

What does coming to terms with the past mean in the 'Berlin Republic' in 2007?

Jeffrey Herf

Editors Note: This is the English translation of a speech delivered on November 16, 2007 at the Schauspiel in Frankfurt/Main Germany in the 35th Annual Römerberggespräche (Römerberg Conversations).

*

From 1949 to today, in all three German post-war states, the Federal Republic, the German Democratic Republic and in unified Germany after 1989, the memory of the Holocaust and other crimes of the Nazi regime has had political consequences. To be sure, memory has had a great deal to do with memorial, days of memory and historical writing about the Nazi era and the Holocaust. But in the last sixty years the unspoken eleventh commandment of German politics after Hitler was more important than memorial and days of commemoration. It was that the German government and German society should do all it could to prevent a repetition of mass murder of the Jews. This, to quote Theodor Adorno, was the most important answer to the question he made famous: What does coming to terms with the past mean?

In the Federal Republic, coming to terms with the Nazi past had led to different political results such as financial restitution; delayed but important war crimes trials; reconciliation with France under Adenauer; new *Ostpolitik* with East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Soviet Union beginning with Willy Brandt; a 'special relationship' with Israel; and a general consensus that German democracy rested on an alert memory of the Nazi crimes and of the danger of totalitarian dictatorship. As I wrote in *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, the GDR drew wholly different lessons from the past. Astonishingly, its diplomacy played a role in supporting armed attacks on Israel in the Middle East as well as giving training and refuge to West German left-wing terrorists who also wanted to destroy Israel.

Yet both before and after 1989, despite repeated efforts to 'finally' draw a line under

HERF | The Berlin Republic and the Past

the past, a specifically West German tradition of memory of the crimes of the Nazi regime had become a firm and established component of the West German and then German *raison d'état*. Over time, a tradition that began with Theodor Heuss, Kurt Schumacher and others in the late 1940s not only survived but had become wider and deeper in German society. Konrad Adenauer contributed less than Heuss and Schumacher to this tradition. In the words of the German historian Norbert Frei, he advocated a policy of 'politics towards the past' (*Vergangenheitspolitik*) more than of 'coming to terms with the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). But even though Adenauer tolerated regrettable continuities in the Foreign Ministry or the *Bundeskriminalamt*, he also clearly understood the eleventh commandment as a practical political dictum. All in all, so have his successors.

So it was remarkable that only very few West German politicians, scholars and journalists showed much interest in the fact that East Germany supported attacks on Israel. The political scientist Sigrid Meuschel, of the University of Leipzig, who researched and criticized the anti-Semitism of the early 1950s in East Germany was a courageous exception. Her book *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR* was a path breaker for my own work in the archives of the SED [East German Socialist Unity Party] and the Stasi files, both of which hold the documents of the repression of 'the Jewish question' during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in winter 1952-53 in East Berlin. It was with a certain astonishment that I read the publication of the generally very interesting Enquete-Commission reports on the history of the 'SED Staat' because only a very small part of this enormous political and scholarly undertaking is devoted to the East German attack on Jews who were still very much alive.

Nevertheless, the Berlin Republic has not drawn a line under the past. The departure from the West orientation of previous decades did not take place. On the contrary, Helmut Kohl had even more emphatically stressed the importance of ties to the West while simultaneously supporting the construction of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and naming January 27th a day of memory to victims of the Holocaust. Here in Frankfurt/Main, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Thomas Schmid, in their book *Heimat Babylon* stimulated a debate about the long overdue change in German citizenship laws. In 1998, the German parliament brought this right into accord with universalist principles. As Anette Kahane and others working in the Amadeu Antonio Foundation (<http://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/>) in Berlin have stressed, since 1989, especially in the small towns and villages of the former East Germany, there have been a dreadful number of violent, racist attacks

by members of the neo-Nazi scene. Kahane has pointed to one source of this violence and the emergence of a violent Nazi scene as one result of the anti-Semitic clichés which for four decades were spread and propagated in East German society by state supported anti-Zionism. In so doing, this courageous woman has made an important contribution to coming to terms with both dictatorships.

