlin, 1997.

4 H. Lorenz, *Kriegskinder: Das Schicksal einer Generation Kinder*, Munich, 2003; S. Bode,

But recognition as a victim can also have a curiously disempowering effect, as people who in fact had to use all their ingenuity and energy to survive terrible predicaments are turned into the passive playthings of history. With the best of empathetic intentions, our culture turns to notions like victimhood and trauma with an ease which obscures both the past and these terms' own moral and political significance. They give suffering a particular emotional colouring, highlighting innocence and recovery, and the redemptive sides of pain, whilst casting its destructive side into deep shadow: where in all this talk of suffering and fear are we to find kindred emotions such as hatred and self-hatred, rage and envy?

National and personal redemption in the wake of defeat is not a new idea. The German Right of the 1920s was unanimous in staking militant claims about the power of the 'blood sacrifice' made by the defeated on the battle fields of the First World War, and the 1950s articulated a more pacific vision of national rebirth through reconstruction. But now the redemptive message is quite a different one, a search for cure through public talk. Steeped in liberal and human rights' centred values, the current discussion draws on a tradition which was developed in the 1960s and 1970s for speaking about German guilt. This is a tradition of testifying in public, treating public debate as itself a kind of social therapy, as if society can cleanse itself by variously and successively talking out the Nazi past, the Holocaust, collaboration in the former East Germany with the Stasi, or – most recently – the suffering of the war itself. This is in many ways a Protestant tradition, given secular guise by the intellectual framework of a collective psychoanalysis first marshalled by the Mitscherlichs in their classic *The Inability to Mourn*. Whether individual therapy is ever so straight-forward or so in step with public discussion is of course as doubtful as the claim that a whole society is in the grip of the same shared pathology⁵.

The chief difference between the earlier debates of the 1980s about German guilt and the current one about German suffering is one of moral and emotional stance. As former Hitler Youths reread their teenage diaries in the late 1980s and asked themselves hard questions about their own moral responsibility for Nazism, they were deliberately

Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen, Stuttgart, 2004; H. Schulz, H. Radebold and J. Reulecke, *Söhne ohne Väter: Erfahrungen der Kriegsgeneration*, Berlin, 2004; on Holocaust testimony, T. Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, Oxford, 1994; and P. Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience*, London, 1999.

⁵ On the cult of the fallen soldier, see G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York and Oxford, 1990; A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, Munich, 1967.

confronting their former selves as if they had become not merely older, but also morally separate persons⁶. By contrast, little self-interrogation is demanded of witnesses once their childhood suffering is endowed with the unquestionable status of 'survivor testimonies'. And this easily shades into an uncritical kind of narcissistic self-absorption. Just as Reich-Ranicki found that Böll's early work used the limited horizon of the child to avoid the wider perspective of the Nazi war of annihilation waged in the East, so the new works on German war children help to restore an exclusive and homogeneous national narrative of the war, as if there were not millions of forced foreign labourers – let alone concentration camp prisoners – in their midst. Films like *Downfall* cast this paean to the suffering of the German people at the hands of the Nazis and the Soviets into the visual poetry of the big screen as the real tragedy of the war.

Such muted passivity is distorting not because Germans did not suffer in the war – they clearly did – but because they did not suffer passively. If we delve into how suffering and sacrifice were discussed in Germany during the middle years of the Second World War, we find a quite different picture. As Goebbels knew well, in German *Opfer* means both suffering and sacrifice, and the word was used incessantly to link the 'terror bombing' of German civilians with the blood 'sacrifices' needed to win the war at the front. There was nothing passive about the wartime notion of national suffering. Nor did it appeal only to Nazi propagandists. During 1943 and 1944, the mass bombing of German cities brought non-Nazis closer to sharing in Hitler's apocalyptic visions of total victory or total defeat than ever before. It was precisely visions of German suffering and sacrifice which made possible a greater brutalisation of German society and convergence with Nazi values than at any other time during the Third Reich.

