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Unmasking Former Nazis in Adenauer's Germany

Individual Careers and Historical Significance

MARY FULBROOK

This article sets the controversies around Kurt Ziesel's revelations about individuals in a wider perspective. Applause for a liberal public sphere which allowed such controversies to be aired should not obscure the deeper, continuing currents that prevented West Germany from living up to its image of 'overcoming the past'. The FRG gained a reputation for facing up to Nazi crimes, but at a deeper level the continuities in personnel and practice made for a very different story. The Ziesel case therefore also raises wider questions about the ways in which societies—and not only Germany after 1945—deal with the aftermath of political conflict and engage in structural as well as personal transformations.

Introduction

Axel Schildt evokes the ways in which a former Nazi enthusiast, Kurt Ziesel, challenged the reputations of key figures in the media and literary circles who were now upholding the virtues of liberal democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).¹ Schildt reveals the complexities of a twisted situation. In postwar West Germany, right-wing critiques of the now dominant liberalism could not be based explicitly on discredited Nazi values. Other tactics were needed. Ziesel spearheaded a new approach to reputational damage and character assassination. While representing his own Nazi past in terms of a supposedly understandable and forgivable youthful idealism led astray by his elders, and mitigated or tempered by repeated brushes with the regime, Ziesel sought to undermine the credibility of other former Nazis who were prominent in the liberal media.

One intellectual after another was subjected to merciless critique by exposure of a silenced Nazi past. Ziesel's 1957 book, *Das verlorene Gewissen* ("The Lost Conscience") provoked a storm of controversy; it was reprinted several times in rapid succession and issued in an updated edition in 1961.² Those at-

tacked faced an uncomfortable choice between irate responses drawing attention to their own former compromises, or attempts to starve Ziesel of the oxygen of publicity by refusing to engage in self-defensive debate. In exploring the Ziesel case, Schildt sheds new light on the difficulties encountered by so many during the extraordinary transformation from being upholders of the Nazi regime to supporters of a new form of society, casting a shaft of illumination into one of the murky depths of this early period.

Reactions were however not merely at an individual level, involving only those immediately affected by Ziesel's attacks. What is particularly interesting about the Ziesel episode is that this was effectively a critique from the right, rather than the expected critiques from the left. And interestingly, despite the Nazi pasts of those exposed by Ziesel, some of their principal defenders and supporters came from the liberal scene which they now also espoused, including prominent individuals with impeccable credentials such as Theodor W. Adorno and Hans Werner Richter. Not all were convinced by Ziesel, however; and many from the left-liberal scene, including notable writer Heinrich Böll, were downright scathing. Böll was of the view that the "real surprise" of Ziesel's book consisted only in learning about the supposedly "wild tumult of feelings of resistance" that had allegedly been "swirling around among the ranks of Nazi authors." Böll added somewhat bitterly: "If only something of this resistance had actually been evident at the time!" Overall, he suggested, "Ziesel's books do nothing to speed up the essential cleansing" of Nazis in postwar Germany; rather, "they only add yet one more category to the many categories of the 'damaged': that of those 'damaged by Ziesel.'" But, Böll went on, "we are all damaged by—and survivors of—the past. Nothing is either healed or cleansed by Ziesel."³

The initial storm of controversy aroused by Ziesel's interventions brought him some short-lived fame, but did little to restore him to what he felt should have been his rightful place in the postwar public arena. Within a few years, the arguments around his personal accusations died down. But Ziesel's approach had broader long-term reverberations. The exposure of a Nazi past became a widespread and frequently used strategy through the following decades, with unexpected revelations repeatedly occasioning major scandals, even if these were not always massively damaging to individual careers.

The Ziesel case highlights the fact that so many people managed to change from being Nazi supporters to liberal democrats, with a surrounding veil of implicit silence about their past, as it suited them under a new regime and when the recent past was so utterly discredited. But what difference did this make?

