“Die Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit“:

The Complications of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Post-Nazi Germany

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11 April 2008
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Introduction

Essentially since 1945, Germans have struggled with issues both of national and personal responsibility for the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War. In an effort to alleviate the pain of the past, many, especially in the beginning, simply kept silent on the matter. But as writers and thinkers have begun to break this silence, a complex set of questions emerges. To what extent are the ordinary Germans who collaborated with the Nazis to be held accountable for their actions? What does it mean when we still love these perpetrators? And what shall we tell our children about their heritage and their stake in their nation’s legacy? Through an analysis of works that grapple with these issues, I will attempt to understand the cultural phenomena that led to the Holocaust, as well as some of the philosophies that modern writer and theorists have submitted in response to such questions.
Understanding the Culture of the Third Reich

In retrospect, it is often easy to make the Germans who collaborated with the Nazis into uncomplicated monsters. We find their actions reprehensible, and we feel that had we been placed in such a situation, we would have chosen to resist the Nazi regime. But as Erika Mann and Traudl Junge explain through their books and, in Junge’s case, through a documentary, the culture that ushered in the Third Reich was not so simple; nor were the decisions that German citizens made every day. In her 1940 collection of fictional vignettes, Wenn die Lichter ausgehen: Geschichten aus dem Dritten Reich, Erika Mann explores both with sympathy and with moral conviction the lives and experiences of the inhabitants of an unnamed Bavarian town. Further, in her 1938 nonfiction work Zehn Millionen Kinder: Die Erziehung der Jugend im Dritten Reich, Mann details the phenomenon of exclusive fascist education, or perhaps a lack thereof, during the Third Reich. In the 1949 East German film Rotation, director Wolfgang Staudte paints a similar picture of a family suffering under poverty and the pressures of fascist activity. The cultural environment that Mann and Staudte depict then illuminates the very real remembrances of Traudl Junge, who as a very young woman became one of Hitler’s personal secretaries. None of these accounts attempt to justify cooperation with the Nazis, but they all make it easier to understand how an otherwise moral person might become involved with the movement.

In her novel Wenn die Lichter ausgehen: Geschichten aus dem Dritten Reich, Erika Mann explores a fictionalized Bavarian town under the pre-war Nazi regime. In each chapter, the author visits the life of a different citizen, and through that subject’s eyes, we meet the regulars of a local pub, a young couple, a middle-aged business owner, a young farmer migrating to the
city, the inhabitants of the local prison, and many more. While it is clear both from Mann’s tone and from the story of her life that she vehemently opposed the Nazi regime, her attitude toward each of her subjects, Nazi or no, is considerably gentler.

In the first chapter, „Unsere Stadt,“ we enter the town through the perspective of a foreigner, “the stranger.” For a modern reader, this first look into 1930s German culture fascinates, not simply because of the importance of the era, but because Mann seems to promise a candid look at the town’s inhabitants—a look relatively untainted by the Nazi propaganda that pervades many of the documents contemporary with Mann’s work. Our human hope, of course, is that the people we meet in the town pub will be heroic resistance fighters, or at least that they will espouse a relatively palatable worldview. But what we see, as the stranger walks into the pub during a radio address by Hitler, is that the townspeople, while not united in their Nazism, seem to be more or less in agreement with Hitler’s politics. One man complains, „’Eineinhalb Stunden‘, meinte er, ‘und noch kein einziges Wort über unsere Brüder im Sudetenland‘“ (12). His complaint is not with the nature, but with the particular content, of Hitler’s current propaganda. Furthermore, Mann writes,

„’Hast du die Kirchenbanner gesehen?’ fragte eine Frau ihren Mann. „Ich habe mindestens acht gezählt, allein fünf in der Bärenstraße.“
Ihr Mann nickte. Ein verstohlenes Grinsen huschte über sein Gesicht.
„So eine Unverfrorenheit!” sagte er. „Kirchenbanner hinzuhängen, wo es ausdrücklich verboten ist!”
Zur Bekräftigung schlug er mit der flachen Hand auf den Tisch.
Dennoch hatte der Fremde den Eindruck, daß der Mann sich freute.
„Eine ausgemachte Unverschämtheit“, wiederholte er und warf dem Wirt einen fröhlichen Blick zu“ (12-13).
„Der Mann sich freute“ – that is, he does not simply express these opinions because he is expected to, but because he enjoys feeling authoritative and indignant toward those who do not follow the rules.

Later, when Frau Murks, a member of the women’s air-raid protection brigade, enters the pub, the bartender makes an obvious effort to flatter and coddle her; meanwhile, Frau Murks discusses the plight of her comrade, who, having been too old and weak, missed her seventh training exercise, and must now begin again to complete her ten drills (14-15). The overall impression of the chapter is that while the party does force many to participate, and while its policies may be somewhat harsh, the patrons of the pub seem to be even enthusiastically in favor of Nazi politics. It is possible, of course, that the public setting in which these citizens find themselves tends to discourage any potential expressions of dissent, but the vigor with which they express their consent seems to indicate that these people actually do agree with the Nazi regime.

Mann’s next chapter explores further the complexities of belief and participation in the Nazi regime. „Infolge eines bedauerlichen Irrtums …“ tells the story of Marie, a politically moderate young woman from a Catholic family, and her boyfriend, Peter, who has bought fully into the Nazi philosophy. Upon feeling ill, Marie goes first to see Killinger, a Nazi doctor, who tells her that she is pregnant; she does not trust his diagnosis, and goes to Munich to see Peter’s uncle, the „Liberale alter Schule“ (35). Peter’s uncle tells Marie that she is not pregnant, but simply malnourished and overworked. But when Marie returns home after a few days’ stay in Munich, Killinger and the Party accuse her of leaving to have an abortion. Under such suspicion, Marie and Peter both lose their places in the Nazi student federation, Peter’s uncle is driven out of practice, Marie loses her job, and crowds destroy her family’s store. In the end,
Marie and Peter commit joint suicide, shortly after which the Party admits that, „Infolge eines bedauerlichen Irrtums hat der nationalsozialistische Staat zwei junge, hoffnungsvolle, bereitwillige Leben verloren ... Heil Hitler!“ (43). Under such circumstances, how useful would resistance really have been?

_Wenn die Lichter ausgehen_ continues with nine further diverse, yet still unified, vignettes. Mann examines, among other instances, the invasive activities of the Block Watch, the ill effects of outlandish government quotas on small farmers, and the struggle of a college professor to decide what to teach his students about the government. Some characters, like the imprisoned Pastor Gebhardt, stand in open opposition to the Nazis; many more, like Peter, subscribe wholeheartedly to the national-socialist doctrine. But most of this town’s inhabitants find themselves trapped somewhere in between dissent and agreement. Their primary concern is for the wellbeing of themselves and their families; the benefits of modern education, or of a society that is tolerant of opposition, are not available to these people. For the ambivalent, to join the Nazi party means to reap employment and social acceptance, and to avoid persecution and imprisonment. While, as Mann would be the first to stipulate, these factors alone clearly do not excuse collaboration with the Nazis, the author’s insight into the complicated and essentially human inner workings of her characters makes clear that the victims and perpetrators cannot simply be tossed into the categories of good and evil.

In 1938, two years before Mann published _Wenn die Lichter ausgehen_, she produced her non-fiction work _Zehn Millionen Kinder: Die Erziehung der Jugend im Dritten Reich_. The focus of the book, which Mann echoes several times in her fiction, is the extent to which the Nazi regime altered the German school system, so that children who attended school between 1933 and 1945 became not only indoctrinated in the Nazi Weltanschauung, but also, according to
Hitler’s goals, utterly uninformed regarding every other area of study. Mann’s unrelenting criticism of the Nazis and her presentation of copious documents to support her claims make her work both insightful and disturbing.

Mann submits several excerpts from Hitler’s writings and speeches as evidence of his particularly anti-intellectual stance on education. For instance, she quotes *Mein Kampf*:

Erstens soll das jugendliche Gehirn im allgemeinen nicht mit dingen belastet werden, die es zu 95% nicht braucht und daher auch wieder vergißt. … von hunderttausend Schülern, die zum Beispiel Französisch lernen, werden kaum zweitausend für diese Kenntnisse später eine ernstliche Verwendung haben, während 98 000 in ihrem ganzen weiteren Lebenslauf nicht mehr in die Lage kommen, das einst Gelernte praktisch zu verwenden… So müssen wirklich wegen der zweitausend Menschen, für welche die Kenntnis dieser Sprachen von Nutzen ist, 98 000 umsonst gequält werden und wertvolle Zeit opfern. (qtd. in 50)

That anyone would take such a utilitarian approach to education is, of course, upsetting; but in light of Hitler’s further statements regarding the indoctrination of children, it becomes clear that under such conditions, wide knowledge poses a threat to the status quo. According to Mann, Hitler later said,

Wenn es heute in Deutschland noch Leute gibt, die sagen, wir fügen uns nicht in eure Gemeinschaft, sondern wir werden nach wie vor dieselben bleiben, dann antworte ich: ihr werdet vergehen, aber nach euch wird eine Jugend kommen, die nichts anderes mehr kennt! (56)

The Nazis’ efforts, then, were in a sense aimed at erasing the past; a youth that had no concept of a tolerant society, of other cultures or religions, or of a time when Hitler’s ideology was not regarded as absolute truth, would have no basis for resistance. Germany’s schools became a factory for Nazi followers, and, as Mann contends, the lies were built directly into the grammars. The author excerpts a primer by Richard Alschner, which presents such copy exercises as,
These „Greuelmärchen“ are, of course, completely true. That young children were made to copy these lines is frightening enough—but that Erika Mann wrote her book in the United States in 1938, before the war even began, lends an unsettlingly prophetic air to her work.

