In June 1966, Willy Brandt, who had not yet become foreign minister or chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD), expressed his vision for reconciliation with its eastern neighbors: “A peace settlement, if it comes one day, will demand sacrifices. These sacrifices would be understood . . . as the price for the war that was initiated and lost by Hitler.” And he also knew that the territories east of the Oder-Neiße border, which were already lost in fact, could not therefore be an adequate sacrifice.

Brandt found the “sacrifice” that would be acceptable four and a half years later, when he came to Warsaw as chancellor to sign the treaty that would formally recognize the Oder-Neiße border. As an accompanying journalist wrote in a later article that appeared in Der Spiegel, “This unreligious man, who was not co-responsible

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for the [Nazi] crimes, who was not even there . . . , now kneels down at the former Warsaw Ghetto—he kneels not for his own sake . . . . He confesses to a guilt that he himself does not have to bear, and asks for forgiveness, which he himself does not require. He kneels there for Germany.”

This eyewitness account of Brandt’s Kniefall in Warsaw on 7 December 1970, though without explicit reference to biblical texts, is unmistakably rich in religious symbolism, especially surrounding the idea of the “guilt- or atonement-sacrifice” (Schuld-/Sühnopfer). For in the book of Isaiah (chap. 53), one reads an almost identical description, with these details: the sin-offering (v. 10), who has done no injustice (v. 9), bears “our” crime/guilt/sin (vv. 5, 6, 8, 11, 12), willingly and silently (v. 7).

The “vicarious sacrifice” himself, though, did not think of guilt and innocence in these terms. Writing some years later, Brandt explained that he had only done “what humans do, when words fail,” that he “also remembered that, despite Auschwitz, fanaticism and suppression of human rights have not yet ended.” In other words, not only the “pastness” of German guilt arising from Nazi crimes, which Brandt shared as a German, but also the “presentness” of attitudes, tendencies, and frames of mind as roots of the crimes, was called into attention by the silent confession. It was not a confession to end all confessions, nor was it only a confession of past crimes that cannot be changed, but a confession of present, ongoing failures, a self-opening—to critique, accusation, and scrutiny and even risks of abuse—that has now become the new attitude, rather than a one-time-only event.

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4. Only the Lutherbibel uses the word willig.
5. Brandt, Begegnungen und Einsichten, 525 (emphasis added).
6. Ibid., 526.
7. According to a contemporary survey by Der Spiegel, though, a slight plurality of Germans (48 percent vs. 41 percent) found Brandt’s gesture in Warsaw “exaggerated” (übertrieben) rather than “appropriate” (angemessen). “Kniefall angemessen oder übertrieben?,” Der Spiegel, no. 51 (1970).
One immediate response to Brandt’s spontaneous confession, which exposed not only the Federal Republic but also himself personally to unforeseeable risks and dangers, was mourning. Brandt recalled that his friends in the delegation had “tears in their eyes,” and that then Polish prime minister Józef Cyrankiewicz had told him how his wife had “wept bitterly” talking over the phone about Brandt’s *Kniefall* with a friend. Inge Meysel, a German-Jewish actress who had suffered persecution in the Nazi period, said some years later that she had “wailed” (geheult) after seeing the image of the kneeling Brandt. In the succinct words of the same *Der Spiegel* reporter, “This December is bleak and bitter. . . . But now one is almost thankful for this wind, which is icy-cold, that [one can say] one’s eyes become wet because of it.”

Yet this weeping is not the type that hurts—such as crying for justice, or rather, the kind of weeping that is an expression of the present, unattended wound that is still inside. The weeping in Warsaw in the December 1970 belongs to another category, to what one may call “curative mourning” (see R14). Writing for *Die Zeit*, Hansjakob Stehle, himself a veteran contributor to Polish-German understanding, spoke of the “liberation of healing” that unfolded on 7 December, which exorcised the “spectres of the past.” A close associate of Władysław Gomułka, then leader of the Polish Workers’ Party, told Stehle that he had never before seen his chief “so liberated” in the presence of Western visitors. And another “otherwise cool Polish observer” was moved by Brandt’s gesture to whisper to Stehle his newfound admiration for the Federal Republic.