Responsibility without Guilt: Restoration and Rehabilitation in Adenauer's Germany

Konrad Adenauer set the tone for the FRG's response to the Nazi past in his well-known speech to the Bundestag on 27 September 1951. In this, he claimed that the "vast majority of the German people rejected the crimes that were committed against the Jews and did not participate in them." Nevertheless, "in the name of the German people unspeakable crimes were committed, which impose upon us the duty of moral and material compensation."⁴ Note the use of the passive voice throughout this speech: crimes *were* committed *against* people, but not actually *by* anyone. Germans have a moral responsibility, but no-one actually appears to have been guilty. Or at least, the "vast majority" of Germans were not guilty; by implication, the few who had supposedly been genuinely responsible were either dead or had already been convicted in the courts. Germans could get on with new lives, acknowledging moral responsibility but not guilt.

This was of course a gross misrepresentation of history. But it admirably served Adenauer's political purposes: rehabilitation of the FRG in the eyes of the western world, and rehabilitation of former Nazis within the state. Within a few years, the FRG had become a respected member of western military and economic alliances; and former Nazis had made their peace with democracy, rescuing their jobs, careers and pensions.

The fact that there were so many former Nazis in high places in Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's Germany was more than evident.⁵ It was also politically controversial, providing East German communists with ammunition for their claims about being the 'antifascist state' while all major Nazis had supposedly fled to the west. From the late 1950s, there were energetic campaigns emanating from the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) both to highlight this fact and, in the cases of Adenauer's chief aide in the Chancellery, Hans Globke, and his Minister for Refugees and Expellees, Theodor Oberländer, even to institute trials *in absentio* for alleged war crimes; Oberländer was sentenced in a show trial in 1960, and Globke in 1963. The strategy of identification of key individuals, now triggered and powered by the communist left in eastern Europe, bears some similarities in principle to Ziesel's attacks on post-Nazi liberals from the right. Since Nazism was now officially discredited on both sides of the Iron Curtain, revelations about the Nazi past of individuals could provide a common political weapon in the arsenal of both left and right—more surprising, as Schildt points out, when coming from the latter camp, given its own ideological affinities and former affiliations.

The continuities also proved controversial among western scholars and citizens critical of the shortcomings of western democracy. In debates over “restoration,” the argument was repeatedly made that continuity of personnel was essential to avoid administrative and economic chaos and that it also served to stabilise the new democracy. The counter-argument could readily be mounted that such continuities in both structures and personnel, rather than taking the opportunity for a clean break, were deeply unjust, morally questionable, and even pragmatically unnecessary. Counterfactually, there may well have been enough qualified people who had been excluded after 1933 by virtue of their socialist sympathies or Jewish ancestry and who would now have been more than able to fill the positions that were instead held onto or rapidly refilled by former Nazi sympathisers and conformists. But, proponents of the first position suggested, the fact that former Nazis were retained or reinstated served to stabilise the new democracy in ways that had not happened after 1918, when elites continued to fight against and undermine the newly created Weimar Republic. And in any event, so it was often argued, most who had conformed under the Third Reich were not “really” Nazis; the Nazis were always the “others,” fanatics, activists, dead or convicted.

Whatever the balance of these debates, which no longer rage as fiercely as they did in West Germany prior to 1990, further questions arise. At the individual level: had people genuinely converted after 1945 and seen the error of their previous ways, or were they simply conformists who trimmed their sails to whichever regime they found themselves serving? Can one believe their later protestations that they had been “always against it” (*immer dagegen*) and that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they had never “really” been Nazis? How should one evaluate their utterances after 1945 when these seem to repress, or reinterpret, the evidence of behaviours prior to that date? And at the broader, structural level: what was the significance of staffing a wholly new regime—one that not only explicitly acknowledged responsibility for the Nazi past but also sought to bring the guilty to account—with people who had also served under Nazism? What were the implications of having prominent former Nazis in high places in West German politics, society and culture? Is a concentration on individual personalities and expressed views in the public sphere in fact simply missing the far greater significance of continuities in practical areas which made a real difference, with continuing reverberations of Nazism in postwar West Germany?