All in all, despite new attacks against the place of Holocaust memory in the Berlin Republic, it remains firmly anchored in the political and intellectual establishment. The question, however, of what political consequences should and must be drawn from this memory, remains controversial. Since 1998, when Osama Bin Laden declared war on the United States and the Jews, and even more so after the mass murder in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, another question has moved to the center of our attention. It is: How will politicians, opinion makers, intellectuals and scholars within the Berlin Republic react to the contemporary radical anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism and, yes, a new totalitarianism that come not from Germany but rather from the camp of radical Islam. Will the intellectual arsenal that has been developed through many valuable studies dealing with the crimes of the Nazi past lie harmless on the bookshelf or will it be applied to the contemporary threat posed by the radical Islamists?

This evening, I don't want to rehearse the sad history of the trans-Atlantic conflict about the war in Iraq. As someone who supported—and still supports—the war I acknowledge to you that 'we,' that is, the United States, began this war on mistaken premises regarding weapons of mass destruction. We invaded with too few soldiers, unjustified assumptions about how long the war would last and with the application of painfully ahistorical analogies to the American occupation of Germany after World War II. When German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said to U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in Munich, 'I am not convinced' that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, I have to admit here openly that Fischer's scepticism proved to be correct.

But especially after President Bush replaced Rumsfeld with Robert Gates as US Secretary of Defense, and appointed David Petraeus as Commander of U.S. forces in Iraq I am still of the view that in time an Iraqi government can emerge that can defend itself and will not collapse into a reservoir for terror and weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, a political and military collapse of the American enterprise in Iraq (due to a premature withdrawal of our forces) would be a catastrophe for Germany, the European Union, global security and peace. It would also be

HERF | The Berlin Republic and the Past

an enormous victory for the forces of Islamist terror, in fact a victory of greater historical significance than was the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1979.

Tonight, I am not going to revive the arguments about the war in Iraq. Rather, my key point is the following: today, coming to terms with the crimes of the Nazi past must not only mean a continuing focus on the history of National Socialism in Germany and Europe. Our view should also extend beyond Europe's borders. As Mathias Kuentzel in *Jihad and Jew Hatred: Nazism, Islamism and the Origins of 9/11* (New York: Telos Press, 2007; originally, *Jihad und Judenhass: Über die neuen antijüdischen Krieg*, Freiburg: ca ira, 2002) and Michael Mallmann and Martin Cuppers in *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz: Das Dritte Reich, die Araber und Palästina* [Crescent and Swastika: The Third Reich, the Arabs and Palestine], German intellectuals and scholars have already done so. These three authors have shown us that the interaction and fusion of Islamic fundamentalism and the remains of fascist and Nazi ideologies did not first begin with the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 or 1956, with the Six Day War in 1967, the Iranian Revolution of the Mullahs in 1979, the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and certainly not with the foundation of al-Qaeda. The ideological inspiration of Islamist terror has an intellectual and cultural history that extends back into the 1930s and 1940s, in particular in the Moslem Brotherhood in Cairo. Of course, coming to terms with the Nazi past will naturally always primarily be preoccupied with German and European history on the continent of Europe. But this does not mean that it should not be Eurocentric.

This fall, at the American Academy in Berlin, I am working on a history of the diffusion of Nazism's radical anti-Semitism to the Middle East and to the Islamic world during the World War II and the Holocaust. Important documents are to be found in the Political Archives of the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin and in the Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*) in Berlin and Freiburg. But other very important documents lie elsewhere. Under the direction of Alexander Kirk, the American Ambassador to Egypt, American diplomats in Cairo during World War II tape recorded Nazi Germany's Arabic language short-wave radio broadcasts to the Middle East. They translated them into English and send verbatim transcripts of between 15 and 30 pages every week back to the United States State Department in Washington, D.C. In the last sixty years, so far as I've been able to determine, what I'll call 'the Kirk transcripts,' have lain unread in the National Archives of the United States, now located in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. I found them this summer. Hence, for the first time, they offer the most complete record of

Nazi radio propaganda and greatly enrich our historical knowledge regarding the diffusion of National Socialist ideas to the Middle East.

