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DISSONANT LIVES

Generations and violence through
the German dictatorships

MARY FULBROOK

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the German dictatorships*

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Preface

This book is not a standard ‘history of Germany’ in the twentieth century, or even of the German dictatorships, but rather is concerned with the ways in which Germans of different ages and life stages variously lived through and across the major historical ruptures that peculiarly marked that century: it is about collective patterns of experience and individual passages through the violent eruptions of wars and post-war periods, and through the succeeding dictatorships of Nazism and communism. It explores the experiences and perceptions of selected individuals, and analyses the ways in which major historical events, and changing structures of constraint and opportunity, affected the course of their lives and their outlooks.

For this project, the concept of social generations has been used as a tool of analysis, in order to explore how the ‘same’ historical period can be experienced quite differently according to social age or life stage at the time, to understand how certain cohorts disproportionately rose to prominence in the historical record of particular regimes at certain times, and to see the ways in which earlier periods of history had lingering implications in later presents. I have thus sought to trace not only individual lives but also the collective patterns that may under certain historical circumstances, although not always, be seen among those born in roughly the same era. ‘Generation’ is sometimes more and sometimes less significant for the ways in which key moments or periods of history are experienced; it is not always important, and sometimes not at all, yet people are themselves on occasion keenly aware of how just how different their own lives might have been had they been born just a few years earlier or later. This is particularly the case in a country beset, as Germany was, by violence, warfare, and radical historical ruptures, with major changes of highly ideological regimes, where people repeatedly faced massive challenges and repeatedly were brought to account for their own biographies and their own recent pasts. So generation is, in a sense, a hidden factor in historical experience which warrants more explicit and systematic attention than it has frequently been given.

My attempt to write ‘history from within’ has meant a primary focus on what people themselves wrote and said about their lives—sources that are often termed ‘ego-documents’. These should, on the one hand, never be seen as adequate guides to ‘how it really was’, to adopt a favourite Rankean phrase, since the worm’s-eye view is rarely a good vantage point for mapping out the shape of the wood as whole, and particularly not when those in charge of the wood are past masters at deception and manipulation of the inhabitants; but on the other hand, such subjective perceptions and self-representations themselves form a crucial part of that history, and indeed help to shape it. In exploring the degrees of dissonance between what people confess to themselves and others in private letters and diaries, and their acts in public under particular regimes, a new approach may be developed to understanding the German dictatorships in terms of varying degrees of ‘availability for

mobilization' by intrusive and demanding regimes, and more or less willing 'enactment' of roles by their citizens, adopting manners of speaking and behaving as appropriate to their surroundings. This too forms a crucial, if often hidden, part of understanding stability and change, affecting what it was or was not possible for those in positions of power to achieve.

The book attempts, then, to combine an exploration of the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of succeeding generations with an analysis of changing historical structures and developments. The standard historical narrative of the period, in terms at least of the basic chronology of major events and high politics, is taken for granted as a relatively familiar if highly contested backdrop to the exploration that follows. The work covers such a vast span, beset by innumerable historical controversies, that I have thought it best to keep footnote references to relevant secondary literature to a minimum and only to suggest, on occasion, where to go for further reading on any particular period or problem.

In writing the book, I often had the sense of trying to paint shifting shadows, or capture the wind by observing distant ripples in the trees. Yet this aspect of perceived and experienced history is central to the ways in which people live and behave, and hence has massive implications for understanding the character particularly of dictatorial regimes, where outer behaviour and private reflections are intrinsically related, yet often run quite at odds with each other. Moreover, even a dictatorship which is ultimately predicated on force and physical containment requires its functionary classes to put policies into effect; and policies of waging an aggressive war of expansion or committing acts of organized genocide on an unprecedented scale require the mobilization or cooperation of millions of people.

This last point is perhaps the hardest to confront. For, in writing about people who lived through what, from a comfortable vantage point in the early twenty-first century, seem like almost impossible times, facing at best only a 'choice' between the 'lesser of two evils', I feel I have frequently hit up against the limits of history as a discipline. There is only so much we can know, understand, explain, or describe. Nevertheless, what follows is an attempt to bring aspects of Germany's dictatorial past to the present in ways which make intelligible some of the worst features of German history in the twentieth century, and clarify some of their longer-term implications for those lucky enough to survive or to be born later; or rather, to make another kind of sense out of this past, and hence to contribute to a fuller understanding of aspects of what, ultimately, remains beyond comprehension. The attempt has frequently made me feel deeply humbled; I hope the results will nevertheless prove illuminating.

Acknowledgements

I have many debts of gratitude which it is a pleasure to acknowledge. The Leverhulme Trust awarded me a three-year Major Research Fellowship, giving me leave from UCL to become, for once, almost completely free from other university duties and able to immerse myself in research and writing. The Leverhulme Trust also provided travel funding for archival research and undertaking some additional oral history interviews. The research for this book would simply not have been possible without such generous support. Archivists have been unfailingly helpful, and I would like to thank staff in the following archives for their assistance: the German Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv) in Berlin, the Central Institute (Zentrale Stelle) in Ludwigsburg, the State Archive Berlin (Landesarchiv Berlin), the Kempowski Archive in the Academy of Arts (Akademie der Künste), the Secret State Archive of Prussian Cultural Heritage (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz), the Field Post Collection of the Museum of Communication (Feldpostsammlung Museum für Kommunikation) in Berlin, the Rhineland State Archive (Landschaftsverband Rheinland) near Cologne, the Archive of the Library of Contemporary History (Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte) in Stuttgart, the manuscript collection at the Houghton Library of Harvard University, and the Katowice State Archive (Archivum Państwowe w Katowicach) in Poland; particular thanks are due to the German Diary Archive (Deutsches Tagebuch Archiv) in Emmendingen (where staff opened up for me when the archive was technically closed, in deepest August) and to the Local Archive (Heimatarchiv) Schöneberg in Berlin, both of which allowed me not only to have unfettered physical access to their collections but also to the office photocopier.

This book in part grew out of an earlier research project on the GDR 1961–1979, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which I would like to thank again for its support. I also continue to benefit from Silvia Dallinger's work as an Honorary Research Assistant. Esther von Richthofen, Angela Brock, and Erica Fulbrook provided assistance with oral history interviews in German; and Marta Szynska assisted me with interviews in Polish. Christa von Richthofen and Anne-Franziska von Schweinitz were of considerable help in opening up the world of the German aristocracy, and providing materials, contacts, and leads for oral history interviews with aristocrats who remained in the GDR after 1945. Bodo Förster and the Sophie Scholl Schule in Berlin generously shared the history of their school with me, and put me in contact with the former secretary of the Old Girls Association, Inge Cohn-Lampert. For reasons relating both to themes and constraints of space, oral-history interviews have been only selectively alluded to here, and will be deployed more extensively in forthcoming related publications which expand on some of the issues raised in this book. I am particularly grateful to all those individuals who were willing to share their personal experiences in oral-history interviews, bearing witness to their lives through challenging times; and to

those families who let me read letters and diaries of close relatives and friends. For reasons of the anonymity which has been preserved in quotations in the text, where pseudonyms or initial letters in place of surnames have been used, I shall not thank them explicitly by name here.

There is always a danger among historians, when acknowledging debts, of seeking to weigh up the many multiple influences on the shaping of a project; I shall resist the temptation here to list individually those with whom I have talked through the issues addressed in this book, and whom I would like collectively to thank in this context. My colleagues at UCL have been extremely supportive during my period of absence from most of the routine travails of academic life. It has been a particular pleasure to have continued to supervise a group of highly talented UCL graduate students, many of whom have been working on related topics, and to have benefited from stimulating discussions in our many informal workshops and conferences. The German Historical Institute London has been a constant companion, providing assistance and support for both jointly and separately organised conferences; I would like to thank its staff and particularly its director, Andreas Gestrich, for all they have done during this time. Christiane Wienand and Julia Wagner also helped in organizing joint conferences with the GHIL on themes relating to this book, and I would like here to express my thanks to them and also my gratitude to the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the German History Society, and the Marie Curie Foundation through the UCL Centre for European Studies, for additional conference support. I have, in the course of this project, also benefited greatly from discussions with colleagues nationally and internationally, in the context of lectures and conferences in a wide variety of places across the world. Finally, I would like to thank Christopher Wheeler and the anonymous reader for OUP for their very perceptive comments, Matthew Cotton for hanging on as it took ever longer to complete, and John Nichols for straying well beyond his comfort zones of music and literature and taking the time to pick up typographical errors in the manuscript while I struggled to complete the translation of quotations. This task proved extraordinarily challenging, not so much because it was not clear what the German meant or implied, but rather because of the often heavily context-laden tone of utterances deriving from the German dictatorships, where the relevant English words or phrases often seemed to provide little by way of equivalence in wider connotations and tone. On occasion, I have therefore commented on the difficulties of translation and suggested alternatives.

I dedicate this book to my family, in the widest sense. All our lives and identities have been shaped, in one way or another, by the kinds of forces that I have only been able to begin to explore in this book. I dedicate it to the memories of my father, a Canadian, whose own father went missing under mysterious circumstances in the Great War, in 1917, hugely affecting his own outlook and passage through life; my mother, who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, equally massively affecting the future course of her life; and my brother Howard, who, born in Wales and utterly British, as an adult settled in Germany; I would so much have liked to have been able to share it with them. I dedicate it also to my other brother Hanno, whose disrupted pan-European childhood and sense of lost relatives were so much part of

the developments described here; and to Howard's wife and children, Germans who have grown up in the shadow of a culture of imposed shame without any personal guilt. Our own tangled family histories reveal just how complex the issues are, and how ridiculous it can be to make simplistic generalizations about 'the Germans'. Most of all, I dedicate this book to my husband Julian, and to our three children, Conrad, Erica, and Carl. Julian, as always, not only put up with my obsessive interest in the past, but also (more or less) willingly exposed himself to some of the accompanying sagas of research trips in Germany, Poland, and the USA, and even devoted a 'summer holiday' to ploughing through and constructively commenting on a full draft of the manuscript; Erica gave me invaluable assistance with oral-history interviews in Germany; Conrad and Lara filmed interviews in Poland; and Carl shared much of my indulgence in the past in Berlin; and all of them lovingly bore with me and supported me while I was at times immersed in the research to the exclusion of life in the present.

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1

Introduction

Violence and generations through the German dictatorships

Truly, I live in times of darkness!
...
What sort of times are these, when
A conversation about trees is virtually a crime
Because it entails silence about so much wrongdoing!
...
You, who will arise after the flood
In which we drowned
Think
When you speak of our failings
Also about the dark times
That you escaped.
...
Yet of course we also know:
Hatred even of baseness
Distorts our own features.
Anger even about injustice
Makes our own voice rough. Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.
You however, when the stage has been reached
When human beings help one another,
Think of us
With consideration.

(Bertolt Brecht)¹

The central challenge of understanding twentieth-century German history can arguably be summarized in one word: Auschwitz. And around this one word—which stands, of course, for far more than Nazi Germany's largest industrial extermination centre and concentration camp—there are many other, more wide-ranging

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'An die Nachgeborenen', my translation. The German original can be found in Karl Carstens (ed.), *Deutsche Gedichte* (C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1983).

questions. Not only the immediate and obvious questions: who were those directly responsible for unleashing the policy of mass murder; who were the perpetrators and facilitators; and how could it come to be in a highly cultured, 'civilized' nation? Were there indeed, as some would claim, continuities between the military culture of Imperial Germany, with genocidal practices in its African colonies, and the violent 'colonization' of Poland some forty years later? What precisely was the impact of the Great War on the cultures of violence of the 1920s and 1930s, and what role did these play in the development of Nazi rule? But also, in the longer term: how did people who lived through and beyond the 'age of extremes' interpret, confront and respond to the multiple challenges of their times? How were those Germans who lived through periods of major economic, social and political crisis affected by their experiences—and how did they reconfigure their roles and identities across rapid changes of regime and in highly uncertain times? What were the more distant reverberations, even among those born much later, into quite different circumstances? How did living through Germany's 'second dictatorship', the German Democratic Republic (GDR), dominated by the Communist power against whom the Germans had fought and by whom they had been defeated, affect behaviour patterns and social identities, and what implications did these experiences have for interpretations of the Nazi past? In what ways do the experiences, memories, and collective representations of two German dictatorships continue to affect Germans even in the united, democratic Federal Republic of Germany formed with the collapse of the GDR in 1990? In short: 'Auschwitz' must inevitably stand, in Germany, for a past that was memorably and controversially termed the 'past which will not pass away'.²

Millions of Germans of course had nothing to do with Hitler's project of exterminating Europe's Jews as well as many others on 'racial' grounds; and many lives remained apparently untouched by foreknowledge of the as yet unthinkable, or by the later and highly diverse legacies of Auschwitz. Even so, both the crises preceding and the immediate and longer-term consequences of the Nazi regime deeply affected all those who lived through even a small portion of this turbulent century. The reverberations of the wars of aggression and mass genocide unleashed by Germany have affected, however distantly, millions of people throughout the century.

This book seeks to view the dictatorial regimes of twentieth-century Germany 'from within'. Taking a deeper look at the life stories of individual Germans from a range of periods and backgrounds may help to provide a new understanding of the ways in which not only the character of the German state, economy, and social structure changed over the century, but also the very character of people themselves. Exploring the interactions between individual perceptions as captured through an ever changing 'inner eye' (which is itself of course socially and culturally

² Ernst Nolte, 'Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1986, reprinted in *'Historikerstreit': Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987).

shaped), and the flux of social relations and political demands, may help us to understand the formation and transformation of ‘social selves’. This book focuses on ordinary lives, in the sense of people who were not themselves policymakers and shapers, not at the pinnacle of any political hierarchy; but at the same time, it argues that there is no such thing as ‘ordinary Germans’ in any general sense. People are very much shaped by the times and places into which they were born and through which they grew up. Yet it was also possible for individuals—within the very variable constraints of both their circumstances and their subjective perceptions—to make active choices about their routes through life.

Political instability and radical changes of regime meant that Germans frequently had to change their outward allegiances, or at least adapt their behaviour patterns, in order to pursue what they construed as their personal life projects. Aspirations, opportunities, constraints, were dramatically affected by changing circumstances across the major political divides of 1918, 1933, 1945, and 1989–90. The World Wars initiated by Germany brought about the physical mutilation, psychological scarring, and premature deaths of tens of millions of people, and radically affected the shape of international as well as German politics and society for half a century or more. People were affected, too, by the no less fundamental but often less immediately discernible shifts in social and economic structures and cultural traditions. What it was that individuals thought they wanted to achieve in life, and the ways in which they pursued their goals, were not only radically affected by the period, place, and social location into which they were born, but also by the moment of their birth, and their ‘social age’ at the time of major historical events—age-related chances could make the difference between violent early death, or long and relatively peaceful life; between becoming a Nazi or becoming a communist; between believing in God and giving birth to numerous children or believing only in life on earth, taking the pill, and assuming a woman should be able to pursue a career of her own choosing.

For those living through these demanding times—characterized by violence, war, revolution, and mobilization in service of radically different ideological causes—any attempt to steer a personal course was doomed at one time or another to hit up against constraints and penalties. The varying demands of politically intrusive, ideologically driven regimes, and the character of the lives—and deaths—of individuals were intrinsically interrelated. We can only begin to comprehend the century that produced Auschwitz if we try to understand the ways in which individuals lived through these turbulent times.

I. TRADITIONS AND LEGACIES OF VIOLENCE

Genocide was not a uniquely German invention. There is no claim here that other countries, other peoples, have not committed or been victims of appalling acts of inhumanity, carried out in a variety of ways in different places. But the extraordinary escalation of a state-sanctioned resort to violence as a political tool, and the widespread willingness to participate in brutal killings and in a bureaucratic

machinery ultimately geared to extermination during Hitler's war, nevertheless remain to be explained, as do the consequences for Germans after the war.

Auschwitz was a product of a very specific history, characterized by extreme political instability and the widespread use of violence as a political tool even well before the Nazi dictatorship. The latter cannot be adequately understood without looking in some depth at its prehistory; far from being some extraordinarily powerful and evil force effectively 'outside of history' (captured in such phrases as a 'spanner in the works', or inflated through an excessive concentration on the individual personality at the expense of historical context), Hitler emerged from the turmoil of the Great War and was only able to amass political support under the very specific historical conditions of Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. Those who were willing to enact the Nazi project, to carry the functions of the Nazi state once Hitler was in power, were themselves, too, shaped by the legacies of Imperial and Weimar Germany. To understand Auschwitz, it is important to understand the perceptions and actions of those who made it possible—beyond the clearly central level of key decision-makers and power holders. But it is important also to understand the impact living through this period had on the people who, in different ways and at different stages of their own lives, variously contested, sustained, and participated in the workings of the Nazi state.

Beyond Auschwitz lay the two post-war German states—both designed, in very different ways, to ensure that war and genocide could never again proceed from German soil. While the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in the Western zones of occupation under the influence particularly of Britain and America (as well as their junior partner, France), became eventually a stable and economically productive democracy, in the Soviet zone of occupation in what is now eastern Germany, a new communist dictatorship, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was erected in place of the former Nazi regime. In East Germany during the Cold War new processes of mass mobilization took place under very different ideological colours from those of the preceding decades: Hitler's rabid racism and anti-Bolshevism was replaced in the GDR by communist anti-fascism. And the GDR, in turn, collapsed forty years after its foundation, with the 'gentle revolution' of autumn 1989 followed by accession to an enlarged Federal Republic of Germany in 1990; those living through the 'second German dictatorship' were faced by further challenges of accounting for and recounting their past.

Generations in Germany thus lived through radical and rapid changes of regime—often socialized under one, making their lives under another, reflecting on their past under a third. At each stage, they had to behave, and to present their actions both to themselves and to others, under massively different ideological and political conditions. Anyone living through these extraordinary historical periods was inevitably challenged and marked by their experiences, and particularly so when they lived under dictatorial conditions that radically constrained what kinds of 'selves' they could develop.

I have chosen in this book to focus specifically on the significance of generations in the transitions into, through, and out of Nazism and communism: two regimes which tried energetically to mould and remake their citizens in forms shaped by powerful, interventionist ideologies, backed up by significant reserves of power and

repression for those who refused to conform or did not fit ideologically driven ideals. The transitions of 1918, 1933, and 1945 were common for Germans living in both East and West; but the final transition of the 'short' twentieth century, 1989–90, had a peculiarly powerful impact on the social self only for former GDR citizens, whose state was absorbed into an enlarged Federal Republic: with this transition, for them, the whole social world and web of relationships which had in large part constructed, constrained and sustained their identities also disappeared. The puzzles of generation formation and the transformation of social selves are thus presented most acutely in the successive ideological transitions from Nazism through communism to a capitalist democracy. West Germans only needed to perform one flip in this process—with also some significant continuities across the 1945 political divide, it should be noted, in both personnel and social and economic structures, for all the upheavals of the post-war period—while East Germans faced a far greater set of transformations, both in the scale and character of the transformations required after 1945 and in the upheavals after 1989. What concerns me most in this context, therefore, are patterns of accommodation to dictatorial regimes of opposing political colours, and the shifts across major moments of historical ruptures. The comparisons developed here diachronically, across a long stretch of time, could well be supplemented, of course, by glances across the inner-German border at simultaneous developments in what was rarely called the 'other Germany' (an appellation generally retained by West Germans for the East, rather than vice versa); but the full realization of such a project, with systematic comparisons of generation formation in the two German states of the Cold War period, would require a major extension that would more than burst the bounds of this particular project.³ The general line of inquiry, and the theoretical approach developed here, can of course be applied far more generally: not merely to West and as well as East Germany, but indeed to any other society at any time. The contours of the rapidly succeeding German states, and the character of the massive historical ruptures in twentieth-century Germany, perhaps allow us to see most clearly, both in detail and in high relief, more general processes which are at work far more broadly in other places and other times. The uniqueness of this singular history should not obscure the fact that major historical upheavals and challenges, and varying less-visible pressures and constraints, always help to shape the social behaviour, 'character', and self-representations of different communities at any given time.⁴

There have been innumerable attempts at answering the central questions of routes into and (for those lucky enough to survive) out of 'Auschwitz', understood as the epitome of modern industrial violence and the nadir of German history. It is only too evident that there can be no fully adequate mode of representation or explanation;

³ It is interesting that very few Western textbooks or histories of 'Germany' before 1989 seemed to feel any need to make more than the merest gesture towards incorporating GDR history into a larger narrative, generally satisfying themselves with a few comments about the loss of the 'Soviet zone' and the significance of the Wall and repression, but barely giving more than the minimum of space to any deeper discussion.

⁴ I shall be exploring some of these issues further in my work on *Reckoning with the Nazi Past*, part of an AHRC-funded project on *Reverberations of the Second World War in Europe*.

that, in face of the ultimate moral inexplicability of the gas chambers, all attempts at historical explanation will be at best partial. But this does not mean that some kinds of approach are not more adequate than others. While touching on these broader issues, it should be emphasized at the outset that this book is not concerned with the by now familiar (if still highly controversial) questions of policy formation and high politics, but rather with the ways in which ordinary people were involved in and affected by the wider systems that made Auschwitz possible, and those that followed. It is also important to stress that among the least adequate approaches to ‘explaining Auschwitz’ are those that seek to make generalizations about ‘the Germans’ or ‘German traditions’. One of the major arguments of this work is that the question of which traditions, norms, and patterns of behaviour became predominant, which patterns of behaviour were fostered and which values suppressed, was very much a contested and always contingent matter; in this sense, the political context was always crucial.

II. A SENSE OF GENERATION: AGE-RELATED CHALLENGES AND UNRESOLVED ISSUES

The notion of social generations allows us to explore the extent to which, and the ways in which, people are shaped by their times, and in turn affect the times through which they live. But there are a wide variety of ways in which this slippery term is used, so some preliminary clarification is essential.

The most obvious, long-term general usage of the term is in the ‘biological’ sense, referring simply to family generations—grandparents, parents, children and so on—and linguistically rooted in the word for procreation. In the social sense, the term is used more broadly, in a variety of ways. It may refer to what are seen as age-related conflicts (rather than conflicts rooted in class, race, religion, gender, or other relevant attributes): for example, over life styles, leisure pursuits, sexuality, mutual duties and responsibilities relating to care of the young or the old, and so on. Similarly, a ‘generational claim’ may be made when articulate members of a particular age group feel a need to define themselves as distinct from others who are older or younger. These sorts of ‘generational discourse’ tend to arise when people are highly aware of, or sensitive to, rapid changes of social relations and cultural value systems, or when there are age-related conflicts over social activities or the distribution of resources. In recent media inflation, there has been something of a game of ‘coining the generation’, with slaphappy labelling for any phenomenon which might help to enhance sales figures or audience viewing rates in a Western culture obsessed by lifestyles.

In more theoretically self-aware senses, the term is also used in a variety of ways, partly driven by methodological concerns and partly by substantive questions.⁵ The

⁵ There is a growing literature on the concept of generations, with which I do not intend to engage explicitly here. See for a range of approaches and further references: Mark Roseman (ed.), *Generations in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jürgen Reulecke (ed.), in collaboration with Elisabeth Müller-Lückner, *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003); Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt (eds.), *Generationen* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005); Ulrike Jureit, *Generationenforschung* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht,

notion of 'cohorts', those born within particular time periods, may be useful as an analytic tool simply for investigating the ways in which succeeding age groups had different experiences or characteristics, with an open mind about possible findings. Coming from quite another perspective, the notion of generation is often used to refer to 'second' and 'third generations' with respect to collectives such as 'immigrants', 'perpetrators' or 'victims/survivors', where the key experiences or characteristics of the 'original' group are held to have continuing implications for their children and grandchildren, irrespective of differences of age across members of any of these groups. 'Social generations' in a more general sense are often assumed to have characteristics in common by virtue of common experiences at a particular life stage, particularly in periods of radical political and social change. The classical formulation of this approach was to be found in Karl Mannheim's influential concept, which emphasized 'key formative experiences' (*Schlüsselerlebnisse*) which allegedly stamped their mark on members of a cohort, cutting across social or religious differences, at a crucial stage in youth; to be a 'social generation' in the full sense of the term, such formative experiences should also give rise to a later subjective sense of common collective identity.⁶ Subjectively, the concept may be used by groups of contemporaries seeking to claim a role for themselves, as speaking for a wider cohort, or as a spearhead of cultural change. Sometimes both of these approaches overlap, with cross-fertilization between collective self-appellations and outsiders' analyses, as in the notion of the (left-wing) radicals known as '68ers', or the (largely right-wing) radicals of the Weimar Republic claiming to speak for a 'Front Generation' after the Great War.