In short: did the apparent openness in public confrontations with the Nazi past, the apparent willingness to engage in controversy about individuals, that was made possible by the liberal public sphere of the FRG, in fact serve

to mask the continuing, pervasive significance of continuities in other ways—ways that mattered far more in practice?

Entanglement in Nazism: Conformity, Complicity, and Cover-Ups

Exposing the Nazi pasts of individuals could only be of limited significance when so very many had been implicated in the system and functioning of the Third Reich. In both East and West Germany there were efforts to distinguish between those who had supposedly been purely “nominal” Nazis, and those who had a more tainted past. But it was hard to know how even to begin to compute the numbers who were potentially contaminated by former involvement in Nazism. Nor has it been much easier for historians to disentangle and evaluate the evidence. Much depends on the criteria used for identification of a Nazi past.

Ordinary National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) membership is and was not a very useful starting point. With more than eight million members at its peak—roughly one in ten of the German population (and of course a far higher percentage of the adult population)—the NSDAP had been a mass party. So many former NSDAP members claimed after the war that they had joined only under pressure, whether in order to keep their jobs and protect their families, or to be able to work from the inside “to prevent something worse.” This was of course easier to claim with some plausibility if party membership was acquired relatively late, from 1937, or where there was significant evidence of other previous political commitments, such as membership of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD, *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) or the German Communist Party (KPD, *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*), which then required a degree of “over-compensation” to avoid penalties and show evidence of dramatic new commitment and transformation. For people who had joined the NSDAP earlier—whether in the “years of struggle” before 1933, or in the heady first few months after Hitler's accession to power—different apologetics could be brought to bear. Youthful idealism, a patriotic concern for Germany's place in the world, a socially admirable desire to find solutions to economic distress and political instability—all of these could be claimed in mitigation even under the different conditions of the postwar period. In Cold War West Germany, anti-communism could also be adduced as an acceptable excuse, while antisemitism could not. As far as the persecution and extermination of the Jews was concerned, either one had supposedly been ignorant, having “known nothing about it,” or one had been allegedly impotent, incapa-

ble of acting against it. The postwar myth of having been merely an innocent bystander began to take shape.

It was not necessarily much easier to distinguish on the basis of former behaviours. In denazification proceedings, personal testimonials—popularly dubbed “Persil certificates” to whitewash a character’s past—were often brought to bear as supposed proof of longstanding deep religious commitments or small acts of kindness towards an individual who had been persecuted, whatever the evidence of other behaviours. This was often twisting the evidence beyond credibility, but it widely served its purpose, officially producing a nation of *Mitläufer* (fellow travelers), albeit with significant variations in the proportions allotted to this category in the different zones of occupation.

Yet for all the scepticism which is warranted in the more extreme cases of self-defensive deception and rewriting of the past, there was also some truth underlying these self-representations. Widespread conformity could indeed be interpreted not as evidence of genuine enthusiasm but rather the outward manifestation of a social performance under duress, for fear of the potential adverse consequences of stepping out of line. It is difficult to determine in retrospect the shifting proportions of the population who, at any given moment, felt they were engaged in a form of coerced conformity and outward displays that did not accord with their inner doubts and disquiet.⁶

Yet, whatever their personal reservations, by participating in the wider structures and processes that ultimately made mass murder possible, millions had in effect been complicit in collective violence—some far more than others, depending on role, time and circumstances. For example, bureaucrats in parts of the civilian administration had, in one way or another, colluded in sustaining a system that dispensed inhumanity. Widespread complicity in the sense of being an accessory to a crime was evident where people benefited from new opportunities for career advancement or material gain, through the exclusion of Jews from professional positions or the forced “aryanization” of their businesses and properties. Even informal practices in everyday life could be interpreted as a form of complicity, as inter-personal behaviours served to sustain processes of discrimination and exclusion, with significant consequences for the progressive isolation and degradation of the victims of persecution. And at the other end of the spectrum of culpability: even active perpetration was not limited to a supposedly brutal and sadistic few. Violence and murder had been carried out on such a scale that hundreds of thousands had in one way or another been directly involved. There was a massive mismatch between the capacity and procedures of postwar systems of justice and the sheer scope of involvement in collective violence on the scale of Nazi crimes.