In view of the intensive preoccupation of German historical scholarship with the origins of National Socialism in the modernization crisis of the 19th and 20th century, I had hoped for a greater German contribution to the explanation of the roots of Islamist terror. When one thinks of Karl Dietrich Bracher, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Kocka and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, or on the German-Jewish émigré historians in the United States such as George Mosse and Fritz Stern, we are dealing with a scholarly treasure that has greatly contributed to our understanding of fascism and National Socialism. The understanding of the interaction of modernity and anti-modernity in National Socialism was also a central point in Thomas Mann's novel, *Doctor Faustus* as well as in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. With the publication of my own book, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (1984), I also contributed to this literature. By 'reactionary modernism,' I referred to a paradoxical blend of enthusiasm for technology combined with the rejection of the Enlightenment and liberal democracy. I think that this historical research on the pre-history of Nazism remains of considerable importance for understanding the revolt against modernity today that is coming from outside Europe. Indeed, Dahrendorf once called Germany 'the first new nation.' Bracher referred to 'national socialism' outside of Europe. Both argued that the crises of modernization in the 'third world' could produce new dictatorships and new totalitarian ideologies.

Radical Islam can be understood as a form of reactionary modernist ideology. In Iran, with Hamas and Hezbollah and al-Qaeda we observe a remarkable mixture of hatred against Western civilization, on the one hand, and enthusiasm for technology, on the other. The terror attack of September 11 carried out by the Hamburg cell, composed partly of engineering students, represented an ideal typical reactionary modernist act. The perpetrators used modern passenger airplanes as weapons and hoped to enter paradise as a result of this deed. Just as fascism and Nazism were phenomena of segments of a society that overwhelmed with the pace of modernization, sought a way to combine modernity and tradition, so Islamic fundamentalists have used Western technology in an effort to destroy the West. In recent years this blend of modern technology and reactionary ideology has assumed terrible forms in the internet and in Iraq in the form of 'IED' (improvised explosive devices) and especially in the form of the suicide bomber.

HERF | The Berlin Republic and the Past

To be sure, different languages, state structures, geographical locations and cultures distinguish contemporary totalitarianism from that of the 20th century. Nevertheless, today's radical Islamists have much in common with their fascist and Nazi predecessors. The ideological attack on liberal democracy and cultural modernity, on full equality for women, on the priority of the freedom of the individual in the face of the pressures of collectivism, the vision of a totalitarian society and especially and most of all the murderous hatred of the Jews, all of this returns now enveloped in a religious discourse. As their fascist and Nazi predecessors once did, now the radical Islamist propagate paranoid conspiracy theories combined with fanatical anti-Semitism and the radical anti-Americanism that is bound up with it. With these ideological foundations, the Islamists, just as the Nazis of the 1940s, have legitimated the murder of defenceless civilians.

Since 9/11, in the United States and in Europe, the scholarly work on these themes has been too weak. Perhaps in Germany after the historians's dispute (*Historikersstreit*) the thesis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust places every effort to examine the connections with and traces of Nazi ideology with the early history of radical Islamism under suspicion of, yet again, comprising yet another unjustified German effort to get out from under the burden of the Nazi past. I don't share this view. As Kuentzel, and Mallmann and Cuppers have shown us, a careful, nuanced effort to explore the peculiarities of radical Islam and the contribution made to it by fascist and Nazi ideology belongs very much in the center of the contemporary effort to come to terms with the Nazi past.

A core theme of historical scholarship lies, on one hand, in examining the tension between historical specificity and uniqueness, on the other hand in generalization about tendencies that are present in different societies. An adequate historical analysis of the origins of radical Islam includes the interaction of Islamic tradition with ideas that originated in 20th century Europe. Scholarly and intellectual cooperation between historians of the European dictatorships of the last century and our colleagues who research the history of Islam, the Arab and the Persian worlds is urgently needed to produce this badly needed historical understanding.