Though praised by Stehle as having “contributed more than all the speeches” with his speechless gesture, Brandt was quick

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to direct the “gratefulness for the sacrifice made” to where he thought it belonged: the sacrifice of the expellees. He recognized their “great suffering,” and thanked them for not having, on the whole, mobilized themselves to form a hostile revolt against the Warsaw treaty of 1970. 13 Indeed, it is undeniable that Brandt’s act of turning, which was a representative act of “German turning” (see the problem of representation in P11), entailed an act of injustice vis-à-vis the expellees, in the sense that the former forsook his responsibility of fighting for the latter’s justice. In this situation, it appears inevitable that collective turning involves a choice of guilt: the prioritization of others’ justice (i.e., that of outside victims, victims of one’s own wrongdoings) over one’s own (i.e., that of internal victims). It is true, however, that German turners such as the EKD Ostdenkschrift supporters have resorted to “substitutive atonement” vis-à-vis their internal victims (see P4), but ultimately the issue of internal guilt was not thereby definitively resolved.

It is important therefore to recognize that even here an act of mutual-turning was in order. Once again, Marion Gräfin Dönhoff rose to the task. For even before Brandt went to Warsaw, as a victim herself she had already begun the process of de-victimization, itself a painful turning for the victims of expulsion, in support of the recognition of the Oder-Neiße border. Speaking to her fellow refugees and expellees in a front-page article on Die Zeit in November 1970, she defended the treaty by arguing that it was Hitler—not the “representatives of Bonn”—whose “brutality and reckless insanity had wiped out 700 years of German history” and thereby lost the eastern territories. 14 She urged the expellee organizations to “stop their polemics,” for the return of those territories would invariably lead to violence and “the expulsion of millions of human beings again—which is exactly what no one wants.” 15

Recalling also the three-time participation of Prussia in the division of Poland, Dönhoff in effect reiterated the “just punishment” thesis

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15. Ibid.
(see P4), and pushed it forward not by basing it only on the “war by Hitler” argument (i.e., German guilt), but by bringing the guilt closer to home (i.e., Prussian guilt). With this guilt-consciousness, she sought to offer her fellow Germans a “new beginning” forestalled by the one-sided “accounting” of guilt: “No one is without sin. But the attempt to bring each other to account is not only senseless; it would lead to a situation in which the curse of an evil act gives birth to further evil. That’s why a new beginning? Yes, or else the escalation would find no end.”

Brandt’s “bold confession of guilt” in Warsaw would indeed be unthinkable without these previous contributions by earlier turners like Dönhoff. Brandt himself repeatedly conceded that “understanding and reconciliation cannot be furnished by statesmen, but must grow and mature in the human hearts themselves on both sides,” and this was cultivated by exactly the kind of work Dönhoff and Stehle did. Brandt gave credit to the German churches for “psychologically preparing” the German population for the Warsaw treaty, and particularly the EKD Ostdenkschrift of 1965 (see P4), for initiating this psychological “decramping” (Entkrampfung). “The conversation of the churches and their communities was ahead of the dialogue by politicians.”

Indeed, a closer analysis of Brandt’s expressions on this theme shows that many of these were in fact the fruits of previous turnings. His point that postwar Germans were not “collectively guilty” but “collectively responsible” was but an adaptation from early German-speaking Jewish turners who had sought to broaden the scope of responsibility to include themselves (see P9). His assertion that the recognition of the Oder-Neiße border should in no way be construed as the legitimization of expulsion,

16. Ibid.
18. Brandt, Begegnungen und Einsichten, 534, 541.
19. Ibid., 540.
20. Ibid., 240–41.
but rather, as a *Schlußstrich* to the chain reaction of injustice, even at the expense of a just claim, had already been forcefully argued by the *Ostdenkschrift*, which also lent him the important insight of turning to the integration of expellees in West Germany in the debate on the border problem.\(^{22}\) His already cited recognition that collective reconciliation is not within the purview of interstate politics, but is in the realm of interpeople, interpersonal relationships, was already highlighted by the Bensberger *Memorandum* of 1968.\(^{23}\) Finally, the idea that reconciliation requires sacrifice was of course not “new”; what was new was the realization of the idea at the particular time with the particular meaning in the Warsaw of December 1970. For if one could chase the line of sacrifices that had led to this point, then one would arrive at the point in 1965 when the Polish bishops made the first “willing sacrifice for reconciliation” between the Germans and the Polish people. As the drafter of the Polish letter, Boleslaw Kominek implored his German counterpart, Julius Döpfner, in the interval between the publication of the Polish letter and the response from the German bishops: “Please pray that the letter will not also scandalize us too much. . . . But there is a price to pay for bridge building; *it demands sacrifices.*”\(^{24}\)

In regard to the reception of Brandt’s *Kniefall*, though as mentioned above more Germans were initially negative about it than supported it, the facts are that the treaty was ratified by a majority in the Bundestag in May 1972 (with the opposition abstaining), that Brandt’s Social Democratic Party (SPD) was reelected the same year, winning the highest percentage (45.8 percent) of votes ever in party history, that Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace

\(^{22}\) Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 527.