So was it really surprising to find that so many prominent individuals in the media and public life had, in one way or another, first made their peace with the Nazi regime and were later unwilling to acknowledge this? The more interesting questions here, perhaps, relate to how they subsequently dealt with their pasts, whether in terms of self-justifications, reformulations, or selective silencing; and what lessons they drew from past experiences for new approaches in the very different circumstances of postwar Germany.

Silencing the past was clearly easier than engaging in explicit apologetics and self-exculpations. The former *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM, League of German Girls) youth leader and publicist Melita Maschmann was unusual in this respect. In 1963 she published her own attempt to reckon with her Nazi past, an account written in the form of unanswered letters to a former Jewish school friend, Marianne Schweitzer, with whom she had lost contact.⁷ Far from being typical of her gender and generation at the time (as she is often portrayed by historians), in the later 1930s and early 1940s Maschmann had been an activist on behalf of the youth movement in Nazi press and publicity work, and also played a practical role in the colonisation and Germanisation of the newly acquired territories in defeated Poland. She had also, on her own initiative, been not merely complicit but actively involved in perpetration by betraying to the Gestapo her school friend's elder sister, Gabriele ("Rele") Schweitzer, and Rele's then boyfriend and later husband, Hans Seidel, who were both members of a clandestine opposition youth group. As a consequence, both Rele and Hans were arrested and incarcerated, with long-term consequences (including, decades later, Hans's suicide).⁸ These acts of denunciation may appear relatively minor in comparison with the far greater crimes committed by those involved in direct physical violence, but they nevertheless had a significant effect on the victims. By the early 1960s Maschmann was however, unlike so many former Nazis, clearly troubled both by an uneasy conscience and a desire to re-awaken contact with her former friend, someone with whom she had formerly had a close emotional bond. Such fractured ties of friendship—both in their initial severance, and in the later difficulties in re-connecting—were typical among people who had lived through the immense divisions introduced by the Nazi regime. Arguably, Maschmann's explicit strategies of self-defence—her appeals to youthful idealism, having been misled by older leaders whom she admired, her determination to prioritise what she saw as the national interest, her supposed suppression of instinctive feelings of sympathy with victims and pity particularly for children suffering in the Kutno ghetto—were arguably also typical. If challenged, many Germans in the decades after the war would have sought to represent themselves as essentially "good people" who had been led

astray, or who had only acted out of the best of motives. But not many offered such a self-critique and attempt at self-justification so openly as Maschmann.

Those whom Ziesel exposed had, it would appear, attempted to cover up some of their more uncomfortable biographical moments and moral compromises. It was more the attempted cover-up and silencing of the past, than what they had actually done at the time, that seemed to be the problem—as indeed was the case when the prominent West German writer Günter Grass, who had long adopted the role of mouthpiece of the conscience of the nation, very belatedly confessed to his former SS membership as a young person at the very end of the war.⁹ But the individuals targeted by Ziesel were now seeking to re-orientate themselves in ways that Ziesel himself could not accept, smarting as he was from his own marginalisation in the liberal-dominated media of post-war West Germany. The personal controversies he provoked were ultimately largely fruitless in terms of his own ends. Arguably too they missed a wider and far more important point.

Structural Contamination and Wider Consequences

The scandal of a silenced Nazi past was not as significant at the individual level as at the level of a widespread silent continuity of mentalities and personnel in places that made a difference in practice. The failure in Adenauer's Germany to achieve a real turnover of staff in key areas, and indeed what has been called the “re-nazification” of certain professions with the reinstatement of the so-called 131ers (following legislation passed in May 1951 under Article 131 of the Basic Law) who had been initially disgraced in denazification proceedings, is where the persistence of Nazis in high places made a significant difference.