Despite everything about her book that might remove all hope of saving Germany’s children from the Nazi regime, Mann clings tenaciously to the idea that ordinary people hold the power to influence the system. She describes the „kleinen Heldentaten des Alltags“: the actions of teachers and citizens who, in their quiet ways, manage to resist the influence of the Nazis, by valuing education over indoctrination, or by showing kindness to a Jewish student (57-58). Just as in her fictional accounts of the Third Reich, Mann approaches the German people with a sincere dedication to seeing them not simply as Nazis or Jews, but as complex individuals—and, as such, the hope remains that Germany will save itself from this monstrous regime.

Wolfgang Staudte’s film Rotation continues in the vein of Mann’s work as it follows a German family through the economically difficult interwar period, the benefits of joining the Nazi party, and the eventually devastating consequences of such participation. Hans Behnke, who in the beginning of the film faces the stress of raising a new family in a tiny basement apartment, initially resists the Nazis, but he finds success in his job as he becomes involved with the fascists—and economic survival, the film seems to emphasize, ultimately is more important to most families. Staudte depicts an intense amount of harassment and pressure from the local Nazi chapter for Hans to join; it seems at times that the film exaggerates these pressures in order
to make the characters more sympathetic, but in comparison with what Mann describes, Staudte’s portrayal of the culture is not unreasonable.

As time goes on, Hans’s son Helmut becomes deeply involved with, and indoctrinated in, the *Hitlerjugend*. Hans, meanwhile, has begun to turn secretly against the Party and to help to distribute anti-Nazi leaflets. Helmut finds the leaflets and denounces his father to the Nazis, and Hans lands in prison for the remainder of the war. Up until this point, the film is so sympathetic toward Hans’s Nazi collaboration, and so pessimistic regarding his chances of successful revolt, that the message seems more to excuse the Germans who cooperated with Hitler’s regime, than to reveal anything terribly important about their guilt. Toward the end of the film, however, Hans studies the wall of a cell, on which the names of martyred resisters have been inscribed. Among the names is carved, „Sie sind gestorben, weil sie nicht schuldig werden wollten“ (1:15:00). At this point, *Rotation*’s message seems to change its tack. Was Hans’s collaboration ever truly justified?

It is useful to mention again at this juncture that *Rotation* was a product of East Germany. As I will discuss more deeply in future chapters, it was a very common attitude within the DDR that those who became East Germans were not the collaborators, but the victims of the Nazi regime; with East Germany’s new identity, linked with the USSR states that had faced similar persecution under the Nazis, it was easy to pretend that East Germans had never participated in these crimes. The primary audience of *Rotation*, then, might not actually have considered themselves to be the same kind of Germans as Hans Behnke. Under such circumstances, the film’s sharp criticism toward the end of those supposedly innocent bystanders might, for this audience, have overridden the sympathy we feel for Hans as he joins the Nazis.
Regardless of Rotation’s final message, its cultural portrait, especially that of Germany’s educational system during the 1930s, becomes especially useful in understanding the story of Traudl Junge, a young woman from Munich who eventually became Hitler’s secretary. Her 2002 book, Bis zur letzten Stunde, part memoir and part biography by Melissa Müller, describes Junge’s experiences in growing up during the Third Reich, as well as her incidental assignment, at the age of twenty-two, to Adolf Hitler’s private secretarial pool. Although Junge at the time was a follower of the Nazi regime, she was hardly what one might describe as a Nazi. Instead, as becomes apparent in her book, she was a relatively innocent and unquestioning follower.

Junge’s father, like many men, as Melissa Müller explains, felt drawn after the Great War to join a far-right organization:

Die militärische Niederlage und das Tauziehen um den Versailler Vertrag, die durch den Krieg geförderte Emanzipation der Frauen und ihr neu erworbenes Wahlrecht, die wirtschaftliche Not – all dies wollen die Männergruppen, die sich hinter Uniformen verstecken und ihre Waffen und Orden demonstrativ zur Schau stellen, kompensieren (17).

Traudl, then, was born into a family with fascist affiliations. Although she did not live with her father during her childhood, her similarly conservative grandfather refused to discuss politics; her father’s example was the only one she had. Soon, Junge became involved with „Glaube und Schönheit,“ a branch of the Bund Deutscher Mädel; according to Müller, the goal of „Glaube und Schönheit“ was to form girls, „die bedinungslos an Deutschland und den Führer glauben und diesen Glauben einst in das Herz ihrer Kinder legen“ (26). But for Junge, like for most of her schoolmates, the BDM was not a political organization. Instead, the girls practiced gymnastics and dance, and received social stimulation in an otherwise extremely restrictive society.

Junge subsequently was raised in „ein von Politik unbelastetes Leben“ (28); after she finished school, she came to understand that she could not fulfill her dream of being a
professional dancer, so she became a secretary. One day, through a family connection, she managed to move to Berlin, where she was invited to compete for a job as one of Hitler’s personal secretaries—an opportunity that to her entailed simply the excitement of an important position and a more luxurious lifestyle.

In her memoir, which she wrote originally in 1946, Junge describes in detail the furniture in Hitler’s Berlin bunker and at his Eagle’s Nest in Berchtesgaden; the generous accommodations aboard Hitler’s private train; the fatherly kindness with which Hitler regarded his female staff; the many meals he shared with his secretaries and honored guests; and even the days and weeks surrounding Hitler’s suicide and Germany’s surrender to the Allies. But what Junge does not seem to acknowledge in her reflections is any real sense at the time of the moral implications of her employment. Junge explains that, „Ich war zu Beginn meiner Tätigkeit ... belehrt worden, dass ich meine Arbeit mit niemandem zu besprechen hätte, und ich wusste, dass diese Anordnung ein strikter Befehl auch für alle anderen Mitarbeiter ... war“ (56). While Junge did transcribe speeches, and even a pair of wills, for Hitler, she contends throughout that she never truly discussed politics or the war with anyone. During his meals, Junge explains, Hitler chose to eat with women because he did not want to address such issues.

The combined effect of Junge’s apolitical education, and the personal affection she felt for her employer, who also shielded her from the gruesome realities of the Nazi regime, was that she came only years later to understand fully the implications of her employment. Living such a sheltered life, albeit directly in the epicenter of Nazi politics, and having no real concept of—or interest in—the specifics of the war, Junge explains that,

Es war leicht, einen Krieg zu führen, wenn man ihn selbst nicht am eigenen Leib spüren musste. Ich selbst hatte nie zuvor, auch im tiefsten Frieden nicht, solchen Luxus genossen und gesehen. Und als ich sie beobachtete, die Herren der Regierung, ... wie sie
In this fantasy world, safer perhaps from the war than she could have been anywhere else in the country, and utterly oblivious to events such as the Holocaust, Junge hid through the end of the war.

Later, in the documentary *Blind Spot: Hitler’s Secretary*, Traudl Junge describes on camera her sheltered youth, the phenomenon of Hitler’s charisma, and the staggering guilt she faced in her later life. Junge begins by explaining that Hitler and the Nazi regime manipulated their followers into believing that the war was a necessary sacrifice for the survival of the *Vaterland*, and that Hitler claimed, either directly or indirectly, to assume all blame for the war on behalf of the German people (0:1:41). She describes Hitler as a father figure who gave his disciples a sense of security, and that, „Ich hatte keinen Grund zu sagen, ich wollte nicht bei ihm bleiben“ (0:19:36).

As a response to her copious descriptions of Hitler’s furnishings, his clothing, and other seemingly unimportant details of her experience, Junge says that while today these facts seem quite trivial, directly following the war, they were important to the culture (0:27:51). In light of her later statement that in her perception, the German culture did not demonstrate any real desire for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* until the 1960s (1:23:27), the reason for the interest in Hitler’s furniture seems to have been that such details serve to humanize a figure who for many was, and is, both epically important and fascinating. Especially for those who retained their hero worship
of Hitler directly after the war, Junge says, it took courage simply to challenge the previous image of Hitler as a powerful but ultimately benevolent man (0:44:43).

Junge, however, did not remain as willfully ignorant as she was during her youth. She describes a particularly important moment following the war when she encountered the monument to Hans and Sophie Scholl in Munich; it was then, she says, that she realized that she could have done something (1:25:32). Junge describes throughout *Blind Spot* her simple unconsciousness of the Nazis’ real activities, but she never seems to imply that her ignorance was an excuse. Instead, the picture that emerges is that of a young woman who, raised in a household that never discussed politics, propagandized by Nazi youth movements, and exposed only to a Hitler who was kind, polite, and fatherly, just never thought of another course of action until she became older and saw the truth.

