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Kylie Giblett

The version that wanted to be written

Writing the Nazi past
as historiographic metafiction

ESV ERICH
SCHMIDT
VERLAG



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By
Kylie Giblett

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1. No German identity without Auschwitz: Germans as perpetrators, Germans as victims and the disrupting impact of historiographic metafiction

“*So viel Hitler war nie*”¹. With this observation, historian Norbert Frei summed up the overwhelming presence of the Nazi past in German public discourse in 2004. His observation can also be applied to the whole period from German unification in 1990 until at least the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2005 and beyond through to 2010². During this period, the Nazi past was a major feature of German cultural life, from public debates, through historical exhibitions and memorials, to novels, films and television shows. For the cultural industry, engagement with the events of the Third Reich and their extended aftermath was practically unavoidable. The unification of Germany in 1990 set in train a number of dramatic changes in Germany’s political, social and cultural landscape which necessitated a reconstitution of German identity, including a reassessment of the newly unified nation’s approach to its common Third Reich heritage. At the beginning of this new era, the Germans needed to decide which “version” of their past they wished to tell. They spent the first 20 years of the Berlin Republic engaged in furious cultural debate over this very question.

The widespread discussion of the Nazi past in the two decades following 1990 gave rise to a number of controversies, prompting Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove to comment that “[i]n reunified Germany, the past is thus not so much another country where they do things differently, but a hotly contested territory”³. They have described Germany’s post-unification

¹ Frei, Norbert “Gefühlte Geschichte: Die Erinnerungsschlacht um den 60. Jahrestag des Kriegsendes 1945 hat begonnen. Deutschland steht vor einer Wende im Umgang mit seiner Vergangenheit” *Die Zeit* 21 October 2004.

² Donahue has also identified this as a period of particularly intense engagement with the Holocaust in German culture, German literature, and German studies, an intensity which has now cooled: Donahue, William Collins “Aber das ist alles Vergangenheitsbewältigung: German Studies’ Holocaust Bubble and Its Literary Aftermath” in McGlothlin, Erin and Kapczynski, Jennifer M *Persistent Legacy: The Holocaust and German Studies* Rochester: Camden House, 2016: 80–104.

³ Fuchs, Anne and Cosgrove, Mary “Introduction: Germany’s Memory Contests and the Management of the Past” in Fuchs, Anne, Cosgrove, Mary and

discourse about the past as being characterised by “memory contests” in which different groups and individuals in a pluralistic memory culture advance their own identity-forming narratives about the past without any one narrative necessarily gaining the upper hand⁴. Chloe Paver has similarly described the reassessment of German identity during this period as a time of “shifting memories – ongoing social negotiations about the way in which the Third Reich and its crimes are to be remembered”⁵. The fulcrum of many of these “memory contests” about German collective memory⁶ and national identity in the post-1990 period was the perpetrator/victim dichotomy. Throughout the period, narratives of the Nazi past in which Germans were depicted as perpetrators and those in which Germans were portrayed as victims competed with each other for dominance in German public discourse. In reality, the categories of “perpetrator” and “victim” are not always clear-cut and both terms encompass grey areas of greater complexity. Not all “perpetrators” are war criminals in the judicial sense, and not all “victims” are on par with the victims of Auschwitz. Perpetrators may also be victims and vice versa. However, the perpetrator/victim dichotomy has provided the flashpoint around which competing versions of the Nazi past have ignited, and it therefore provides a useful key for analysing the German approach to that past in the post-unification period.

Literature has played an essential part in this post-unification reassessment of German identity, both as a reflector of and contributor to the public discourse on the subject of how Germans should remember their Nazi past. It has contributed significantly to the national memory culture and been understood as an important medium of cultural memory⁷. Indeed, Birgit

Grote, George *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990* New York: Camden House, 2006: 1–21 at 2.