In 1987, Wilhelm Körner noticed an advertisement in *Die Zeit* asking for diaries and letters from the war. It had been placed by the novelist Walter Kempowski, and after attending one of the author's public readings, Körner dug out his own war diary and sent it in. With a thirty-two year career in the upper schools of Bremerhaven behind him, Wilhelm was shocked to reread the steady Gothic script of his teenage diary and to rediscover that earlier self whose passionate convictions

6 See N. Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis*, London, 2005, introduction; G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Die Hitlerjugend-Generation: Biographische Thematisierung als Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Essen, 1986; D. von Westernhagen, *Die Kinder der Täter*, Munich, 1987; P. Sichrovsky, *Schuldig geboren: Kinder aus Nazifamilien*, Cologne, 1987; and esp., D. Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989.

were so jarringly different from those he now held. ‘I very much wish,’ he commented in his covering letter, ‘that I had thought differently at the time, that I had seen through this disastrous regime and waged spiritual resistance against it.’ Instead, the enthusiastic Hitler Youth has become a committed member of the *Volkssturm*, and continued to set his hopes on miracle weapons until the Third Reich was finally defeated. There was a gap at the end of the war: it took Wilhelm a week before he could bear to pick up his pen again. When he did, on 16 May 1945, he poured out his misery:

The 9th of May will definitely count amongst the blackest days of German history. Capitulation! We youths of today had struck the word from our vocabulary, and now we have had to experience how our German people after an almost six-year encirclement has had to lay down its arms. And how bravely has our people borne all hardships and sacrifices.⁷

And on it went, for pages. These may have been the banalities of the age, the words he had heard from the radio and the Hitler Youth, school and his parents, and his friends and which continued to form his ideas and feelings after Goebbels’ voice had fallen silent on the airwaves. He belonged to a cohort of young Germans born at the end of the 1920s and start of the 1930s who were formed in the Hitler Youth, the anti-aircraft batteries of the *Flak* and in the *Volkssturm*. But Wilhelm Körner had believed in them, and he would have died for them.

Wilhelm Körner was far from alone in believing in the efficacy of the war and personal readiness for self-sacrifice till the end. In April 1945, the student Lore Walb reluctantly accepted the rationality of surrendering her small western town to the French, but confided to her diary how ‘most deeply shamed and humiliated’ she felt, grieving for the ‘millions of soldiers who have fought for years and are still fighting at the front for no purpose’. Nothing made sense at that moment⁸. As the Russians closed in on Berlin, another teenage girl committed her dilemmas to her diary. The daughter of anti-Nazi Social Democrats, she had finally come to hate the Nazis herself, and she did not think Berlin could or should be defended. But faced with the prospect that her brother Bertel would

7 Kempowski-Archiv, Nartum, 2035, Wilhelm K., b. 1929, letter to Walter Kempowski, 14 Oct. 1987: ‘Ich wünsche sehr, daß ich damals anders gedacht hätte, daß ich dieses unheilvolle Regime durchschaut und ihm geistigen Widerstand entgegengesetzt hätte’ and ‘“stinknormal”’. Diary for 23 Mar. 1942–29 May 1947: 16 May 1945: ‘Der 9. Mai, es wird wohl zu den schwarzen Tagen der deutschen Geschichte gehören. Kapitulation! Wir Jungen von heute hatten dieses Wort aus unserem Sprachschatz gestrichen, und nun mußten wir erleben, wie unser deutsches Volk nach einem fast 6 jährigen Ringen die Waffen strecken mußte. Und wie tapfer hatte das Volk alle Not und alle Opfer getragen.’

8 L. Walb, *Ich, die Alte – ich, die Junge, Konfrontation mit meinen Tagebüchern 1933–1945*, Berlin, 1997, pp. 333–4.

soon be fighting with the *Volkssturm* in the battle for Berlin, she wrote, ‘I’m terribly afraid for Bertel, because it would be so dreadful for mummy. I myself,’ she confessed chillingly, ‘would be ready to sacrifice him, Frau L. sacrificed her Life’s joy after all.’ Would Bertel’s death make her equal with her German teacher, Frau L, who had already lost a husband on the eastern front, and whom Liselotte idealised as the epitome of German womanhood?⁹