Through Junge’s and Mann’s work, a portrait emerges of a 1930s German culture that was frustrated by social change and economic depression, that featured strong traces of existent anti-Semitism, and that, perhaps most importantly, made little real effort to educate its children about politics, history, or a broader *Weltanschauung* than what the Nazis offered. Particularly for those who grew up during such a time, as we see in Mann’s *Zehn Millionen Kinder* and in Junge’s biography, these children truly were „eine Jugend ... , die nichts anderes mehr kennt!“ (Hitler, qtd. in Mann 56).
Examining the Perpetrators

Without the excuse of ignorance, however, it becomes much more difficult to understand how a very real person—often one’s own family member—could both have bought into the Nazi ideology, and personally have participated in the violence of the war and the Holocaust. In order to understand this dichotomy between brother and killer, between human and monster, writers like Uwe Timm and Christine Brückner have attempted to explore the inner workings of these figures, while philosopher Geoffrey Scarre examines the morality of the Nazis in a more general scope.

For Uwe Timm, examining the Nazi mentality has meant studying his own brother. Timm, a Nachkömmling, was just two years old when his older brother, Karl-Heinz, joined the SS and was sent into Russian territory. Timm describes his childhood as relatively sheltered from the realities of his brother’s profession; Karl-Heinz wrote letters to his family describing vague violence, but for little Uwe, these reports never seemed like reality. Karl-Heinz was wounded in battle in August 1943, and he died shortly thereafter; the military sent his diary and letters home to his parents, but Timm says that he couldn’t truly examine the papers until after his mother’s death—„Solange sie lebte, war es mir nicht möglich, über den Bruder zu schreiben“ (9).

Timm explains the effect of his eventually opening the diary through the metaphor of the ending of the „Ritter Blaubart“ fairy tale:

Da schloß sie auf, und wie die Türe aufging, schwomm ihr ein Strom Blut entgegen, und an den Wänden herum sah sie tote Weber hängen und von einigen waren nur die Gerippe noch übrig. Sie erschrak so heftig, daß sie die Türe gleich wieder zuschlug, aber der Schlüssel sprang dabei heraus und fiel in das Blut. Geschwind hob sie ihn auf und wollte das Blut abwaschen, aber es
war umsonst, wenn sie es auf der einen Seite abgewischt, kam es auf der anderen Seite wieder zum Vorschein (9).

As soon as Timm opens the door and sees what his brother truly thought and did, he cannot *unsee* it; the blood makes impossible any effort to lock up this knowledge. As for Timm’s mother, she simply refused to open the door, very likely because she knew what she would find. As Timm later writes, such refusal to examine the past—out of fear of social or legal repercussions, out of the desire to preserve the positive memory of a loved one, or out of the Third Reich habit of silencing all criticism—was extremely common. He says, „Es ist die zur Gewohnheit gewordene Feigheit – das Totschweigen“. And as Timm goes on to explore the contents of his brother’s diary and letters, the reason for „dieses Nicht-darüber-Sprechen“ becomes more and more clear (129).

The author describes an older brother who, while not taking much interest in his younger sibling, generally was considered to be a kind and honorable young man: „Er log nicht. Er war anständig. Und vor allem, er war tapfer, sagte der Vater, schon als Kind. *Der tapfere Junge*“ (14). And while he is not overly effusive in his writings, Karl-Heinz seems to be affectionate toward his family and sympathetic toward the Germans who suffer air raids and scarcity during the war. Regarding the English air raids he witnessed on German towns, Karl-Heinz writes, „Das ist doch kein Krieg, das ist ja Mord an Frauen und Kinder – und das ist nicht human“ (24). Timm’s brother here is, by all accounts, at least of average socialization and moral capacity. This Karl-Heinz is the son of his parents, the big brother to little Uwe, and the hero of the neighborhood.

But much of the content of Karl-Heinz’s diary seems to contradict such humanity. One of the first, and most striking, entries that Timm transcribes, reads:

*März 21.*
Donez
Brückenkopf über den Donez. 75 m raucht Iwan Zigaretten, ein Fressen für mein MG (16).

„Ein Fressen für mein MG,“ echoes Timm repeatedly, as though unable fully to process the statement. The author wonders of the Russian soldier, „An was wird er gedacht haben? ... An den Tee, etwas Brot, an die Freundin, die Mutter, den Vater? ... An was wird er gedacht haben, der Russe, der Iwan, in dem Moment? Ein Fressen für mein MG“(17). Timm’s conception of his brother’s victim as a person—as one who enjoyed cigarettes, who thought about tea and girlfriends, as one who noticed the landscape—is incongruous with the absolute detachment of „Ein Fressen für mein MG.“ The apparent disconnect here is between Karl-Heinz the person, „der tapfere Junge,“ and „Iwan“ the victim, who merits no such human consideration as that with which Karl-Heinz regards himself.

In a similar fashion, Karl-Heinz mentions later in the diary the destruction of Russian homes:

Wir bauen die Öfen der Russenhäuser ab, zum Straßenbau.

... 
Dieser Abbau bedeutete die Zerstörung der Häuser. Was haben die Menschen gesagt? Haben sie geweint? ... Es wird von ihm niedergeschrieben, ohne auch nur einen Augenblick eine Verbindung zwischen den zerstörten Häusern in der Ukraine und den zerombten Häusern in Hamburg zu sehen (89).

Timm searches in despair for a trace of the compassion his brother exhibits while criticizing the English air raids. The rest of the journal, up until Karl-Heinz’s death in a field hospital, offers only more such unsettling hypocrises. In many ways, what is most disturbing is what Timm’s brother does not write; Karl-Heinz makes no mention at all of taking prisoners. Timm outlines three possible reasons for this omission: that the SS troops killed their Russian captives immediately, that the Russians never surrendered, or—most disturbing—„daß er es nicht für
erwähnenswert hielten“ (33). In the likely case that Karl-Heinz simply did not find the prisoners (or the lack thereof) worth mentioning, he was demonstrating the „Totschweigen“ that his family later would adopt (129). Unlike for the Timms’ mother, however, whose reluctance to remember the war likely came from guilt or shame, Karl-Heinz’s silence on such subjects seems to have come from the belief that they simply were not important. As Timm observes, his brother’s journal is almost entirely apolitical; instead of propaganda, it contains „der normale Blick auf den Kriegsalltag“—that is, a viewpoint that does not attempt to assign any value, positive or negative, to its subject—in a situation that, under better circumstances, would warrant moral outrage (91).

Timm does not attempt to justify his brother’s attitude or actions, nor does he try to excuse his family’s complicity in the Nazi regime. Instead, he observes the effect that his brother’s story, while locked away and while brought to light, has on his family. For the Timm family, regardless of their personal political convictions, it was not possible to regard this soldier as anything but a son and a brother. Karl-Heinz Timm shows himself to be capable of immense cruelty, but he is not without a soul or a moral compass, and he seems genuinely to have loved his family. For Uwe, the most difficult challenge is to admit that his brother was a killer. But for the modern reader, it is far more painful to accept that this killer was a brother.

In her story „Die Banalität des Bösen“, one of her collection of Ungehaltene Reden ungehaltener Frauen, Christine Brückner, like Uwe Timm, attempts to enter the mind of a perpetrator, this time Eva Braun. The title, a famous term coined by Hannah Arendt, alerts the reader immediately to the nature of Eva’s personality; she is in this story, just as Traudl Junge describes her in her memoir, willfully cheerful and ignorant of the Nazis’ activities. As Eva
converses with the (silent) soldier who has been assigned to protect her on the night of her suicide, her tone is unsettlingly pleasant. She says,

Bedienen Sie sich! Wein oder Sekt oder Bohnenkaffee? Sie dürfen auch rauchen! Stehen Sie nur nicht da wie ein Wachposten vor einem Ehrenmal! Noch bin ich’s nicht (121).

As she continues to speak, Eva refers even more nonchalantly to her own death. If we were not sure that she actually knows Hitler, we would peg her for a member of a cult; Eva speaks with such absolute conviction about „Meinführer“ that she seems to be entirely without her own sense of self (125). Although she knows the nature of the Nazis’ activity, and while she seems to be in ideological agreement with them, Eva has contented herself in acting only as the domestic side of Hitler’s life:


As Eva seems to tell herself, she remains disconnected from the war. In this sense, Brückner’s Eva mirrors Traudl Junge. In their minds, to be uninformed, uninvolved, implies absolution. But unlike Junge, Eva is aware of the horrors around her. She says,


Eva speaks as though rampant death were a chore. It is this particular statement, this self-righteous refusal to take moral responsibility for what quite obviously constitutes murder—if she would only admit it to herself—that erodes what sympathy the reader might have for Brückner’s Eva.
As such, Timm’s account of his brother seems to raise deeper moral questions. That Karl-Heinz was essentially a loving son and brother, that he seems to have been of average moral character among his peers, makes his crimes even more disconcerting. When, as perhaps with this fictionalized Eva Braun, the person in question seems more crazed than reasonable, it is easier to label the perpetrator as a monster, and subsequently to declare that we, and our ancestors, have nothing in common with the Nazis. After all, no one can argue that the majority of the German population was as deranged as Hitler or Eva Braun. But that population did elect Hitler and, moreover, cooperated in his plans.