⁴ Fuchs, Anne and Cosgrove, Mary “Introduction” *German Life and Letters* 59.2 (2006): 163–168 at 164; Fuchs, Anne and Cosgrove, Mary “Introduction: Germany’s Memory Contests and the Management of the Past” 2.

⁵ Paver, Chloe *Refractions of the Third Reich in German and Austrian Fiction and Film* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 at 1.

⁶ On collective, cultural and communicative memory, see Assmann, Jan *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* Munich: Verlag CH Beck, 1992 at 34–56; Assmann, Jan “Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität” in Assmann, Jan and Hölcher, Tonio *Kultur und Gedächtnis* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988: 9–19.

⁷ Hardtwig, Wolfgang “Zeitgeschichte in der Literatur 1945–2005: Eine Einleitung” in Schütz, Erhard and Hardtwig, Wolfgang *Keiner kommt davon: Zeitgeschichte in der Literatur nach 1945* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008: 7–25 at 13; 15; Nünning, Ansgar “Beyond the Great Story: Der

Neumann has described literature as a player in the battle for control of cultural memory, fulfilling its central function within memory culture by reintegrating different memory discourses, reviving forgotten or marginalised experiences, critically reflecting on the construction of memory, and through appropriation by the reader⁸. As a player in the “memory contests” which took place after the caesura of 1990, literature promoted positions on the perpetrator/victim dichotomy and fiction authors used it to influence the direction of that cultural debate.

Towards the end of the landmark novel of the period, Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*, the narrator Michael Berg reflects on the story he has just read to the reader and states that: “*Die geschriebene Version wollte geschrieben werden, die vielen anderen wollten es nicht*”⁹. When German fiction authors wrote about their country’s Nazi past during the 20 years of hotly debated “memory contests” following 1990, which “version” of the past did they choose to write? One in which Germans are portrayed as perpetrators? Or one which places the emphasis on Germans as victims? In this book, I seek to answer this question by conducting a detailed textual analysis of four novels published in the period 1990–2010 as a key to understanding German literary approaches to the Nazi past during this crucial period in the formation of Germany’s post-unification identity: Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*, *Unscharfe Bilder* by Ulla Hahn¹⁰, *Himmelskörper* by Tanja

postmoderne historische Roman als Medium revisionistischer Geschichtsdarstellung, kultureller Erinnerung und metahistoriographischer Reflexionen” *Anglia* 117.1 (1999): 15–48 at 21. See generally Neumann, Birgit “Literarische Inszenierungen und Interventionen: Mediale Erinnerungskonkurrenz in Guy Vanderhaeghes *The Englishman’s Boy* und Michael Ondaatjes *Running in the Family*” in Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses: Konstruktivität-Historizität-Kulturspezifität* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004: 195–215; Erll, Astrid “Literatur als Medium des kollektiven Gedächtnisses” in Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft: Theoretische Grundlegung und Anwendungsperspektiven* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005: 249–276.

⁸ Neumann, Birgit “Literarische Inszenierungen” 213.

⁹ Schlink, Bernhard *Der Vorleser* Zurich: Diogenes, 1997 (first published 1995) at 205–206.

¹⁰ Hahn, Ulla *Unscharfe Bilder* Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005 (first published 2003).

Dückers¹¹, and *Flughunde* by Marcel Beyer¹². All four of these novels approach the Nazi past by incorporating discussions of postmemory and historiography which mark them out as examples of historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction thematises critiques of historiography which suggest that there are many “versions” of the past and that the objective “truth” about the past cannot be known. In doing so, it has the potential to fundamentally disrupt the categories of perpetrator and victim by destabilising the basis on which we judge guilt and innocence. To fully explore the way in which German authors have dealt with the perpetrator/victim dichotomy in the crucial period of 1990–2010, this book also analyses *Der Vorleser*, *Unscharfe Bilder*, *Himmelskörper*, and *Flughunde* as historiographic metafiction with a view to deepening our understanding of the presentation of the Nazi past in post-1990 German literature and enriching our understanding of the legacy of the Third Reich in contemporary German society.