Not all of these uses of the term are relevant in the current context, where the primary focus is on exploring the ways in which people lived through the German dictatorships. Here, for pragmatic purposes, the concept of generation is used in two quite specific senses.

The first has to do with what might be called 'sore-thumb generations' or 'cohort clusters'. These are members of particular cohorts which 'stick out' in the historical record, groups of people born within a few years of each other who tend to play a highly visible historical role in some way, with striking differences in their outlooks and actions from those born a few years earlier or a few years later. The prevalence of such 'cohort clusters' in particular positions at particular times is something which needs to be explained in some detail: to appeal simply to 'common generational experiences' fails to explain anything at all, since the distinctive cluster may or may not be typical of the wider cohort from which it is drawn, many members of

2006); and on historical approaches to generation formations in Germany, see e.g. Walter Jaide, *Generationen eines Jahrhunderts. Wechsel der Jugendgenerationen im Jahrhunderttrend. Zur Geschichte der Jugend in Deutschland 1871 bis 1985* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1988); and on generations in different areas of Europe, see e.g. Dieter Dowe (ed), *Jugendprotest und Generationenkonflikt in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert. Deutschland, England, Frankreich und Italien im Vergleich* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1986); and Stephen Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, November 2007).

⁶ Karl Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generationen' in Mannheim, *Wissenssoziologie* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1964; orig. 1928), pp. 509–65.

which may not have developed in similar ways or drawn similar conclusions from their experiences. It is also worth noting that members of 'sore-thumb cohort clusters' may not be at all aware, subjectively, of participating in any kind of common generational experience. This is, then, a category imposed by external analysis, which may or may not find echoes in the subjective consciousness and discourse of those involved. In this particular usage, the notion of cohort clusters is a category designed solely to highlight the existence of statistical prevalence and curious patterns, which themselves require further exploration and explanation. Common experiences while young may, as we shall see, turn out to have less to do with later patterns of behaviour than do other factors, including differential birth and death rates, or post-war social and political opportunities.

In analysing the German dictatorships, it is highly striking that there are two particular cohorts that 'stick out' in this way. Even more strikingly, they are both, in some respects, what might be called 'war-youth generations': those either too young to fight in, or to take much responsibility during, the Great War; and those either too young to fight in, or to take much responsibility during, the Second World War. Members of both of these cohorts were nevertheless old enough consciously to witness and to draw what they presumed to be the lessons for the future of the two World Wars inaugurated and lost by Germany while they were still young. Both those born in the first decade or so of the twentieth century, and those born in the later 1920s and early 1930s, were radicalized by their generally indirect experiences of war as teenagers: both came to play highly active, historically significant political roles in later periods.

The first 'war-youth generation', born roughly from 1900–14, took the lessons of the Great War to mean radical commitment to new ideological causes—on both the right and the left. This was a highly politicized, but also highly divided generation. It remained divided: while one part played a major role in supporting the Third Reich, a smaller section of this cohort, bitterly opposed to and persecuted by the Nazis, took up key political roles in the communist cause once the opportunity presented itself in the GDR.

The second 'war-youth generation', whom I shall call the '1929ers', were those born from the mid-1920s through to the early 1930s, who were socialized entirely within the framework of Hitler's Third Reich. While a group of 1929ers stand out as significant in the public life of the Federal Republic of Germany, particularly in roles as 'public intellectuals', their most startling prominence was achieved, across the board, in the GDR, where members of the 1929er cohort became the most committed communists, not only populating significant positions across the range of institutions of state and society but also at lower levels and at the grass roots providing much of what support there was for the GDR. As curious as it seems, these younger members of what is often seen in an unduly undifferentiated fashion as one long 'Hitler Youth generation' were to become both the backbone of the East German communist functionary system and also, even among the wider population, generally the most supportive of the new communist system, the least religious, and the most nostalgic for the GDR after its collapse in 1989. In the GDR context at least, the 1929ers were far more homogeneous in outlook and

attitude than the older members of East German society, among whom deep pre-war divisions persisted in radically altered circumstances. So these two 'sore-thumb generations' seem to demand much closer inspection: their striking prevalence in support of later ideological causes which were very different from the worlds in which they had been socialized requires exploration.

The second sense in which the concept of generation is used here is rather broader: it has to do with the differential impact of the times people live through and the significance of their 'social age' at time of particular historical contexts and developments. I am not in any way suggesting that common patterns of socialization, let alone any 'key formative experiences', necessarily produce similar *outcomes*, but rather seeking to draw attention to the importance of common *challenges* at a particular life stage—to which individuals may respond very differently—and, equally significantly, of *unresolved issues*, which become salient under later circumstances.

People of course face challenges throughout their lives—dealing with births or bereavements, sitting exams, forming relationships, making moves, applying for new positions—but these may remain quite haphazard in their distribution and patterning in any given area at any given time. Common challenges, however—arising, for example, from economic depression, civil war, mobilization for war abroad, repression by a dictatorial power, radically new social policies—are faced when major historical events massively intrude on what people consider to be their 'private lives'. Such challenges may be experienced by different cohorts in distinctive ways related to biological and social life-stages. Older people will face the demands made on them by a newly imposed dictatorship in different ways than will younger individuals, who have less by way of prior experience on which to base independent evaluations of a new ideology; similarly, children will have a different experience of war than adults in positions of responsibility at home or at the front, or elderly people with rather different resources and strategies for survival. Such age-related distinctions will of course be cross-cut by other distinctions which may be of far greater relevance: political commitments and 'race' radically divided German society in the Third Reich; politics continued, under totally different ideological colours, to cross-cut all else in the GDR; class and status, and in different ways gender, regional and religious differences, always cross-cut distinctions of generation. Yet the issue of generation remains an intriguing one, getting to the heart, as it does, of the possibilities of malleability and (self-)transformation of human beings in ways which are heavily patterned, if never entirely determined, by changing historical environments.

There are a variety of possible responses to common challenges, depending both on social location and on cultural and personal characteristics. Thus, some people will have greater 'structural' degrees of freedom than others, a wider range of opportunities to negotiate and navigate their own path through the circumstances which face them; others, by virtue, for example, of a lower social status, more restricted resources, or access to positions of power and influence, will have far less choice over where they are sent and what they are required to do. Thus, there are widely differing degrees of what might be called 'structural availability for

mobilization'. Similarly, some milieus will be far more in tune with, or compatible with, whatever a given regime is trying to do at any particular time; others will be designated as oppositional, unacceptable, or simply impervious to penetration by whatever the dominant idea system demands at the time. This means that there are also varying degrees of what might be called 'cultural availability for mobilization'. Beyond these two aspects, however, it is also vital to note that individuals differ in terms of their own moral outlooks, personalities, willingness to compromise or conform, their capacity for independent thought, and their courage to take a stand, even under conditions of utmost risk. Even those who appear, in terms of their structural location, to have very limited degrees of freedom, in fact are often prepared to take a strong stand on the basis of personal moral convictions. In contrast, for example, the aristocratic officer class in the Third Reich—a group who, in terms of position, potentially had the highest degree of leeway—for the most part compromised and cooperated with Hitler's policies almost up to the end; and it was only a small fraction who dared to join in the oppositional activities around the July Plot of 1944 that could have toppled Hitler and terminated the war.

The level of individual perceptions and individual responsibility therefore cannot be written out of any concept of generations. But here there are major methodological and theoretical issues to be addressed. It is important to distinguish between the 'inner self', the 'monitoring eye', and outer behaviour patterns; yet it is extraordinarily difficult for historians to gain access to the former. Moreover, even when there are apparently good historical sources, it is clear that the ways in which an individual thinks about and self-reflexively monitors his or her own 'performances' at any given time is in itself a historical product: there is no abstract 'authentic self', untainted by historical and social setting; even the most apparently 'private' ruminations, such as diary entries written only for the author's own benefit, are in quite large measure constituted by the discourses, aspirations, and characteristics which that setting has inculcated within the individual, whether in terms of internalization and unconscious acceptance, or in terms of resistance, discomfort, and partial reaction against, while yet simultaneously thinking in the very terms of the cultural codes and moral frameworks of the moment. This is, in a sense, the mystery of socialization: that individuals sense themselves to be unique, timeless souls, and yet reflect and enact, 'authentically', a role constituted within or against the terms of their times. Furthermore, any analysis of individual life stories over time, and particularly across major historical transitions, rapidly shows the ways in which individuals themselves are aware of a changing historical 'self'. What they share in common with others by way of assumptions, ways of thinking, concepts that serve to define the character of their world, values, aspirations, help to constitute what might be called a 'social self', irrespective of individual differences in personality and aptitudes.

So with generations, we do have to be in some ways concerned with changing 'social selves'; but at the same time we have to remember that these too entail degrees of individual moral responsibility. 'Inner selves'—however socially and culturally constituted and informed—are also acting selves with varying experiences

of distance from or harmony with the historical conditions in which they live; and individuals have degrees of choice about the ways in which they make their lives through often uncomfortable times. The ways in which they represent their choices and experiences are however highly coloured by the varying discourses of the day, and the ends they seek to achieve within any given context.

The second part of this sort of generation formation concerns ‘unresolved issues’: that is, the widespread salience of specific, selected aspects of experience at a later date. Such unresolved issues may consist in uncomfortable legacies of a persistent physical or psychological nature—the long-term effects of war wounds, traumatic experiences, loss of family and friends, a lasting sense of ‘before’ and ‘after’, difficulties with trust, and so on. Or they may consist in occasional challenges to which a response must be given: moments when particular actions are brought to account under a subsequent regime, or moments when a particular cultural development calls up repressed memories, and public debate reawakens old scars. They may be worked out through explicit, public, articulate debates; or they may remain inchoate, bubbling along at an informal level in the circles of families and friends, or even largely unspoken, revealed only in emotional reactions, patterns of behaviour, failures to connect, or ‘active silences’. After the extraordinary violence of the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in the most brutal atrocities in war and the mass murder of millions of civilians on grounds of ‘race’, such evasions and silences always accompanied explicit controversies.

There is always fluidity in any moment of construction of a collective identity on the basis of generationally defined common experiences. Writing a history of ‘social generations’ is a bit like trying to paint a sky full of clouds which are constantly shifting in density, shape, relationship, sometimes barely existent at all and at other times looming over the landscape in ways which are inescapable. Generations are not ‘essentialist’ entities, always there to be negotiated: they are not continually existing collective actors. Both subjectively perceived and ‘remembered’ experience, and a collective discourse in a situation where certain ‘memories’ are selected as relevant, come together to form moments when a ‘generational identity’ may be experienced. But even then it is always experienced within a life full of other roles and identities, some of which may be far more important for those concerned—political, moral, religious, cultural, gender, class and ethnic identities may well take precedence for most people most of the time, not to mention everyday roles within family, locality, places of work and leisure, and so on. Yet interpretation of and confrontation with certain experiences may be patterned on generational lines, particularly in twentieth-century Germany where individual lives were so deeply affected by rapid, multiple, dramatic historical transitions; and the manner of later construction of these experiences, however personal the memories, is always ‘contaminated’ or informed by later contexts of remembrance.

When exploring the question of social generations, then, one has to explore not only how individuals reacted to the challenges of the worlds in which they made their lives, but also the broader contexts of their perceptions, ‘experiences’, and later patterns of recounting or ‘making sense of’ their lives. For twentieth-century Germans, the central defining events for generation formation relate to the wars

unleashed by Germany in 1914 and 1939, and to the extraordinarily intrusive, proactively mobilising, ideologically driven dictatorships of Nazism and Communism. The two World Wars and the radical regime changes across this century of violence made massive demands on and cut dramatic caesurae in the lives of those born during these turbulent times—experiences which were generationally patterned. The difficulty is in connecting the broader historical contexts and structures—the stuff of ‘real history’—with the changing perceptions and culturally informed subjectivities of those whose lives were shaped by these historical contexts and who in turn helped to affect how things developed.

III. ‘MOBILIZATION’ AND INDIVIDUAL MOTIVES

One of the keys to understanding the impact and legacies of the two German dictatorships is that of mobilization; and this mobilization was highly distinctive with respect to the generations that acted as the prime ‘carriers’ of each. Effectively, both were sustained and supported disproportionately by the two ‘war-youth generations’. These generations, and the puzzles they present—their historical prominence requires explanation, rather than providing any easy answers—are central to the analysis of the twentieth-century German dictatorships. In short, what we have to explain is the question of why certain groups were more readily mobilized in service of particular ideological causes than others.

The Third Reich was led by self-proclaimed members of the ‘front generation’ (among them, of course, Hitler, though there are problems with the designation of this alleged ‘generation’), and largely ‘carried’ by the war-youth generation, those too young to have been directly involved but old enough to have had some direct personal knowledge of what the Great War meant for German society. It was most enthusiastically supported by what one might call the ‘first Hitler Youth Generation’, those born during and in the early years after the Great War. It is particularly among these last two groups—roughly, those born between 1900 and 1924—that the greatest enthusiasm for and active participation in the Nazi project is disproportionately to be found. In this sense, these are ‘sore-thumb generations’: despite deep internal divisions and the prevalence of strongly opposing views, their profile in the historical record sticks out as disproportionate in comparison with that of older or younger age groups in ways which require deeper historical exploration. We can say *that* they supported Nazism particularly strongly or actively; we still need to explain in some detail *why* this was so.⁷ It requires a very careful generational analysis to determine why the most active carriers and supporters of Nazism were disproportionately drawn from among the ‘younger’ adults among the newly defined ‘racial community’ (*Volkgemeinschaft*) of Nazi Germany, and not from the self-proclaimed and in fact highly diverse ‘front generation’, from which of course a small proportion of right-wing leaders were drawn. Moreover, given the prevalence

⁷ See also Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002).

of younger cohorts, who had not personally been involved in the Great War, in the later translation of Nazi ideology into violence in reality, questions must be raised about the alleged military 'cultures of violence' transmitted across time in Germany; some have suggested lines of continuity from the suppression of uprisings in the German colonies in the early 1900s, through atrocities committed following the invasion of Belgium and France in 1914, to the acts of terror in Poland following the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.⁸ When possible lines of transmission of 'cultures of violence' are explored in more detail, these younger cohorts appear to be generations 'carrying the torch' for those who were slightly older, rather than there being any significant continuities of personnel or some reified 'cultural tradition' of violence. A focus on the people who acted as carriers, and the political configurations which allowed some projects to rise to dominance over others, thus may help to clarify some of the issues involved. This book, then, argues against any disembodied notion of 'continuities' in mentalities or cultures, and focuses attention rather on changing historical agents under particular social and political circumstances.

Despite the differentially strong support for Nazism among those too young to have fought in the Great War, it has to be remembered that these were also radically divided generations, and increasingly so on both political and 'racial' lines. It is necessary to combine an analysis of generational experience and its subjective processing with a political analysis of the changing balance of forces through the 1920s and 1930s. This is particularly significant in light of the very rapid 'nazification' of German society after 1933, with implications for the mentalities, behaviour patterns, and new constructions of the self among enthusiasts and conformists on the one hand, and the dissidents and outcasts of Nazi society on the other. The Third Reich was a deeply intrusive regime which had fundamental implications for all who lived through it; the category of 'bystander' is arguably one of the least helpful of all in seeking to understand this period.

Living through the Third Reich also seems to have had key implications for one of the subsequent regimes, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), when viewed in generational terms. And again, curiously, it appears to have been a new, second 'war-youth generation', this time with reference not to the Great War but rather Hitler's war, who provided the most active and committed supporters of the new communist regime—although here we see some extraordinary twists of ideology and leaps of conversion.

Politically, the GDR was initially led by a tiny minority of committed communists drawn from the deeply divided front generation, with a tail of younger

⁸ On these questions, see particularly Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military culture and the practices of war in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005); John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities: A history of denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); see also Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and mass killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). The book by David Olusoga and Casper Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's forgotten genocide and the colonial roots of Nazism* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010) unfortunately appeared too late for me to take into account in this work.

supporters and later leaders (including Erich Honecker) drawn from the first war-youth generation. Their distinction was in the depths of their communist commitment, their survival through the Third Reich (and indeed through Stalin's purges, if in exile in the Soviet Union), and thus, in some sense, in the generational experiences of the deep divisions of the earlier twentieth century, the classic 'age of extremes'.⁹ The founding fathers of the GDR were, however, but a tiny minority of their cohort: the little splinter that still sought to fight the battles of earlier decades. The vast majority of their cohorts had, by contrast, been either active supporters of Nazism or had gone along with or somehow passively survived through the Nazi regime, insofar as they were not 'racially' excluded from the 'national community' or *Volksgemeinschaft*. While one might seek to adduce the generational experiences of those growing up during the Great War and the turmoil of its aftermath to explain generationally differential support for the Third Reich, one could hardly suggest that the succeeding communist dictatorship was massively supported by these cohorts, the majority of whom had not merely been steeped in the anti-communist, or 'anti-Bolshevik', ideology of Nazism, but had also been actively implicated in or beneficiaries of the associated racist and murderous practices. Their dislike and fear of the newly imposed communist regime with Soviet backing had major historical roots. And positions with respect to Nazism came to override earlier distinctions between generations: whether or not one had fought in the Great War paled into insignificance compared with the question of whether or not one had been an active Nazi. All those who had been sufficiently old during the Third Reich to have faced its challenges as adults became, effectively, now a 'KZ generation': whether having survived, actively sustained or benefited from Nazi rule, or whether having opposed or been victimized by the regime, all those who had been adults in the Third Reich were subsequently in some respects defined by having lived through this period in ways that those just a few years younger, children and teenagers during the Third Reich, were not.

The real puzzle emerges with respect to those a little bit younger: the cohorts born, roughly, from the later 1920s through to 1932, the 'second Hitler Youth generation' or those whom I prefer to call the '1929ers'. They are also sometimes known, at least as far as males among them are concerned, as the 'air force auxiliary generation' (*Flakhelfergeneration*) or, in another variant sometimes used to refer to intellectuals from these cohorts in the Federal Republic of Germany, the '1945ers'.¹⁰ If the leaders of the GDR were but a tiny minority of older political

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The short twentieth century 1914–1991* (London: Penguin, 1994).

¹⁰ For 'public intellectuals' in the Federal Republic, see e.g. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Christina von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise. Eine Geschichte der westdeutschen Medienöffentlichkeit 1945–1973* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006). For a pioneering analysis revealing the significance of this age group for the GDR, see Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

activists, with massive backing from the occupying Soviet power, the long-term carriers of communism were drawn from the far broader group of those who had just reached the brink of adulthood at the time of foundation of the GDR. An analysis of 'Who was who in the GDR' (*Wer war wer in der DDR*) reveals that the communist state was functionally carried by a very narrow age range—the '1929ers'.¹¹ And an analysis of professed attitudes towards and memories of the GDR among different cohorts early in the twenty-first century reveals that the most striking support of, and evidence of active participation in, the organizational structures and political institutions of the GDR was to be found among precisely these 1929ers.¹² The differences in participation among the functional elites with respect to those just a few years older can be to a large extent explained by demography: there were very low birth rates in the Great War and differentially high death rates in the Second World War for these cohorts. But it is less easy to explain attitudinal differences among those who did survive.

Most striking, however, are the differences between the 1929ers and those born shortly afterwards, in the baby-boom years of the Third Reich, with its combination of a return to full employment and pro-natalist policies. Those large cohorts born during the Third Reich—the now much discussed generation of 'war children' (*Kriegskinder*), too young to have been fully socialized by the Hitler Youth or the formal education system, some of them direct 'witnesses of war' but far too young to have participated actively in war—not only played a disproportionately small role in the GDR regime, but also had the least positive attitudes towards the communist dictatorship, both at the time and later. Yet they tended on the whole to retreat into silence, or excelled in 'expressive' activities such as art and music, rather than being practically involved in the functioning of the system. Their relative 'absence' from political or functionary positions cannot be explained in terms of either post-war demography or politically channelled opportunity structures. They were, in numerical terms, abundant, alive, and well; nor did they face any 'blocked opportunities' through the early filling of posts by the slightly older 1929ers, since the mass flights to the West and the high turnover of personnel up to the building of the Wall in 1961 continued to provide ample opportunities for advancement among those politically untainted by Nazism by virtue of age, and relatively willing and committed, or at least prepared to conform in the ways required of them. 'Blocked opportunities' only became a serious issue with the

¹¹ Helmut Müller-Enbergs, Jan Wielgoß, and Dieter Hoffmann (eds.), *Wer war wer in der DDR? Ein biographisches Lexikon* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag and Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2001 edn). For further details, see Ch. 6, below, and M. Fulbrook, 'Generationen und Kohorten in der DDR. Protagonisten und Widersacher des DDR-Systems aus der Perspektive biographischer Daten' in Annegret Schüle, Thomas Ahbe, and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive. Eine Inventur* (Universitätsverlag Leipzig, 2005), pp. 113–30.

¹² See further M. Fulbrook, "'Normalisation' in retrospect: East German perspectives on their own lives' in Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979: The 'normalisation of rule'* (New York: Berghahn, 2009).

social stagnation of the 1970s and 1980s, affecting the prospects of cohorts born after the war but not those born during the Third Reich.¹³

How then should one try to explain these striking generational patterns of disproportionate participation and absence with respect to the Nazi and communist regimes? It is necessary to combine some kind of overview, including analysis of structures and generalizations about trends, processes, and exceptions, with selective in-depth probing into individual patterns of perception and response to the varying challenges of the day.

IV. 'INDIVIDUAL' LIVES

These developments, and the ways in which they were not merely perceived but enacted, indeed bitterly fought and contested, by contemporaries from a range of social and political positions, can be explored and arguably better understood by pursuing the differing paths of individuals living through the various transitions from imperialism through Nazism and communism. There is a vast range of sources for exploring the subjective experiences, perceptions, and inner ruminations of individuals, not all of which have as yet been adequately exploited by historians, let alone set together in a broad sweep across the century. This book draws on a wide variety of materials often known as 'ego-documents' or 'testaments to the self', including published and unpublished diaries, autobiographical essays and memoirs, letters to and from the front during the Second World War or across the 'Iron Curtain' dividing post-war Germany, and life stories derived from oral history interviews, as well as a myriad of archival sources. There is no suggestion that such sources can tell us 'how it really was'; contemporaries are often not the best guides to their own societies and often have little insight into the wider structures within which they live. But they do tell us a lot about changing perceptions and constructions of the social world, about ways in which people wanted to present themselves in different contexts, about inner conflicts and also about ambivalences and difficulties. And hence they provide insights into how particular societies functioned and changed; how people interacted with the wider political circumstances of their lives; and how they were affected by the momentous events of the century, carrying the traces and impact of earlier periods forwards, with implications for subsequent actions and attitudes, as well as transmission to those born later.

It may immediately be objected that individuals are not 'typical'. No claim is made here about any spurious 'typicality' for those whose lives have received attention in this book, although I have tried to trawl widely and ensure that a relatively broad range of voices and perspectives can be heard at any given period.

¹³ See e.g. Ralph Jessen, 'Mobility and blockage during the 1970s' in Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a socio-cultural history of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn, 1999), Ch. 18; and more generally on the transformation of East German social structure and social classes, M. Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

The significance of intertwining an exploration of individual lives with more general trends and patterns is rather different, and can be highly illuminating for several reasons.