Geoffrey Scarre’s article, “Understanding the Moral Phenomenology of the Third Reich,” attempts, on a philosophical basis, to understand this very issue. Scarre posits that, “bracketing off the Holocaust as ‘inexplicable’ involves an evasion of reality which is inconsistent with a sincere attempt to understand our age” (424). I would add that to categorize the Holocaust as outside of human capability or imagination, or as a crime perpetrated by monsters, is to risk fooling ourselves that we lack the capacity to commit the same sort of evil in our own time. That is, if we rely solely on an image of the mythical, demonic Hitler and his equally psychotic henchmen as being responsible for the Holocaust, we simultaneously absolve all of the ordinary Germans who collaborated with the Nazis, because all-powerful Hitler forced them into submission. History, of course, does not support this view; a handful of lunatics could never have murdered six million Jews on their own. Instead, average young men like Karl-Heinz somehow brought themselves to perpetrate these crimes.

As Scarre observes, most of the Nazis who were responsible for the Holocaust, “behaved in their ‘off duty’ hours in accordance with moral standards that we would recognize as normal” (424). Uwe Timm’s description of his brother as „der tapfere Junge“ supports Scarre’s assertion;
before joining the SS, Karl-Heinz never seemed to be particularly cruel, but his callous attitude toward the Russian enemy seems to contradict this image of the noble boy (Timm 14). Eva Braun, too, although she seems unimaginably blasé regarding the horrors of the war, treats others with kindness, and even enjoys playing with the children whose deaths she cannot be bothered to stop (Brückner 131). The Timm family, as well as Traudl Junge, clung to this more palatable notion of the criminals they loved, in part because to love, or to admit the existence of, any other part of those people would have reflected poorly on themselves.

Scarre’s argument rests first on the idea that the anti-Semitism on which Nazism was based was widely accepted in German society prior to the war (429). Erika Mann’s works seem to support Scarre’s claim. In _Zehn Millionen Kinder_, Mann describes a system that does not need to convince parents and children of the danger of the Jews; instead, it simply proclaims loudly the truth of the old myths, and supports those myths with a _Weltanschauung_ that glorifies Germanic heritage and lends an air of grandeur to the lives of the Aryan German population. Even if a person was not convinced of the dangers of the Jews, a stint in the Third Reich educational system, or in an organization like the one in which Traudl Junge took part, might well serve to indoctrinate the uncertain. Moreover, because it was not seen as desirable to teach children real history or comparative politics, a young person might, upon being told an anti-Semitic myth, lack the information or the critical faculties to refute the claim. The children were, as Mann points out, meant to know nothing else (Mann 56).

Given such a solid basis of ignorance, anti-Semitism, and perhaps most importantly, anti-intellectualism, the average German might then, argues Scarre, feel as though he were acting reasonably in defending himself against an alleged Jewish enemy (436). A modern audience
might criticize the readiness of the young Nazis to kill based simply on Hitler’s urging, but

Scarre counters that,

such criticism smacks of the easy wisdom of hindsight. There were no simple tests that anyone could have done to discredit the stereotypes of the Jew or the witch. The belief-systems that sustained the persecutions of Jews and witches were elaborate, speciously plausible, hedged against empirical refutation (both Jews and witches were held to be expert at concealing their malevolent designs behind a cloak of innocence), and deeply entrenched (436).

It is difficult from the position of twenty-first century academia to imagine oneself in the position of absolute conviction that the Jews were not worthy to live; but Scarre urges us to put aside our moral superiority for the moment, so that we might come to understand the Nazis as the people they were.

This attitude implies that the perpetrators of the Holocaust could not have been fully responsible for their actions. If we were instead to view the culprits as “autonomous beings,” who were not so heavily influenced by their environments that they were unable to resist the influence of Nazi propaganda, we could assign the blame easily and fully to each German who participated (Scarre 438-439). This perspective, however, is double-edged. In terms of directing our anger, these “autonomous” Nazis would make an easy target; we can feel that we have blamed the appropriate parties, and that we as “autonomous beings” ourselves simply would not have made the same ideological choices as those Nazis. But as we attempt to reconcile our continued love for family members, or our continued sympathy with such a figure as Karl-Heinz, with the idea that these people chose evil, the autonomy approach falters. What would this mean for a mother who continues to love her son, even though she knows that he volunteered for the SS? What would it mean for the descendants of a woman who willingly agreed to act as a secretary for the man who masterminded the murder of millions? It would not be reasonable to
call such sympathy unjustified, nor would it be reasonable to believe that millions of Germans spontaneously and independently developed the urge to kill their neighbors.

Scarre’s thesis, that the German perpetrators acted from within what they mistakenly felt to be a correct moral code, makes it much more understandable that so many ordinary people could choose to kill as they did. Scarre defines this type of fault in morality:

Moral blindness in some area is the failure to perceive the true worth of things in that area; it consists either in overestimating or underestimating values (as the Nazis overestimated the value of belonging to the Aryan race and underestimated that of belonging to the human race). Germans are in principle no less well equipped to grasp values than anyone else, but the citizens of the Reich were morally more unlucky in their circumstances than most (439).

It is perhaps not coincidental that both Scarre and the makers of the Traudl Junge documentary, *Blind Spot*, chose blindness as their mode of explaining the inability of the Nazis to apply their normal morality to this particular area. Karl-Heinz Timm displays a similar type of “moral blindness” in his apparent inability to compare his own participation in the destruction of Russian villages to the destruction of his family’s home in Hamburg (Timm 89). Many of the characters in Erika Mann’s *Wenn die Lichter ausgehen*, as well, have come to weigh their own prosperity more heavily than the survival of their neighbors—the inherent selfishness in the principle, as Bertolt Brecht describes it in his *Dreigroschenoper*, of „Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.“ The resulting conception of the Nazis, then, is that the majority of those who carried out these crimes were no different in their moral capacity than anyone else, but that because of the culture in which they lived, they mistakenly undervalued certain classifications of humanity.

Perhaps the most frightening implication of Scarre’s theory is that,

The Germans of the Third Reich had no monopoly on the capacity to be duped. There is no reason to suppose that people of other
races or nationalities, raised in similar circumstances to Hitler’s Germans, would have been any less susceptible to error than they were (443).

To recognize the capacity within ourselves of making these very same mistakes is indeed sobering, and is enough, in some cases, to encourage us to revert to the perspective that tells us that the Nazis acted as individuals, that they were genuinely evil, and that we possess the moral strength to avoid such error.

Moving Forward
As time goes on, it becomes not only the perpetrators themselves who must decide how to approach their pasts; the next generation, and even that generation’s children, now grapples with their ancestors’ guilt, the tendency of that generation to bury the past, and these children’s own feelings, often divided between disgust at these crimes and their love for their own family members. In his novel *Der Vorleser*, Bernhard Schlink tells of an affair in the 1950s between a teenage boy and an older woman. The affair, however, is not the scandal in the book—the eventual revelation of Hanna’s role as an SS guard in a concentration camp, and Michael’s emotional and intellectual struggle with this truth, constitute the philosophical bulk of the novel.

In the beginning, as we see young Michael fall in love with Hanna, it is without any concept of what she has done. He sees her kindness toward him during his illness, her exhaustion after a long day at work, and the humbleness of her tiny apartment. Hanna seems like—and perhaps is—an ordinary lower-class woman. Hanna’s beauty is not that of a film star, Michael explains:

> Sie hatte einen sehr kräftigen und sehr weiblichen Körper, üppiger als die Mädchen, die mir gefielen und denen ich nachschauten. … Sie hatte nicht posiert, nicht kokettiert. … Ich erinnere mich, daß ihr Körper, ihre Haltungen und Bewegungen manchmal schwerfällig wirkten. Nicht daß sie so schwer gewesen wäre. Vielmehr schien sie sich in das Innere ihres Körpers zurückgezogen (17).

The narrator’s descriptions of this woman are compassionate and even-tempered. Hanna is not a particularly sophisticated woman, but Michael describes her genuine tenderness toward him, and later, her insistence that he finish the school year. When Michael tells her that in order to finish the year, „ich [müßte] wie blöd arbeiten,“ she responds,

> „Blöd ist deine Arbeit? Blöd? Was meinst du, was Fahrspen auf und lochen ist.“ Sie stand auf, stand nackt in der Küche und spielte Schaffnerin. „Wer hat noch keinen Fahrspen?“ Sie sah mich an. „Blöd? Du weißt nicht, was blöd ist“ (36).
In hindsight, of course, it becomes clear that much of Hanna’s reaction to Michael’s statement stems from her own secret illiteracy. Her frustration at being restricted to the most elementary of jobs, and her own sense of squandered opportunity, cause her to balk at Michael’s wish to leave school. But the other important element to this scene is the vivid illustration of Hanna’s deep caring for Michael. She may not be the most intelligent or educated person, but she certainly is not a monster. One might argue that Michael has simply fooled himself into thinking that Hanna does not, per se, typify the role of a killer; but it seems more likely that he genuinely has seen an inner part of Hanna—a part that has little to do with her activities during the war (about which he is not yet aware).