1.1 Willing executioners? Germans as perpetrators/victims in German culture after 1945

Literary engagement with the “memory contests” of the post-unification period took place within the broader context of a more general cultural reconsideration of the place of the Nazi past in the newly unified German present. The unification of Germany in 1990 intensified the need to establish a common German identity following decades of separation, an important part of which involved integrating attitudes to the most recent common past of East and West, namely the Third Reich. During the course of the two decades after unification, versions of Germany’s past which portrayed Germans as perpetrators vied with those which portrayed Germans as victims for the upper hand in German public discourse and the pendulum of public memory swung back and forth between these two poles. The emphasis on Germans as perpetrators can be seen in the controversy surrounding Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which argued that most ordinary Germans of the Third Reich shared Hitler’s fanatical antisemitism, and that this was the primary reason for their involvement in the Holocaust. Although the book was widely criticised on historiographical grounds, many positions taken in the debate surrounding it showed that its portrayal of Germans as

¹¹ Dückers, Tanja *Himmelskörper* Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005 (first published 2003).

¹² Beyer, Marcel *Flughunde* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996 (first published 1995).

intentional perpetrators resonated with the German public¹³. Another example of the focus on Germans as perpetrators was the exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* mounted by the Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung, initially in Hamburg and subsequently in other cities around Germany and Austria from 1995 to 1999¹⁴. The exhibition aimed to debunk the myth of the *saubere Wehrmacht* by showing (primarily by means of photographic evidence) that not only the SD and the SS, but also ordinary *Wehrmacht* soldiers had been involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity on the Eastern Front in the Second World War. The exhibition gave rise to a significant debate as to whether *Wehrmacht* soldiers, who made up the majority of German men involved in military action, should be viewed as perpetrators rather than victims. The emphasis on Germans as perpetrators in public discourse was also a feature in the discussion surrounding the 2005 opening of the *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* in Berlin. Also known as the *Holocaust Mahnmal*, this site of remembrance places the memory of Germany's guilt and shame right in the heart of its capital, something perhaps unique in the history of any country. As Frei has put it, "*Symbolpolitisch hat es das noch nicht gegeben: dass eine Nation im Zentrum ihrer Hauptstadt ihr größtes geschichtliches Verbrechen bekennt*"¹⁵. The dominance of this "Germans as perpetrators" narrative in

¹³ On the Goldhagen debate generally, see Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* London: Routledge, 2002 at 119–142; Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N *Lexikon der "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Deutschland: Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009 at 295–297.

¹⁴ Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944 Archiv* <<http://www.verbrechender-wehrmacht.de/docs/archiv/archiv.htm>> (accessed 8 October 2020); Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944. Begleitbroschüre zur Ausstellung* Hamburg: Hamburg Edition, 2004. See also generally Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past* 143–174; Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 288–290. A second version of the exhibition (significantly altered in response to criticism of the original exhibition by historians) toured from 2001 to 2004.

¹⁵ Frei, Norbert "Gefühlte Geschichte". Schmitz also comments that "Germany is virtually the only country in the Western world that commemorates the crimes committed in the name of the collective": Schmitz, Helmut *On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004 at 6. For a thorough discussion of the background to the Holocaust Mahnmal, see Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past* 194–232. See also Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 290–293.

Germany's public memory culture into the new millennium may be demonstrated by reference to the speeches given by Bundespräsident Joachim Gauck and Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel in January 2015 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. In his speech, Gauck highlighted the centrality of the Holocaust for German identity, saying "*Es gibt keine deutsche Identität ohne Auschwitz*"¹⁶. Similarly, Merkel described the memory of the Holocaust as something which "*prägt unser Selbstverständnis als Nation*" and emphasised the "*immerwährende Verantwortung*" of Germans to keep that memory alive¹⁷.