Prize in 1971 and named “Person of the Year” by *Time* magazine in 1970, and that, finally, some three decades after the *Kniefall*, a commemorative plaque in his honor was erected in Warsaw, and the image and footage of the confession are still prominently remembered in museums from Bonn to Berlin. Though one can never say with exactitude how many victims of Nazi atrocities have accepted this confession, it is probably not an exaggeration to conclude that the “face of the confessant” (Schreiber) was met with the face of an appreciative community.

Hence this act of confession and the responding act of its appreciation together formed a **voluntary loss of honor** and its restoration from the other. The voluntary “loss of face” on the part of the wrongdoer, or the representative of wrongdoers, in the symbolic act of *lowering* oneself, and in so doing attracting negative attention to oneself, demonstrated or sought to demonstrate the “broken spirit and contrite heart” that are demanded in the biblical understanding of confession. Considering the historical circumstances at the time, a West German chancellor could easily—and very reasonably—have adorned himself with quite a different spirit when concluding the Warsaw treaty of 1970. For the recognition of the disputed border (and hence the loss of the Ostgebiete) could have already been touted as *the* sacrifice for reconciliation, a concession made to save one’s face. In other words, it could have been a spirit that says: Take this compensation, and leave me alone and my nation’s honor intact. But to the contrary, Brandt had already declared in Moscow, before coming to Warsaw, in a way that is baffling in terms of negotiation tactics or self-interest paradigms: “[This treaty] is no giveaway; what was lost was already long gambled away, not by us, who in the Federal Republic of Germany

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25. In the cover image, Brandt was further portrayed as the “crucified iron chancellor,” thus hinting at his status as “vicarious sacrifice” for Germany.

26. In the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn, for instance, Brandt’s *Kniefall* is prominently displayed, together with his Nobel Peace Prize, the *Time* “Person of the Year” cover, and the *Der Spiegel* survey. Not far from this exhibit, the letters of the Polish and German bishops, together with the EKD *Ostedenkschrift* and the Bensberger *Memorandum* are also on display (author’s observation made on 17 Jul. 2011).
have borne and continue to bear political responsibility, but by a criminal regime.” This was consistent with what he had already expressed in the 1966 speech quoted above: “Many people behave as if we still possessed the territories east of the Oder-Neiße. . . . But I want to say to you. . . . One is not doing any good, when one promises more than he can give.”

Indeed, a confession is ultimately an act that “does nothing” in material terms. The sacrifice made is neither tangible nor quantifiable. It can either be read and understood in symbolic terms, or rejected as an act of self-interest by a political actor. Hence it is inevitable that skepticism should arise as to “what comes next” after this confession: Does it replace or come with atonement—in both material and human terms? As Tadeusz Szymanski, a Polish concentration camp survivor, remarked, “The treaty . . . was an essential step forward. . . . But [it] must be fulfilled with life.” He then went on to commend the German volunteers of Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ASF), who since 1965 had come to Auschwitz and other concentration camp locations in Poland to pay homage and to provide conservation services. “Every group [of volunteers] that comes to Poland can be of great help in this regard,” said Szymanski, who also spoke of a personal experience in which a weeping and forgiveness-seeking German student had “helped me understand the young German generation better,” despite the survivor’s professed prejudices and doubt resulting from the concentration camp ordeal.

Indeed, long before Brandt’s Kniefall in Warsaw, German volunteers had already been “seeking forgiveness with their hands.”

28. Ibid., 242.
30. The German volunteer organization Action Reconciliation Service for Peace was founded by a group of Protestant leaders in 1958. See later chapters for more on the activities of ASF.
31. Rabe, Umkehr in die Zukunft, 65, 72.
32. Ibid., 121–22.
33. This is a formulation derived from the founding document of the ASF by Lothar Kreyssig, “Wir bitten um Frieden.” Rabe, Umkehr in die Zukunft, 14–15.
in Poland. By the time Brandt arrived in December 1970, these volunteers had already completed (re)building projects and/or been providing social services not only in Poland, but also in Israel, the Soviet Union, the United States, and other Western European countries. And even as the problem of reparation (*Wiedergutmachung*) to the millions of qualified victims in Poland would still have to be dealt with in the subsequent years, especially the difficulty of ensuring that the material compensation would actually arrive in the hands of individual victims, rather than disappearing in the state budget for other purposes, previous compensation agreements between (West) Germany and other “victim-nations” had at least on this point demonstrated the will of the (West) German people, on the whole, to do “atonement” in this regard. Hence, the question has never been whether confession can or does replace atonement, but rather, whether the same would be acceptable if one is without the other, and vice versa.