This was certainly the case with respect to the legal profession, where judges decided that they should themselves not have to account for the sentences they had passed during the Third Reich, since they were supposedly merely upholding the law of the land at the time—including handing down exceedingly harsh penalties for trivial infringements of the then law, including lengthy sentences or even the death penalty for minor political offences. Alongside their own effective self-exoneration, or exclusion from having to account for former compromises with the Nazi regime, went a tendency to excuse professionals in other areas, including high-level medical professionals involved in euthanasia killings, and civilian administrators in the annexed and occupied territories. While professional offices were filled by people who had served under Hitler, the application in West Germany of the ordinary criminal law definition of murder as an individual act resulting from “base motives” and carried out with

“excess brutality” increasingly meant that the notion of Nazi “perpetrator” was reduced to images of ill-educated, lower-class thugs who had exercised brute force in low-level capacities such as camp guard. And where, as in some trials, there was irrefutable evidence of murder even in this individualised sense, judges often seemed to show more sympathy with and understanding of those in the dock, and with defence witnesses on the perpetrator side, than with the victims whose testimony for the prosecution was often treated with a degree of scepticism bordering on derision. This was of course far from universally the case, but there were certainly sufficient instances for one to wonder whether the persistence of certain outlooks, mentalities and sympathies was in fact frequently detrimental to consistency in the pursuit of justice. Even in the trials for murders carried out as part of the T4 “euthanasia” programme, higher level professionals seemed to have had an easier job of ensuring they were acquitted than did the subordinates who gave practical assistance in the administration of killing. And it was not merely a question of the significance of the sympathies of specific individual judges in particular trials; key early decisions in principle by a Nazified legal profession were instrumental in setting the parameters of what could subsequently be done under the law, even by lawyers of a younger generation or of quite different political views.¹⁰ Hessian Attorney-General Fritz Bauer, who spear-headed the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, was repeatedly depressed by the significant obstacles that lay in the path of justice in the early FRG. And however much western democrats may criticise the East German dictatorship, which was very far from any kind of *Rechtsstaat* (state upholding the rule of law), and which refused to pay reparations to the state of Israel, it is an indisputable historical fact that former Nazis were six or seven times more likely to be convicted for crimes committed under Nazism in the East than in the West, and sentences were a great deal more severe.

The significance of persisting mentalities and continuities of personnel in West Germany was evident, too, for at least the first decade and a half after the war, in many other areas: bureaucrats dealing with claims for compensation on the part of Roma and Sinti (“gypsies”), who were still often viewed as basically criminal or “asocial” elements who had actually warranted detention and deportation under Nazism; homophobic officials who applied sharpened laws against homosexuality with even more vigour and more severe effects in the 1960s than had been the case in the 1920s; and industrialists who had made massive profits through exploitation of forced and slave labour, and refused to countenance any claims for compensation on the part of the few survivors who sought remedies for their suffering. Recent officially commissioned in-

dependent historical investigations of a range of FRG ministries and institutions have also revealed just how extensive and significant was the saturation of West German government and administration with former Nazis.¹¹ And all these persistent attitudes and prejudices had significant consequences in practice for those who had already suffered, irrespective of the newly dominant liberalism in the public sphere or the embarrassment occasioned by occasionally turning over one of the many stones under which a plethora of former Nazis could be revealed.

Conclusions

All this tends to set the controversies around Ziesel's revelations about individuals in a wider perspective. Arguably, the froth of (not always) righteous indignation around exposure of prior Nazi sympathies, and the applause for a liberal public sphere which now allowed these to be aired, should not be allowed to obscure the deeper, continuing currents that prevented West Germany from really living up to the image it sought to present of coming to terms with its Nazi past. Some of its dirty underwear may now have been hung up to dry in public, as it were; but there was an awful lot more that was still being worn under more democratic outer garb, and with consequences that were not only disagreeable but actually deleterious in practice.