However, despite this predominance in German public discourse of the cultural memory paradigm in which Germans are seen primarily as perpetrators, the post-1990 period also witnessed a renewed interest in German victimhood, particularly in the period after 2000. This interest centred on the suffering of German civilians during the *Flucht und Vertreibung* of millions of Germans from Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War and during the Allied bombing of German cities such as Dresden, as well as on the suffering of the "ordinary soldier" in the difficult conditions of the Eastern Front and on the rape of German women by Red Army soldiers. The focus on "Germans as victims" was something of a mass media phenomenon, with Guido Knopp's history programmes on ZDF television attracting large audiences¹⁸, and news magazine *Der Spiegel* publishing several special issues on the subject¹⁹. A number of historical and literary contributions were also influential in turning the public focus towards German victimhood, including Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand*, WG Sebald's *Lufkrieg und Literatur*,

¹⁶ Gauck, Joachim *Bundespräsident Joachim Gauck zum Tag des Gedenkens an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus am 27. Januar 2015 in Berlin* <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/01/150127-Gedenken-Holocaust.pdf.jsessionid=76AA7AA99B9F033A831F907ADED99588.2_cid379?__blob=publicationFile> (accessed 8 October 2020).

¹⁷ Merkel, Angela *Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel anlässlich der Gedenkveranstaltung des Internationalen Auschwitzkomitees zum 70. Jahrestag der Befreiung des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz-Birkenau am 26. Januar 2015* <<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-anlaesslich-der-gedenkveranstaltung-des-internationalen-auschwitz-komitees-zum-70-jahrestag-der-befreiung-des-konzentrationslagers-auschwitz-birkenau-am-26-januar-2015-431116>> (accessed 8 October 2020).

¹⁸ Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 341–344.

¹⁹ "Die Flucht der Deutschen: Die Spiegel-Serie über Vertreibung aus dem Osten" *Spiegel special* 2/2002; "Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel: Der Bombenkrieg gegen die Deutschen" *Spiegel special* 1/2003.

and Günter Grass' *Im Krebsgang*²⁰. The resurgence of the "Germans as victims" narrative in the post-1990 period challenged the "Germans as perpetrators" paradigm for dominance in German public discourse, leading to concerns amongst some commentators that the new emphasis on German victimhood could lead to a reduced emphasis on German guilt and a relativisation of the suffering of Holocaust victims²¹.

Although German interest in the Nazi past and the perpetrator and/or victim roles played by Germans during the Third Reich was particularly intense in the period immediately after unification, the discourse about that past in many ways continued patterns established prior to 1990. Bill Niven has noted that the way in which the newly unified Germans dealt with their past after 1990 was, to an extent, "a continuation and radicalization of a process of coming to terms with the past, rather than its first phase", acknowledging the continuity of certain aspects of post-1990 *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with what had gone before²². Post-1990 debates about the past may have been shaped by the different social and political context brought about by unification, yet they tended to repeat many of the points characteristic of discussions of the Nazi past prior to 1990. In particular, the contest between perpetrator and victim narratives which was the focus for many of the debates about the past in the post-unification period can be seen as constituting the continuation of a pattern which may be observed in Germany's attempts to come to terms with its Nazi past since 1945. An emphasis on Germans as perpetrators and German guilt can, for example, be seen in the war crimes

²⁰ Friedrich, Jörg *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* Berlin: List Taschenbuch, 2004; Sebald, WG *Luftkrieg und Literatur* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001; Grass, Günter *Im Krebsgang* Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009. For overviews of the "Germans as victims" discourse from the late-1990s, see Schmitz, Helmut "Representations of the Nazi past II: German wartime suffering" in Taberner, Stuart *Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 at 142–145; Schmitz, Helmut "Introduction: The Return of Wartime Suffering in Contemporary German Memory Culture, Literature and Film" in Schmitz, Helmut *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007: 1–30.