First, in cases where the sources are adequate, this approach allows us to gain a deeper understanding of changing frameworks of perception over time: not merely changing vocabularies of expression, as dominant discourses and ways of seeing the world shifted, but also changing patterns of (self-)justification across major historical and political divides. Thus we do not have to wonder whether the vicissitudes of survival and suppression of documentation have left distinctive paper trails, prioritizing certain kinds of account over others, from which we construct a disembodied narrative of ‘change’, not knowing whether the ‘culture’ is changing, or whether some individuals are later simply keeping their mouths shut while others gain greater publicity. Where there is sufficient material we can, in short, probe aspects of changing views and discourses within the space of one person’s life, as expressed in different contexts over a period of time.

Secondly, and perhaps particularly where an individual might be held to be far from ‘typical’, we can use such material to probe precisely what are the often hidden expectations and normative frameworks of a given historical context. This is very obviously the case where a person hits up against the normative and juridical borders of a regime, coming into conflict with whichever authorities disapprove of the conduct or attitudes of the individual in question. Thus the tracing of individual lives can be helpful in probing the boundaries and limits, the unspoken assumptions and hidden norms of behaviour, that might—precisely in their very ‘normality’ or taken for granted status in the period—go un-remarked or unnoticed in the diaries and letters of those who conformed and saw ‘nothing special’ to talk about.

Thirdly, exploring the development of individual lives allows us to explore the ways in which people are only in part a ‘product of their times’: it allows us to reach a better understanding of the kinds of moral choices facing people, of the ways in which they constructed or explained these choices to themselves, and the possible routes of action that were within their mental horizons. We can then better understand how people chose certain patterns of action and not others; without entering into the hoary questions around any concept of ‘free will’, it is important to understand the ways in which people historically perceived constraints and evaluated priorities, in choosing (or not even thinking about) how to act, particularly when they acted in ways with which we can barely empathize, let alone sympathize or admire. For all the emphasis on birth cohorts and generational groupings, and on the social and historical construction and shaping of social roles, this analysis is predicated on the view that there is an irreducible core of individuality, however hard that may be theoretically to define and however historically bounded and constructed the expressions of ‘individuality’ may be. Yet each individual could only operate within a historically situated, socially and culturally defined, and politically constrained field of forces, and it is within the domain of the historian to explore just how the ‘inner self’, as socially expressed in letters, diaries, memoirs, developed in constant interaction with an ‘outer’ environment from which the seeing eye might experience greater or lesser degrees of

distance. People might develop very different senses of identity, or adopt different roles and personae simultaneously, under different circumstances; an exploration of the expressions of ‘inner self’ and observed behaviour patterns can help us to understand the changing historical constraints and opportunities all the better.

Finally, and not least in importance, a focus on selected lives over longer periods of time can be of help in exploring the longer-term consequences that certain patterns of behaviour, perhaps disproportionately fostered under one regime but condemned by a subsequent state, may have had for conceptions of self, attitudes, and values, and ways of representing a particular past to others, including to later generations. In this way, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of the less-obvious legacies of particular historical moments for later ways of thinking, making choices, and acting. ‘Coming to terms with’ an ever receding past, a transient present, and a constantly overhauled future, is an integral part of the transmission of values and social relations. ‘Memory’, or at least the ways in which people recount their actions under different contexts, is an intrinsic part of later social and cultural relations, and is thus integral to the project of understanding generational shifts not only across twentieth-century Germany, but has far wider relevance for other times and places.

V. DISSONANT LIVES THROUGH THE GERMAN DICTATORSHIPS

The two German dictatorships are rarely set together in terms of continuities across 1945, a divide which has been more easily, or at least in the Western historiography more frequently, crossed with respect to the transition from the Third Reich to the Western Federal Republic of Germany; and insofar as they are set within the same framework, the approach is generally that of key events and changes in political and social history across a radical historical caesura, and not that of the lingering consequences for and effects on the people living through this period. A generational approach can, by contrast, help to explore the ways in which such states affected those who lived through them and moreover, in the particular twisted history of twentieth-century Germany, made the transition from one to the other. Through what follows, episodes and developments in individual lives are explored, some in greater depth and some only briefly, with an eye to the ways in which perceptions, choices, and behaviours were not only shaped by the changing circumstances of their times, but also in turn actually made certain developments, certain types of politics and society, more possible than others.

Throughout, a key theme is that of the changing character and consequences of different kinds of violence, as well as the ways in which violence was experienced differently by people of different ages. For this, it is important to start where many of the people who carried the Nazi project in the Third Reich themselves started: in the early twentieth century. The major focus of this book is on patterns of living through the two German dictatorships, but these cannot be understood without exploring the experiential context of what came before: the legacies of Imperial

Germany and defeat in the Great War, and the political instability and economic upheavals of the Weimar years, are the essential backdrop to exploring the massive disruption to German lives wrought by Hitler's attempts to create a 'racially pure' society that would dominate the world. When alleged 'continuities' in German traditions of militarism or cultures of violence are explored, it becomes very clear that particular political conditions and unique historical circumstances rendered some people far more susceptible to the lures of radical politics than others, and allowed certain forces to become dominant while others were suppressed. Chapters 2 and 3 trace some of the diverse ways in which individuals were variously involved in or affected by the trajectory of violence before 1933, from genocidal practices in Germany's African colonies, through the Great War and the radicalization of politics in the paramilitary movements of the 1920s, to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in 1933. It rapidly becomes clear that what ultimately emerged was by no means foreordained. Furthermore, and more importantly in this context, nor were people's responses to these challenges prefigured: the debates and disagreements in a deeply divided society were intense. The fact that the radical right eventually gained the upper hand in 1933 did not preclude the equally radicalized left-wing splinters of the first war-youth generation from returning to the historical stage at a later juncture, when the balance of power internationally tipped in their favour in what became East Germany after the Second World War.

Once Hitler had appropriated a monopoly of state-sanctioned force in the 1930s, however, the possibilities for contestation were radically constrained. The stain of racism that spread through German society in the 'peace-time' years of the Third Reich contaminated all who came into contact with this phenomenon, one way or another, as explored in Chapter 4. A key argument here is that what I have called the 'formation of two worlds' was in itself a form of hidden violence—at least, in the sense that many of those 'perpetrating' it, without necessarily being involved in or approving of acts of physical violence, were frequently unaware of the full impact and hurtfulness of their actions against those who were progressively excluded from the circle of fellow citizens (and ultimately, unless they were very lucky, from the land of the living entirely). Those who were young adults in the early 1930s were uniquely poised to make their careers with and within a Nazi state that was radically purging and excluding all its real and imagined opponents, on 'racial' or political grounds; many others, less committed but unwilling to face the risks of open disaffection, were prepared in public to 'go along' with the game they now felt they had to play—but with the consequence of further exclusion of those designated as outcast from the circle of fellow citizens. The apparent antinomy between repression and enthusiasm—giving rise to repeated debates about the balance of consensus, conformity, and coercion in Nazi Germany—is dissolved once we realize the extent to which people were able to disassociate their inner reservations from outward accommodation to both the perceived and the undeniably real and unavoidable demands of the regime. And again, it becomes apparent that responses were interestingly patterned not only by all the obvious factors ('race', class, religion, region, morality), but also by age: generation crucially affected the character and degrees of exposure to Nazi influences and pressures,

the levels of enthusiasm and willingness or otherwise to conform, and the longer-term implications of experiences before, during, and after the Third Reich. This period and what came afterwards also cannot be adequately understood without a sense of what war meant for millions of Germans of different backgrounds and generations. Once Hitler's policies—which were imbued with violence all along—exploded into an aggressive war of expansion and annihilation, the mobilization of those included in the Nazi 'racial community' was far wider, embracing even those who were less than willing participants in the process, inexorably affecting their own sense of self and community. Chapter 5 makes an attempt, again, not merely to rehearse the horrendous developments of war and extermination during these years but to explore the ways in which people were differentially involved and how they conceived their experiences, with different implications for self-understandings and the possibilities for shaping later post-war lives.

The book could have ended just there, in 1945. But it did not, for a number of reasons. The legacies of Nazism for post-1945 Germany—and indeed for Germany still today—can only be fully comprehended if we explore the ways in which history did not simply come to an end, or simply start afresh, at the 'zero hour' of 1945. People's lives are messier and more continuous than the narratives of history books that confine and contain historical periods within the dates of particular political systems; and the age at which individuals crossed this greatest of historical divides made a massive difference to the ways in which they engaged with what came afterwards, thus shaping what was or was not historically possible in the post-war world. This point is true for both of the German states founded on the soil of the defeated Third Reich, and its implications have been increasingly explored for the West German state, the Federal Republic of Germany. Our understanding of the succeeding German dictatorship in East Germany is, however, equally if not even more likely to be enhanced by setting it within the context of the broader understandings of history that this approach allows. The GDR is so easily and frequently seen simply as an imposition out of the sky, as it were, by the occupying Soviet forces, instantly rendering all those Germans under Soviet control innocent victims of communist oppression; but it may be nuanced rather differently in the light of the approach suggested here. Chapter 6 presents a brief summary of the curious, generationally patterned character of differential support for the GDR, which is then, in the following chapters, explored further in terms of subjective experiences and perceptions in changing circumstances. Chapters 7 to 11 variously explore the ways in which people of different generations sought to establish a degree of what they saw as 'normality' after a period of unprecedented suffering and violence; how they sought to build new lives and construct a better future while still dealing with the legacies of the past; and how, increasingly, the drab present of 'actually existing socialism' began to crumble, inaugurating the final major transition of the century, the 'gentle revolution' of 1989 and the demise of the GDR through unification with the West in 1990.

The Third Reich unleashed unrivalled destruction, radically transforming or truncating the lives of millions of people across the world, and lasted a mere dozen years. It has become a mountain in history. The GDR, by contrast (consigned by

some historians to the status not even of a foothill but merely a ‘footnote in history’), struggled along for forty years, attempting to create a more equal and just society of ‘workers and peasants’, under the constant paranoid surveillance of the State Security Service or Stasi, and behind the massive fortifications of concrete, barbed wire, and machine guns that formed the ‘Iron Curtain’ between Cold War East and West. This was long enough for generations to be born, come to maturity, and make their adult lives under conditions which they increasingly—despite the obvious barriers in a divided Germany—began to take for granted as a new form of what they saw as everyday ‘normality’. For the first time for the best part of a century, generations lived through decades of peace; and while fears of a Third World War were very present through the 1950s, in the years of *détente* (before the renewed superpower tensions in Europe from the late 1970s), people even began to feel there was a secure future, in a context which might not be ideal but in which they sought to make the best of their lives. For East Germans, in a relatively guilt-free context as far as official representations of the past were concerned, ‘coming to terms’ with the communist present very often took precedence over any concern for the Nazi past. Even so, the past remained always to some extent present, particularly when precipitated by commemorations, life events, or the quest for advantages or avoidance of disadvantage. For many older East Germans, memories of times prior to division, and the character of defeat and occupation introduced notes of dissonance into the life stories of those expected to buy into the new myth of ‘liberation’, and continued animosities were exacerbated by a sense of loss of years of one’s own life and damage suffered which could never be redeemed. Living through this regime, too, where violence was in a sense concentrated at the literal and metaphorical borders of the regime—the Wall and the Stasi stand as shorthand for visible physical repression as well as hidden control through surveillance and manipulation—had a further impact on the patterning of inter-personal relations and social selves. Moreover, the sheer extent of social and economic transformation during the relatively lengthy lifespan of the GDR—surviving for more than three times as long as either of its immediate predecessors—requires exploration. Here again, the generational dynamics are complex yet crucial.

Particularly interesting about the history of twentieth-century Germany is the way in which the Nazi regime was replaced by a dictatorship of quite opposite ideological colours in the communist GDR. While the vast majority of members of older generations were officially exonerated by the new communist regime in what was now a self-proclaimed ‘anti-fascist state’, their own experiences and actions were not adequately represented in the new state. They had to come to terms with it—or, particularly if among those groups adversely affected by communist policies, or with relatives in the West, or seeing better economic and professional chances, seek to flee before the last hole in the border was sealed with the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. But others were remarkably, surprisingly supportive—a feature that has to date been far less well explored, let alone explained, than the familiar history of dissent and flight. Moreover, the support came from what might at first seem highly unlikely quarters. One of the oddest features of GDR history is that those who had been most exposed to Nazi propaganda, those who had been

socialized entirely within the period of Hitler Youth organizations, became the most stalwart supporters and institutional carriers of the new communist state. The tales they heard in the family were perhaps not the tales that were officially proclaimed; and, with the need for sudden radical conversion from Nazism to communism, there was arguably from the outset a sense of inbuilt dissonance. Yet they made a clean break with a past in which many felt they had been 'betrayed' and sought to build anew. They were, in the end, not entirely successful even in the terms of their own visions and ideals of the 'better Germany'; but they remained, even after the end of the GDR—which coincided with their own entry into retirement—the most nostalgic for aspects of its unique society and what they saw as its distinctive achievements.

The East German dictatorship was characterized not only by its difficult birth and early years, marked by upheaval and violence; it also witnessed a period of relative 'normalization of rule', in which a degree of increasing predictability and routinization fed into a sense of stagnation, before the decline during the 1980s and the sudden demise of the GDR in the 'gentle revolution' of 1989. And it was those who had been socialized entirely within the GDR, born in the early 1950s, who were at the forefront of the often highly idealistic attempts to transform it from within, and which ultimately brought it down with the collapse of communism. Yet Germans lived through this last great rupture, eventuating in unification with the Western Federal Republic of Germany in 1990, and later looked back on their lives, in ways that were somewhat at odds with their enthusiasm for the revolutionary challenges of autumn 1989.

* * * * *

These cases raise central questions about twentieth-century German history. Put very simply, they point to questions about the long-term preconditions and the eventual ways in which genocide could take place in a highly advanced society which prided itself on its level of 'civilization'; they point to questions about how individuals conceived of their behaviour at the time, how they dealt with state-sanctioned incidents of violence, and how they sought to confront, or evade, accounts of their own roles in it afterwards; and they point to questions about how the violent pasts of twentieth-century Germany were not only represented and dealt with in later decades, but also shaped patterns of behaviour and attitudes across generations, with continuing reverberations right up to the present. These levels are inchoate, far more difficult to grasp and define than are the obvious points of political history, with moments of policy formation, events, and decisions; but the attempt to write 'history from within', discussed more explicitly as a theoretical approach in the concluding chapter, promises to yield a deeper understanding of the most significant questions of recent German, and indeed world, history.

Selected aspects of an ever changing, ever reinterpreted past were always present, at whichever time of the century we look. Across each of these phases and historical ruptures, Germans repeatedly had to invent themselves anew, with ambivalent and complex attitudes towards a personal past that they had to recast in later representations of their own former roles. This could be achieved with varying measures of

success depending both on earlier behaviours and later requirements, but always at some personal cost to a sense of a continuous self; and in a context where individuals frequently bore the physical and emotional scars of what had come before, carrying the legacies of their personal past in ways that could not always easily be realigned with the demands of the new. Most notable, perhaps, is the fact that at each major historical turning point—1933, 1945, 1989—it was the then young adults who were best placed to engage with the new projects of building a better future, whether or not they threw off, rejected, or preserved selective aspects of the supposed legacies of the old. This too gave a unique generational dynamic to the course of German lives, as people variously challenged, trumpeted, or bemoaned what they saw as the actions and omissions of their forebears. This book is, then, not a ‘history of Germany’ in the twentieth century, nor even a ‘history of Germans’, but rather, through exploration of the striking patterning of individual lives in the context of world historical events, an attempt to make more intelligible these extraordinary times, and to understand in greater depth how people perceived, were shaped by, and variously contributed to the turbulent times in which they lived.

2

Violence abroad: Generations and the legacies of imperialism

I consider the accused [Hans Paasche] to be a person who is energetic, dashing, but not adequately brought up, which is doubtless why any inhibitions seem to have been switched off. . . ; I believe that his pacifist inclinations were rooted in his participation in the East African turmoil, where he distinguished himself in his part in it, but later, as he more than once reported, found the killing of people painful.¹

There was no straightforward ‘front generation’, although there was a great deal of myth-mongering around this concept, claimed as it later was for political purposes. Nor did the escalation of genocidal violence in the African colonies of Imperial Germany, or the atrocities committed during the Great War, stand in any direct line of continuity with the brutality and genocide carried out under Nazi auspices, on a far more extensive scale, some thirty or forty years later. But these early experiences of colonial violence and European war did have a massive impact, with reverberations across the century. The Great War destroyed structures and unleashed forces that destabilized the continent for decades, the ensuing tensions arguably only resolved with the end of the Cold War in 1989–90.

Far more insidious than any alleged front generation for the course of history in the following decades was the development of the war-youth generation: those whose lives were marked by what they saw as the consequences of the Great War, and by their self-imposed missions. Yet even here, matters are more complex than might at first appear. There was no single, simple understanding of what the ‘mission’ might be: even the war-youth generation, which has been singled out as a ‘generation of the unbound’ fighting for the radical right, was a deeply divided generation.² Radicalism and the use of violence for political purposes were common to many parts of both the far left and the extreme right in the Weimar years. Which strand ultimately became dominant was not a matter of particular ‘formative experiences’, but rather of power politics—and of the eventual domination of the radical right, with state monopolization of the means of violence, and brutal repression of political alternatives.

¹ Bundesarchiv Berlin (BAB), R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 2, Affidavit of Korvettenkapitän Walter Goethe, fol. 38.

² See particularly Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002).

Growing up in the shadow of the war-youth generation were those a few years younger, who were in the 1930s to become the 'first Hitler Youth generation': people who as youngsters had witnessed at first hand what the crises of the Weimar years had meant for their own parents and families. Depending on their political and moral background and inclinations, a substantial proportion of this generation was readily available for mobilization in the Nazi cause and prepared to engage in the use of violence in the course of the 1930s.

All of these comments with respect to the activities of distinctive generations merely refer to splinters: to those who stand out in the historical record as particularly active, particularly visible in spearheading or providing the troops in the many battles for the soul and future of Germany in a highly unstable age. Millions of others, less evident in the historical record, witnessed and were marked by the turbulent times through which they lived, and sought in far quieter ways to conform to the norms of the age or to make their own more wayward paths through the thickets of convention and constraint.

Through exploration of individual lives—in this case, particularly that of Hans Paasche—we can begin to understand some of the patterns and the costs of different kinds of individual responses to age-related challenges through imperialism, war, and crises bordering on civil war.

I. HANS PAASCHE AND COLONIAL VIOLENCE

In August 1905 Hans Paasche, still in his early twenties and in charge of a small group of European sailors and African *Askari*, or native soldiers, had to participate in a hastily assembled military tribunal in the small colonial outpost of Mohoro, on the River Mufiji in the then German colony of Tanganyika.³ Paasche was roped in at the last minute as one of the military judges listening to the cases of four Africans who had allegedly been involved as rebel leaders in the Maji-Maji uprising. Paasche was unusual among the Europeans in the area in having taken the trouble to learn the native language, Kiswahili, and could more or less follow the proceedings. The four undernourished and semi-clad Africans whose cases were heard did not look to Paasche like dangerous rebels, unlike those whose armed combat he had faced in the bush. The assertions and counter-assertions presented that hot morning did not amount to anything that could be called a compelling legal case; the linguistic difficulties, and the speed of the hearing, did not inspire any confidence in the judgment. Following pleas of innocence on the part of the accused, and wild accusations on the part of witnesses for the prosecution, the four Africans were duly sentenced to death and hanged in front of a large group of local people who

³ On Hans Paasche's life, including a selection of his works, see: Magnus Schwantje, *Hans Paasche: Sein Leben und Wirken* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, E. Berger and Co., 1921); *Flugschriften des Bundes Neues Vaterland* Nr. 26/27, pp. 1–28; Helmut Donat (ed.) in collaboration with Wilfried Knauer, with an Introduction by Helga Paasche, *'Auf der Flucht' erschossen . . . Schriften und Beiträge von und über Hans Paasche. Zum hundertsten Geburtstag von Hans Paasche* (Bremen/Zeven: Schriftenreihe das andere Deutschland, 1981).

had been assembled to witness and learn from this demonstration of German 'justice'. The bodies of the alleged ringleaders of rebellion were left dangling from the trees in the square outside the administration building of this tiny outpost of European 'civilization', their stench increasingly unpalatable in the midday sun, but were not removed for hours as a 'lesson' for the native population.

This incident was to trouble Paasche for the rest of his life, radically affecting his attitudes towards war and the use of violence. He became an active member of the pre-war German youth movement, an outspoken critic of the pervasive military culture and political leadership of Imperial Germany, and eventually, following two years of increasingly disaffected service in the Great War, he became what one biographer has termed a 'militant pacifist'.⁴ Paasche had drawn his own lessons from his experiences of violence in the German colonies which were very different from those of many others in his generation. Moreover, as the bourgeois son of the vice-president of the Reichstag, Hermann Paasche, Hans Paasche was drawn from precisely that class of society which had been socialized to uphold the dominant norms of Imperial Germany. His case, then, is all the more surprising—and highly revealing, both in the waywardness of his life and in the eventual manner of his passing, of the kinds of norms, pressures, and challenges facing young men of his background at these times. In a perverse kind of way, Paasche's idiosyncratic challenging of the boundaries of the dominant moral universe of Imperial Germany serves to highlight some of its key elements—and to illuminate aspects of the violent birth of Weimar democracy, a democracy that was truly less than democratic as far as radical politics were concerned.

Hans Paasche was born in 1881 in the Baltic port of Rostock.⁵ His father, Hermann Paasche, was a committed National Liberal who first entered the Reichstag in the year of his son's birth; he was a landowner of comfortable means, as well as an academic economist who authored tracts on the devaluation of money, the East African economy, and the worldwide sugar trade. In the course of all this he also travelled very widely, including in Africa, the Far East, and North and Central America. Most importantly for his son Hans, he was an emotionally cold, authoritarian *pater familias* who came to stand, for Paasche junior, for all that was wrong with Imperial Germany and its notions of 'civilization'. The personal conflict between father and son embodied and reflected the wider generational and political conflicts in which Hans Paasche became so deeply engaged.

When Hans was three the family moved to Marburg, where his father held a position at the university; and when he was twelve, they moved again, this time to Berlin, so that his father could commit himself more fully to parliamentary activities while retaining his academic interests. Hans Paasche was gifted musically—encouraged by his mother Elise—but did not enjoy the strict, elite

⁴ Werner Lange, *Hans Paasche: Militant pacifist in Imperial Germany* (Trafford Publishing, 2005).

⁵ For biographical accounts, see: Helmut Donat, 'Vom preussischen Militär zum deutschen Pazifisten und Revolutionär—Zum hundertsten Geburtstag von Hans Paasche' in Donat (ed.), *Auf der Flucht' erschossen...*, pp. 13–27; Lange, *Hans Paasche*; Magnus Schwantje, 'Hans Paasche: Sein Leben und Wirken', *Flugschriften des Bundes Neues Vaterland* Nr. 26/27 (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, E. Berger and Co., 1921), pp. 1–28.

secondary school he attended in Berlin, the Joachimsthal Grammar School (*Gymnasium*). With his strong dislike of the school atmosphere and discipline apparently compounded by poor health and inappropriate medical treatment, Paasche left school a year early, not following in his father's academic footsteps—a matter no doubt of some disappointment to his parents. But an acceptable alternative career was rapidly organized. With some assistance from his father's close friend Admiral Alfred Tirpitz, who was in charge of the Naval Office of Imperial Germany, Hans Paasche became a Naval Cadet in 1899 and, by virtue of ability as well as social background, rapidly rose to a position of some responsibility at a relatively young age.