In seventeen year-old Liselotte’s case, this outlook went back to the middle years of the war. At the age of fourteen she had developed an overwhelming crush on her German teacher, the wife of a Prussian officer, the perfect ‘German woman’ Liselotte aspired to become. When the RAF embarked on its five-month ‘battle of Berlin’ in November 1943, it was the example of her teacher that helped Liselotte to maintain her composure as, night after night, she cowered in the cellar of her parents’ block of flats. By the new year, Liselotte could no longer free herself of her dread and fear during the daylight hours and her efforts were narrowing in focus: she must not, she repeated to herself like a refrain, break down. ‘As the bombs explode around you with unimaginable noise, death reaches for your heart with his icy hand,’ she wrote on 3 January 1944. ‘You have only one thought,’ she went on

“If only it would stop!” But it does not stop. You think, in a moment your nerves must crack, you’ll have to cry out, but you’re not allowed to, you have to keep your composure, you are not allowed to be weak, because that is what Frau L. told me ... Goebbels always talks about the power of strong hearts. If he had ever sat in an air raid shelter, he’d know how weak the human heart is unless it’s completely full of God ... human fear of the end is so unimaginably great that, confronted by near death, no strength and no submission to God’s will survives other than a quavering human heart.¹⁰

9 Liselotte G., I. Hammer and S. zur Nieden (eds), *Sehr selten habe ich geweint: Briefe und Tagebücher aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg von Menschen aus Berlin*, Zurich, 1992, p. 310: 17 Apr. 1945: ‘Ich wäre schon bereit zu sterben, nur habe ich Angst vor dem Todesgrauen im Keller. – Für Bertel fürchte ich nur, weil es für Mutti so schrecklich wäre. Ich selbst würde bereit sein, ihn zu opfern, Frau L. hat ja auch ihr Lebensglück geopfert.’

10 Liselotte G., in Hammer and zur Niedern, *Sehr selten habe ich geweint*, pp. 287 and 290–1: 29 Dec. 1943 and 3 Jan. 1944: ‘Nur einen Gedanken hast du: “wenn es doch aufhörte!” Aber es hört nicht auf, du meinst, im nächsten Augenblick müßten deine Nerven zerspringen, müßtest du aufschreien, aber du darfst es ja nicht, mußt ja Haltung bewahren, darfst nicht schwach werden, denn das hat mir Frau L. geboten, u. Ihr Wille u. Vorbild gilt auch in Todesangst, wo doch Ihre Liebe sogar zu schwach ist, gilt doch Ihr Vorbild. ... Göbbels [sic] redet immer von der Kraft der starken Herzen. Wenn er einmal im Luftschutzkeller gesessen hätte, wüßte er, wie schwach das Menschenherz ist, ist es nicht ganz von Gott erfüllt ... die menschliche Angst vor dem letzten ist so unvorstellbar groß, daß im Augenblick des unmittelbaren Todes doch nichts übrig bleibt von Stärke u. Ergebenheit in Gottes Willen, als ein zitterndes Menschenherz.’

But, as Liselotte communed with herself, turning over the examples of the proud Prussian German teacher whom she idealised, of her father who stomped around their flat muttering about revolution, and calling on God and Goebbels to guide her, she also found a way of going on. She found solace in the Gothic notion of sacrifice which would become more potent the longer the war lasted: “If victory is no longer to be had, then there is still honour”, shouted Teja to the Ostgoths, still fighting as they fell. Can one not shout to Germany’s enemies: “you can murder me, but you cannot kill me, for I am eternal!”¹¹