Later, after a series of misunderstandings rooted in Hanna’s illiteracy, the pair split, and Michael finishes high school and enters law school. There, he and his classmates, in their detached academic environment, debate the legal responsibility of former Nazis for their crimes. Michael wonders whether the concentration camp guards should be prosecuted on the basis that their crimes were, in most of the Western world, already considered illegal at the time, or whether they should not be prosecuted because at the time they committed the crimes, these acts were not considered illegal or unacceptable in Germany (86). Michael goes on to imply that he and his classmates, all future lawyers, see themselves as ultimately superior and detached from the history and perpetration of the Holocaust. He says,

Essentially, these students construct an ethical and legal morality in which the current generation, which was not old enough to have been involved with the Nazis, asserts the absolute guilt of all perpetrators. Such a reality allows, „daß man atmen und sehen konnte,“ in the sense that the young may feel perfectly self-righteous in their condemnation of Nazism, and thus in their own moral superiority. Compared to the „Totschweigen“ that plagued German society in the past, such an attitude is indeed a breath of fresh air, but it carries its own set of complications. Michael and his classmates find that they must blame nearly everyone, including their own parents, for the crimes of the Third Reich:


For a group of university students, it is perhaps not so difficult or painful to proclaim the moral inadequacy of their parents. But when Michael and his class are required to attend the trial of five women accused of having carried out unusually cruel acts during their time as guards at a small concentration camp outside Krakow, Michael’s philosophy goes on trial as well. Hanna is one of the defendants.

Initially, Michael judging Hanna along the same basis as he has judged everyone else. He cites his feelings of separation from and anger with Hanna as the root of this awful feeling. Michael says,

The sense that Michael has judged Hanna based on a gut feeling—here, one of hurt and betrayal—and not based on the specifics of her personality or the case against her, makes him begin to understand the rashness of his personal policy toward former Nazis. One might easily condemn all of the perpetrators based on such instincts; after all, their crimes are abhorrent, and the urge to denounce, and thus separate oneself from, those crimes is strong. But Michael knows Hanna. He understands that simply to categorize her as a sadistic murderer would be unjust and, moreover, inaccurate. This, after all, is the woman with whom he fell in love, who showed him tenderness and affection, who urged him not to make the mistakes that she has made. Hanna is not perfect, and she was an SS guard, but her case cannot be so uncomplicated.

As the trial proceeds, Michael’s purist philosophy continues to break down. When the prosecuting attorney asks Hanna to testify as to whether or not she personally sent prisoners to the gas chamber, Hanna asks the judge quite earnestly, „Was hätten Sie denn gemacht?“ The judge answers indignantly, „Es gibt Sachen, auf die man sich einfach nicht einlassen darf und von denen man sich, wenn es einen nicht Leib und Leben kostet, absetzen muß.“ But as Michael observes, the judge’s answer does not truly answer the question. He says,

Davon zu reden, was man muß und was man nicht darf und was einen was kostet, wurde dem Ernst von Hannas Frage nicht gerecht. Sie hatte wissen wollen, was sie in ihrer Situation hätte machen sollen, nicht daß es Sachen gibt, die man nicht macht (107).

While formal ethics still hold an important place in society, the rules are rarely so simple in such situations. Raised in the society of the Third Reich, illiterate, and facing immense pressure from her superiors and her coworkers, Hanna made the wrong decision—but that decision is still understandable. To expect that such perpetrators should have known better, that they should
have chosen without question to sacrifice their jobs, their prosperity, even their freedom and their lives, for the sake of morality, ultimately is rather unreasonable.

Especially after he comes to understand that Hanna is illiterate, and that it is for this reason that she has been convicted of a crime she did not commit—although in general she is guilty—Michael eventually comes to understand the faults of his previous assumptions. Michael’s efforts here to excuse Hanna’s membership in the SS, however, are problematic. He tells himself that Hanna’s illiteracy, something that could not truly be her own fault, has been the root cause of all of her problems:

Deswegen hatte sie sich der Beförderung bei Siemens entzogen und war Aufseherin geworden. Deswegen hatte sie, um der Konfrontation mit dem Sachverständigen zu entgehen, zugegeben, den Bericht geschrieben zu haben (127).

While it is reasonable to argue that had she been literate, Hanna might never have experienced these troubles, Hanna might still have joined the SS for any other reason; she apparently did not have trouble reconciling Nazism with her morality. How might Michael excuse a woman with the same story, except that she had joined the SS for a pay raise, and that some other extenuating circumstance had made her complicit in the particular crimes on trial?

But Michael’s motivation in defending Hanna’s actions comes not from logic—it comes from love. His image of this woman as his lover is incongruous with his image of her as a cold-blooded killer. The answer lies somewhere in between. Hanna is not entirely innocent, nor are her moral decisions excusable. But to characterize her as a one-dimensional criminal, or to claim that we would never have made the same decisions in her position, would be unfair. As Michael explains, he finds it impossible both to understand Hanna and to condemn her. From inside Hanna’s perspective, he cannot claim that his decisions would have been any nobler; to condemn Hanna without attempting to view the world through her eyes would mean to label her a
Wendel 30

monster. Michael decides that, „sie nicht zu verstehen, bedeutete, sie wieder zu verraten“ (151-152). He decides in favor of understanding over vilification, and he continues his relationship with Hanna by tape recording books and sending them to her in prison—an action that, according to the attitude he developed in his university courses, would have been unacceptable.

Shortly after Hanna is released from prison, she commits suicide. Michael seems in the end to have found little moral certitude to replace his lost sense of the world; he continues to question his attitudes and actions. He wonders,


But the message of Schlink’s novel seems to be in part that Michael has found that to question, to seek understanding, and perhaps never fully to decide on an answer, ultimately is better than the „Totschweigen,“ and better than giving in to the urge to condemn this woman.

Michael Verhoeven’s 1990 film Das Schreckliche Mädchen explores, through both direct storytelling and powerful symbolism, a similar process of discovery and confrontation to what Michael Berg experiences in Der Vorleser. As Sonya begins her research into her town’s Nazi past, she breaks the silence of decades, and her efforts do not go unnoticed. The approach of the generation that lived through the war is simply to act as though nothing happened—again, Timm’s „Totschweigen.“ In part, their memories of the fascist regime are traumatic; Sonya’s research reminds them of an era full of stress, instability, and, of course, guilt. But the townspeople also seem to feel that they can only move on if they deny that a part of themselves, or of their neighbors, collaborated with the Nazis. Through the town’s collective, unspoken agreement to attempt a fresh start, its citizens find, or think that they have found, a temporary measure of peace.
But for the younger generation, the personal trauma of the Third Reich is not a factor, and they are more willing, and more eager, to examine the past. Many, however, would still like to believe that their own ancestors—the stuff from which they are made—would not have collaborated with the Nazis. This possibility does not receive much direct attention in Das Schreckliche Mädchen; Sonya’s grandmother, her role model, was a staunch resister of the Nazi regime. But what would have happened if Sonya had discovered these secrets not about her neighbors, but about her own family? I suspect that her personal struggle in accepting her neighbors’ guilt would have been more problematic. Sonya’s teachers, the town pillars, and the local record-keepers are indeed people whom Sonya would like to be able to respect, but even outside of these characters’ secrets, their behavior tends to be corrupt and arrogant—for instance, the schoolteachers’ willingness to accept bribes in exchange for good grades. When Sonya eventually discovers that these figures have been hiding their past Nazi collaborations, the shock is subsequently not nearly as harsh as it might have been if she had realized, for instance, that her kind and upright grandmother had made no effort to stop the Nazis.

Nevertheless, one might consider the young neo-Nazis who attack Sonya to represent the demographic of ordinary youths who react negatively to the idea that their own parents or grandparents could have shared the responsibility for the Holocaust. These young men have nearly as much motive as their grandparents for wanting to keep silent. They, just like Sonya, look up to their elderly relatives as role models; heredity and familial love mean that they, in many ways, are similar to those relatives. If evidence arises that their family collaborated with the Nazis, it could mean that they themselves would have been Nazis, or that they are somehow morally deficient because they love such monsters. The resulting reaction, in this case, is of
outright denial, expressed through the affirmation of Nazi beliefs. If Hitler was right, these boys’ grandparents were right, too.

Scarre’s argument, along with the perspectives of writers like Erika Mann and Traudl Junge, provides an answer to this problem that is far more satisfactory than defensive neo-Nazism or simple “Totschweigen.” We, as humans, do all carry the capacity for such evil within us. The ancestors of these youths were essentially moral people who, as a result of outside factors, including a culture that did not value dissent, were more easily convinced to carry out their crimes. This is not to say that these ancestors are less guilty. As Rotation pointedly notes, the perpetrators were just as morally capable as the thousands who resisted the Nazis—„Sie sind gestorben, weil sie nicht schuldig werden wollten“ (Rotation 1:15:00). But these young men’s ancestors are not monsters. They still possess redeeming qualities that could justify their descendants’ love and forgiveness, just as Michael learns to look past Hanna’s mistakes in order to continue loving her.