By 1905, at the time of the colonial rebellion in German East Africa, Hans Paasche was a well-established young marine whose ship, the *Bussard*, had been conveniently cruising in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Tanganyika following a year-long trip starting in Bremerhaven in May 1904, and including a stint in Ceylon and the Seychelles. Paasche felt himself to be at the very dawn of his own life, enthusiastic and invigorated by the as yet unfamiliar world which still awaited him, as he proclaimed in his autobiographical account, penned and published a mere two years later, entitled *Im Morgenlicht* ('In the light of dawn').⁶ But in August 1905 the course of his life was dramatically altered when he was called in to help suppress the Maji-Maji rebellion that had begun to trouble the German colonial administration over the previous few weeks.

This anti-colonial uprising was in some respects a simple rebellion against German economic exploitation and political repression.⁷ But it had unique features, notably the belief in the protective powers of a 'magic water' which would allegedly protect wearers of certain charms against the lethal impact of German bullets. A number of 'ordinary magicians', versed in fertility medicines for both crops and human health, had been persuaded of the additional powers of the 'magic water' discovered by one particular magician. This belief, combined with successful techniques of peer-group pressure and somewhat coercive methods of forcibly persuading reluctant villagers to join the uprising through threatening those who refused, meant that the forces of rebellion spread rapidly across the whole of the southern area of German East Africa, beyond the initial location where small incidents among cotton-pickers had initially sparked unrest. Given the combination of magical beliefs and economic and political unrest, as well as incipient civil war among the rebelling and non-rebelling native populations (with plundering and burning of villages that had refused to join the rebels), and heightened movement across the area behind the European outposts for some weeks, there had been rising concern among the very thin and inadequately protected layer

⁶ Hans Paasche, *Im Morgenlicht. Kriegs-, Jagd- und Reise-Erlebnisse in Ostafrika* (Berlin: Verlag von C. A. Schwedtko und Sohn, 1907).

⁷ For general accounts, see: John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876–1912* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991).

of European authorities.⁸ Moreover, African discontent with the European suppression led to violent incidents against what were otherwise seen as relatively harmless missionaries, with the murder of a bishop, two nuns, and three others connected with the mission precipitating particular disquiet among Europeans.⁹ The uprising itself was relatively rapidly contained. It started in the early summer of 1905, reached a peak in August and was finally brought under control in the ensuing months of the autumn, winter and spring of 1905–6. Its longer-term consequences for the local population in terms of decimation through disease and mass starvation were, however, horrendous. Paasche's role in the immediate suppression of the uprising was but one part of the wider colonial effort, but by no means an insignificant part; and his ruminations on the use of violence are highly revealing.¹⁰

Paasche's first task was to guard the small colonial outpost of Mohoro on the Rufiji delta, but then news reached him that the rebellion was spreading and rebels were quite close at hand.¹¹ For fear that even more natives would feel they had little choice but to join the rebels if Europeans did not rapidly demonstrate decisive strength and restore order, and in the absence of clear orders from the colonial government in Dar es Salaam beyond the need to protect Mohoro, Paasche persuaded himself that it was best to go out and make a display of military superiority:

Refugees reported that the rebels, an hour and a half away from Mohorro, were burning, plundering and shooting . . . The agitation of the people in face of the danger so close by gave cause for thought . . . Above all, since the rebels were ransacking and killing anyone who did not come over to their cause, the black people living in the surrounding areas had to decide whether to join the uprising in order to save their property and the harvest which they had just brought in, if they could not rely on protection by the Europeans.¹²

⁸ There were conflicting contemporary accounts of how the uprising was precipitated, whether or how long there had been prior organization among those intending to rebel, how long those who were put to death had been detained, and why their punishment had been rapidly changed from relatively lenient sentences to the death penalty. See for one perspective of a local administrative official, Otto Stollowsky, 'Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte des Aufstandes in Deutsch-Ostafrika im Jahre 1905/06', *Die deutschen Kolonien*, Bd. XI, 1912, 138–43, 170–3, 204–7, 237–9, 263–6; also available for download from <<http://www.mhudi.de/maji/Anno25.html>> (accessed 4 Oct. 2009).

⁹ See Pater Cyrillus Wehrmeister, *Vor dem Sturm: Eine Reise durch Deutsch Ostafrika vor und bei dem Aufstande 1905* (St. Ottilien: Missionsverlag, 1906).

¹⁰ A closer examination of Paasche's views reveals a more complex situation than that sketched in briefly by Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military culture and the practices of war in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005) (who also mistakenly gives Paasche an undeserved 'von' before his surname).

¹¹ An anonymous official account may be found in 'Die Tätigkeit der Marine während der Niederwerfung des Eingeborenen-Aufstandes in Ostafrika 1905/06', *Beiheft zur Marinerundschau* (Mai Heft), Berlin 1907; also available for download from <<http://www.mhudi.de/maji/Anno62.html>> (accessed 5 Oct. 2009). Mohoro is variously written as Mohorro; I have retained the spelling within quotations as given in each source.

¹² Hans Paasche, *Im Morgenlicht*, pp. 80–1.

Thus convinced that he was actually also acting in the native people's cause, Paasche took a group of eleven sailors and thirty Askaris to find the rebelling natives or 'Schenzis'. A day in the bush of skirmishing and shooting ended with the deaths of several natives.

Even despite his earlier reasoning about the importance of a rapid and effective display of force, Paasche's first experience of causing death in military combat left him shaken and uncertain:

That was, then, the first encounter with the enemy. Blood had been spilled. The first corpses lay there, shot by our guns. It touched me wondrously; who gave us the right to shoot people?—Why did precisely these ones die while others got away?¹³

Paasche was even more shaken following a subsequent battle—again 'successful', but which had left one of his own men killed—when he took the decision not to take prisoners of war, but instead ordered shootings on the spot. His reasoning was that he did not have the spare manpower required to march any prisoners of war back through the bush to a place where they could be securely held, but there was no superior at hand with whom he could discuss this decision. Paasche managed eventually to come to terms with what he had done, but remained somewhat ill at ease:

The impressions of the morning, the battle, the death of a comrade and the decisions that led me to the death sentence for the rebels, overwhelmed me. And again and again the feeling of responsibility came to the fore: would it be recognized that I did the right thing in following the enemy into his hiding place and that I kept on pushing onwards? Would the sacrifice demanded by this morning's battle be understood?¹⁴

Paasche later managed, on a subsequent day when a prisoner was brought in and the Askari wanted him shot on the spot, to formulate a general rule that he considered an acceptable guide to future behaviour. Refusing to have this particular prisoner shot, Paasche reflected:

Perhaps he simply joined the rebellion out of stupidity. . . You can't hold it against any of these heroes if they take up arms, and instinct leads them astray in the belief that through a common struggle they could get rid of disagreeable conditions.

So let that be our principle: we have to protect ourselves, whether or not through bloodshed—if we want to remain the masters, when after all we only have the right of the stronger party and the privilege of cultured beings. . .

Who would shoot his horse, that works for him, because it kicks out? Was not the rope perhaps too short; and the whip was supposed to help?¹⁵

While demonstrating some understanding and empathy for the plight of the Africans who were protesting against the conditions imposed on them by the German colonizers, Paasche's reflections still betray the assumptions of his time about European 'cultural superiority'; nevertheless, he supported only the use of

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ Paasche, 'Im Morgenlicht', p. 121.

defensive violence to protect the German position, not the penalizing violence of making an example by having a prisoner put to death.

But the 'legal' hanging in the town square of Mohoro on that late August day left Paasche increasingly troubled; he was later even more troubled by his own failure to speak out against it at the time, and his failure, as he saw it, to 'tell the truth' about warfare in the years immediately following, allowing a mythology of the glory of military combat and violence to be sustained among those Germans at home who had not directly experienced it at first hand. In his account of this incident, written some three years later and first published in 1909, at a time when he was still trying to conform to the expected attitudes and mores of Imperial Germany, Paasche already registered a palpable degree of disquiet about his participation in this event: he felt uneasy about the cold 'justice' of this kind of killing, in contrast to the apparently more legitimate slaughter incurred in what he could consider as defensive field battles against the militant and threatening rebels.

The experience of colonial violence in German East Africa was a key turning point, or what Germans like to call a '*Schlüsselerlebnis*', for Hans Paasche.¹⁶ He returned to Germany committed to reform, and over the following years energetically threw himself into movements serving a variety of causes: vegetarianism, protection of animals and birds (he was among the first to campaign against a trade in feathers from rare species of birds), the youth life reform movements critiquing the militarism and general mores of Imperial Germany, and pacifism. It is by no means the case that exposure to violence must always have 'brutalizing' consequences; and although Paasche was certainly a highly unusual character, he was far from unique in his responses to violence.

Did the suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion in German East Africa also play a role in heralding, by contrast, the beginnings of a 'military culture' of violence that was to pave the way, eventually, to the genocidal policies pursued by Hitler?¹⁷ This case has been raised, more directly, in relation to earlier developments in German South-West Africa. In the summer of 1904 General Lothar von Trotha had taken command of the suppression of the Herero rebellion against German rule, a task he pursued by ever more forceful measures. On 2 October 1904 von Trotha issued orders to shoot all adult males, and to expel women and children into the desert where, given the lack of food and water, they would soon die. Of the original Herero population of around 80,000, only 15,130 survived, according to a census carried out in 1911.¹⁸ Von Trotha even sought to legitimize these effectively genocidal measures by reference to a 'race war'.¹⁹ These policies, draconian and drastic in terms of their immediate consequences, found however little support at home; on 8 December the Kaiser issued orders to cancel von Trotha's policies, and

¹⁶ See also P. Werner Lange, 'Die Toten im Maisfeld. Hans Paasches Erkenntnisse aus dem Maji-Maji-Krieg' in Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez (eds.), *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika 1905–1907* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag 2005), pp. 154–67.

¹⁷ See Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

¹⁸ John Iliffe, *Africans: The history of a continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 208.

¹⁹ Quoted in Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 59.

von Trotha himself was ousted from his position in 1905. Although he was received back in Germany to some acclaim, being awarded high honours and military medals, his policies had at the time aroused fierce debates and were successfully contested and repealed. Von Trotha had also in some respects broken a taboo by recognizing that the result of his policies would be mass death, and explicitly, if somewhat retrospectively, arguing that such genocide was justified.

This was a line which the Imperial Governor of German East Africa, Gustav Adolf Graf von Götzen, was not prepared explicitly to cross, although the implications of his policies were not dissimilar, and on a far greater scale in practice. The suppression of the Maji-Maji rising also caused massive loss of life, far greater in terms of absolute numbers than in South-West Africa, and not limited to one tribe. While estimates vary, perhaps somewhere between 250,000 to 300,000 people—between one half and three-quarters of the Vidundi, Matumbi, and Pangwa tribes—lost their lives either as a result of the fighting or the wilful destruction of agriculture and purposefully unleashed famine caused by German policies in the area, a death toll perhaps four times that experienced in South-West Africa.²⁰ In German East Africa, too, given the destruction of farming and habitation there were long-term consequences for a generation or more, as a once settled and profitably cultivated area returned to wilderness, and as fertility rates dropped by around one-quarter and mortality rates from diseases soared.²¹ Given the relatively tiny losses on the German side—totalling perhaps 15 Europeans, as well as 73 of their Askari soldiers and 316 native auxiliaries—there was a general unwillingness to treat this as a ‘war’ worthy of the name.²² But for those who suffered from German policies, the hangings and famine through which the Germans reasserted their authority were not so easily downplayed.²³

Using hunger as a weapon in the suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion was a conscious decision on the part of the German authorities. Although von Götzen had himself mooted it earlier, the ‘policy’ is generally attributed to one Captain Freiherr von Wangenheim, who on 22 October 1905 sent in a report from his base in Kilossa to von Götzen in Dar es Salaam claiming an urgent need for military reinforcements. Wangenheim cited the difficulties of fighting rebels whose fanaticism was sustained by belief in the magical powers of their special water, turning

²⁰ These figures are given in Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, p. 200; and Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, p. 622. A lower figure of around 100,000 is given by Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez, ‘Ein nahezu vergessener Krieg’ in Becker and Beez (eds.), *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg*, pp. 11–13, although this is likely to refer primarily to the immediate deaths from scorched-earth policies and not the three-year famine which ensued. It is somewhat surprising that this area has not received greater attention to date.

²¹ Iliffe, *Africans*, p. 208.

²² Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, p. 200; also Becker and Beez, ‘Ein nahezu vergessener Krieg’.

²³ For African perspectives given in eye-witness accounts and oral history testimonies, see G. C. K. Gwassa and John Iliffe (eds.), *Records of the Maji Maji Rising* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1968: Historical Association of Tanzania, Paper no. 4); for the arguable longer-term consequences in terms of the formation of a Tanzanian ‘national identity’, see Karl-Martin Seeberg, *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft. Historische Ursprünge nationaler Identität in Tanzania* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989).

them into invincible ‘soldiers of God’; moreover, their tactics of dispersion across terrain which was difficult and unfamiliar for the Germans were rendering traditional military methods ineffective, particularly with inadequate numbers of troops. In the meantime, while waiting for military reinforcements to arrive from Germany, von Wangenheim argued that:

only hunger and want [can] bring about final submission; military actions alone will remain more or less drops in the water. Only when currently available food supplies have been totally consumed, yet people’s homes have been destroyed by perpetual military expeditions and the opportunity of planting new fields has been taken away from them, only then will they finally have to give up their resistance.²⁴

By the following spring, despite difficulties with the German military campaign during the rainy season that had made the terrain even more problematic, hunger was taking its predicted toll. As Graf von Götzen put it:

The population of these areas had for the most part either fled or had gone under. The troop leader’s report said about this, ‘the numerous corpses of those who had starved to death revealed the conditions we primarily have to thank for people’s inclination, here too, to submit’.²⁵

By April 1906, the uprising was more or less over. In his account of the episode, published some two years later, von Götzen expressed regrets about the policy of suppression through starvation, particularly in terms of its long-term economic consequences:

Peace had been restored in the district of Mahenge. But it was bought through a heavy sacrifice. Even if the period of starvation itself was not of long duration, since bounteous African nature lent a helping hand here, and even if the burnt-down dwellings were rapidly rebuilt, given their simple manner of construction, nevertheless the loss of population entailed a degree of damage that would inevitably have significant adverse consequences for years to come for the lowered economic productivity of an anyway thinly populated country.²⁶

But even von Götzen recognized and regretted the awful consequences of the war, in some places far worse than others, including deaths not only from hunger but also from disease and heightened infant mortality rates; and registered the difficulties experienced in seeking to repopulate particularly badly affected areas.²⁷ The intention had been the suppression of the uprising, not the eradication of a people.

Perhaps these were ‘standard military practices’ in some sense. They were not uniformly applied across the different areas of suppression: Paasche, for example, preferred to ‘reward’ those villagers who refused to support the uprising by ensuring they were settled in places of safety and able to cultivate crops.²⁸ Even von Götzen

²⁴ Freiherr von Wangenheim’s report quoted in G. A. Graf von Götzen, *Deutsch-Ostafrika Afrika im Aufstand 1905/06* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer (Ernst Vohsen) 1909), p. 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 233–5.

²⁸ Paasche, ‘*Im Morgenlicht*’, pp. 125–42.

spoke of a 'Konzentrationslager' (concentration camp) in a sense very different from the later use of the term: in this case the term referred to a camp designed to protect and feed the population of women and children, so long as they recognized German authority and did not support the rebels:

In Kibata, next to the Boma [village compound] a large concentration camp had been established in which hundreds of women and children were accommodated. Here, those who were prepared to submit were collected and settled, so that, under the protection of guards, they could cultivate foodstuffs.²⁹

Certainly the forcible means of imposing German authority on an occupied territory against a rebellious population—public hangings, starvation—were to be found again and again, with ever greater frequency, on an infinitely larger scale and with massively greater brutality during the Second World War. But to link developments in the suppression of colonial rebellions in Germany's African colonies in the 1900s with Hitler's policies and practices in Eastern Europe after 1939 is highly problematic. It was to be a long, twisting path, in which changing political constellations, shifts in the character of the state, and the location of power played a crucial role in determining which views and policies should predominate and which be suppressed. For the time being, everything remained open; and policies were continually contested.

II. 'CIVILIZED SOCIETY'

For a few Germans, the experience of violence exercised against 'inferiors' in Africa was readily transposed to the home front, and replayed with pleasure on the domestic scene. Dr Friedrich R., a lawyer who had been born in 1905 into a well-to-do Berlin family—his father was a judge—recalled, for example, his childhood memories of one of the family's neighbours, a captain who had just served in South West Africa:

He always had a hippopotamus whip and used it to hit his wife and children and servants . . . He often told me how good things were in Africa, because one could beat up the blacks, and if they defended themselves 'then I just always say: "against the wall!"' He was on 'leave' and the leave was really long, but then in 1915 he was sent to Belgium.³⁰

²⁹ Von Götzen, *Deutsch-Ostafrika Afrika im Aufstand*, p. 133.

³⁰ HHL b MS Ger 91 (184), Dr. F. R., p. 3. This is one case from an extraordinary manuscript collection, held in the Harvard Houghton Library, of more than 260 essays written between the summer of 1939 and the spring of 1940 under the title 'My life in Germany before and after 1933' for an essay competition announced by three Harvard professors, Gordon Allport, Edward Y. Hartshorne, and Sydney B. Fay. This competition was designed to gain substantial first-hand accounts of the social and psychological consequences of Nazism, and offered a first prize of \$500. The essay competition was announced in various German-speaking and exile newspapers, and elicited responses not only from émigrés, refugees, and victims of the regime, but also from some Nazi sympathizers and supporters who at that time had few hesitations about trying to proselytize for, or at least recounting, what they still tended to see as a legitimate cause; such frank testimony would be almost impossible to elicit after

But for others, the context, atmosphere, and issues in Imperial Germany were quite different. Life stories, expectations, and aspirations differed radically according to class, region, religion, gender, and milieu, within a wider framework of dominant norms sustained by political institutions and cultural traditions.

Military values had long pervaded Imperial Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II set the tone himself, with his determination that Germany should have a 'place in the sun'. The traditional Prussian emphasis on militarism, a legacy of both the much-praised Frederick the Great and of Bismarck's wars of unification, was augmented by a more recent bourgeois emphasis on competitions for command of the world's seas in rivalry with Britain. The popularity of the growing navy was evident in innumerable ways, from Navy League Associations through to postcards, and even in a craze for the 'sailors' suits' (*Matrosenanzüge*) which were the height of children's fashion for a decade or more. A period characterized by rapid social change and a foreign policy of aggrandizement was pervaded also by a widespread sense among the dominant and articulate classes of the superiority of German 'Kultur'—an assumed national cultural superiority which even intelligent individuals of a liberal persuasion, such as Max Weber, held worthy of defence by military might. Such a framework provided the setting for the aspirations and value systems internalized, expressed, and played out in many families from the more affluent or influential classes, providing, in peacetime, more than adequate fodder for training for the leadership of a German army and navy.

The sons of the aristocracy were traditionally destined for a career in one of three areas: if they were from the landed nobility, and in line for the inheritance, they would of course have responsibility for tending the family estates; if they were a later born son, or from less well-endowed families, they would very likely be groomed to a life in service of the state, through the civil service, the law, politics, or diplomacy; and, of course, they could become an officer of the army.³¹ While none of these careers were in any sense predetermined—having command over resources and a network of good connections always meant that a range of options were open—these careers formed the shapes of their lives, defined the patterns into which they were born; they informed the aspirations of parents and determined the

1945. The minimum word count of essays was supposed to be 20,000 words; most are substantially longer (a few very much longer) while a minority fall far short of the expected word count and some are effectively simply pleas for help in awful circumstances. They all have in common that they do not yet know that there will be the organized mass killing of millions in the 'final solution' which unfolded from 1941; for these writers, the key turning point was 1933, or 1938 in the case of residents of Austria. For a copy of the covering letter of 17 Sep. 1940 from the committee (Allport, Fay, Hartshorne) outlining the essay criteria, see HHL, b MS Ger 91 (179), Lotte P. Most were written in German, but some were written in English; where this is the case, I have made no attempt to correct infelicities of style in the quotations, but have on occasion corrected obvious typographical and spelling errors; I have also respected anonymity throughout by using only the first initial of surnames, and in some cases, where anonymity was already preferred by the writer, also using a pseudonym for the first name.

³¹ For recent developments in research on the German aristocracy in European perspective, see e.g. Eckart Conze and Monika Wienfort (eds.), *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2004); and Monika Wienfort *Adel in der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006).

educational experiences and social networks of the noble young, Arnold Vieth von Golßenau, for example, was born into an old aristocratic family in Saxony, based in the court town of Dresden. In his later memoirs of his childhood and youth, sketching a detailed record of pre-war court life, he records his military training and experiences in some detail; like so many others of his class, at this time he aspired to be an officer, a station to which his birth more or less automatically entitled him irrespective of personal merit.³² Women born into these circles had rather different assumptions about the course their lives would take, largely focusing around marriages and family connections.³³ Common to all upper-class Germans in the pre-war period, arguably, was the assumption and hope that, despite evidence of the rapid social and political changes associated with industrialization and urbanization, things would continue in much the ordered course they felt had been customary across generations of aristocratic domination of the social order.

Some of these aspirations also coloured the views of non-aristocratic circles in Imperial Germany.³⁴ Many bourgeois families were affected by the military fervour of the 'Gründerzeit', the early years after the foundation of the German Empire following Prussia's successful war against France in 1870. Militarism pervades later memoirs of periods of childhood and young adulthood in Imperial Germany among the middle classes. James B., for example, who was born in 1867 in Perleberg, a small town in the Priegnitz area north of Berlin, later recalled the enthusiasm of the *Gründerzeit* which coloured his childhood and overrode differences of religion. His mother had come from Hamburg, where her Jewish family had interacted comfortably with north German and Danish Protestants; his father, the son of a rabbi, had come from Łódź, the 'edge of civilization' where 'eastern Jews' (*Ostjuden*) had fled from persecution in Tsarist Russia. In Perleberg, class differences predominated over differences of religious confession or background:

Those of us who were students at the modern grammar school were the sons of the propertied class. The new epoch sharpened the contrasts between the classes. Lower class wives were at that time just beginning to go to work in the newly founded factories in large numbers. Increasingly frequently now working class children no longer had a hot midday meal. . . .³⁵

Militarism was part of the implicit class tensions even among the young, and pervaded all areas of life for those growing up in the shadow of the wars of unification:

We grammar school students were also perpetually engaged in fights with the pupils going to the ordinary school. . . . It was a pale reflection of the prevailing militarism. There was after all no greater honour in bourgeois families than when their adult sons

³² Ludwig Renn, *Adel im Untergang* (Berlin: Das neue Berlin, 2001).

³³ See e.g. the depiction of childhood atmosphere and family connections in Tisa von der Schulenburg, *Ich hab's gewagt. Bildhauerin und Ordensfrau—ein unkonventionelles Leben* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 1995). For a biography of her brother, see e.g. Ulrich Heinemann, *Ein konservativer Rebell. Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenburg und der 20. Juli* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1990).

³⁴ For the now rather dated debates over an alleged 'feudalization of the bourgeoisie', see David Blackburn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (39), James B., (1867) 'Memoiren eines deutschen Juden und Sozialisten', p. 8.

were appointed as lieutenants of the reserve. Anyone who did not attain this grade suffered perpetually from a loss of esteem and above all of self-esteem. But anyone who had become a Reserve Officer sought arrogantly to look down his nose in the same way as other officers and thus to distinguish himself clearly from ordinary burghers.³⁶

Class and status were thus literally embodied, as inequalities of nutrition and opportunity in youth were echoed in inequalities of aspiration and status as adults, and different gradations of hierarchy were repeatedly aped, enacted, and practised in order to reproduce the militarized social order. The influence of rank and uniform was extended even to the flirtatious activities of young women:

In our town there was, as in most towns of this great military state, a garrison . . . If the regiment came out early in the morning for an exercise, then every young woman would rush to the window to catch a glimpse of her beloved.³⁷

And as James B. later recalled:

In this way, youth too gained some experience of the great war. On the principal wall in the living room would hang two pictures: one of King William, as Emperor Napoleon surrendered his sword as a prisoner after the battle of Sedan, the other the declaration of the German Empire by Bismarck in the hall of the Palace of Versailles.³⁸

Militarism, in this manner of representation, was a matter both of social status and national glory, not of violent death and futile destruction. The more recent experiences of colonialism compounded the legacies of longer-term Prussian military traditions and Bismarck's forceful manner of unification, and on occasion perhaps exacerbated patterns of familial authoritarianism.