Seeing the war as a personal and moral test not just of their outward behaviour but also of their inner feelings seems to have affected teenage girls and boys equally. As a sixteen year-old *Flakhelfer*, Klaus Seidel, manned an anti-aircraft battery in Hamburg’s Stadtpark throughout the week of Operation *Gomorrha*, 25 July–3 August 1943. In the letters he wrote to his mother late at night by the light of the fire-storm, he maintained a far more level, matter of fact tone than the Police President achieved in his official report. Klaus never mentioned a single corpse, never referred to the hurricane-force wind, never described the complete destruction of whole stretches of the city in emotional tones, never admitted to his own fear or his comrades’ – except to say that he could not get through an attack without smoking, but even this was an acceptable military practice. When Klaus wanted his mother to know what they had gone through, he preferred to quote the senior lieutenant in his flak battery who had told him that the bombing of Hamburg was worse than anything he had experienced on the Polish or French campaigns¹². What it cost these teenage boys to summon up their cool poise is impossible to calculate, but they did so in the self-image of having finally grown up and entered the world of men. For them, the new airforce and naval uniforms were not only the realisation of a dream long-cherished through their years in the *Jungvolk* and Hitler Youth. The uniforms were also sacralised once these boys had withstood the ordeal of serving under fire.

It is often said that the Nazis stopped adolescents from developing a sense of responsibility by presenting them with a ready-made set of authoritarian precepts, which spoke to their emotional need to see things in black and white terms. It could also be said that the Nazis inculcated

11 Liselotte G., in Hammer and zur Niedern, *Sehr selten habe ich geweint*, pp. 289–290; 2 Jan 1944: “Gilt es nicht mehr den Sieg, so gilt es doch die Ehre”, rief Teja den untergehend noch kämpfenden Ostgoten zu. Kann man nicht doch den Feinden Deutschlands zuzurufen: Ihr könnt mich morden, aber töten könnt ihr mich nicht, denn ich bin ewig!

12 Kempowski-Archiv, Nartum 4709/2, Klaus Seib to mother, 31. 7. 43.

an excessive sense of moral commitment, a personal responsibility to contribute to the war effort, which finally culminated in teenagers' willingness to sacrifice their own and others' lives in the final months of the war¹³.

The Allied bombing and the war on the eastern front confronted German society by the end of 1942 with a painful, frightening test of endurance, quite unlike the period of glorious victories in 1939–41. The war may have attracted only a minority of enthusiasts, but the prospect of defeat remained the worst eventuality that could befall the German nation, worse than the loss of a whole army at Stalingrad in January 1943, worse even than the destruction of Germany's second city, Hamburg, six months later, and certainly worse than the atrocities Germans were themselves committing on the eastern front. This moral ordering reflected both the widespread acceptance of a Nazi view of what the war was about and a lively appreciation of military realities which was often highly critical of the regime.

Despite Stalingrad and Hamburg, the military reality remained, until the summer of 1944, that the Wehrmacht still controlled the European continent from the Black Sea to the Channel ports and even the air war was not the simple battle between the RAF's Bomber Command and the civilian population, as its most recent historian, Jörg Friedrich, has depicted¹⁴. By March 1944, flak artillery and the night fighter squadrons of the Luftwaffe were able to force Bomber Command to abandon its strategy of defeating Germany from the air and to call off the bombing of Berlin after five months: the British losses over Berlin and Nuremberg were too great. Even after the Wehrmacht's great defeats on the eastern and western fronts in the summer of 1944, many people thought that its new lines along the Vistula and the West Wall would create a new, immobile war of position, ending in a compromise peace or the splitting of the Allied coalition. In other words, we need to think of German morale as able to recover from particular defeats, just as British morale had to do during the first three years of the war. Civilian morale did not simply collapse in 1943: if it had, why did German go on fighting so long? Rather, it fluctuated wildly in response to war news, and some of its most depressed moments are highly revealing about what German civilians believed¹⁵.

13 On arrested adolescent development, see Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–93.

14 See J. Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945*, Munich, 2002, and the recent debate about his work in Lothar Kettenacker (ed.), *Ein Volk von Opfern: Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940–45*, Berlin, 2003.