²¹ Frei, Norbert "Gefühlte Geschichte"; Welzer, Harald "Zurück zur Opfergesellschaft: Verschiebungen in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 3 April 2002. For an alternative view see Assmann, Aleida "On the (In)Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering in German Memory" *German Life and Letters* 59.2 (2006): 187–200 at 197–198.

²² Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past* 4.

trials²³, re-education campaigns and denazification procedures²⁴, and (arguably) the *Kollektivschuldthese*²⁵ imposed by the Western Allies in the immediate postwar years in West Germany and similar actions taken by the Soviet Union in East Germany during the same period²⁶. Some Germans also emphasised general German culpability for Nazi crimes during the postwar years and into the 1950s, including Karl Jaspers in his work *Die Schuldfrage*²⁷ and Bundespräsident Theodor Heuss in his insistence on German “collective shame”²⁸. Other instances in which the characterisation of Germans as perpetrators became the focus of public discourse about the Nazi past after 1945 include the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial of 1963–1965. Both of these trials made the German public more aware of the details of the Holocaust as well as debunking exculpatory myths, such as the idea that the perpetrators were monsters who were unlike the majority of ordinary Germans²⁹, and the assertion that the perpetrators were forced to take part in crimes due to *Befehlsnotstand*, whereby they were unable to refuse orders³⁰. The part played by ordinary Germans in the Holocaust was further cemented in the public imagination by the screening in West Germany in 1978 of the American television series

²³ Although the major war crimes trials at Nuremberg also tended to have the ironic effect of allowing the bulk of the German people to blame their leaders and exonerate themselves: see Fulbrook, *Mary German National Identity after the Holocaust* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999 at 50–51; 55.

²⁴ For a brief discussion of these actions taken by the Western Allies in occupied Germany, see Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 18–24.

²⁵ The idea that the Allies were imposing a *Kollektivschuldthese* on the German population was widely discussed in the postwar period, but the extent to which it was really practised by the Allies is debatable. See Frei, Norbert *1945 und wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009 at 159–169.

²⁶ Niven describes denazification in East Germany in Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past* 41–43.

²⁷ Jaspers, Karl *Die Schuldfrage: Von der politischen Hoffnung Deutschlands* Munich: Piper Verlag, 2012.

²⁸ Herf, Jeffrey *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997 at 312–331.

²⁹ Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in particular emphasised the very ordinariness of one of the Holocaust’s prime movers: Arendt, Hannah *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* London: Penguin Classics, 2006.

³⁰ Fulbrook, Mary 73.

*Holocaust*³¹, and examples of the continuing characterisation of Germans as perpetrators may be seen in a revival of interest in the memory of the Holocaust on the part of political dissidents in East Germany in the 1980s³², as well as in Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker's speech on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War which put remembrance of German victimhood firmly in the context of German perpetration³³.

This recurrent post-1945 narrative in which Germans were characterised as perpetrators faced competition throughout the period from a counter-narrative which understood Germans as the victims of Nazism and the ravages of war³⁴. Examples of this "Germans as victims" narrative can be seen in 1980s attempts by conservatives in West Germany to relativise the Holocaust and break free from the burden of the past, such as the visit by Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan to the military cemetery at Bitburg in 1985³⁵ and various positions put forward in the *Historikerstreit* of 1986³⁶. These 1980s controversies constituted something of a return to the understanding of Germans as

³¹ For a general overview, see Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 243–244.

³² Herf, Jeffrey 362.

³³ Von Weizsäcker, Richard *Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker bei der Gedenkveranstaltung im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestags zum 40. Jahrestag des Endes des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Europa am 8. Mai 1985 in Bonn* <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985.pdf?__blob=publicationFile> (accessed 8 October 2020). See Beattie, Andrew H "The Victims of Totalitarianism and the Centrality of Nazi Genocide: Continuity and Change in German Commemorative Politics" in Niven, Bill *Germans As Victims* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006: 147–163 at 154 for the view that von Weizsäcker's speech encapsulated the shift of focus away from German suffering towards German contrition and emphasised the primacy of the Holocaust and extent of Nazi criminality. See also Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 232–235 for a more critical view.