Class and class conflicts were increasingly important, and play a far greater role than any whiff of militarism in the life stories of those from poorer backgrounds. Otto B., for example, recalled primarily the acute poverty of his youth. Although Otto B.'s memoirs were written in East Berlin in 1960, for the purposes of an East German Communist Party (SED) archive of working-class experiences, the rather jumbled, detailed, and ill-educated way in which they were penned suggests there was little artifice to his account of his early years, very likely reflecting rather accurately the way Otto B. recalled his experiences of childhood; only once he reached the stage of recalling young adulthood did the teleology of party-belonging kick in to help shape the account.³⁹ Otto B.'s father was a tailor; the six-person family lived in two rooms in a building next to what was known as the 'louse park' (*Lausepark*) due to the prevalence of lice among those who frequented it. He recalled never having enough to eat; and his schooling was limited to attendance at what was popularly known as the 'rags school' (*Klamottenschule*), presumably because of the pupils' apparel. The class teacher had a habit of taking regular sips from a schnapps bottle conveniently kept in his pocket. At the age of fifteen,

³⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (39), James B., (1867) 'Memoiren eines deutschen Juden und Sozialisten',

p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.* ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁹ LAB, C Rep 902-02-04, Nr. 65, Otto B. (1880), *Erinnerungen*, 20. Okt. 1960.

Otto B. became an apprentice machine-tool maker and from then on was constantly trying to improve his position and earn higher wages. His memoirs provide immense detail on how much he was paid in which job; apparently total and astonishingly detailed (presumably more or less accurate) recall of the precise wages received in each position suggests this was a constant, overriding concern at the time. The memoirs also, hardly surprisingly in view of the later context of writing, increasingly highlight the 'class struggle'. Otto B. joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1902, and was from then on a party and union activist, playing a leading role in various strikes; he was frequently either fired for his activities, or gave notice. He continued working in extraordinarily bad conditions, never—because of his political views—being able to be promoted to 'Meister' (master of the trade) status, since he could then not be a member of a union, and in any event for him 'being a master was equivalent to being a capitalist lackey'.⁴⁰ Claiming that he had little respect for his bosses, Otto B. reports that he often just left his work and looked for another job.

The era of Emperor Wilhelm II was characterized by inherent instability for a variety of reasons. Changes in both social structure and the international system played a growing role in the destabilization of domestic politics. Unprecedented and rapid population growth, industrialization and urbanization, accompanied a rise in social tensions and posed a challenge to received status hierarchies. New interest groups and shifting political alignments, as well as the apparently inexorable growth of a social democratic movement which was more revolutionary in theory than practice, appeared to challenge the capacity to balance diverging interests of the system devised by Bismarck. In the international sphere, growing tensions and competition between the European powers both in the colonies and at home were exacerbated by an arms race which led almost inevitably to the expectation of war—a war which would, it was widely assumed, be of the old style: short, decisive, contained. The cataclysmic, long-drawn out and destructive war which actually came in 1914–18 was not the war for which German militarism was prepared and which old regime Europe had been expecting.

And perhaps for this reason, for the all tensions and speed of social change, in retrospect the pre-war era was seen as an idyllic and tranquil moment when expectations and life courses were a purely personal matter, not determined by the intrusion of external forces beyond an individual's control. The following third of a century or more was to be very different indeed.

Class, while highly significant in shaping political affiliations and configurations, by no means predetermined politics in an age where religious confession and regional backgrounds still played a major role. And for some, concerns with challenging traditional gender roles evolved as a significant issue of the turn of the century, heralding the better-known emancipatory movements of the 1920s.⁴¹ The personal was, to prefigure a feminist rallying cry of the later twentieth century,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ See e.g. Lillian Fadermann and Brigitte Eriksson (eds.), *Lesbians in Germany: 1890s–1920s* (NP: The Naiad Press, 1990).

already seen as highly political. Emergent generational conflicts also to some degree cross-cut class considerations, particularly in the last few years before the outbreak of the Great War—and particularly among the relatively well-off sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie who did not need to worry quite as much, on a day-to-day basis, as Otto B. did about the precise rate of pay for each job.

Among those seeing generation as a key fault line running across other social divisions, there was growing enthusiasm for cultural trends and views emphasizing the possibility of individual spiritual and physical renewal, as well as societal and political reform, through the energies of ‘youth’ against age, irrespective of class; and a growing desire to break with what were increasingly seen as the authoritarian shackles of a parental generation characterized by stern and dominant patriarchal values.⁴² The *Wandervogel* (literally, ‘wandering bird’) movement, in which young people went hiking together and sought, in closer communion with nature, solace and answers to the complex problems of what later became known as the ‘asphalt society’, was far from the only youth movement at this period; there were inevitable differences in political views and priorities across different, often inchoate and constantly shifting, groupings.⁴³ What was common across these movements was confidence, curiously, in the energy and insights allegedly to be found from a life stage that was, by definition, doomed to be ephemeral.

Different youth movements came together on the Hohe Meißner mountain in 1913 for intense discussion of the ways in which the younger generation could transform not only politics but also, through ‘life reform’ movements, the world and themselves.⁴⁴ Present on the Hohe Meißner was Hans Paasche, who by this time was involved, along with the lawyer and writer Hermann Popert, in publication of a newsletter entitled *Der Vortrupp* (Vanguard) for the *Deutscher Vortruppbund* which they had founded in 1912. Paasche claimed that this newspaper ‘sets itself the task of bringing together, as though in a mirror reflecting heat and light, all the conditions for lifestyle reform in Germany that can make every single member of the community [*Volksgenossen*] healthier, more competent, of stronger resolve, and thus to create better living conditions for descendants yet to come’.⁴⁵ Hans Paasche, now describing himself as a writer as well as an officer of the marines, had in the meantime written significant tracts critiquing Imperial Germany, one collection of which—echoing Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*—was a brilliant parody couched in the form of letters home by an African visiting Germany on behalf of his African sovereign, the letters dating from 1 May 1912 through to the ninth and last letter allegedly penned on the Hohe Meißner on 15 October 1913.⁴⁶ Shifting the perspective to that of the

⁴² See the overview in Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 42–7.

⁴³ See for an overview of varieties, shifts, and changes Peter Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900–1945* (London: Macmillan, 1981), who however resolutely uses the singular noun.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Winfried Mogge and Jürgen Reulecke (eds.), *Hohe Meißner 1913. Der Erste Freideutsche Jugendtag in Dokumenten, Deutungen und Bildern* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1988).

⁴⁵ Reprinted *ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁶ Hans Paasche, *Lukanga Mukara. Die Forschungsreise des Afrikaners Lukanga Mukara ins innerste Deutschland* (Berlin: Verlag Eduard Jacobson, 1980; letters first published in *Der Vortrupp* from 1912–13).

surprised visiting African, Paasche—who had, following his marriage to Ellen Witting, spent a lengthy honeymoon in Africa and been ever more impressed by life beyond the constricting norms of Imperial ‘civilization’—succeeded in critiquing all manner of German traditions and customs, from constraining clothes (including corsets for women who were thus actively turned into the ‘weaker sex’, barely able to breathe), gestures, social greetings, the ‘performance’ of social status through the wearing of certain clothes and adoption of patterns of bearing, through to excessive alcohol consumption and smoking, constantly being in a hurry, and living in a meaningless cycle of rushing to work, ricocheting between employment, transport, coal, schnapps, and prostitutes, marked out by incessant counting of money and time, in a society seen as constantly in motion but to no overall purpose. While such a lifestyle had become so ingrained and habitual as to appear ‘normal’ to the Germans—with traditional feast days, for example, being characteristically ‘celebrated’ by an ever more revolting inebriation—to the visiting African this lifestyle of perpetual haste, social and physical constraint, and repeated intoxication was both absurd and unintelligible; about the only aspects that gave cause for hope were the soothing powers of music, and the potential promise of the youth movement.

By mid-1913 the Vortrupp League had over 4,000 members in 140 different local groups; its newsletter had somewhere in the region of 8,000 subscribers, a quite considerable figure. At the meeting on 12 October 1913 on the Hohe Meißner, around 500 to 600 members were present, alongside members of perhaps fourteen different youth groups of various sorts in gathering totalling around 3,000 ‘young’ people (including Max Weber, at this time in his late forties and perhaps no longer quite so young, though certainly struggling with significant problems relating to his own personal rebellion against an overbearing, authoritarian father).⁴⁷ Also present was one Alexander Schwab, born in 1887 in Stuttgart, the son of the composer and *Opernkapellmeister* Karl Julius Schwab.⁴⁸ Schwab was at this time closely associated with Gustav Wyneken, an influential youth activist and major proponent of educational reform, who played a leading role in creating a loose federation of the ‘Free German Youth’. Together—less than a year before the outbreak of the Great War—these predominantly young people hoped, enthused by the companionship, fresh mountain air and beautiful surroundings, to be able to change both the world and themselves. Very soon many would be dead—and others in bitter conflict about which way to deal with the very real political issues of a society riven both by war and class tensions. Politics was by no means so easily resolved by appealing to the energies of youth and the virtues of a ‘return to nature’.

⁴⁷ Winfried Mogge, ‘Der Freideutsche Jugendtag 1913: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf, Wirkungen’ in Mogge and Reulecke, *Hohe Meißner 1913*, pp. 33–66.

⁴⁸ Hans-Harald Müller, *Intellektueller Linksradikalismus in der Weimarer Republik. Seine Entstehung, Geschichte und Literatur – dargestellt am Beispiel der Berliner Gründergruppe der Kommunistischen Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands* (Kronberg/Ts: Scriptor Verlag, 1977).

III. THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT WAR

The Great War brought Germans into the sphere of national politics as never before: the involvement in the eddies unleashed by the war, whether in active service at the front, on the home front during years of upheaval and deprivation, or in the post-war after-swirls of hunger, illness, and economic and political instability, meant that no Germans were left entirely untouched. And the significance of the legacies of the Great War, in terms of international instability, the radicalization of domestic politics, and transformations of German society, can hardly be over-estimated. Considerable attention has been focussed on a few key issues: the allegedly widespread enthusiasm for war among Germans in August 1914; the commission of atrocities against civilians following the German invasion of Belgium and France; the supposed formation of a 'front generation' formed by experiences in the trenches, particularly on the western front; and, less well-explored, the possible longer-term consequences of experiences on the eastern front. In all respects, the realities were more complex and multifaceted than earlier myths might suggest; but that the Great War had a massive impact on people's consciousness, and constituted a major rupture in their personal lives, is beyond question.⁴⁹

Whole cohorts of adult males were exposed to the experiences of slaughter on the battlefields, maiming and death from wounds behind the front, captivity as prisoners of war, and the short- and long-term psychological consequences of prolonged industrial warfare. The casualties were not on the scale of those later to be experienced in the Second World War; but at this time, and particularly in comparison with the relatively short and decisive battles of the nineteenth century or recent colonial experiences of combat, the Great War amounted to an experience of death and devastation on a previously unprecedented scale. Over 2 million Germans were killed in the war, a far higher rate of death than experienced by the British or French; of those Germans mobilized to fight, around 15 per cent were killed and more than half were injured in some way.⁵⁰ Far higher rates of physical casualties were experienced on the eastern front than in the trenches in

⁴⁹ These and related questions have given rise to a massive literature. See e.g. Rüdiger Bergien, 'Vorspiel des "Vernichtungskrieges"? Die Ostfront des ersten Weltkrieges und das Kontinuitätsproblem' in Gerhard P. Groß (ed.), *Der vergessene Front. Der Osten 1914/15. Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006), pp. 393–408; Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities: A history of denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and mass killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern, 1914–1923* (Essen: Klartext, 1997); Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Frontalltag im ersten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2008).

⁵⁰ German losses were 2,037,000; British deaths amounted to 723,000; and the corresponding figure for France was 1,398,000. The British death rate was 11.8% of those mobilized. Figures taken from Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, morale and collapse in the German and British armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 11, 20–1.

the west, with around two and a half times the likelihood of dying in battle in the east than the west; but the trench warfare, the stalemate, the sense of a lack of control, as well as the experience of mutilated body parts of former comrades being scattered widely across the trenches and devastated landscapes of war, appears to have made the experience more horrific on the western front than in the east. Around one in twenty soldiers were recorded as psychiatric casualties, with the emergence of 'shell shock' as a new term to describe a syndrome of nervous and physical disorder following the traumatic experiences of war (in the later twentieth century, after the Vietnam War, displaced by the more generic notion of post-traumatic stress disorder).⁵¹

The impact of war was experienced also on the German home front in ways which were arguably unprecedented (at least since the devastating impact of the Thirty Years War in some areas, nearly three centuries earlier), although again not to the extent or in the manner of bombing, invasion, and occupation by enemy armies that was to characterize the Second World War. During the Great War, birth rates in Germany dropped massively: from the pre-war, slightly declining rates of between 30.7 and 28.3 per thousand of the population (figures for 1910 and 1913) to dramatic lows of 15.7 in 1916 and 14.4 in 1917—less than half the birth rate of five years earlier.⁵² Rephrasing this: in some senses, what would potentially have been 'half a generation' was at this time not being born. For those who were children during the Great War, malnutrition and relative neglect had a major impact both physically and socially: with fathers away at the front or killed, mothers often called in to work in factories, schoolteachers away at war, younger children experienced a lack of the traditional authority figures that had loomed so large in pre-war years; shortages of food, fuel, and soap contributed to ill-health and a very real degree of widespread material distress.⁵³ A sense of 'moral panic' particularly about working-class youngsters who had grown up in these circumstances, and who appeared to be engaging in criminal activities in youth gangs, was later exacerbated by post-war conditions.⁵⁴

More generally, as conditions worsened on the home front it appeared to many astute observers of the day that a sense of lawlessness in order to survive was widespread across classes and age groups, accompanied by 'demoralization' and a sense of inevitability, even hopelessness, as James B., by now a civil servant and lawyer well into his forties, observed:

But not only the old and the new rich were gripped by this loss of morality through war: the whole nation was diseased. . . . Since the lower classes saw how the upper classes were going about things, so gradually all hesitation about engaging in illegality was shed. Since they did not have enough to eat, they stole. They stole potatoes out of lodgings, vegetables from the fields, chickens and geese from their coops. They falsified

⁵¹ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, pp. 25, 22 ff., 43. The figures for psychiatric casualties were 4.58% of German soldiers, and 5.7% of those serving in the British forces.

⁵² *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das deutsche Reich, 1924–25*, p. 41.

⁵³ See Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, esp. pp. 120–5.

⁵⁴ See also Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

bread and meat cards and sold them. As metals became increasingly scarce, they stole them in order to sell them, handles from doors, even from railway carriages. With an increasing shortage of fabrics, they stole carpets from staircases and curtains and upholstery from railway carriages. Not just one or two cases, but rather there was scarcely a house or a train where one could not see signs of such devastation. Very often children could be seen running around in hardwearing trousers, the source of which was revealed by sections of print betraying the fact that they were made from stolen upholstery.

In offices, previously bulwarks of conscientiousness in the German lands, bribery had become a general practice. Everyone who had anything to do with bureaucracy, and that was the majority of people because of the thousands of orders being issued, would take with them an envelope containing a bank note, in order to leave it lying on the desk of the bureaucrat . . .

To this dissolution of all moral values was associated that of family bonds . . .

The worst of it all was not so much that disloyalty, profiteering, stealing, receiving stolen goods, bribery, swindling, had become general practice, but rather that the destruction of popular morality was experienced as something self-evident, beyond alteration. It was after all war. That was a force against which no-one could do anything.⁵⁵

The extent to which such observations were ‘true’, in the sense for example of statistics on different types of crime (or relative success rates in prosecutions), is less important than the perception of contemporaries that the previous certainties of their social and moral world were being radically shattered.

The Great War and the turmoil which followed proved such a watershed that the relative peace and tranquillity of the preceding decades could only be seen in a rosy light, the pre-1914 years remembered or portrayed as a sort of golden age. Albert D., for example, was a Jewish doctor whose family had lived for generations on the French–German border on the right bank of the Rhine; he could trace his family’s residence there as far back as 1743. The small town in which he had lived, with a population of around 12,000, was mixed in religious affiliation: while the majority were Protestant, around 33% were Catholic, and around three per cent Jewish. Albert D. later recollected that:

The way in which members of different religious confessions and various levels of society—not only economic but also social—were able to live together was at that time virtually ideal. It was not least this fact that caused me to choose this town as the place in which to base my existence.⁵⁶

He married happily, and in due course had a son and daughter; his medical practice flourished, he had a wide circle of good friends and enjoyed an active and varied cultural life. But then, as for so many other Germans, everything changed: ‘In the summer of 1914 I was, as every year, on holiday with my family in the mountains which I so loved’ when the news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the eventual declaration of war came through.

⁵⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (39), James B., (1867) ‘Memoiren eines deutschen Juden und Sozialisten’, p. 50.

⁵⁶ HHL b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., p. 2.

Albert D. was, like so many others, called up. The family were far from military enthusiasts, but rapidly came to terms with it: 'But my wife bore the inevitable as the consequence of patriotic duty.'⁵⁷ Albert D. became a troop doctor on the western front, where he earned the Iron Cross and other honours; and, despite suffering from serious illness in the course of the war, he offered himself back into service even before he had made a full recovery. As the war continued, he described the increasing unpopularity and poor discipline and poor nutrition:

Reports in the strongly censored newspapers had not been believed for a long while, discipline was very lax, the food situation was desperate, and we doctors knew ahead of time far better than most people what the bitter end would be, because we were right there amongst the population. Then happened, what had to happen: collapse, revolution, and the ceasefire.⁵⁸

A similar picture of a peaceful, almost 'golden age' before the Great War is given by Maria K. Born in 1893, she was a young woman when the war broke out; she trained to become a school teacher, and in 1917 she married a Professor of Oriental Languages at Giessen University. She summarizes the effects of the war quite succinctly:

Before the Great War (1914–1918) we had a very peaceful, cheerful life . . . The war caught us totally unprepared . . . Everyone was caught up in the enthusiasm for war . . .

But very soon disillusion began to set in:

The first great wave of enthusiasm for the war ebbed with the arrival of the first lists of casualties. For example, of all the officers of the Giessen Regiment who had gone to war in August, only two were still alive in mid-September . . . By around the summer of 1916 the war had become a great burden. The reasons were probably for the most part the never-ending casualty lists and the scarcity of food. Schoolteaching was made more difficult through the shortage of coal, malnutrition, and the way children were running wild.⁵⁹

These accounts, written in 1940, like many other retrospective autobiographical texts, register some difficulty in seeing the period before 1914 as in continuity with what came later. Far from prefiguring the rise of Nazism, the pre-1914 period is seen as radically disconnected.

The disconnection was registered not merely at the political level but at the deeply personal level, in terms of a discontinuity even in the sense of self. This sense of difference, of even lack of recognition of a former self, is registered explicitly by a highly intelligent German whose now published diaries have illuminated the experiences of some of those who were within a matter of decades to be outcast and indeed headed for the gas chambers. Viktor Klemperer, a distinguished philologist whose Jewish origins lost him his academic position, his home, and very nearly his life in the Third Reich, took upon himself the mission of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ HHL b MS Ger 91 (101), Maria K., p. 1.

documenting the developments of his times in a diary where the personal was, inevitably, the political. Attempting in 1940 to write an autobiographical account of his own childhood and youth, Klemperer found it well-nigh impossible to think himself back into the self who had greeted war in August 1914 with a combination of the general enthusiasm and yet simultaneous doubts.

Explaining why he felt it necessary to reproduce old diary entries instead of rewriting as autobiography, as he had done with rest of his account of his youth, Klemperer first gave some general reasons: in his opinion, Germans generally faced war in 1914, after forty-three years of peace, much as fresh eighteen-year-olds discuss God and the meaning of existence but then later, 'with increasing maturity, become ashamed of time-wasting, triviality and self-revelations, and content themselves with the narrowly defined tasks and problems of their own existence'.⁶⁰ The same could be said of the meaning of war, which had been much discussed at first, but later forgotten as people were swept up in the process and consequences of war and simply had to get on with it. But secondly, and more importantly, there were personal reasons:

But to these general reasons that are applicable to 'everyone' must be added more important personal reasons for the retention of the diary, applicable to 'me'. Today, how could the self-evidence of the 'we' and of the patriotic enthusiasm and of the absolute conviction about Germany's snow-white innocence, about Germany's justified claim to primacy in Europe, flow from my pen? I simply cannot manage to reproduce this in a new narrative, I can only copy it as though from a foreign text. And there is also something else that forces me to leave the text of the following weeks untouched. Today, in the autumn of 1940, when I am living among my former fellow citizens in more restricted conditions and with even fewer rights than a prisoner of war, emotionally my memory is overflowing with that united enthusiasm of the summer of 1914. Yet now, in reading through the old notes, I see with astonishment how even then, for all my absolutely unquestionable sense of being German, for all my enthusiasm and absolute certainty of those basic convictions, even so, virtually right from the very start I nevertheless had moments of self-reflection and doubt. And even these critical outpourings I can't recreate; otherwise I would never be rid of the fear that I was in some way falsely adding into my feelings of that time my thoughts of today.⁶¹

Klemperer thus abandoned his attempt to rewrite his experiences of 1914 as autobiography, and simply reproduced the diary entries of the time.⁶² In one passage in particular, he clearly registered far wider views of the day, identifying:

a popular lust for sensationalism . . . an urge to experience the extraordinary. War is the highest sensation and the only remaining catharsis for a civilized person [*Kulturmenschen*]. That is why war cannot be totally banned from any peaceful society.

⁶⁰ Victor Klemperer, *Curriculum Vitae. Erinnerungen eines Philologen, 1881–1918. Zweites Buch: 1912–1918* (Berlin: Rütten and Leoning, 1989), p. 173.

⁶¹ Klemperer, *Curriculum Vitae*, II, pp. 173–4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 176–212.

War, the great historical event, can render whole nations immortal . . . War is therefore the mass surrogate for individual fame.⁶³

This may perhaps have been what many felt in 1914; it certainly had little to do with what was to come. War changed German society in ways that, in 1914—let alone in the colonial wars a decade or so earlier—were entirely unpredictable. It also changed the people who lived through the war, whether at the home or at the front. In their own later self-perceptions, the period before 1914 came to seem like a golden age; in face of the challenges of war and the continuing turmoil of the period after defeat, nothing could ever be the same again.

IV. THE TRIALS OF HANS PAASCHE

Increasingly, Hans Paasche—who had initially tried to ‘do his duty’ as a good German citizen—came to oppose the war and the government which seemed only bent on prolonging it. By 1916–17, having been relieved from his marine command for failure to obey orders over a disciplinary offence, Paasche was more and more involved in activities designed to bring the war to an early end. He distributed pacifist and anti-war literature, and built up a network of contacts across Germany. By 1917, Paasche was of the view that: ‘There is no point in raising youth in full health only so that they can later be used up as cannon fodder.’⁶⁴ In late 1917, Paasche was arrested on his estate of Waldfrieden, and put on trial on charges of high treason for his activities in opposition to the war. Given Paasche’s social position, his defence lawyer was ultimately successful in getting a verdict amounting to ‘mad, not bad’, and rather than facing the death penalty for high treason Paasche was incarcerated in a ‘mental hospital’ wing in Moabit prison.