15 On the bombing war, see O. Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, Berlin, 1990; on the Wehrmacht, A. Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage: Die bewaffnete Macht in der End-*

There was a darker side to German civilian morale. A string of letters to Goebbels survives from May and June 1944, advising the regime to use the Jews as human shields within German cities – even after they had in fact been deported – banning them from entering air-raid shelters and publishing the numbers of Jews killed afterwards, so that ‘Even if this means has no effect on the terror from the air, at least this plague on humanity ought to be wiped out in part by the actions of their own people in the enemy countries.’ Other proposals built on the German practice in occupied Europe of meting out collective reprisals: leaflets should be dropped informing ‘the British and American government [sic] after every terror attack in which civilians are killed that ten times as many Jews and Jewesses and their children have been shot’. And a number of letter writers explicitly argued that such measures should have the effect on the British and Americans which the ‘new weapons’ and ‘retaliation’ had failed to deliver. Irma J., who called on Goebbels ‘on behalf of all German women and mothers and the families of those living here in the Reich’ to ‘have 20 Jews hanged for every German killed in the place where our defenceless and priceless German people have been cowardly and bestially murdered by the terror-flyers’, also confessed to her own feelings of helplessness: ‘because we have no other weapon available’. K. von N. took the same view, adding that this form of ‘retaliation’ against the Allies had the ‘additional advantage of not putting our pilots at risk’. ‘You should see,’ he opined, ‘how quickly the terror will cease!’¹⁶

The sense of helplessness and vulnerability which fuelled this murderous rage is perhaps most evident in another letter from Berlin, written by Georg R. on 1 June 1944. Headed, ‘I receive my letters *poste*

phase der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft 1944 bis 1945, Munich, 2005; R.-D. Müller and H.-E. Volkmann (eds), *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, Munich, 1999, esp. contributions by Th. Kühne and B. Ziemann, pp. 534–49 and 589–613; and on civilian morale see Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, chapters 8–10.

¹⁶ See M. Steinert, *Hitlers Krieg und die Deutschen*, Düsseldorf, 1970, pp. 260–1. Here, BA, R55, 571, 46: Kurt L., 18 May 1944: ‘der amerikanischen und britischen Regierung ist mitzuteilen, daß für jeden Terrorangriff, bei dem Zivilpersonen getötet werden, die zehnfache Anzahl Juden und Jüdinnen und deren Kinder erschossen werden. ... Ich glaube, daß die jüdischen Drahtzieher dieses Krieges ihre Terrorangriffe einstellen werden, wenn sie damit rechnen müssen, daß ihre Glaubensgenossen dafür zur Rechenschaft gezogen werden.’ BA, R55, 571, 145: 4 June 1944, Irma J.: ‘Im Sinne aller deutschen Frauen u Mütter u der hier im Reich lebenden Familien fordern wir ... sollen u müssen für jeden deutschen Menschen 20 Juden, ganz gleich von wo sie hergeholt werden in diesem Ort erhängt werden, in dem unsere wehrlosen u kostbaren deutschen Menschen von den Terrorfliegern feige u bestialisch gemordet worden sind.’ ‘... weil uns gar keine andere Waffe zur Verfügung steht.’ BA, R55, 571, 240: K. von N.: ‘Sie sollen sehen, wie rasch der Terror aufhört!’ ‘Das hat dabei den Vorteil, dass wir bei der Vergeltung unsere Flieger nicht der Gefahr auszusetzen brauchen.’

restante, because in the meantime I have been burned out once and bombed out twice', Georg R. reminded the *Reichsminister* of his letter of a year earlier, and entitled his proposal, 'No annihilation of the German people and German lands but complete annihilation of the Jews'. Instead of expelling all the Jews from Germany, he had a new idea: 'I propose that we should announce with an *ad hoc* plebiscite that, with immediate effect, we are not going to attack any towns or cities in England any more and hence the enemies may also no longer attack our cities and towns. ... Should our enemies nonetheless dare to attack even one of our towns or cities ..., then we shall have 10,000 or 20,000 or 30,000 Jews shot without mercy.'¹⁷

Goebbels' correspondents were sending back an amplified echo of the Nazi media. In April 1943, the Propaganda Minister had ordered anti-semitic propaganda to be stepped up, until 70–80 per cent of radio broadcasts were devoted to the Jewish question, Jewish guilt in causing the war and the fate awaiting Germany should the Jews take revenge. The new 'Jewish school calendar' issued in April 1943 for the new school year was full of 'quotes' of planned Jewish revenge on Gentiles. At the centre of the campaign against British and American 'plutocracy' lay the secret manipulations of the Jew, the single and unitary image of all Nazi propaganda in the last two years of the war.