Despite important differences, there are a series of parallels between contemporary totalitarianism and that of the past. In both cases, fanatical anti-Semitism plays a decisive role. For the Jews, the threats with weapons of mass destruction coming from Bin Laden and Ahmadinejad recall memories of Hitler's threats. In the Nazi's deluded imagination, the Jews of Europe and around the world were not at all

innocent victims. On the contrary, they viewed them as members of a huge world conspiracy that they constantly described as ‘international Jewry.’ For Hitler and his followers, this invisible but all powerful organization was responsible for all of Germany’s misfortune, culminating in World War Two itself. According to Hitler and Goebbels, the Jews had launched that war as a war to exterminate the German people. It was this paranoid conspiratorial phantasy that offered the central propagandistic, publicly repeated legitimation for the Holocaust. I have explored this theme in more depth in my recent book, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust*.

Today, radical Islamists adopt a radical conspiracy theory about the ‘Zionist-Crusader alliance.’ As with their predecessors, so in the contemporary version of this conspiracy theory, the United States, capitalism and the Jews emerge as main actors. For the Nazis as well as today for the radical Islamists, New York and Washington, D.C. (then the Washington of Franklin Roosevelt whom Hitler called ‘the mental patient in the White House,’ now the Washington of the hate-figure, George Bush) occupy a dominant role as metropolises of capitalism and Jewish power. While the Nazis claimed that Roosevelt was a marionette and ‘stooge’ of the Jewish ‘wire pullers’ operating behind the scenes, today some critics of the war in Iraq warn of ‘Islamophobia,’ or of an ‘Israel lobby’ that was responsible for the war in Iraq. The conspiracy theories of the 1940s led to mass murder. Today they offer a central legitimation for terrorist attacks. In both cases, for those who believe them, such notions present attacks on the Jews as justified acts of self-defense against the supposed aggression of the Jewish enemy. Then and today, among the Nazis and the radical Islamists, projection and paranoia unleash mass murder and terror.

As we all know, the conflict between Israel, the Arab states and Palestinians has a foundation in clashes of real political interest. It is, of course, possible to criticize Israel outside the framework of radical Islam—and this happens with great frequency in this country and in mine. We all know that there are Arabs and Palestinians who want to live in peace and who would accept a two-state solution of a Jewish state living in peace alongside a Palestinian state. But we also know that those who wish to destroy Israel, such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the government of Iran, rely on arguments that have European roots as well as origins in a fundamentalist reading of the Koran. In case you’ve not already done so, I urge you to read the, still unrevised, ‘Hamas Covenant’ of 1988. It’s easily found via Google on the internet. There you will find the usual criticisms of Israel as well as the desire to destroy it completely justified with quotes from the Koran. But you will also find an explanation of the

HERF | The Berlin Republic and the Past

origins of World War I and World War II in Europe that has nothing to do with the Koran and everything to do with works such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other works of European radical anti-Semitism.

Or we can go back farther in history. I urge you to read 'Our Struggle with the Jews,' an essay written in Cairo in 1950 by Sayid Qutb, then a leading intellectual leader of the Moslem Brotherhood and subsequently also of violent jihad up to and including al-Qaeda. Qutb wrote: 'And the Jews did indeed return to evil-doing, so Allah gave to the Muslims power over them. The Muslims then expelled them from the whole of the Arabian Peninsula...Then the Jews again returned to evil-doing and consequently Allah sent against them others of his servants, until the modern period. Then Allah brought Hitler to rule over them. And once again today the Jews have returned to evil-doing, in the form of 'Israel' which made the Arabs, the owners of the Land, taste of sorrows and woe. So let Allah bring down upon the Jews people who will mete out the worst kind of punishment...' In these influential lines read by today's radical Islamists, we hear the traces of National Socialism as well as its enthusiastic reception in the small but over time important ideological currents that contributed to radical Islam.