Paasche himself was absolutely clear that there were direct connections between the experience of violence in the African colonies, and the Great War. Both during his period of imprisonment and after the end of the war, which brought about his sudden release (or rather, liberation by mutinying troops) in November 1918, Paasche berated himself for not having spoken out more honestly and forcefully from 1905 onwards about what the experience of violence and killing really meant; he felt that, had he done so, more people might have been opposed to the Great War and perhaps even prevented it from starting.

The materials collated for the investigation of Paasche’s mental state in the legal proceedings against him for high treason are highly revealing. The immediate generational conflict was clearly acute, as Dr Leppmann, the senior medical specialist, observed after one parental visit:

Unfortunately a few days ago, as my reliable Chief Warder reported to me, on the occasion of a visit paid to his son by Privy Councillor [*Geheimrat*] Paasche, the latter became so vehement and hurtful without any obvious cause such that, should Paasche

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶⁴ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 1, fol. 135.

remain in this mental institution, I would on medical grounds refuse permission for any further visit for at least the next six weeks.⁶⁵

Following six weeks of close observation of Hans Paasche as a patient, and after reading all ten volumes of the files of witness testimony and other evidence collated for the legal proceedings instituted against Paasche in 1917, Dr Leppmann summarized the situation as he saw it. According to Dr Leppmann's report, even Paasche's rather well-meaning parents-in-law were ever more convinced, not least on the basis of their acquaintance with him over many years:

that this so gifted and many-sided man is totally unsuited to real life, that he could never really come to terms with life, just as they had witnessed how, in every position and in every occupation, he had immediately come into sharp conflict with those around him. The manner of his life style was already at that time highly peculiar. He often slept during daytime, and was not in a position to partake regularly in ordinary meals, although he actually never really exercised any kind of demanding job. He was always busy, without any regularity and without any disposition: more or less without any kind of plan or goal, he filled his life with correspondence and writing, with conferences and further discussions. In that period he read a lot and demonstrated in general a very strong desire for knowledge.⁶⁶

However much such a lifestyle might seem understandable to those born into an era of creative freelancers, at this time and in this context Paasche, on this and the balance of much other evidence, clearly could not be 'normal'—an aberration which could, according to many of those giving evidence, be dated back to his experiences in the colonies.

It is worth quoting in full the indictment of the lifestyle of an individual who did not conform to the norms of Imperial German society in the ways expected of someone of Paasche's social station at that time:

Experiences while in the colonies had precipitated his support for unconditional abstinence, following which came one after another the battle for vegetarianism, for animal protection, particularly for the protection of birds, for opposition to inoculation, and related causes. He worked with the Teetotallers and the Knights of the Templar, he fought on behalf of vegetarianism and in every case belonged to the most radical and fanatic representatives of this tendency. There were times when he nourished himself solely on herbs, roots, and all sorts of raw fruit . . . On top of this then came a concern with ethical movements. He joined the Associations for Ethics and Radical Ethics. For months he threw himself into so-called culture of the body and spent whole days sunbathing or in the open air . . . His father-in-law recalls having met him twice on the street dressed in such a manner that he had to be ashamed: with hair growing too long, not wearing a hat, carelessly dressed, and with a briefcase under his arm he looked more like a Baptist itinerant preacher than a former military officer who was after all living in good and secure circumstances.

⁶⁵ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 1, Letter from Geh. Dr A. Leppmann, 9 May 1918, fol. 56.

⁶⁶ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 1, 'Schriftliches Gutachten' by Geh. Medizinalrat Dr A. Leppmann, fols. 100–57, here fol. 108.

Then came the time when he threw himself into the youth movement, again of course also immediately making very radical demands, and where, in the Wandervogel and similar movements, he perceived the salvation of the world. He wrote about all these things and always in such a manner that his articles ever more frequently irritated someone and wounded their feelings, so that he was actually always feuding with someone or other.⁶⁷

It seems a shame that Paasche had not lived some half a century or more later: from perhaps the late 1960s onwards such beliefs, causes, and apparel, particularly in a Western European or North American university city, would hardly have given cause even for passing comment, let alone passed as definitive proof of 'abnormality' bordering on 'insanity'.

Much of the 'evidence' for Paasche's 'madness', or at least 'not being quite normal', was thus garnered from behavioural observations, combined with comments about his apparently inadequate internalization of the rules of social discipline, allegedly compounded by his African experiences. A colleague from the marines, one *Korvettenkapitän* Walter Goethe, commented that: 'As long as I have known him personally (the last time [we met] was in the course of 1915), his personality was intellectually extremely stimulating, but erratic and sometimes self-contradictory.'⁶⁸ Walter Goethe sought to give key examples to strengthen the case:

The following two examples should serve as an indication of his exaggerated style: once, as I heard from a third party, as the leader of the company holding watch for the II. Torpedo Division he supposedly made an entry in the record book to the effect that several people had been drunk; then he added in writing: as long as the people in charge here set such a bad example it's not going to get any better, or some such comment. This his superior would inevitably read. Then another time because he missed church he was punished by being grounded; shortly afterwards he was supposed to serve as a judge. This role he refused on the grounds that as someone who had himself been punished he had no right to sit in judgement over others.⁶⁹

Not merely did Paasche evidence signs of independent thoughts and actions (clearly symptoms of 'madness' in the naval circles of Imperial Germany); he also kept irregular hours, as Walter Goethe had recently learnt from a couple who had reported, following a visit to his wife:

that recently Hans Paasche had lived an extremely irregular life. So for example sometimes he arose at 12 o'clock midday, sometimes at 4 o'clock in the morning, and roamed around in the woods. He must therefore, through lack of any intensive occupation, partial loss of inhibitions and unsatisfied ambitions, have strayed into a peculiar cast of mind.⁷⁰

Others too commented unfavourably on Paasche's irregular life style, which functioned as clear evidence of 'madness'. Ludwig Assmann, for example, whose sister

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, fols. 108–10.

⁶⁸ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 2, Affidavit of Korvettenkapitän Walter Goethe, fol. 38.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 39.

had married into the estate neighbouring the Paasches' home, reported on an incident when he had visited his sister in 1917:

I found myself one day in the front garden and was busying myself with a fishing net. I saw a man and woman on bicycles coming towards the house, they placed their bicycles behind the house and entered the same... On this occasion I made the acquaintance of the two cyclists. It was the accused and his wife... I heard at that time... that he was a somewhat strange person, who for example in summertime went around the garden with his family almost without any clothes on. I personally noticed that the accused came to see my relatives in a rather dishevelled state. He was without a hat and totally unshaven. If he had not been wearing a decent suit, he could have been taken for a tramp.⁷¹

Yet again, failure to wear a hat, and a dishevelled appearance provided supposedly clear evidence of Paasche's alleged 'madness'. This was compounded by having anti-monarchical attitudes, even if here the evidence was only based on hearsay: at Christmas 1917 Assmann's sister had talked to her brother about Hans Paasche, saying that his writings 'were directed against the Imperial house, against the Hohenzollern dynasty and also against the government... On the other hand my sister also revealed that she did not consider the accused to be normal...'⁷² And the case for 'abnormality' was of course strengthened by repetitive corroboration, however apparently unfounded. As Emilia Assmann, the mother of this neighbour, put it to the court: 'I want to add that I heard, while staying with my daughter, but I cannot now remember who said it, that the accused was supposedly not normal.'⁷³

Not being 'normal' was thus a constantly reiterated refrain among those who could not deal with Paasche's nonconformist lifestyle. But there was certainly a little more to his behaviour in the later war years than simply a clash of outlooks on regular sleeping and eating habits as well as conventions on when to wear a hat. Whatever Paasche's previous ideas and outlook, he does seem to have been made 'mad'—or rather, angry, chaotic, insomniac—by the combination of war worries, economic stress, and both personal and political conflicts with his father. The perceived effects of the Great War on ordinary people also seems to have played a major role in what did appear to be something of a breakdown on Paasche's part, even on the evidence of those who wanted to claim a degree of inherent madness all along. Bruno Deuss, the 26-year-old son of a local shopkeeper in the village of Filehne and at that time a lieutenant in the war, reported that:

In June 1917... when I was on leave on Filehne and happened to be in my father's shop, the accused came into the shop and asked me about the mood of the people in the field. He then expressed the view to me that the people had to suffer most in war and the higher officers did not really feel much of the war since they were always

⁷¹ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 2, statement of Ingenieur Ludwig Assmann, 15 April 1918, fols. 256–7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, fol. 257.

⁷³ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 2, fol. 162.

behind the lines in safe locations; he was no longer comfortable with this and that was why he quit his service.⁷⁴

Another local from Filehne, *Landsturmmann* Karl Huth, born in 1899 and still a teenager at the time of giving testimony, also prioritized Paasche's views on the war but felt he was perhaps overreacting:

The accused often expressed himself to me in derogatory terms about the current constitutional position. He was of the opinion that much had been done wrongly, to which the war could be traced back, and he also said that only nationalism was to blame for the war and that the war would not have come about if people could govern themselves. I agree with these views of the accused.

... We spoke about the war and the great unhappiness that it had brought about. Suddenly Paasche threw himself to the ground and behaved like someone in despair, and then stood up again immediately and walked on with me. I gained the impression that the accused suffered greatly from the fact that the war demanded so much by way of sacrifice, particularly in terms of human beings. In my view Paasche concerned himself too one-sidedly with this. On the matter of losses, on one occasion when we were talking Paasche painted the following picture: If we were to estimate the total human losses in this war at 5 million people, then, if one stood these people up side by side, fully dressed for battle, and each man took up perhaps one metre of space, then it would produce a row of the dead that would be five times as long as the distance from Posen to Calais.⁷⁵

A twenty-year-old who had got to know Paasche in the summer of 1915 through family connections claimed that everyone 'held him to be a hugely gifted man of great knowledge and idealistic views, who only wanted the best for his fellow human beings':

At that time Herr Paasche was in my view mentally absolutely normal, although physically he sometimes appeared rather overworked. But I can imagine that through pondering on the war in particular, as well as the rift with his parents, he has now had a nervous breakdown.⁷⁶

There can be little doubt that the family, as well as the war, played a considerable role in Paasche's 'madness', both in terms of his violent disagreements with his father's views and associated outbursts of rage, and also in terms of their own attempts to dominate the definition and diagnosis of his 'symptoms'.

The family was clearly concerned to establish Hans Paasche's 'madness', and its roots in his experiences in Africa. Paasche's sister claimed that his later experiences compounded an inherent instability:

My brother... is as far as I know mentally not normal and also from his youth onwards has always been highly strung... When he came back and temporarily stayed with us, before he took leave of Africa, we had the impression that he was no longer to be taken seriously. He was extraordinarily agitated, liked to debate all manner of reformist ideas and would allow no other opinion on these matters.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 50.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 174.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 22.

She was for a long time of the opinion:

that my brother was not mentally normal. As evidence were his external appearance, his unsteady gaze and restless existence, was well as his constant prowling around like a tiger [*Umbertigern*] during an agitated conversation.

But according to his sister, Paasche's personal experience of bereavement during the Great War appear to have exacerbated his problems and politicized his views:

I particularly noticed this in February 1917, when I visited my brother on the estate that he had acquired from my parents. While my brother had earlier never concerned himself with politics and in general also thought like a soldier, after the death of his brother-in-law, who had died in action against the enemy, he was a changed person, swore about war, praised Grey and his colleagues, who he declared to be the only sensible people, and through this sort of talk succeeded in making us distance ourselves from him completely.

Paasche's sister had never been happy with his marriage to Ellen, the daughter of the *Oberbürgermeister* (Mayor) of Posen, *Geheimrat* Richard Witting, who came from a Jewish family with well-known left-wing intellectuals among the close relatives:

I attribute this turn-around for the most part, besides his mental hypertension, to the influence of his parents-in-law Witting and his uncle, the well-known unpatriotic writer Maximilian Harden.⁷⁷

Paasche's parents too emphasized the significance first of the African experience and claimed 'that Hans Paasche had after 1906 become someone quite different. After his return from the source of the Nile, his relationship with his parents, which had earlier been very touching, had also changed.'⁷⁸

In his summary testimony, Dr Leppmann placed great emphasis on the significance for Paasche of the long-lasting break with his parents, and all that the upstanding members of their generation appeared to stand for, that had been first occasioned by the African experience. Leppmann suggested that only now could be seen:

how deeply the rift with his parents agitated him inside and he was shocked and dismayed when, on the occasion of a recent visit to the prison he [Paasche] admitted how he had, half mad, had done innumerable injustices to his father only then, utterly distraught, to have on the following day burst into tears about being too weak to go openly to his parents and beg for their love. Terrifying and typical for his state of mind was the end of this confession, when, in tears and with his face distorted by grief, he suddenly remarked: 'Yes, if only I had at that time not let the negro hang, then we

⁷⁷ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 5, statement made by Frau Major Paul Kritsler, geb. Paasche, 7 January 1918, fols. 61–2.

⁷⁸ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 1, 'Schriftliches Gutachten' by Geh. Medizinalrat Dr A. Leppmann, fol. 112.

would not have had war'. That was why he had so much sympathy for all those unhappy people who were now suffering from it.⁷⁹

Paasche himself laid some of the blame for his behaviour on his father. When asked how a former officer could possibly behave in the way he had done, he replied:

It really doesn't matter a bit what one used to be. Since at that time I was in the proximity of a father who, by virtue of his whole attitude, put me into such a state that I really could not think about what I should be taking into consideration.

He commented further:

I meant by that, that the fact of my earlier occupation in no way binds me to retain any particular prejudices that I recognize as such, and, if the intellectual development of the times leads that way, also to hold new thoughts and views that have not as yet become the property of the officer classes.⁸⁰

Hans Paasche's behaviour included fasting until he felt quite faint, running around naked, and apparently attempting to identify with Africans he had come to know while in the colonies both in his behavioural experiments and more explicitly with *Lukanga Mukara*; he sought, in short, to critique both in words and practice his own society and all his parents, and particularly his authoritarian, overbearing father, seemed to stand for. But in the context of Imperial Germany it proved impossible either to express these views fully, or to live out the personal and political conflicts he was experiencing. Because Paasche did not fit in, and tried to 'reform' not only himself but also others, he was held to be 'not quite normal'. He was fortunate in having a doctor who treated him with a degree of sensitivity and understanding; but it was also clear that without a father in high places, Paasche would not have had the benefit of such an investigation. His 'treason' would have simply resulted in a death sentence. At this point, however, he was merely committed to an asylum for the insane; it took the collapse of Imperial Germany and the abdication of the Kaiser to secure his release from incarceration—but the turmoil which followed also sealed his own fate.

Hans Paasche was far from typical of the alleged and indeed highly diverse 'front generation' of Imperial Germany. But his case throws into sharp relief some of the possible 'lessons' of violence in the colonies, and the massive institutional, cultural, social, and even familial constraints that limited the freedom of those who, fired by a sense of the mission of youth, sought other ways forward against the views of those elites who dominated politics at this time. Paasche's fate after 1918 was again to highlight quite dramatically the changed constellation of forces after the fall of the monarchy and German defeat.

⁷⁹ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 1, 'Schriftliches Gutachten' by Geh. Medizinalrat Dr A. Leppmann, fol. 134.

⁸⁰ BAB, R 3003 / C 153 / 17, Vol. 4, statement by Hans Paasche, 1 February 1918, fol. 80.

3

Uncomfortable compatriots: Societal violence and the crises of Weimar

I had acquired a pile of newspapers for myself and sat opposite Wuth in the waiting room and read. Wuth did not know who Kapp was, but there were even more names there, [von] Jagow and [von] Wangenheim and Pastor Traub. A few too many old men and old names, I opined to Wuth. [Von] Lüttwitz too is an old General . . .

‘Couldn’t give a fig if there are old names there,’ said Wuth, ‘this is after all a matter for young people.’ And thought for a bit and said: ‘We have to turn back the revolution.’

‘We have to carry on the revolution!’ I said and looked at Wuth and thought, what a chasm even a difference of just five years in age makes between us.¹

The concept of a ‘front generation’ was popularized by the radical right in the 1920s, deploying selectively reinterpreted experiences and the alleged ‘lessons’ of the lost war in the service of revisionist political causes. The legend of the supposed ‘stab in the back’ by Jews and Marxists (often combined in the notion of ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’), while the German heroes at the front supposedly remained undefeated, was of course a central element in political myth-mongering; and the concept of the front generation was, for certain right-wingers—not least Adolf Hitler himself—of immense significance as a claim rather than a description. But this does not mean that historians have to tread in the tracks of those contemporaries. The impact of the Great War was by no means limited to that very broad and highly diverse cohort of males—one can actually hardly speak of a ‘generation’—who were, at one stage or another, called up into military service. The ‘front generation’ was a convenient political myth, which served a certain purpose among right-wing circles; but as far as the disproportionate involvement of particular age cohorts in the later Nazi regime was concerned, it was in fact those who were too young to fight in the Great War, the ‘war-youth generation’, who proved to be of major historical significance.

What we see in this period is a rather interesting phenomenon, in which the diverse and often conflicting claims of contemporaries and the later findings of

¹ Ernst von Salomon, *Fünf Jahre Unterschied*, reprinted in Bert Roth (ed.), *Kampf: Lebensdokumente deutscher Jugend von 1914–1934* (Leipzig: Philipp Reklam jun., 1934), pp. 81–2.

historians are somewhat at odds. The concept of 'generation' perhaps became culturally salient as never before, but in practice pulled in all manner of different directions. On the one hand, the myth of the 'front generation' was a powerful rallying cry among leaders of the Free Corps movements and right-wing ethnically-nationalist (*völkisch*) groups, appealing to notions such as the alleged 'comradeship of the trenches', arguing the need to take issue with the Treaty of Versailles, and promoting the use of violence as a political weapon even in peacetime. There was also, however, arguably a far wider sense among former soldiers, however pacifist or otherwise in inclination, that they could never really transmit the full horror of their experiences at the front to those at home. In terms of relatively highbrow literary production in Germany this view was well-known through Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* ('All Quiet on the western front') or in different ways in the semi-autobiographical account of *Krieg* (War) by the now communist Ludwig Renn (the literary pseudonym adopted by the aristocratic Arnold Vieth von Golßenau); yet, in the wider context of popular war literature, such views arguably remained in the minority. In these circumstances, 'generation' became in some senses a flag which could be waved by people of a wide variety of persuasions: age, and particularly 'youth' appeared suddenly highly relevant at this time, for whatever cause.² Some have suggested that the notion of generation failed to appeal as much to the left as the right: while particularly intellectuals on the right might think that generation promoted 'values' above material interests, the overriding concern of socialists and communists remained focused on questions of class irrespective of age.³ But even among left-wing circles—and not only those taking their cue from Marx, but also religiously motivated and pacifist socialists—the youth movements of the day had an impact on thinking about 'generational' tasks for reshaping the future. Many of those involved in both the pre- and post-war youth movements were highly critical of those older Germans whom they saw as responsible for war. Interestingly, those involved in radical left-wing causes appeared, on average, to be a decade or so older than those drawn to the right: largely born in the 1890s, rather than the first decade of the twentieth century, many of the activists on the left were more likely actually to have been members of the much-vaunted 'front generation' than were the younger right-wingers to whom

² See e.g. E. Günther Gründel, *Die Sendung der jungen Generation. Versuch einer umfassenden revolutionären Sinndeutung der Krise* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1933; orig. 1932), which is dedicated: 'Den Alten zum Trost; Den Jungen zum Ansporn.' See for a key historical analysis and argument, Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002); English summary in Michael Wildt, *Generation of the Unbound: The Leadership Corps of the Reich Security Main Office* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002), particularly the summary of the argument on pp. 11–13. Lutz Niethammer has suggested that appealing to 'youth' as a claim to reshape the world and prepare the future is basically a twentieth-century phenomenon; see his suggestive (but empirically less than entirely well-founded) essay, 'Sind Generationen identisch?' in Jürgen Reulecke (ed.), with Elisabeth Müller-Lückner, *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003), pp. 1–16, here p. 2.

³ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 82–4.

this label appealed so strongly.⁴ Put differently, perhaps: the ‘long front generation’ (which included Hitler) was deeply divided, whereas among the war-youth generation there was a highly active, visible, right-wing tendency, not echoed in similar proportions on the left. Common to all these strands, however, was the sense that ‘generation’ was a future-oriented vehicle for change: working towards the production for a better future, whether through revision of the past or completion of an unfinished revolution.

When the attitudes and actions of specific age cohorts defined by year of birth are analysed, rather than the self-constructions in the writings of articulate males, the concept of the ‘front generation’ begins to dissolve.⁵ While the Great War left inescapable traces on all who lived through it as adults, the impact was too broad in terms of age groups, too class-, gender-, and region-specific to warrant the construction of such a label; this was simply not a coherent social or cultural group, let alone any kind of collective historical actor, even in part. By contrast, significant minorities among those born slightly later do stand out as ‘sore-thumb generations’. Substantial numbers drawn from the war-youth generation (born roughly in the first decade or so of the twentieth century) and the ‘first Hitler Youth generation’ (born during and in the early years after the Great War) were in fact eventually to prove disproportionately the most ardent carriers of the new Nazi institutions, and most active participants in the exercise of state violence against newly defined outcasts in the 1930s, in contrast to older Germans who by and large disapproved of wanton violence in a peacetime society. In different ways, the experiences of the war-youth generation and the first Hitler Youth generation at key life stages arguably predisposed some active minorities among them to be disproportionately supportive of the Nazi cause; and those who were inclined to conform and be mobilized were by the 1930s at a key life stage, ready to launch and hitch their own careers to the Nazi regime, once this had come to power under quite specific historical circumstances. Generationally specific experiences during their childhood and youth thus rendered significant numbers of young people ‘available for mobilization’, both culturally and structurally, for extremist political movements both in the 1920s (among the older ones) and in the Nazi regime once it was in power, thus making a difference, ultimately, to the kinds of policies that Hitler could put into effect.

Even so, this analysis must be set in a broader political context: the availability of young people for mobilization does not itself explain the rise of the NSDAP to government.⁶ Moreover, it is important to recognize that these were also deeply

⁴ Cf. the generational analysis in Detlev Siegfried, *Das radikale Milieu. Kieler Novemberrevolution, Sozialwissenschaft und Linksradikalismus, 1917–1922* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 2004), particularly pp. 14 ff.

⁵ See e.g. Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and on the writings of ‘intellectuals’, generally male, in comparative European perspective, Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), Ch. 2.

⁶ It cannot be emphasized too strongly that here, as throughout the book, I am not seeking to explain the course of events; I am, rather, trying to understand the differential impact of key events and periods on people of different ages who lived through them. For a standard analysis of the Nazis’ rise to power, see e.g. the narrative and further references in Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*:

internally divided generations; it was politics, rather than any alleged generationally specific 'formative experiences', which determined which currents became dominant, which were challenged and which suppressed—and thus whose voices could be heard, later proclaiming a 'generational status'. What different claimants to generational status sought to achieve was bitterly contested. It was a question of shifting constellations of power, not of inherited cultural traditions or easy transmission of experiences, which led from colonialism to Nazism. There may at first glance appear to be apparent 'continuities' between the acts of violence and atrocities evident in the German colonies in South-West and East Africa in 1904–7, the German invasion of Belgium and France in 1914, the invasion and occupation of Poland in 1939, and the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. But these apparent similarities (with key contrasts, too) are not simple continuities; they do not lie in any straightforward heritage and transmission of a supposed 'German military culture', as though this were some essential legacy of Imperial Germany in a direct descent towards Nazism.