At Easter in 1960, when ASF volunteers arrived in Servia, Greece, which was conquered by the German army in 1941, they were so shocked by the hospitality they received from the local population that some of them asked themselves: “Is reconciliation here necessary at all?” They were told by the locals that “the Turks were often even more brutal than the Germans and the Italians; in

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36. The readiness or unreadiness of East Germans to atone for Nazi crimes does not, of course, lend itself to sweeping judgment. To cite one example, while it is true that the East German government had refused to participate in ASF projects because it “felt no responsibility for national socialism, but it had rather stood firmly in the tradition of anti-fascists,” it is also a fact that the majority of willing volunteers at the beginning of ASF were from East Germany. See Rabe, *Umkehr in die Zukunft*, 20–21. In view of this internal tension, one could perhaps appreciate even more the various projects within East Germany that the ASF was able to pull off after all.
37. See, however, the ASF’s reservation about institutionalized (as a substitute for personal) *Wiedergutmachung*. Rabe, *Umkehr in die Zukunft*, 15, 78–79.
the civil war [of 1946–49] we were exceedingly harsh and brutal against one another. Besides, war is war: in which human beings are under other laws.”

Though this response was in all likelihood uncommon in any given population, it was nevertheless a typical response of victims seeking to take the guilt away from the perpetrators. One “method” is turning to the shared nature of sin/guilt, including oneself, to “neutralize” the distinctiveness of the perpetrator. But as Willem Visser’t Hooft said, “A confession is only valuable when it is spontaneous”; this taking away of guilt through comparison can only be a voluntary act by the victims themselves, not by others, who have no valid claim to victimhood, and least of all by the perpetrators themselves, who must, if the biblical paradigm of reconciliation through repentance is to be realized, be the first and the last to emphasize the distinctiveness of their guilt and not let it “pale in comparison” with others’ guilt.

This will to hold onto the single fact of one’s own guilt in one’s own confession, which has been (re-)generated multiple times in the postwar period, was demonstrated by a young German volunteer of the first group to Israel in 1961. When asked during a televised interview about their motivations in joining the ASF project, some said, “Serving world peace,” but one of them said, “It’s what had shocked me most [in the last war], the persecution of the Jews,” and then went on to recount what she had heard from her parents and from books. As with Brandt’s confession, this act of self-opening furnished the victims with a much-needed occasion for curative mourning.

The same evening, a Jewish woman called up . . . to see if she could visit the group [of ASF volunteers]. The next day she was with us . . . and told us of

39. Ibid.
her hatred of the Germans, and of how the short TV interview the evening before had so moved her, as if suddenly light had pierced through darkness. . . . Then she came up to me and said: “You won’t believe how thankful I am for what you said last night.” And she held my hand tight . . ., struggling with tears, she said: “We have the same Father, you know.” . . . The woman had lost twelve siblings in the concentration camps.42

As the first German chancellor to visit Israel, in 1973, some twelve years after the first ASF project in Kibbutz Urim,43 Brandt was offered a chance to read at Yad Vashem a biblical passage in German in which the God-victim’s “removal of guilt” is promised (Ps 103:8–16).44 A contemporary observer noted the “unusual” reception that Brandt was accorded as a German in Israel, and Golda Meir, then prime minister of Israel, praised him as someone who had “made it easier for Israel to turn a new page in Israeli-German relations.”45 But just as in the case of the reception of previous “gestures of turning,” already mentioned in the previous chapters, it was from the German side that voices of reservation were heard.46

42. Ibid.
43. Rabe, Umkehr in die Zukunft, 36–37.
44. Brandt, Begegnungen und Einsichten, 593.
46. Astounded as he was by Brandt’s reception in Israel, Strothmann was nonetheless reserved about the “vague hope” of that “promise of God’s mercy” from Psalm 103. He ended the article with his own solemn conviction: “The six million deaths remain.”