At the end of Das Schreckliche Mädchen, however, the town sinks back into silence. After years of opposition and even outright persecution, Sonya’s town decides to recognize her work officially and to create a monument to her efforts. By making such a public recognition of Sonya’s work, the townspeople feel that they have made up for their crimes, and that they can now put an end to the matter—they can move on, and their collective acknowledgement of Sonya’s righteous efforts will cancel out their own refusal to discuss the issue. As soon as she has gotten past the feelings of flattery and triumph that understandably might follow such a difficult battle, Sonya recognizes the superficiality of this recognition. The townspeople, she seems to think, will never voluntarily examine the parts of themselves that were won over by Nazi extremism. The film ends when Sonya wildly flees the commemoration ceremony and
hides with her young daughter in the town’s prayer tree. In light of this ending, the message of *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* does not seem particularly optimistic.

Is it truly possible to address these issues without initiating the sort of identity crisis that Sonya’s town seems to experience? Schlink, I think, would say yes. As Michael observes, there may never be any easy answers to how we should treat or view our guilty ancestors, to what it means about ourselves when we continue to love those criminals, or to what we truly would have done in their positions. But to strive genuinely to answer these questions seems infinitely preferable to denial or outright condemnation. What Sonya fails to experience in this film is the moment that Michael faces in the courtroom: the realization that his righteous indignation has gotten in the way of his still justifiable love for Hanna. Sonya seems to have little motivation to want to forgive her neighbors, and therein lays the relative extremity of her attitude. In terms of morality, Sonya is right—but in terms of effective communication, and of helping her community to learn to deal with its past, Sonya’s approach may be flawed.

A 1992 report of public opinion poll among Germans seems to corroborate Sonya’s experience. As the journal *Society* reports,

> About one in three Germans believes the Nazi era had its good sides and that Jews are partly to blame for having been persecuted so often in history, according to a poll by *Infas*, a German public opinion poll institute. … 32 percent agreed with the notion that Hitler’s regime had its good sides before it launched the Second World War. *Infas* says that 10 percent of Germans in the West and 4 percent in the East agreed wholeheartedly with the statement: “It is the Jews’ own fault that they have been persecuted so often in their history.” Twenty-eight percent in the West and 27 percent in the East said there was ‘a bit of truth’ to that view (‘Germans See Nazis’ ‘Good Side’” 2-3).

The results of this poll are, of course, disturbing. The author of this article compares these numbers to the increase in neo-Nazi violence, which was recent in 1992. But in the context of
*Der Vorleser* and *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*, some of these opinions might stem from the current generation’s struggle to reconcile its grandparents’ actions with morality. If one can argue that the Nazi regime was not entirely bad, that the Jews were in some way asking to be treated poorly, it means that one’s grandparents might have been at least partially justified in their support of the Third Reich. What’s more, the perpetrators themselves likely gave silent affirmation of these beliefs by *not* talking about their participation. The younger generations might interpret this silence not as regret, but as a declaration that there is nothing to talk about, that the perpetrators felt justified in their actions. Without a perspective of regret from their grandparents, these men and women seem likely, out of love for their families and out of a desire to preserve their own sense of self-esteem, to espouse pro-Nazi beliefs.

What becomes clear through *Der Vorleser* and *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* is that while the desire is strong among younger generations to expose and place blame for the cooperation of ordinary Germans with the Nazis, these issues can never be so straightforward, by virtue of the simple fact that we still love the perpetrators. In some cases, such as that of the young neo-Nazis, we affirm the beliefs of that regime so that we can affirm that our grandparents were right. Other times, we find that we must temper our urge to condemn such people because we still sympathize with the guilty, and because we wonder what it could mean about our own morality that we could feel for such criminals. Clearly, „Totschweigen“ and neo-Nazism are not the answer, but neither is the clear-cut judgment that Sonya and young Michael espouse. We may never indeed find the “right” answer, but as Michael posits, it may be enough simply to try.

**Educating the Next Generation**
In light of the struggles of writers like Uwe Timm, Bernhard Schlink, and the fictional Sonya to reconcile the current state of German culture with the existence of these silent, unpunished collaborators, it becomes essential to examine the attitudes of Germany’s youngest generation, its schoolchildren, as well as how and what their parents and teachers tell them about the Nazi era. In many ways, what we tell our children is the manifestation of what we would like to tell ourselves; these small people are younger, more innocent versions of ourselves, and they wait for us to inform them and to help them to process this information. The formation of a pedagogical doctrine about the Holocaust, then, reflects the current state of Germany’s attitude toward itself.

A recent example of the German government’s struggle to decide what it will and won’t say about itself is the controversy, between 2006 and 2008, over whether the Deutsche Bahn would agree to display a French exhibit about the transport of Jewish children by the Reichsbahn to the concentration and death camps. Hartmut Mehdorn, the head of the Deutsche Bahn, argued in 2006 that the exhibit was not appropriate to be displayed in train stations because, “the subject is far too serious for people to engage with it while chewing on a sandwich and rushing to catch a train.” Wolfgang Tiefensee, Germany’s Federal Transport Minister, responded that it would only be right to hold the exhibition in the places where the crime occurred, and that to refuse to allow the installation would give the impression that the Deutsche Bahn would rather not advertise its predecessor’s participation in the Holocaust (“Controversy” 1).

To be fair, the Deutsche Bahn is not the Reichsbahn. To say so would be equivalent to making the claim that Germany’s modern Bundestag is responsible for the actions of the Nazi dictatorship. Mehdorn’s role is, essentially, to run a business, and an exhibit that might give the
false impression that the Deutsche Bahn was somehow making an effort to apologize for its actions as the Reichsbahn could amount to some very bad publicity, especially because Germany’s train stations receive heavy traffic by foreign tourists who might not see the distinction between the modern train system and its predecessor.

Ultimately, Tiefensee won the argument. To the German transport ministry, the danger of appearing to try in some way to hide the realities of the Holocaust was more important than Mehdorn’s worries about the appropriateness of the setting or the implications for the Deutsche Bahn’s image. Tiefensee said that, “dealing with our history in a responsible fashion is a precondition for democracy and tolerance.” Margret Suckale, a spokeswoman for the Deutsche Bahn, said at the exhibition’s opening that, “the Reichsbahn without a doubt played a supporting role in the Nazi genocide” (“Exhibition” 1). This response is fairly typical of the German government’s approach in recent years toward statements to the public. Germany’s reputation for the Holocaust is, in my ways, a public relations nightmare; this is not to say that other nations shouldn’t find the Nazis’ deeds abhorrent, but that the German government now feels the need constantly to be on the defensive about its official policy on the Third Reich. German officials simply could not allow Mehdorn’s complaint to carry weight, because any reluctance to display Germany’s Holocaust guilt could cause uproar in the international community.

As Emma Dresler-Hawke’s study on modern German students’ attitudes toward the Holocaust illustrates, however, the approach of the German people to its nation’s Nazi past is a bit more complicated than the German government might like to imply. Dresler-Hawke conducted comparative studies in 1995 and 2000, in an effort to survey both the general German attitudes toward responsibility for the Holocaust, and the potential differences in attitudes
between students who grew up in former East Germany and students from the Western areas.

Regarding the distinctive attitudes of former DDR inhabitants, Dresler-Hawke explains,

> The former German Democratic Republic's (GDR) [DDR] identification with the antifascist resistance against the Nazi regime permitted much of the social and political responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich to be avoided. … as a new antifascist state, the GDR claimed a complete break with the fascist past. Moreover, according to official GDR historiography, the GDR owed its existence to the resistance against Hitler's regime, and, with its proud antifascist record, dissociating itself from the crimes of the nation in this way made it possible for the GDR to absolve its citizens from responsibility for the fascist crimes (Buruma, 1994) (133-135).

As I discussed briefly in Chapter 1, it is thus important to regard East German documents like *Rotation* with a measure of caution. Because of the widespread belief that the inhabitants of what would become East Germany identified themselves as part of the resistance against the Nazis, what we might interpret in the film as an admission of cultural guilt seems more like an accusation of West Germans’ guilt.

The education of young East Germans, as Dresler-Hawke goes on to explain, consequently differed significantly from the information presented to West German children. Eastern schoolbooks present the facts of the Holocaust, but “these atrocities … do not affect them [the students] as they were not asked to atone for, or reflect on, the crimes committed by their parents or grandparents because they were, supposedly, the children of the antifascist resistance” (Dresler-Hawke 135). Such attitudes thus have influenced the students’ perceptions regarding the roles of individual people, versus the Nazi leaders and officials, or the large companies that benefited from slave labor, in carrying the responsibility for the Holocaust. The results of Dresler-Hawke’s study were as follows:
### Figure 1

**[1995] Categories of the People Who Were Held Responsible for the Holocaust (140)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>West %</th>
<th>East %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nazi leaders like Hitler, Himmler, or Goebbels</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi Party (NSDAP)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large industrial companies</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population that lived at the time</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the Jews that lived at the time</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>1995 %</th>
<th>2000 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nazi leaders like Hitler, Himmler, or Goebbels</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi Party (NSDAP)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large industrial companies</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population that lived at the time</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the Jews that lived at the time</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1995, students in former East Germany were significantly more likely to place the blame for the Holocaust on the Nazi leaders than Western students were; moreover, more Eastern students said that the Nazi leaders were responsible than said that the general population was at fault (Figure 1). These trends seem to confirm Dresler-Hawke’s theory that East Germans see their own ancestors as resisters or as innocent bystanders. In 2000, Dresler-Hawke repeated the study, only in the East, with another group of approximately the same size (but she emphasizes that these were not the same students as in the previous study). In the later survey, students seem significantly more willing to place the blame for the Holocaust on the general population, and less eager to claim that the Nazi leaders carried the responsibility. The cultural attitudes and educational approaches in the region seem to have changed.