Generationally specific experiences did however, within a broader and ever changing field of forces, play a key role in degrees of preparedness (or otherwise) to listen to a given message, fight for a particular cause. Thus experiences of Imperial Germany, of the Great War, and of the troubled Weimar years, differed not only by class, status, gender, region, and religious and political views, but also according to the ages and life stages of particular cohorts at the time of major historical developments. War, for example, was experienced very differently not only with respect to whether one was male or female, but also whether one was aged eleven, twenty or sixty at the time. And structurally given opportunities, or life chances, as well as culturally informed aspirations, were radically affected by the time as well as the place—social and geographical—of one's birth. But ultimately it was politics that made the difference: which political forces were able to achieve positions of dominance, and which were suppressed; which groups were able to extend their influence over and mobilize the young, and which were not; whose views were heard, and whose silenced.

I. THE PARTIAL RUPTURE OF 1918

The loss of the will to continue fighting played a central role in bringing the war to a close in the autumn of 1918, initiated by the sailors' mutiny and the subsequent setting up, all over Germany, of soldiers' and sailors' councils. The mutiny of the armed forces precipitated the collapse of monarchical government in Germany, with the abdication of the Kaiser and the announcement of a Republic on 9 November 1918, and the signature of the Armistice two days later, on

How the Nazis destroyed democracy and seized power in Germany (London: Penguin 2004); and for an exploration of far broader aspects of Weimar culture, particularly in terms of the ferment of creativity and modernity emanating in left-wing circles, see e.g. Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

11 November. But the end of violence as a political weapon was not merely not in sight; the collapse of the imperial regime appeared to have exacerbated, not alleviated, the internal tensions which the Kaiser had so proudly announced, in the summer of 1914, to be a thing of the past. What is more, the post-war cult of violence appeared to glorify the 'hero's death' in new ways, ways which were, among a radical minority, even then not a matter only of myth but also of deadly practice. But this was continually—and violently—contested; and contested under appallingly difficult and unstable conditions.

In the short-term, the forces of moderation took control. An interim government was formed under the initial leadership of Friedrich Ebert (who in 1919 became Weimar's first president) and colleagues from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), along with representatives of those further left in the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). Ebert soon entered into an agreement with the leadership of the army, leaving the military effectively outside parliamentary control—a situation which became increasingly problematic for the stability of the fledgling democracy in the following months and years. Military force in cooperation with the police and with the assistance of Free Corps units was used from the outset by Ebert's government to suppress radical uprisings: the murder of the Spartacist (communist) leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919 provoked particular bitterness on the part of the more radical left-wingers, with the newly formed German Communist Party (KPD) now turned against the moderate Social Democrats of the SPD who had supported this forceful suppression of communist leaders. The left was from now on emotionally as well as politically divided.

Despite the climate of violence, elections were held, producing what at first seemed like a workable coalition dominated by the SPD. In the course of 1919, a new democratic and in some respects highly progressive constitution was adopted in Weimar (hence the name of the new Republic), given that the streets of Berlin were too unsafe for parliamentarians to meet in the capital city. But adoption of a constitution did not mean that parliamentary party politics would work smoothly in practice. This was not only an effect of the apparently punitive provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, revealed later in 1919, but was integral to the contested character of Weimar right from the very start.

With the continuation of fundamental disagreements over the shape that politics should take, and the rapid proliferation of paramilitary groupings, the early years of Weimar were beset by political violence. Everywhere, but particularly in areas such as Berlin or Munich at the times of putsch attempts, there were street battles between left and right, inflicting scores and at times hundreds of casualties. Photographs from the time reveal the extraordinary levels of violence in Berlin streets and at flashpoints elsewhere across Germany, with periodic explosions; destruction of housing, trees, and lamp-posts; the deployment of tanks and soldiers on streets; and signs that civilians should stay indoors because of the dangers on the streets.⁷ Violence was

⁷ Despite the Nazi orientation of the text and the clearly tendentious selection of photographs, an intriguing collection of visual material can be found in Hans Roden (ed.), *Deutsche Soldaten, Vom Frontheer und Freikorps über die Reichswehr zur neuen Wehrmacht* (Berlin: Paul Franke Verlag, 1935).

routinely deployed by both left and right in the course of assorted attempts to wrest control of local or national government. Free Corps units were deployed at first with and increasingly also well beyond the authority and guidelines of the Weimar government in attempts to influence the course of events in the provinces and border regions of a Germany which had lost not only its colonies overseas but also territory at home, creating in particular the hated 'Polish corridor' separating off East Prussia from the rest of the reduced state of Germany. Those influenced by the climate of conspiracy and clandestine organization also constructed their own sense of 'justice' through political assassinations and random murders of political opponents, sometimes 'justified' by ad hoc decisions and post hoc attempts at legitimation.⁸ But this was all within a climate which was, in a sense, given an aura of respectability from above: courts rarely prosecuted or gave lenient sentences to right-wing political offenders for violent acts, including murder, in contrast to the far more severe sentences meted out to those infringing the law from the left. Moreover, the radical reduction in the size of the armed forces following the Versailles settlement led to secret attempts at rearmament and clandestine military training. After Ebert's untimely death from appendicitis in 1925, the aging hero of the Great War and veteran of the nineteenth-century wars of unification, General Paul von Hindenburg was elected in his place. Born in Posen in 1847, and in his own person representing all the old Prussian, militaristic, and aristocratic virtues of an age which was soon to disappear entirely, the anti-republican new president conspired with the army leadership to undermine the Weimar constitution which they had been empowered to uphold—and this even before the economic troubles of the years after the 1929 Wall Street crash precipitated a governmental crisis eventuating, within a few short years, in Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler as Chancellor. Thus from 1925 onwards, in the midst of Weimar's most stable and productive years, a predominantly anti-democratic political culture at the helm of the state more than counterbalanced the modernist experiments which were flourishing in the arts, architecture, design, and scientific and intellectual life of the time.

Equally if not rather more problematic from the point of view of the stability of the new Republic were the economic consequences of the ways in which the Great War had been financed through loans, combined with the ways in which the governments of the early 1920s chose to deal with apparently punitive reparations payments. The short-term outcome was the exacerbation of pre-existing inflation, which rapidly spiralled out of control, peaking in the summer of 1923 in a manner which left a searing mark on those who lived through this experience. In the medium term the introduction of the Dawes Plan in 1924 appeared to give some stability to the Weimar economy, while the statesmanship of Germany's foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, assisted in restoring Germany's place in the international system. But the political party system remained inherently unstable, with coalitions among the relatively large number of political parties fragile and short-lived, bringing what was derogatorily known as 'the system' into some disrepute.

⁸ A literary insight into this 'scene' can be found in Joseph Roth's first novel, *The Spider's Web*, trans. John Hoare (London: Granta Books, 2004).

Moreover, the relatively weak German economy crashed further and faster than any other European economy following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which precipitated the withdrawal of the American short-term loans on which Germany had heavily depended. If inflation had been the major economic catastrophe of the early years of Weimar, recession, depression, and mass unemployment—exacerbated by government policies—characterized its closing years. These developments were, inevitably, accompanied by political radicalization and renewed violence on the streets, even as democracy itself was undermined at the top by the replacement of parliamentary government by authoritarian rule by presidential decree already from 1930 onwards.

The short-lived Weimar period was, then, one of extremes and of inherent instability. Hypothetically, it might perhaps have stabilized had the economy enjoyed the same kind of developments as characterized West German transformation after 1945 (and particularly after the introduction of the Marshall Plan, injecting money and expertise into Western Europe on a massive scale following the currency reform of 1948, a plan designed precisely in order to ward off the very real threat of political radicalization and instability). But it did not; and the broader conditions, individual decisions and detailed sequence of events that together help to explain the ultimate rise of the NSDAP and the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor in January 1933 need little further rehearsal here. Less clear, however, are the ways in which members of different generations experienced this period of upheaval and instability, and the consequences of their experiences at particular life stages not only for their own life stories at the time but also for the ways in which they became entangled in the later development of the Third Reich and, in some cases, also the succeeding East German dictatorship.⁹

For the vast majority of adult Germans, the Great War and its ending appeared at the time to signify a major life rupture. It was not only Thomas Mann, who at the start of his magisterial *Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*), first published in late 1924, registered a sense that the pre-war world was in some sense a dream, a recent but now vanished country. Millions were afflicted by a sense that an old world had come to an end, and that they were having in some way to start anew. This was, arguably, the first great rupture of twentieth-century Germany; and it played out not only in the faltering, inadequate, but ultimately cataclysmic regime-change at the top of the political system in 1918, but also in repeated ways, multiplied a millionfold, in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

At this point, however, the rupture for those who were already adults at the end of the war was primarily one of dealing with changes as they affected lived experience in the present, rather than requiring also a fundamental questioning and indeed frequently radical rejection of previous personal identities, as was to be the case after 1945. There was after 1918 no equivalent of post-1945 'denazification' or fundamental critique of people's roles in the previous regime—far from it.

⁹ See Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The crisis of classical modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), Ch. 4, for suggestive discussion of the experiences of different generations within the Weimar years.

And although the monarchical regime of Imperial Germany had been brought down by an internal revolution, it was not rejected and replaced quite as radically as was to be the case not only after defeat in war in 1945 but also after the ‘gentle revolution’ and eventual demise of the GDR in 1989–90. After 1918, there was both widespread yearning for what had been before, and also large continuity in the structures of social, economic, and military power, for all the changes in political regime and the diversification and flowering of new strands of culture, particularly in the growing metropolitan centre of Berlin.

Thus there was in 1918, despite the fundamental changes to the political system, no radical turnover of elites; and no radical critique of the past. The challenges for most people were primarily to do with how the post-war world affected their lives in the new conditions of the present; and not—as was the case after 1945, and in different ways after 1989–90—with (also) having to account for one’s own past life. The shock of transition was thus principally a shock of dealing with new challenges and with the practical and emotional legacies of war, and generally very much less a matter of seeking to ‘overcome the past’ in terms of recasting one’s own life story. Even so, the upheavals that history threw into personal lives necessarily also affected people’s sense of self, although experiences and responses differed from one individual to another, depending on a variety of factors, as a few examples readily demonstrate.

II. TRANSITIONS

Released from his incarceration in a mental institution by revolutionary sailors on 9 November 1918, Hans Paasche went straight to the Reichstag and was rapidly elected a member of the Executive Committee of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils (*Vollzugsrat der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte*).¹⁰ In the following few weeks, in which momentarily everything seemed possible during the very early period of the provisional, newly formed democratic government under Friedrich Ebert, Paasche was highly active in Berlin. Although on the left, he was no supporter of anti-democratic politics, and determined to discuss and debate as openly as possible without taking personal offence at those with whom he had political disagreements. He was, in many respects, uncomfortable with the emergent party political landscape of the winter of 1918–19, while writing agonized moral tracts about what had gone wrong with German politics over the preceding years. But, whichever direction his political activities might have led him, his private life dramatically intervened. Paasche took time out from politics in November to visit his wife Ellen, whom he had only been able to see on rare and intermittent visits during his period of imprisonment, and their four children at their home on the estate of Waldfrieden (near what is now Przesieki in Poland). Ellen had, like so many at this time, fallen prey to the post-war influenza pandemic, but seemed to be on the road to recovery. Following a short visit,

¹⁰ Magnus Schwantje, ‘Hans Paasche: Sein Leben und Wirken’, *Flugschriften des Bundes Neues Vaterland* Nr. 26(4), 1921, p. 20.

Paasche went back to Berlin to resume his political activities, planning to return to Waldfrieden and his family very soon. But on 10 December 1918, the news reached him that his beloved wife had died, fatally weakened by her bout of influenza, at the age of twenty-nine. Paasche never fully recovered from this blow, and retreated from the national political arena as best he could, basing himself in Waldfrieden with his children, although still embroiled in numerous political controversies and continually plagued by distressing and threatening enmities.

The influenza pandemic was worldwide, not restricted to the post-war countries of Europe; but, given the exhaustion and malnutrition of so many in Germany in the later war years and immediately after the war, it had particularly virulent consequences in this context. Combined with the loss of around 2 million soldiers in military combat, the much lower birth rate during the war, and the increase in civilian deaths from other causes, the pandemic of 1918–19 left post-war German society demographically extremely skewed.¹¹ War widows; fatherless children; a disproportionate percentage of teenagers compared not only to younger children but also, more crucially from the perspective of generational tensions, to adult males who could exert some authority over them; all contributed to a sense of a deeply disrupted society, in which an attempt had to be made to build anew—but in which the age which had passed was retrospectively widely cast as neither fully rejected, nor entirely without merit. This was indeed a major rupture, but not an absolute rupture combined with absolute rejection. It was therefore open for some to combine a new revolutionary fervour with a wild twist of revisionist rhetoric. But this remained a minority; most simply tried to pick up the pieces of their ‘private’ lives and construct some sense of ‘normality’, despite all that seemed to be continuing to plague them even after the end of the war. And influenza was far from the only problem of the post-war period.

Albert D., like so many other adult males, had been called up and served on the front as a medical doctor, earning the Iron Cross.¹² Finally demobilized in spring 1919, Albert D. returned to try rebuild his practice, which at first appeared as if it would once again flourish. He was initially surprised at ‘how rapidly my clientele reappeared and the relationship of trust between patients and doctor had not suffered as a result of the frequent and long breaks’ in contact. But the psychological and physical consequences at home were infinitely worse than anything he had expected. Worse, then, came in the wake of war:

But now . . . a new and weighty concern fell on me: my wife’s state of health had suffered badly. The sudden death of her father not long before, the heroic death of her younger sister’s husband, who had fought as a volunteer with the German troops in Palestine, the sudden death due to a lung infection of her sister, now a war widow, leaving behind two little boys, and not least the fact that her mother went blind at virtually the same time, all this coming on top of the worry and agitation about me so wore the poor woman down that in a fit of melancholy in the winter of 1919 she took her own life.¹³

¹¹ See Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, pp. 224 ff.

¹² See Ch. 2 above, pp. 42–3.

¹³ HHL b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., p. 3.

Both Albert D.'s own parents also died in 1918, within six months of each other. In face of these multiple family tragedies, which put a total end to the relative tranquillity and secure life plans he had been developing before the Great War and shattered his world, Albert D. tried to survive by throwing himself into work. A favourite cousin of his wife came to help take care of the children, and—like many widowers with small children—Albert D. ended up marrying the new housewife and mother substitute, and tried to rebuild his life. This attempt, which even in face of massive emotional upheavals was at least apparently based on secure economic foundations, was in the event short-lived. In 1922–3 came the inflation:

Accumulated savings melted away, years of the hardest labour, both mental and physical, had been in vain, the solid foundations of the family began to shake. And once again the German people were highly agitated, in part in deep despair.¹⁴

Doctors were particularly affected by the inflation because of the relatively long delay between treating a patient and being paid from the sickness insurance funds (*Krankenkasse*), such that the fees were more or less worthless by the time they received them; Albert D. at one point found that when he was eventually paid for treating 500 patients he was able to buy only two loaves of bread. In his view, workers who were paid weekly were better off than professionals such as doctors, because workers could buy wares almost immediately at a price they could still afford with their frequently paid wages.

The Great War was thus but the first part of more than a decade of upheaval, a period in which history and personal life were closely enmeshed in ways which altered the course of people's lives. As Albert D. summarized his own experience, and its inevitable implications for his sense of self:

If in 1920 the reconstruction of my family and of my own self [*des eigenen Ich*] had begun, with the end of the inflation in 1923 this was followed by financial reconstruction. War and the privations of war, shortages of food during this period, the revolution of 1918, general strikes, the attempt to establish a soviet-style republic [*Räterepublik*] precisely in the area of Franconia where I worked, and not least certain conditions and restraints of the Versailles Treaty and rapidly rising unemployment in the whole Reich repeatedly shook the faith of the German people in a better future. And in addition, people were the object of political agitation and divided among countless parties and party political groups.¹⁵

The experiences of illness and familial disruption were common to Germans of all religious confessions. Historical, social, economic, and political events in the widest sense affected the lives of virtually all Germans; life courses were massively affected by trends on a broad, societal scale, rather than displaying the random variations with vicissitudes rooted in personal decisions, fortunes, and misfortunes, that people felt they should have been able to expect and which they read back into the contrasting golden age before the war.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

All Germans were in one way or another affected. Maria K. too recalled the post-war period as one of immense suffering, losing both her mother and her first baby in the influenza epidemic:

I also experienced the devastating consequences of the hunger blockade. A huge number of people died in the influenza epidemics of 1918 and 1920. A body suffering from malnutrition has only weak resistance. So in February I lost both my mother and my eldest son in the flu epidemic.

Hunger and privation had a demoralising effect on all of us; many laws were, if at all possible, circumvented. ‘Hamstering’ [foraging and storing up food], for example, was strictly forbidden.¹⁶

As after 1945, the overwhelming need for personal survival took precedence over the traditionally law-abiding conventions of the German educated bourgeoisie. Maria K. and her academic husband, along with another professor from Giessen University, went out to the countryside to engage in the foraging and illicit storing up of food (‘hamstering’) that was both forbidden and yet essential to the survival and well-being of their families. She also recalled—like many others—that the humanitarian aid given by Quakers was crucial: ‘The nutrition of school children was very much improved by the Quaker food programme.’¹⁷ But, a drop in the ocean of suffering on the home front, such aid would not prove sufficient to deal with the hunger and epidemic illnesses of the early post-war period.

Some Germans found additional problems emerging more forcefully at this time. Notably absent from Albert D.’s account up to this point was the further fact that he was Jewish. This played, in his recollections, absolutely no role whatsoever in his patriotic experiences of and involvement in the Great War and its tragic immediate aftermath. But very soon Albert D. was to experience the rising antisemitism and racially defined nationalist radicalism that was whipped up in certain quarters in the early post-war years. Albert D. became increasingly aware that Jews were being singled out as a ‘whipping boy’ or scapegoat (*Prügelknabe*), with antisemitism rapidly on the rise in the early 1920s. He noted further that right-wing groups were beginning to appropriate the word ‘German’ for their side only, for example calling their demonstrations a ‘German Day’ (*Deutscher Tag*), ‘as though the right-wing parties and above all the Nazis were the only ones who could lay any claim to patriotic love’. And their methods, too, were more than clear: ‘Right from the very start terror dominated the field.’¹⁸

This field was one that was, however, highly contested, and at this point there were many who were vehemently opposed to the extremist ructions on the right. Carl P. (born in 1895), was perhaps somewhat unusual in a variety of ways before the Great War broke out. Like many of his generation and background, Carl had been brought up in what were held to be strict Prussian virtues: in his own words, he was ‘from the earliest age held to the tenets that one should have no “moods”

¹⁶ HHL b MS Ger 91 (101), Maria K., p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ HHL b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., pp. 5–6.

and should disguise one's feelings. Maintaining one's composure [*Haltung*] in every situation, that was the highest principle of education in our house.' Yet, now more in common with that minority of his generation and background drawn to the life reform youth movements, Carl rebelled:

Just imagine: I refused to smoke and drink like other young people, because I thought it stupid and undignified! I generally ran around without wearing a hat, which at that time was still held to be unseemly, and wore shirts with the so-called 'Schiller collar', that is with an open neck. All that 'was simply not done'. For my part, I found my environment to be narrow-minded and petty [*spießig*], dumb and superficial, and I sought to 'get back to nature'.¹⁹

When the Great War broke out, Carl had refused to volunteer, unlike many other young men in his environment. He was, however, eventually called up in 1916 and worked in a paramedical capacity, having earlier trained in the Red Cross. Invalided out with tuberculosis in 1917, Carl P. remained ambivalent about his war experiences. But he was quite clear that, whatever lessons his cohort gained from this period, there were wider generational conflicts at play:

We, the so-called generation of war volunteers, had something of the revolutionary about us. We protested against the burdensome social conventions inherited from the feudal era in Prussia, we no longer wanted to be led by the nose but believed instead in our own capacity to determine our own fates. It did not matter whether someone of my generation was a child of a working class family, a son of a bourgeois, or an aristocrat, all basically felt the same: but all had to fight against an inner resistance grounded in respect for one's elders or 'betters', rooted in our upbringing. Most of us succeeded only partially on this front. Some got stuck along the way. Others exploded and became radical fighters, only later to sink quietly into oblivion. Only a few were able to blend together the old and the new era in a harmonious union that would make it possible to them to be a valuable mediator of the old to the up-and-coming generation, and to lead the way into the new which held so much promise.²⁰

Interestingly, although Carl P. saw 'generation' here as in some respects transcending class differences, he was acutely aware that the challenges facing those a few years younger could be responded to in very different ways, as radical solutions were increasingly sought to the tensions of the age. In the 1920s Carl P., now a committed Social Democrat living in Germany's eastern provinces—first in the Posen region, then in Silesia—became increasingly worried about the rise of extreme nationalist forces, which became ever more threatening as far as his own life was concerned. He threw himself into political work, primarily as a journalist on behalf of the SPD, commenting on the increasingly violent state of a country that, although technically at peace, was embroiled in conditions verging at times on outright civil war.

By 1919, Hans Paasche was also highly critical of the post-war situation. He too saw deep generational conflicts that overlaid political divisions and added an almost

¹⁹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (174), Carl P., pp. 8–9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

irresolvable emotional complexity to the state of Germany at the outset of the first attempt at democracy:

A double rift runs through our people. Free spirits irreconcilably oppose reactionaries; and between young people and their fathers yawns a chasm larger than ever before between two generations. If parents only knew how revolutionary the active youth of today feels, and particularly the offspring of aristocratic, militaristic, capitalist families, they would shudder. Below these there is then another youth, the hopeless war product of bigoted high-school teachers. In this stratum the concepts of violence, hereditary enemies, the Fatherland, will become completely ridiculous.²¹

In large measure these problems were rooted, not only in the institutional and political arrangements of the day, but also in what Paasche saw as the deeply authoritarian upbringing which had been so common in Imperial Germany, and which, in his view, was designed to bring about unconditional obedience and preparedness for death:

Be aware, you German, that you have been brought up in a mentality of servitude . . . You are to obey anyone claiming authority over you: father, mother, policeman, conductor, you have to honour all of these, even if they are the least free and therefore the most criminal of people, cutting you off from friendship, love, happiness, and making this life a misery for you. This crime begins with your parents. Typical German parents are the most servile creatures the earth has ever produced. They do not want their children to be able to lead their own lives, and in this they succeed. The child's will must be broken . . . But, you obedient children, honour your parents who, out of heartfelt love, prepare you for all of this, for the school bench, the barracks yard, and a mass grave.²²

Hans Paasche's remarks, bringing together the psychological and the broad political conflicts of his day, were rooted in bitter personal experience. He might have been in a small minority, but he was far from alone in his views or perceptions. Nevertheless, his contribution to the struggle for a better future remained somewhat muted, following the death of his wife and his retreat to his country estate to live quietly with his four children. All the same, he continued writing, thinking, and liaising with others in search for solutions to the state of Germany, not only political and economic, but also social, moral, and deeply personal.

Wider responses to the new conditions were highly various, as members of different religious denominations and political persuasions sought to come to terms with the new conditions of the post-war regime. Some continued to struggle for left-wing causes, whether through the use of violence—as on the extreme left—or by exploring moderate or even pacifist routes. The German Quaker movement was even born in the 1920s, as the combination of the material relief provided by American and British Quakers and the wider message of principled non-violence fell on the receptive ears of young people who were shattered by the violence of war

²¹ Hans Paasche, *Das verlorene Afrika* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, E. Berger and Co., 1919; *Flugschriften des Bundes Neues Vaterland* Nr. 16), p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

and disturbed by their own Protestant Churches' support of the military action.²³ But this was a tiny handful of individuals. Other members of the front generation, who were what might be called 'social casualties of the peace', moved into the penumbra of rapidly proliferating right-wing circles. Despite Hitler's heightened visibility—and indeed excellent exploitation of national publicity—in the trial following the unsuccessful Munich Beer Hall putsch of 1923, the party with which he associated himself and then took over as leader was only one of many such right-wing groupings at the time.²⁴ Many people at this time became involved with one or other of many right-wing circles, including the emergent Nazi movement, only later to leave again. About the only generalization which can be made is that the vast majority of adults at this point were deeply unsettled, unsure of the shape the future would take, or in which direction—beyond personal material survival—they should devote their energies.