If Goebbels' propaganda had only convinced Nazis, it might have had relatively little impact. But, as Victor Klemperer found out, Goebbels' orchestration of the Jew as the true protagonist in the war provided a focus for the fears and disorientation felt by people who were not Nazis and who would have been horrified at the idea of shooting Jewish hostages. The nice factory foreman, a fellow veteran of the First World War who had sympathised with Klemperer on 12 March 1944 for having lost his academic job just because he was Jewish, turned a week later to the idea of Jewish 'billionaires' as he cast about helplessly to give

17 BA, R55, 571, pp. 123–126, Georg R., 1 June 1944: 'Ich empfangе meine Briefe postlagernd, weil ich inzwischen einmal ausgebrannt und zweimal ausgebombt wurde. Zweiter Teil meiner Darlegung von 4. 6. 43:
Keine Vernichtung des deutschen Volkes
und des deutschen Landes
sondern
gänzliche Vernichtung der Juden
... Demzufolge schlage ich vor, dass durch eine Volksabstimmung *ad hoc* und anschließend veröffentlicht wird, dass ab sofort wir in England keinerlei Städte oder Ortschaften mehr angreifen und demzufolge auch die Feinde unsere Städte nicht mehr angreifen dürfen. ... Sollten die Feinde es dennoch wagen, auch nur eine unserer Städte oder Ortschaften, ... anzugreifen, dann werden wir 10,000 oder 20,000 oder 30,000 Juden rücksichtslos erschossen lassen.'

Klemperer a reason for the latest, senseless American bombing of Hamburg. For people like him, the abstract idea of a 'Jewish plutocracy' offered an explanation which cut across their personal liking for individual Jews. To make sense of the ferocity of the aerial onslaught on the civilian population, the 'terror bombing' required a conspiracy by an enemy who was filled with an implacable hatred of Germans and Germany¹⁸. As German cities burned and turned to rubble and the number of military and civilian dead rose, it did seem to many adults and teenagers as if this was a war of annihilation being waged against the German people by implacable enemies. The apocalyptic 'all or nothing' tone which Hitler's speeches had always had now suited the circumstances of 'total war' as never before.

Belief in the 'Jewish' bombing went beyond hard-line Nazis, and was strengthened by more than just anti-semitic propaganda. It was conditioned by the widespread knowledge of the mass shooting of Jews in the East. The cultivated patrician, Lothar de la Camp, wrote from Hamburg to his siblings on 28 July 1943 in the midst of Operation *Gomorrha*: 'In private and even in bigger circles, simple people, the middle classes and the rest of the population make repeated remarks about the Allied attacks being the revenge for our treatment of the Jews.' In Munich, Essen, Hamburg and Kiel, voices were overheard that summer making the same point. Over ten per cent of letters written to Goebbels in mid-August protested against the anti-semitic campaign. Some pointed out that people had other worries; others that the Germans were now being punished for what they had done to the Jews. By 2 September 1943, the *Stuttgarter NS-Kurier* felt that it had to publicly rebutt the argument that world Jewry would not have fought Germany had Germany not solved the Jewish question so radically. Goebbels' anti-semitic rhetoric was beginning to rebound on the regime. But he had nonetheless won a deeper victory. For neither Lothar de la Camp, nor the people he was citing had any doubt that the Jews had the means to launch such devastating attacks on Germany. In spreading this sense of Jewish power, Goebbels' propaganda about the Jewish 'plutocracy' had done its work well, even if its present effect was to make Germans feel anything but confident¹⁹.

18 See V. Klemperer, *To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer*, 2, London, 1999, pp. 289 and 291: 12 and 19 Mar. 1944, and his *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, London, 2000, pp. 172–81.