³⁴ Welzer has also pointed to the parallel continuation of German victimhood narratives in private family discourse, even when there was a focus on German perpetration at the public level: Welzer, Harald, Moller, Sabine und Tschuggnall, Karoline *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005.

³⁵ See Maier, Charles S *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988 at 9–16 and Herf, Jeffrey 351 for further detail.

³⁶ See Fischer, Torben and Lorenz, Matthias N 238–240 for an overview. For more detail, see Maier, Charles.

victims which had dominated discussions about the Nazi past in West Germany in the 1950s, particularly in the political realm. In West Germany in the 1950s, the government under Konrad Adenauer, in large part out of practical necessity and in order to achieve its political goals³⁷, tended to focus on issues which emphasised German victimhood. These included the return of the remaining German prisoners of war, assisting the families of dead or wounded soldiers, and dealing with the influx of millions of German *Vertriebenen*³⁸. When Adenauer asked in 1950 “*ob in der Geschichte jemals mit einer solchen Herzlosigkeit ein Verdikt des Elends und des Unglücks über Millionen von Menschen gefällt worden [sei]*”³⁹, he was referring, not to the Jews, but to Germans suffering as a result of the continuing detention of German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. The gradual dismantling of the denazification process and the reintegration into economic and social life of Germans compromised by their involvement with Nazism also encouraged Germans to see themselves as victims of “victor’s justice”⁴⁰.

The nature of “Germans as victims” narratives in East Germany was different, but such narratives were arguably more pervasive and more foundational in terms of national identity. In East Germany, the early postwar focus on German culpability was soon replaced by the politically motivated narrative of antifascism, which became the dominant mode in which East Germans were directed to view their past. Identifying Nazism with the capitalists in the West, the East German regime established a foundational ideology of “antifascism”, under which the “workers and peasants” of their new communist state were encouraged to consider themselves “antifascists”, thereby identifying themselves with communists and others who had been “antifascist” victims of Nazism⁴¹. This idea of antifascist victimhood was

³⁷ Herf, Jeffrey 267; 389.

³⁸ For a brief discussion of some of these issues, see Moeller, Robert G “The Politics of the Past in the 1950s: Rhetorics of Victimisation in East and West Germany” in Niven, Bill *Germans As Victims* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006: 26–42 at 30–34.

³⁹ Adenauer, Konrad *Erklärung des Bundeskanzlers Adenauer in der 94. Sitzung des Deutschen Bundestages zum Gedenktage für die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen 26 October 1950*

<<http://www.konrad-adenauer.de/dokumente/erklarungen/kriegsgefangene>> (accessed 8 October 2020).

⁴⁰ Frei has discussed this process in detail in Frei, Norbert *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. See also Fulbrook, Mary 51–55; 59–65.

⁴¹ Moeller, Robert G “The Politics of the Past in the 1950s” 29. See also Rothe’s discussion of antifascism as East Germany’s master commemorative

accompanied by official endorsement of the portrayal of East Germans as the victims of British and American bombing campaigns, particularly the bombing of Dresden⁴². The narrative of antifascist victimhood tended to have the effect of suppressing the memory of Jewish suffering in favour of the suffering of the communist opponents of Nazism⁴³ and remained the dominant public memory paradigm in East Germany until 1989⁴⁴.