There is therefore something of a paradox involved in West Germany's process of 'coming to terms with the Nazi past'. While the FRG increasingly gained a reputation for facing up to and taking responsibility for Nazi crimes, at a deeper level the continuities in personnel and practice made for a very different story. While large numbers of people were able to mouth the right utterances and conform to new norms across changing circumstances, with behaviour adapting to radically altered political environments, questions around the legacies of the past are about more than simply individual conversions and convenient cover stories. The Ziesel case, in itself intriguing, therefore also raises far wider questions about how we should address the ways in which societies—and not only Germany after 1945—deal with the aftermath of political conflict and engage in structural as well as personal transformations.

Notes

1. See Axel Schildt, "In the Crosshairs: Kurt Ziesel's Adenauer-Era Campaign to Expose the Nazi Pasts of West German Intellectuals," in this publication.

2. See Kurt Ziesel, *Das verlorene Gewissen: Hinter den Kulissen der Presse, der Literatur und ihrer Machttträger von heute* (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns, 1957; 7th ed. 1961).

3. Heinrich Böll, "Der Schriftsteller und Zeitkritiker Kurt Ziesel: Versuch eines Beitrages zur sogenannten Bewältigung der Vergangenheit," *Die Zeit*, March 16, 1962, <https://www.zeit.de/1962/11/der-schriftsteller-und-zeitkritiker-kurt-ziesel/komplettansicht>, accessed July 3, 2019.

4. "Aussöhnung mit dem Staate Israel und den Juden in aller Welt': Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Dr. Konrad Adenauer und Erklärungen der Fraktionen im Bundestag am 27. September 1951," in Dietrich Rollmann, ed., *50 Reden aus dem Deutschen Bundestag 1949–1983: Zum 35jährigen Bestehen des Deutschen Bundestages* (Stuttgart: Burg Verlag, 1983), 97–102, here 98.

5. See further, Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 1996); idem, *1945 und wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2005); Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and the journalistic treatment in Willi Winkler, *Das braune Netz: Wie die Bundesrepublik von früheren Nazis zum Erfolg geführt wurde* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2019).

6. This is a point I am exploring further in a book on bystanders, supported by an AHRC grant for a collaborative project on complicity and perpetration. See also Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, revised in two vols. 2017).

7. See Melita Maschmann, *Fazit: Kein Rechtfertigungsversuch* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1963); see also Helen Epstein, "I Was a Nazi, and Here's Why," *New Yorker*, May 29, 2013.

8. See further Fulbrook, *Reckonings*, 198–201.

9. See Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006). It is possible that this was a form of pre-emptive confession, given his likely exposure following a publication a few months earlier which had provided some hints in this direction: Ute Scheub, *Das falsche Leben: Eine Vatersuche* (Munich: Piper, 2006), 7–62, describes not only her father's public suicide by drinking cyanide at an event where Grass had just spoken, her father's last words being a greeting from the microphone to his SS comrades, but also Grass's subsequent extended and somewhat surprising interest in her family.

10. For further details and references, see Fulbrook, *Reckonings*, 205–358.

11. See the first path-breaking work of a spate of independent historical commissions, Eckart Conze et al., *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Blessing, 2010), which was followed by a series of others in similar vein. On justice, see Manfred Görtemaker and Christoph Safferling, *Die Akte Rosenberg: Das Bundesministerium der Justiz und die NS-Zeit* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2016). On the West German secret service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*) and its predecessor, the *Organisation Gehlen*: Christoph Rass, *Das Sozialprofil des Bundesnachrichtendienstes: Von den Anfängen bis 1968* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2016); Gerhard Sälter, *Phantome des Kalten Krieges: Die Organisation Gehlen und die Wiederbelebung des Gestapo-Feindbildes*

“Rote Kapelle” (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2016); Ronny Heidenreich, Daniela Münkler and Elke Stadelmann-Wenz, *Geheimdienstkrieg in Deutschland: Die Konfrontation von DDR-Staatssicherheit und Organisation Gehlen 1953* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2016); Sabrina Nowack, *Sicherheitsrisiko NS-Belastung: Personalüberprüfungen im Bundesnachrichtendienst in den 1960er-Jahren* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2016).