The researchers, however, also found that, “both 1995 and 2000 groups were more inclined to perceive their grandparents in the roles of victims and/or opponents of the regime than as regime supporters” (Dresler-Hawke 143). There is an essential discrepancy in the data here. The majority of students in 2000 believed that the general population was responsible for the Holocaust, but a majority of those students also believed that their own ancestors had not been responsible. Logically speaking, it seems highly unlikely that both perceptions could be true. As Dresler-Hawke explains, this attitude “suits their view that their family and they themselves are innocent, and provides them with a positive identity” (145). Despite extensive education as to the true nature of the Holocaust’s perpetration, these students, perhaps as a form of emotional self-defense, continue to believe that their ancestors could not have been involved.

In his essay, “Research on the Attitudes of Pupils and Teachers towards the Shoa in Germany,” Bodo von Borries examines a set of studies, conducted between 1992 and 2000, which were similar in subject matter to that of Dresler-Hawke. While von Borries found that
German youths had had extensive education on the facts of the Holocaust, a minority population of the youths perceived the “achievements” of the Nazi regime positively. For example, a small group of the students surveyed said that they associated National Socialism with “resolutely standing up for [the] greatness and power of Germany;” a somewhat smaller faction also associated National Socialism with “order, security, industriousness and cleanliness” (von Borries 212). Von Borries interprets this result to indicate the existence of a relatively small neo-Nazi subculture. To the author, this faction participates out of a desire to rebel. He says,

> In my opinion, it is completely useless to confront such adolescents with additional lessons about the Holocaust, additional documentary films or additional visits to concentration camps and museums. They are immune to such information and “civil rights” arguments. They desire to be infamous “bad guys”, and they want to provoke. Many do not hide their admiration for their great-grandfathers (212-213).

The problem does not seem to be a lack of education; as von Borries affirms, most of the students were fairly knowledgeable about the Holocaust. But it has been perhaps the effect of that education on certain youths that causes them to rebel. It might be that these young men and women simply have discovered the hot-button issues that can anger their society the most.

Another option, however, is that they find it difficult to reconcile their love for their ancestors, and their desire to have pride in their nation and its history, with what they have learned about the Holocaust. To proclaim that the Nazis were correct means to exonerate these youths’ loved ones, and to glorify the history of the nation into which they were born. The end result, then, would be similar to what Dresler-Hawke sees in schoolchildren who are willing to blame everyone but their own grandparents for the crimes: they can maintain a positive self-image.

Nonetheless, much of the German government’s official information on its Holocaust education plan does not reflect the phenomena that von Borries and Dresler-Hawke have noted.
In his essay for the German Information Center in New York, Gunter Wehrmann seems much more focused on reassuring Americans of Germany’s progressive attitude, than of examining critically the actual effect of Holocaust education on German students. Wehrmann explains rather optimistically that,

For Germans, the Holocaust is not an event that happened in a faraway place in some distant past, but is part and parcel of their recent history. … The treatment of the Nazi period in all its aspects ... is compulsory teaching matter at all types of schools in Germany and at all levels of education. The Holocaust is treated as the most important aspect of the period of Nazi rule (2).

Barring the development of psychic powers, Wehrmann cannot possibly speak for “Germans.” What’s more, the author’s statement that the Holocaust is of primary importance in this subject area directly contradicts von Borries’s statement that, “it is my impression that often only three or four lessons are devoted to the Holocaust itself, even if the teacher carefully follows the guidelines of the syllabus” (1). It would not be possible to prove here whether or not the Holocaust receives the sort of attention that Wehrmann claims it does, but von Borries’s comment causes us to read cautiously with regard to the German Information Center’s perspective.

Further, while Wehrmann does mention “their ancestors’ guilt” as one issue that young Germans need to confront (2), the lists he provides from a ninth-grade teaching handbook of principles which “students should learn to recognize” is as follows:

- the destruction of a democratic government based upon the rule of law.
- the enforcement of the Führer's principles.
- total regimentation of the population through propaganda.
- discrimination and terror, and the anti-human ideas of the prerogative of an Aryan race form the basis from which Hitler could unleash a world war and embark upon the systematic destruction of human lives (3).
The wording of these principles seems to make very little mention of individual perpetration by ordinary Germans. The points place no responsibility for *who* destroyed the democratic government, or who enforced the Führer’s principles; moreover, the third point, “total regimentation of the population through propaganda,” seems to imply that an unseen, all-powerful force brainwashed the entire public into complicity, and the fourth point posits that *Hitler* embarked upon the systematic destruction of human lives. None of these points are untrue, but they seem distinctly to neglect to mention the widespread anti-Semitism that preceded Hitler’s *Machtergreifung*, or the idea that the Nazis could never have carried out their plans without massive amounts of help from average German citizens.

Wehrmann does seem to redeem himself toward the end of the essay, when he mentions the inner complexity of the perpetrators, and the idea that the examination of these issues is crucial to the formation of ethical strength in children. He writes,

> Teaching social values and imparting the knowledge of the achievements and crimes that human beings are capable of are essential for nourishing a commitment to tolerance and democracy in young people. … If the teaching of ethics were a panacea, there would be no thefts, no homicides, and no bias-related crimes -- because all perpetrators were once taught not to steal, not to kill, and not to hate a fellow citizen of a different color or creed (3).

Wehrmann’s statement seems to agree with Geoffrey Scarre’s argument that most of the Nazi perpetrators were ordinary, otherwise ethical people who allowed their moral perspectives to become distorted. And the idea that the Nazis were human—that we all possess the same capacity for evil—is important. But what Wehrmann again seems to have missed is the importance of addressing students’ feelings about the former Nazis whom they do *not* abhor. To deny the responsibility of these children’s ancestors would be unjust; but to fail to teach the children to understand, and perhaps even to forgive, their grandparents, could send toward one of
two extremes: like young Michael Berg, the self-righteous condemnation of every perpetrator, or, like the neo-Nazis, the re-affirmation of fascist principles in order to exonerate their grandparents. As Bernhard Schlink suggests, the simple effort to help students grapple with these questions, even if they are never to find a solid answer, might be enough to prevent such unhealthy extremes of thought.

While not as scientific as those of Dresler-Hawke and von Borries, Erin Browne’s article, “Holocaust Education in Germany Expands,” provides what is perhaps a more realistic view of the state of Holocaust education in Germany today. Instead of consulting the teachers’ manuals, Browne asks several German students themselves about what it means to them to be German in the wake of the Holocaust. Both Katha and Gigi address the issue of Germans’ reputation abroad; the two girls feel that the rest of the world views modern Germans as holding the same ideologies, and the same guilt, as their forebears. They feel frustrated by these attitudes because they would like the same right to express national pride—pride in the Germany of today, not the one of sixty years ago—as the citizens of other countries enjoy (2-3). Matthias echoes his classmates’ idea that the Germans of more recent generations are not necessarily responsible for their ancestors’ crimes; moreover, the people who collaborated with Hitler did so not because they were German, but because they were “people with a weak character”—meaning, in short, that similar citizens of any nation could have made the same mistakes (2). Andrea’s comments are perhaps the most problematic. She says,

> With his psychology, Hitler influenced the people and he made them into his marionettes. I did not live then, but I am sure I would never maltreat people or kill them. For me it is hard to kill a fly - how I could kill a person? I am sure that my grandparents never voluntarily killed a Jew or another person, too (2).

This student simultaneously puts the bulk of the blame on Hitler—“he made them into his
—and affirms naively that both she, and her grandparents, would have been immune to the Nazi ideology. I do not intend to criticize Andrea for holding such beliefs; after all, she is still a teenager, and it is so often difficult even for adults to begin to question with any sense of realism what they would have done in the situation of their grandparents. Andrea here responds to the idea of herself as a Nazi just as the judge does in Der Vorleser. As Michael says,

Davon zu reden, was man muß und was man nicht darf und was einen was kostet, wurde dem Ernst von Hannas Frage nicht gerecht. Sie hatte wissen wollen, was sie in ihrer Situation hätte machen sollen, nicht daß es Sachen gibt, die man nicht macht (Schlink 107).

Without a true understanding of the lives and mindsets of Germans during the Third Reich, Michael implies, pure morality is not enough to predict what one would have done. Insofar as Andrea is a representative of the results of German education about the Holocaust, her statement seems to warrant the inclusion of perspectives like Michael’s in classroom discussions of the Holocaust.