19 See D. Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution. Public Opinion under Nazism*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1992, pp. 145 and 147, and his 'German public awareness of the final solution', in D. Cesarani (ed.), *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, London, 1994, pp. 215–27, citing Hermann Hirsch in *Stuttgarter NS-Kurier*, 2 Sept. 1943; also

This pessimistic understanding of the national situation rose and fell in waves as the news from the different fronts altered during the long middle phase of the war. When the Americans reached Aachen in September 1944 they found a population which expected to be collectively punished for what had been done to the Jews²⁰. But even critical and unhappy citizens had assimilated and made their own the deeper assumption that the Jews had the unity and the power to direct the Allied bombing campaign. Goebbels was right to think that he could use fear and atrocity propaganda to prevent depressed civilian morale from collapsing into outright defeatism. In this crucial sense, Goebbels had got his message of a world Jewish conspiracy across successfully.

By the final phase of the war, it was clear to most Germans that retaliation against England had no real chance of success. Already in 1943, the millions of forced foreign workers were running the risk of being treated as scape-goats for the impotent rage people felt after bombing raids. And, as German air defences finally crumbled and the bombing became far heavier from the autumn of 1944 than it had ever been, fear and rage focused on the 'Russian' workers more murderously than ever. After air raids, looting was widespread amongst all sections of the population – as even German police statistics confirm. But, by the last phase of the war, the merest suspicion of looting by 'Eastern' workers became a license for murder. On 14 October 1944, the Duisburg *Volkssturm* stood a 'suspicious-looking' Russian working in a clean-up squad against a wall in the street and shot him, simply because they had been told that some Russian POWs had been eating jam in the basement of a demolished house nearby. In the final phase of the war, such lynch violence became commonplace in the Ruhr. This thirst for revenge may have been driven by fear and feelings of being a helpless victim of the 'Anglo-American terror bombing', but it also testifies to the spontaneous upsurge of a brutal violence with which current discussions of civilian suffering fail to engage.

K. Schickert, 'Kriegsschauplatz Israel' in the Hitler Youth journal *Wille und Macht* for Sept./Oct. 1943; J. Noakes, *Nazism*, Exeter, 1998, vol. 4, pp. 496–8; Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, 369; F. Trommler, '“Deutschlands Sieg oder Untergang”. Perspektiven aus dem Dritten Reich auf die Nachkriegsentwicklung', in Th. Koebner, G. Sautermeister and S. Schneider (eds), *Deutschland nach Hitler*, Opladen, 1987, pp. 214–228. L. de la Camp, cited in R. Hauschild-Thiessen (ed.), *Die Hamburger Katastrophe vom Sommer 1943 in Augenzeugenberichten*, Hamburg, 1993, p. 230: 28 July 1943; Ursula von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen 1942–1945*, Munich, 1981, p. 40: 3 Mar. 1943.

²⁰ D. Bankier, 'German public awareness of the final solution', p. 216, based on American Intelligence reports from the 12th Army Group.

Conclusion

By the time its political structures had collapsed on 8 May 1945, much of Nazism's racial and moral ordering had been imprinted deeply upon German society, down to the quite personal ways in which people who did not particularly favour the regime drew their commonsense notions about crime, war guilt, black-marketeering, Russian 'hordes' and foreign 'Displaced Persons'. Although the regime had set out from the beginning to transform the values and loyalties of its citizens, it was neither regime propaganda nor the period in which the regime was most popular which played the decisive part in this process.

While Hitler had basked in a miraculous glow after the *Anschluss* with Austria and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, most Germans were deeply relieved to have avoided war and many – especially in the big cities – had looked askance at the violence and destruction of the November 1938 pogrom against the Jews which followed Hitler's triumph at Munich. Belief in Hitler in the 1930s did not depend on sharing his view that war was a spiritual necessity. It took mass bombing to make large numbers of Germans share in his 'either everything / or nothing' vision of the war. Many came to share this view of their nation's predicament unwillingly and unhappily. The same events that served to imprint the moral brutality of Nazism on those who had maintained their distance from the Nazis before 1939 also undermined confidence in the Nazi party, its media, its leaders and, ultimately, even Hitler himself. It was above all in the new apocalyptic world of the German cities – the very terrain on which Nazism had been least secure in the 1930s – that the casual brutality Nazism had encouraged against the racially inferior would take on mass proportions. To investigate how German victimhood looked during the Second World War itself is to discover something much more disturbing than the many very real individual traumas. It is to discover a society engulfed by an apocalypse of its own making.