In the contest between competing versions of Germans as perpetrators or victims since 1945, different perpetrator and victim narratives gained dominance at different times in both East and West Germany⁴⁵. Whilst both East and West Germany emphasised different iterations of the victimhood narrative in the 1950s, its dominance was displaced in West Germany by a Holocaust-centred memory regime which depicted Germans as perpetrators and was the dominant public memory paradigm in the West at the time of unification. However, regardless of the positions of dominance at any given time, the very fact of the continuous coexistence of and competition between perpetrator and victim narratives since 1945 suggests that German debates about the Nazi past have tended to crystallise around the perpetrator/victim dichotomy across the whole period. The discourse surrounding the question of whether Germans should be seen as perpetrators or victims has been central to discussions about German collective memory and identity, not only in the post-1990 debates, but since 1945. The continuing importance of the perpetrator/victim dichotomy for German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* following unification indicates that the oscillation between “Germans as

discourse in Rothe, Anne “Das Dritte Reich als antifaschistischer Mythos im kollektiven Gedächtnis der DDR: Christa Wolfs Kindheitsmuster als Teil- und Gegendiskurs” in Zuckermann, Moshe *Deutsche Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003: 87–111 at 92–102. See also Fulbrook, Mary 55–58.

⁴² Moeller, Robert G “The Politics of the Past in the 1950s” 29; Niven, Bill “The GDR and Memory of the Bombing of Dresden” in Niven, Bill *Germans As Victims* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006: 109–129.

⁴³ Rothe notes that the insistence of the East German regime on seeing the Holocaust through a Marxist lens negated the Holocaust as genocide because it viewed the “Jewish question” as subordinate to the class struggle: Rothe, Anne.

⁴⁴ Herf, Jeffrey 362; 393. See also Beattie, Andrew H 153.

⁴⁵ Frevert discusses the various portrayals of Germans as perpetrators or victims in both East and West Germany from 1945 through to the 1990s: see the chapters authored by Frevert in Assmann, Aleida and Frevert, Ute *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999.

perpetrators” and “Germans as victims” constitutes a key element in the quest to understand how German attitudes to Third Reich history developed in the decades after 1990 and provides an important frame for the analysis of how these competing “versions” of the Nazi past have been dealt with in post-unification literature.

1.2 Literary reflections of the perpetrator/victim dichotomy

Literature played a significant part in the intensive post-unification reassessment of German identity, both by holding up a mirror to the “memory contests” concerning which “version” of their Nazi past Germans should remember and by providing a direct contribution to the extensive public discourse on that subject. In doing so, literature of the 1990–2010 period in many ways continued a pattern it had been repeating in the decades following 1945. Indeed, literature has been an essential part of the way in which Germans have approached their Nazi past since the end of the Second World War. German authors have often played an active role in the field of memory politics⁴⁶, as can be seen in the memory debates inspired by authors such as Martin Walser, WG Sebald, and Günter Grass⁴⁷. Literature is an important contributor

⁴⁶ On the subject of German authors as public intellectuals and political figures generally, see Bullivant, Keith *The Future of German Literature* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994; Brockmann, Stephen *Literature and German Reunification* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. In relation to the position in East Germany specifically, see Bathrick, David *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

⁴⁷ On the controversy surrounding Walser’s 1998 Friedenspreisrede, his approach to writing about the Nazi past in his 1998 novel *Ein springender Brunnen*, and his subsequent debate with Ignatz Bubis, see Niven, Bill *Facing the Nazi Past* 173–193; Schödel, Kathrin “Martin Walser’s *Ein springender Brunnen* (A Gushing Fountain)” in Taberner, Stuart *The Novel in German Since 1990* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011: 108–122. On the discussion of Germans as victims of Allied bombing raids and the lack of representation of this in German literature sparked by Sebald’s 1997 lectures on the subject of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, see Arpaci, Annette Seidel “Lost in Translations? The Discourse of German Suffering and WG Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur*” in Schmitz, Helmut *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007: 161–179. On Grass’ *Im Krebsgang*, which (amongst other things) drew attention to German wartime suffering in the context of flight and expulsion, and the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, see Taberner, Stuart “Literary Representations in Contemporary German Fiction of the Expulsions of Germans from