It seems, furthermore, that some of the methods of German Holocaust education have been contributing to an unsettling phenomenon among German students. In his article, “Berlin official: German kids tired of Holocaust,” Etgar Lefkovits of the Jerusalem Post reports that Dr. Benedikt Haller of the German Foreign Ministry has said that, “German children tend to show Holocaust fatigue.” According to Haller, an “over-infusion” of information about the Holocaust has left many students feeling overwhelmed by, and subsequently resistant to, information about their ancestors’ guilt (1). Lefkovits cites two American Holocaust scholars, Bernita King and Susan Meyers, as criticizing Haller for his remarks, on the grounds that, “he should be the biggest cheerleader of Holocaust remembrance,” and that, “this is the wrong message to send out when there is so much more work that needs to be done” (1). But King and Meyers seem almost
willfully to be misunderstanding Haller’s comments. Lefkovits’s title, too, is a bit sarcastic in its report of the message, as though we should already be offended at the callousness of these German children.

In the article, Haller says explicitly that he does not see these new issues as a reason to reduce Holocaust education. Instead, Haller implies that because of this new challenge—which we cannot simply ignore just because we find it distasteful—it will be necessary to develop newer, more effective methods of encouraging German students to think about the Holocaust without provoking this sort of adverse reaction. In the end, a more diplomatic, and perhaps even a more mature, approach to the issue will promote a more candid national dialogue. As the situation stands, such children have become understandably overwhelmed by the constant message that their beloved relatives, and as a collective, they themselves, are responsible for the Holocaust. How does one tell a ten-year-old that her grandmother was a Nazi, and that she has been born into a stake of the national guilt for the Nazi legacy? Her natural resistance to this idea is a defense mechanism to preserve her self-esteem. The answer is not, of course, to tell her that her grandmother was not a Nazi; but clearly, a new approach is necessary.

Petra Thorbrietz, in her somewhat more in-depth article for the German magazine Focus Schule, addresses this very issue of “Holocaust fatigue” among German youths. Thorbrietz explains,

Inzwischen drückt schon die vierte Generation die Schulbank und äußert in Umfragen, sie sehe nicht ein, warum sie sich immer noch schuldig fühlen solle für etwas, mit dem sie nichts das Geringste zu tun habe. Der Generationskonflikt hat über die Jahrzehnte seine Macht verloren – ob Opa oder gar Uropa mal Nazi war oder die Großtante für Hitler schwärme, interessiert die wenigsten (1).

Although Thorbrietz offers a succinct summary of the issue, I would argue that the problem is not so much that the children are not interested in whether or not their relatives are guilty, but
that the children know that asking, and hearing an affirmative answer, could create serious problems for their own self-image—it is thus preferable simply not to ask.

However, Thorbrietz offers a compelling set of evidence for the problem of “Holocaust fatigue.” She reports that the terms „Jude“ and „Opfer“ have once more become popular derogatory terms among adolescents (2), and that student tour groups in the concentration camps often exhibit a startling disconnect from the reality of the setting:


These teachers’ reports corroborate my personal experience in observing a group of high school students while touring Buchenwald in the summer of 2005. The teenagers laughed, chatted, and even roughhoused their way through the tour, and they could not even be brought to silence by the experience of walking through the crematorium or standing in the lower room of the crematory building, which was used both for storing bodies and for hanging prisoners from hooks on the wall until they died. Needless to say, their behavior astounded and disturbed me. But in retrospect, what I observed seems to have been another symptom of “Holocaust fatigue.” It is possible that the sights of the camp were so emotionally disturbing that these teens resorted to cheerfulness as a method of masking their feelings; after all, it is often not very socially acceptable among groups of that age to show emotion, particularly while trying to process such complex emotions. I certainly would never bring a child younger than fourteen on one of these tours. But it seems likely, too, that in dissociating themselves from the experience of the camp and the resulting feelings of grief and guilt, these teens managed to find temporary respite from what to them feels like a constant inundation of demands that they feel responsible on behalf of
Despite these apparent setbacks, Thorbrietz cites at least one teacher who seems to have found a method of circumventing her students’ resistance to serious Holocaust education. Hannelore Steinert recounts that,


Thorbrietz’s diagnosis of the “Holocaust fatigue” phenomenon is not, therefore, without hope. It is not that, as Dr. Haller’s critics seem to think, teachers wish overly to soften the blow of the Holocaust or to stop teaching it altogether. Instead, instructors and must seek to understand the nature, and the causes, of their students’ attitudes, and develop new methods of connecting with adolescents in such a way that does not cause them to shut down out of self-defense.

One of the most recent developments in German Holocaust education has been a new children’s book, “The Search,” which the Anne Frank Haus in Amsterdam has released in comic book format. “The Search” tells the story of Esther, a Jewish teen, as she copes with her family’s deportation after she escapes imprisonment herself (Kimmelman 1). The philosophical approach of this new text is what seems to set it apart from previous materials. Michael Kimmelman writes that,

> Without excusing anyone or spreading blame, the story, rather than focusing on Hitler and geopolitics, stresses instances where ordinary individuals — farmers, shopkeepers, soldiers, prison guards, even camp inmates — faced dilemmas, acted selfishly or ambiguously: showed themselves to be human (1).

“The Search” focuses not on the German identity, or on punishing the perpetrators, but on their ancestors.
Holocaust history, as a reflection of what can be possible when ordinary people find themselves in extraordinary situations. While the book could not, of course, pretend that the culprits are not to blame for their actions, one teacher claims that, “it teaches the subject … so that it’s no longer just about victims and perpetrators” (2). According to the book’s proponents, such an approach focuses the students’ attention away from thoughts of their relatives’ and their nation’s guilt, toward the moral perplexities of the Holocaust and of human nature. As a result, students seem more receptive to a serious discussion of the events. “We decided,” says one of the book’s writers, “not to show Hitler as a beast or inhuman because the Nazis, after all, were human beings. That’s the point. Anyone can be a perpetrator or a hero” (Kimmelman 2). This affirmation reiterates once more the implicit arguments of writers like Schlink and Timm; when we acknowledge the humanity of our guilty forebears, we can begin to cope with the elements of guilt that we find within ourselves.

Conclusion

Through a survey of works that attempt to address the culture of the Third Reich, the mentalities of the ordinary Germans who collaborated with the Nazis, and the struggle of those perpetrators’ descendents to come to terms with the events of the Holocaust, I have sought to
understand the complexities of Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, especially as it pertains to the youth of today. Writers like Erika Mann and Traudl Junge have endeavored to explain the predisposition of Third Reich Germany toward anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism, while Uwe Timm and Bernhard Schlink have examined the intricacies of understanding a Nazi perpetrator who happens also to be a loved one. Furthermore, an examination of the modern German school system reveals that the current approaches to teaching the Holocaust often fail to combat students’ tendencies toward denial, neo-Nazism, and “Holocaust fatigue.” Through these texts, it becomes clear that a simplistic conception of the Germans who collaborated with the Nazis is insufficient. It is only when we set aside our moral absolutism and attempt to understand these perpetrators in the context of their culture and, most importantly, their humanity, that it becomes possible to reconcile the truth of the Holocaust with our own urges to love and to forgive these criminals, and to forgive ourselves for loving them.

Aber es kam anders.

Ich ging ganz normal zur Schule.

Viel Glück beim Test!

Dunkel!

Hab kaum was dafür getan...

Ich wusste nicht, dass es ein Abschied für immer sein würde.

Bin nachher, Estelina. Tschüs, Mamut!

Später ...

War halb so schlimm. Viel leicht wird’s noch ’ne Viert.

Namu war.

Da stand Helmus Vater. Er war Polizist.

Ist was passiert?

Hör zu, Deine Eltern wurden verhaftet. Willst du zu ihnen? Oder willst du was anderes?

Die Entscheidung fiel mir fürchterlich schwer, aber ich beschloss, zu Professor Bouwer zu gehen.

Namu, Esther? Komm schnell rein.

Meine Eltern wurden verhaftet, als ich in der Schule war. Was mach ich jetzt?

Du kannst heute hier schlafen, ich seine dafür, dass ich morgen jemand abholt.

He ... Der Polizist, war das deiner Capi?

Mein Uropa. Er war der Vater meiner Oma.
But it all went wrong. I left for school that day as usual. Good luck with your test! Yes, thanks! I should have studied harder.

I didn't realize at that moment that I was saying goodbye forever. See you later, Esther! Yes, bye mom!

Later... That went better than expected. Perhaps I even passed.

Huh... what?

It was Helena's father. He worked for the police...

Hello, Sir, what's wrong? Listen. Your parents have been picked up. Do you want to go to them or perhaps somewhere else?

It was a terribly difficult decision, but I finally decided to go to Professor Bouvier's house.

Esther, what is it? Quickly, inside!

My parents were picked up while I was at school. So, now what? Stay here tonight. I'll arrange for someone to pick you up tomorrow.

Hey... that policeman, was he your grandfather?

My great-grandfather. The father of my grandmother.
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