From May 1945 to spring 2006, there was not a single government in the world that both threatened the Jews with mass murder and had the means to carry out such a threat. We have seen anti-Semitic movements, parties, neo-Nazis and skinheads. The Arab states have conducted wars with conventional weapons against Israel. With its aerial strike in 1982, Israel brought Saddam Hussein's effort to build a nuclear arsenal to a temporary end. However, in 2006, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad changed this situation when he said that Israel should be eliminated from the map and that Iran would insist on its 'right' to have nuclear technology. It has been utterly clear to almost everyone inside and outside Iran that by 'nuclear technology,' Ahmadinejad means nuclear weapons. In other words, in the spring of 2006, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened the Jews with a second Holocaust. For Germans in the Berlin Republic who think that coming to terms with the Nazi past is a good and necessary thing to do, Ahmadinejad's threat now poses this question: What will and what can Germany do to prevent Ahmadinejad from having the means to carry out this threat?

Last year in the United States, I published *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust*. When I reread the speeches by Hitler and Goebbels, I saw that not only did Hitler in a speech on January 30, 1939 announce

a prophecy that if 'international finance Jewry yet again' starts a war in Europe, the result would not be 'the destruction of the Aryan race in Europe.' Rather, Hitler continued, the result would be 'the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe.' Between 1939 and 1943, Hitler publicly repeated the famous prophecy at least seven times. The repetitions were on the front pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter* and were broadcast on the radio. But in the words of the German historian of the Nazi regime, Karl Dietrich Bracher, the underestimation of Hitler and the radicalism of his ideology accompanied his path to power as well as his foreign policy after 1933. One of the most important conclusions of the historical research about the public language of the Nazi regime regarding the Jews has been the when Hitler was speaking with deadly seriousness when used words such as '*Ausrottung*' (annihilation) and *Vernichtung* (extermination). Unfortunately, the prevailing understanding of ideology of among his contemporaries too often directed their attention to Hitler's other supposedly 'real' purposes.

After Hitler, the meaning of political sophistication changed. We need to apply this transformed and post-totalitarian understanding to the public statements of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. When Ahmadinejad publicly states that Israel should be wiped off the face of the map and when everything points to further and unbroken development of Iran's nuclear weapons, then I think that at least one purpose of facing the Nazi past in the Berlin Republic in 2007 consists in taking Ahmadinejad's threats against Israel very seriously. As I stated before, the memory of the Holocaust in post-war Germany has always had political consequences. Today, when others publicly threaten with weapons of mass destruction, it is the responsibility of the Berlin Republic no less than it is of any state that rejects racism, anti-Semitism and genocidal threats and actions, to do everything possible to secure Israel's existence and to help to bring about an end to the threats from Iran. In light of the significance of German business interests in Iran, there is much Germany can do to help to accomplish this end without the threat of military force. Today, in my view, the most important political consequence of the memory of the Holocaust lies precisely in this effort.

In London in the spring of 2006, a group of English intellectuals close to the Labor Party wrote the 'Euston Manifesto' and placed it on their website. In fall of 2006, some of us in the traditions of American liberalism wrote 'American Liberalism and the Euston Manifesto.' It too is now available at the website of the Euston Manifesto.

HERF | The Berlin Republic and the Past

We have tried to revive and bring up to date the political standpoint of an American liberalism in the traditions of Franklin Roosevelt and the anti-fascist liberalism of that era. Both the English and American statements are pleas for a specifically liberal confrontation with radical Islam. We thought and we think that the ideological and military confrontation with radical Islam should not be waged only from the right of center side of the political spectrum. The battle against anti-Semitism, terror and the after-effects of National Socialism and of the continuing crisis of modernization in the Arab and Islamic world should also be an important component of Western liberalism. Tonight, in the city of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Fritz Bauer and Joschka Fischer, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* but also in the terms of classical European liberalism, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in this city that has been such an important one in the history of a liberal and free spirit in Germany, I repeat this Anglo-American but hopefully also European plea as emphatically and urgently as possible.

Jeffrey Herf has been a Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin in 2007. He is Professor of History at the University of Maryland. His acclaimed 2006 book *The Jewish Enemy. Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*, was published by The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.