One such 'casualty of the peace' was Willy B. (born in the later 1880s), who was initially retained in the army after the end of the war but left it in 1919 because of his dislike of the new Republic.²⁵ Coming from a well-to-do family, Willy B. at first switched to the study of art history at Berlin University, rapidly gaining a doctorate in the subject, supported by his father. But his family's fortunes were ruined by the inflation (as was his father's health: he died in 1923), and Willy B. was forced to become a travelling salesman to make ends meet. Although achieving some modest success in this capacity, which he put down to his austere lifestyle in contrast to that of many contemporaries, Willy B. was deeply unhappy:

For about ten years I could not get over the painful loss of a career as an officer . . . Anyone who knows what it was like to grow up in the Prussian Officer Corps will understand that, as a monarchist, it was impossible to muster any affection for the German Republic. And what high hopes were raised when a small opportunity arose somewhere to don once again the beloved military uniform.²⁶

Willy B. thus became involved with radical circles involving individuals such as Graefe, Wulle, Ludendorff, Hitler, and was also a participant in the Kapp putsch of 1920, as well as an enthusiastic supporter of Hitler's 1923 Beer Hall putsch. As he put it:

With incomparable enthusiasm I took my place alongside younger comrades from all possible nationalist associations, in the EHER publishing house in Munich's Schelling Street, in order to get revenge for the 'Jewish inflation' and the Jewish revolution. The failure and the thousandfold betrayals of those November days of 1923 in Munich threw us all back into deep despondency.²⁷

²³ See further Ch. 10 below, pp. 423–5. See more generally Hans A. Schmitt, *Quakers and Nazis: Inner light in outer darkness* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

²⁴ See further Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998).

²⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (22), Willy B.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Willy B. explained how the loose groupings were held together by perpetual and constantly shifting enmities: one ‘became an opponent of everything and everyone. There was barely anyone we did we not fight: Stresemann, the League of Nations, the Jews, the Marxists, we had become “perpetual fighters” [*ewige Kämpfer*].’ He swung back and forth between different movements in the radical circles, and ended up slightly uneasily with the group around Hitler rather than Ludendorff, explaining that ‘the desire to speed things up a bit drove one into the arms of the National Socialists’. Despite a slight sense of unease, he clung to the wider right-wing cause:

When I had to take my SA group to stir things up in working-class areas, I was never quite able to rid myself of a feeling of injustice. But the prevalence of the Jews was enough to keep you in line. You would be pulled into the swirl of party activities and slowly a person does after all get used to things that one would at first have instinctively refused.²⁸

Even the shifting language in this account—switching back and forth between the first person pronoun and the more distanced and general ‘*man*’ (‘one’ or ‘you’) and ‘*der Mensch*’ (‘person’) indicates Willy B’s continuing slight sense of unease about actions he could not seem even in retrospect to take full ownership of or render compatible with a personal sense of authentic self. Clearly his character changed in the perceptions of people who knew him at the time, too. A former comrade, of rather different political persuasions, was quite shocked when he met Willy B. again; this man, Willy B. reports, ‘shot himself when Hitler came to power’.²⁹ It is clear that, at least initially, the peculiar combination of persuasive pressure and collective action exercised by right-wing radical circles on a person of similar inclinations in principle was sufficient to overcome initial distaste for the implications of the programme in practice. But eventually Willy B., too, developed more serious doubts and even began to feel repelled by the circles in which he found himself.

Willy B.’s break with Nazism was at first somewhat ambivalent, but eventually sufficient to cause him to flee the country. The collapse of his business, however hard he worked, in the recession after 1929, he continued to blame on ‘Jews’; his antisemitism clearly remained relatively untouched by his growing pangs of conscience. And yet, while he agreed on the alleged ‘problem’, he began to doubt the capacity of the Nazis either to provide appropriate answers or to deal effectively with the issues they were trumpeting as problems; and he increasingly came to criticize the violence of Nazi methods:

Already in 1929 I was noticing a continuous decline in the income of my business, one could work and work but no longer get ahead at all. Trade and commerce had virtually completely gone over into the hands of Jewish people, and they would not tolerate a former officer as a representative there. So pressure built on pressure and produced hatred against all who were not Nazis. From them one expected salvation. But there was a muffled beat coming from the heart and the conscience . . . I allowed myself to

²⁸ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (22), Willy B.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

criticize, to harbour scruples, to raise doubts as to whether the party could rip us out from Versailles and the Dawes [reparation] payments.—In the deepest recesses of the soul, one became a defector.³⁰

Interestingly, again the style of Willy B.'s account, with its oscillation between the first and third person, and occasionally even almost absent subject, reflects his vacillations, hesitations, and sense of unease and self-doubt. Unable to make a profitable living or feel at ease with himself, he eventually decided to emigrate, and left initially for Memel (a contested territory taken from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, and later taken over by Lithuania); here, after Hitler had come to power, he felt he was being spied upon by Nazis. His final break with the cause came, however, only when his growing disquiet about Nazi methods was confirmed by the issues surrounding the burning of the Reichstag shortly before the elections of 1933:

This served to break the last internal bond with these bandits. My instinctual feeling that crime would be raised to a state maxim had not deceived me. I have never been able to engage in hypocrisy and lying, just as little as cutting my coat to suit the prevailing wind.³¹

In his transition from willing antisemitic nationalist to principled refusal to engage in accommodation with a criminal regime, Willy B. was unusual. But the inner struggles between his sense of self and the demands of the cause, between the internalized aspirations and moral codes of his pre-war youth and the changed demands of his adult life, reveal particularly clearly just how much was at stake on a personal as well as public level even for those swept up in the right-wing movements of the day.

Willy B. wrote his autobiographical sketch while in Sweden in 1940, and concluded it with an oddly nationalist paean of praise to pacifism (now incorporating even use of the second person as he engages in injunctions to his future self):

It was time to break camp here too. The fiftieth year of my life had been reached. Homeless, searching for freedom, you must wander in the world you little human vessel [*Menschenschifflein*]!—Everything has been taken from you that you used to consider noble and good. What are your medals? A farce. What is the Fatherland under the heel of these mad criminals? A hell-hole. Where is the free German spirit? Disappeared, and in its place a slave mentality and a desire for a place at the bigwigs' feeding trough.—Loudmouths, instead of quiet capable people! . . . Away, away from this plague of the spirit. . . . A new world war is raging, and here, off the beaten tracks, stands a German man whose life has led him from the Prussian cadet corps to a humanistic pacifism!³²

Willy B.'s life course, as he recounts it, demonstrates perhaps a particularly striking trajectory. But he was far from alone in his earlier pattern of movement into and out of a variety of right-wing circles through the chaotic 1920s. And he was also not alone in having difficulty in trying to make sense of the post-1918 world in which

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

he found himself, in the light of principles, aspirations, and deeply rooted expectations inherited from a previous era. The difference in his life from those of millions of others was that, after 1933, despite being in broad agreement with many Nazi prejudices and aims, he found it harder than most on the right to swallow acknowledgement of the criminality of Nazi methods, and did, ultimately, recover some sense of autonomous self (even addressing himself as a 'little ship' which by definition only he could steer) outside the confines of a state which had given way to a regime of madness. His Fatherland, as he had conceived of it before 1918, had already effectively been taken away from him; removal from the geographical but no longer emotional homeland was then less of a step when Willy B. finally took it.

Experiences were very different among those who only reached adulthood after the end of the war, and were children or teenagers during the war: the war-youth generation. They had barely known anything but a condition of warfare; many had almost dream-like memories of what seemed to have been an idyllic childhood, broken suddenly by news that the country was at war—generally remembered as being problematic mainly for having cut short what should have been a seemingly unending summer holiday in the country, the mountains, or at the Baltic coast. The distinctive experience of this generation has been well-described by Sebastian Haffner (born 1907), who while in exile in Britain in the late 1930s penned what he conceived of as memoirs of a rather typical childhood and youth. For Haffner's generation, the stability of the mid-Weimar years was, experientially, an exception, and one to which many of his age group found it hard to accustom themselves after a decade (1914–24) of rapid and violent change during the formative years of their young lives. Haffner's account is highly suggestive in a number of respects. As he presciently commented when writing in 1939:

Perhaps people will not think it worth making the effort to represent in such detail the inadequate reactions of a child to the World War. It certainly would not be worth the effort if this were just an isolated case. But it is not an isolated case. A whole German generation experienced the war in this or similar ways, as children or youngsters—and much more significantly, this is precisely the generation which today is preparing for a repeat performance.³³

Equally presciently, Haffner went on to comment that:

There was a lot which later assisted Nazism and modified its character. But its roots lie here: not in the 'experience of the trenches' (*Fronterlebnis*), but in the German schoolboys' experience of war. The front generation in general actually delivered relatively few genuine Nazis. . . . The real generation of Nazism is rather those born in the decade from 1900 to 1910, who experienced the war, quite untroubled by its reality, as one big game.³⁴

But the story of how a generation exposed to war as play became the carriers of the Third Reich was a complex one; and it is only a small part of this generation who

³³ Sebastian Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen. Die Erinnerungen 1914–1933* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), p. 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

were to rise to historical prominence as the 'sore-thumb cohort' spearheading the expansion, through military aggression and oppressive civilian administration, of the Third Reich. The mechanism of transmission deserves somewhat closer attention. The details vary from case to case, but certain groups were very unlikely to become prey to right-wing radicalization.

Common to all of those who were still children at the time of the war was the officially transmitted atmosphere of war adulation, propagated not only through schools and newspapers, but also in the prevalence of war games in the playground and after school. As Haffner rightly emphasized, for his generation war was essentially a game, not a matter of exposure to real violence and real suffering. What counted for them was 'the fascination of the game of war: a game in which, according to secret rules, numbers of prisoners, territories gained, strongholds seized and ships that were sunk played roughly the role of goals in football or "points" in boxing'.³⁵ Such experiences were common more or less wherever children went to school. In Vienna, Stephen J., the son of a Jewish father whose family originally came from Hungary and a mother who was descended from a stream of Austrian state officials and members of the lesser nobility, recalled:

As an eight-year-old boy I naturally saw only the glory of war and not the misery and suffering behind the gigantic, screaming headlines of the newspapers . . . I avidly read the war books that were appearing by the dozen at the time . . . In the park in front of our house I passionately played 'soldiers'.³⁶

There are many similar recollections from amongst those who were children at this time.

Yet the lessons subsequently drawn from defeat were highly varied. In the course of the 1920s Haffner increasingly disassociated himself from those who remained absorbed in nationalist activities. He observed with interest but again some considerable critical distance those young people who had made dizzying economic gains during the early period of inflation and then could hardly deal with the stabilization of the economy that followed. By the time he was a young law student, Haffner had very clear and well-developed political opinions of his own which conflicted sharply, and in principle, with the possibility of making compromises with the new regime. Even so, it took him quite a while to realize this and draw conclusions about how he should respond in practice.

There were other reasons too for varying responses among members of this generation. Class, region, milieu, all played a role, as did, in part, differences of religious confession, particularly where individuals were increasingly aware that they were seen as partial outsiders, and as questions of 'race' began to become more salient.³⁷

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (100), Stephen J., pp. 5, 6.

³⁷ In his detailed and insightful study of Breslau, Till van Rahden argues that the 'decisive turning point . . . came in the last years of the First World War and early in the Weimar Republic, when relations between Jews and other Breslauers deteriorated dramatically. Against the backdrop of experiences during the war and the army's "Jew count" of 1916, the postwar crises and inflation, the high degree of Jewish integration eroded. While the socioeconomic situation of Breslau Jews worsened

Wolfgang Y., for example, was born in 1908, in the Silesian industrial town of Kattowitz, of a Catholic father and a Jewish mother—a quite typical ‘inter-faith’ marriage at a time when this was both increasingly common, and not seen as in any way incompatible with commitment to German national identity. For personal reasons his parents divorced when Wolfgang was one year old, and he lived with his Jewish mother and her parents. His maternal grandfather:

was a pious Jew, well respected in town, belonging to the better bourgeois circles . . . He was a stern, deeply religious man, who got along very well with the Catholic priests of the area and socialized with them on a friendship basis.³⁸

At this stage, given his commitment to a notion of German and Prussian identity, Wolfgang, like so many living in this borderland region of Silesia, was as a young person attracted to a military career. Writing in 1940, Wolfgang recalled that:

The population in border areas probably succumbs rather readily to chauvinistic influences, in these border areas there is a seamless transition from national to nationalistic . . . [I] wanted to become a soldier, an officer, a Prussian officer.³⁹

Nevertheless, he was already somewhat put off this choice of career by the sight of his wounded cousin, who had been serving on the eastern front during the Great War:

My mother and I received permission to visit him in a field hospital behind the front. We found lying on a straw bed a groaning being, and as a youngster I was badly shattered by this sight. Then we drove across a field of slaughter, it was winter, the wagon of the Polish farmer taking us to the station threw up great trails of blood in the snow.⁴⁰

Subsequently Wolfgang’s cousin died of his wounds, still in his mid-twenties, ‘a handsome, highly gifted man’.⁴¹ Yet even this direct personal witnessing, as a child, of the tragedies of war did not keep Wolfgang from active and enthusiastic participation in the standard war games of his generation while at school, by now living with his grandparents in Berlin, where he attended the Werner Siemens Realgymnasium. His account echoes that of Sebastian Haffner: ‘There was a lot of talk of the Emperor, of Germany, of German-ness [*Deutschtum*], of German heroes . . . during school breaks we played war in the schoolyard. I was often the leader of the German troops . . . At that time I learned very little, I just read war stories, my life was completely filled up by talk of war.’⁴²

Unlike many others of his cohort who had been caught up in the excitement of war while playing games at school, however, Wolfgang Y.’s views became clearer

after 1918, anti-Semitism increased and gained in significance in many spheres of social life in the city.’ Till van Rahden, *Jews and Other Germans: civil society, religious diversity and urban politics in Breslau, 1860–1925*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 4.

³⁸ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (251), Wolfgang Y., p. 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

and he distanced himself from unthinking adulation of all things military as he grew older. One uncle, who was married to a Catholic Hungarian, lived in a villa in the well-to-do Berlin suburb of Grunewald, quite near to the house of the German foreign minister, Walther Rathenau (who was Jewish, and assassinated by right-wing extremists in 1922). The uncle, whom Wolfgang visited frequently, talked endlessly about the Kaiser; he also 'wore a moustache like the Emperor, also held himself in a very military posture'.⁴³ In the course of the early 1920s, when Wolfgang visited some of his Christian relatives by marriage (the parents-in-law of an uncle) who lived in Weimar, he became increasingly critical of the petty bourgeois attitudes and adulation of authority evident in these circles:

I would like to adduce one phenomenon that seems to me typical of the outlook of this bourgeois stratum: every senior teacher, every burgher in Weimar was not only proud that Goethe had belonged to the same people as he himself, but also behaved as though something of Goethe's genius had been passed on to him. When these people talked of the poet, they then grew in their own self-esteem and in their own eyes became great minds.

Adulation of Goethe was quite compatible with a combination of ultra-militaristic tendencies, anti-republican sentiments, and heavy emphasis on the maintenance of conventional social roles and the appearance of morality, while the superficial guise of social order could readily mask a total lack of moral considerations in practice:

Everyone talked of war, of the Emperor, of Generals, not a single one supported the Republic. One always conducted oneself in a dignified and measured way, and laid great value on everything being in order. Later I learned, through my aunt, how fragile morality really was in this stuffy bourgeois nest [*Spießernest*], what sorts of things went on behind the mask of honour in the best families in town. My hatred of everything smacking of petty bourgeois stuffiness [*alles Verspießerte*] arises not least from this trip to Weimar.⁴⁴

At this time, Wolfgang Y. simply felt a degree of distaste; but within a matter of a decade, it was from precisely such circles as these that support for far more radical policies came, ultimately ousting people like Wolfgang Y. from their homeland—and worse.

Some members of the war-youth generation were, in the context of the crises of both the early and the late years of the Weimar Republic, highly ideologically mobilized—but in a variety of directions, both left and right. It was again *politics* that determined which elements would be fostered, be offered particular opportunities and chances, and 'rise to the surface' of the historical stage at different times. Members of the war-youth generation subsequently played a role in *both* German dictatorships, and not just the Third Reich: they disproportionately provided the carrier classes of the Nazi regime, but also some of the leaders and long-lasting functionaries of the GDR. The splits that were visible between members of this generation already in the 1920s and 1930s continued to be played out under the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–2.

Cold War conditions of the 1950s and 1960s. But it was those on the radical right who eventually won the battle for domination in the course of the 1920s and 1930s.

III. THE FREE CORPS AS TRANSMISSION BELT OF VIOLENCE

Why did some young people in the period after 1918 particularly glorify violence? Why did not the experience of death, and the apparent senselessness of the destruction not merely of so many lives all around but of whole landscapes laid waste, not have the universal effect on mentalities that might have been promoted by the well-known (anti-)war literature of the later 1920s? A part of the answer must lie not only in the prevalence of popular literature glorifying war, but also, more importantly perhaps, in the lack of personal experience of violence for most of these young people during the war itself, which was witnessed only at a distance, vicariously, and largely in terms of exaggerated reports of German successes; for the war-youth generation, it was news of unexpected defeat, rather than exposure to real violence, that came as the major shock. This stood in marked contrast to the later experiences of many young people at the end of the Second World War, when massive bombing of the home front, experience of flight and mass dislocation, and exposure to violence all around in the chaos of the closing months, served to render eventual defeat not only very real but in some respects also a relief. Added to the only distant knowledge rather than direct first-hand experience of physical front-line brutality in the Great War were, for the war-youth generation, the difficulties of the early Weimar years, with economic and political chaos providing the context for some to look for more radical solutions to persisting problems. Finally, the political situation both permitted and indeed fostered the flourishing of groups ready to mobilize youth in service of violent causes. It is this last, perhaps, which provided the key to the transmission of traditions of violence as a political weapon, although without willing participants and followers such leadership would have remained on the meaningless fringes of history.

It is in the politics of the Free Corps movements and the right-wing *völkisch* groups—first in a small way, but sanctioned from above and with backing in high places—that certain members of the war-youth generation were initially mobilized in service of right-wing causes, at a time when the army was officially reduced to a rump of a mere 100,000 men for purely defensive purposes (and some of those who had been demobilized were still searching for a military cause). The Free Corps were self-styled representatives of the ‘front generation’ in conjunction with what they claimed to be the nation’s youth.⁴⁵ The more significant groups—which were often named after their leaders—developed songs which contributed to the sense of

⁴⁵ See e.g. Ernst von Salomon, *Das Buch vom deutschen Freikorpskämpfer* (Berlin: Wilhelm-Limpert Verlag, 1938).

comradeship and belonging, such as the 'Ehrhardt-Song' of the Ehrhardt Brigade: 'Comrade, give me your hand / together we will stand . . . Swastika on the helmet / Black-white-red band / The Ehrhardt Brigade / is our name . . . Comrade give me your hand / As we once swore to each other . . . / The Ehrhardt Brigade / will one day rise again!'⁴⁶ The last phrase, with its connotations of the Christian concept of resurrection (*wird einst aufersteh'n*), conveys some sense of the quasi-religious mystic community of struggle and ultimate redemption that was being enacted here.

Much of the Free Corps legacy was significant precisely by virtue of its capacity for myth-making, both at the time and in retrospect. A purple passage from a pro-Nazi rendering of Free Corps history, published in praise of Hitler in 1936, for example, provides something of the general ideological flavour and construction of history. First its author, Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, praises the heroism of German soldiers in the Great War, hitting all the key phrases:

In the face of death only that remains which possess eternal value, and out here this is above all comradeship and leadership.

So at the front a new world is formed . . . A new homeland [*Heimat*] is born, one that inevitably rejects everything not worthy of it, but in return knits together all the more closely those who are sworn to this community.⁴⁷

Soldiers on returning to Germany in 1918, on this account, saw the decline and decay of the home front with new eyes; they felt they were having to return, actually 'un-defeated' but called back purely because they had been 'betrayed', and were supposedly shocked by the Germany to which they returned:

Because it was impossible that the meaning of four years of fighting and struggling could be [reduced to] what was happening all around: this chaos, this cowardly revolution, this downfall of a nation that had been held to be immortal.⁴⁸

On this view the Free Corps had but one aim:

They only had the one goal, to save their Fatherland. From decline, chaos and bolshevism within. From the enemy at the bleeding borders and the attacks of Bolshevism from abroad. For them it was about Germany. Only about Germany!⁴⁹

In support of his arguments, Schmidt-Pauli included a quotation from Erich F. Berendt's *Soldaten der Freiheit*:

'The front generation, along with a nation's greatest treasure, its youth, has come together in strong determination to change German fate. Not because of the anxious calls for help on the part of a government to which they were opposed, but rather out of recognition of an ineluctable duty towards people and Fatherland. And it was not

⁴⁶ Excerpts taken from the full version as reproduced in Manfred von Killinger, *Kampf um Oberschlesien 1921* (Leipzig: v. Hase und Koehler Verlag, 1934), pp. 51–2.

⁴⁷ Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, *Geschichte der Freikorps 1918–1924* (Stuttgart: Robert Lutz Nachfolger Otto Schramm, 1936), p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

only a battle for German borders and the existence of the Reich. The battle they were waging was also a battle for the German soul.⁵⁰

This quotation nicely brought together the front generation and the nation's youth in a common fight for the people and the Fatherland, and even, to conclude the potent mixture, the 'German soul'. Von Schmidt-Pauli sought to come to an equally neat and persuasive conclusion:

So we see here, after the lost Heimat of the front and the estranged Heimat of the Fatherland after Versailles, a new Heimat arising for the best Germans . . . the Heimat of the Free Corps.

From this Heimat the path then leads up to the final great Heimat that we are today happily experiencing, the Heimat of the New Germany.⁵¹

Many similar accounts were produced in the first years of the Third Reich. In fact, however, the lineage from the front-generation experience through the violence of the Free Corps, in the early years after 1918, to the violence first of the storm troopers and then of the established Nazi state was far from as simple or direct as portrayed in this sort of propaganda. Even so, these groups and related acts of violence had a major effect on the lives of those involved.

The Free Corps groups were predominantly led by men who had indeed fought at the front. Like the 'front generation' more generally, the leaders' ages spanned more than four decades: of thirty-nine Free Corps leaders whose birth dates are known (out of a list of forty-one), the oldest was born in 1859; eight were born in the 1860s, eight in the 1870s, thirteen in the 1880s, and nine in the 1890s.⁵² Well over a third of these leaders (sixteen of the forty-one) had the aristocratic 'von' in their name. Only four of the Free Corps leaders, including one of the two youngest, born in 1899, appeared not to have had any active experience in the Great War. This was, then, a small group of older men who were in large part motivated by the fact that they could not accept that Germany had been defeated. And there were many continuing causes after the cessation of hostilities and particularly after the Treaty of Versailles which seemed to them to demand violent solutions. These ranged from combating left-wing movements, rebellions or putsch attempts, as in Berlin, Munich, and the Ruhr, to skirmishes on Germany's contested post-Versailles borders in the east, particularly in the Baltic and in Silesia.

But if the leaders were drawn from the very wide and amorphous cohorts of the front generation, spanning four decades, their followers were a far more tightly knit generational group, apparently crossing differences of class rather than age. Young men who had just left school or who were of student age appear to have been particularly drawn to military activism in these groups. One idealized account,

⁵⁰ Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, *Geschichte der Freikorps 1918–1924* (Stuttgart: Robert Lutz Nachfolger Otto Schramm, 1936), p. 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵² Analysis compiled on the basis of material in Robert Thoms and Stefan Pochanke, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Freikorps* (MTM Verlag, 2001), 'Kurzbiographien berühmter Freikorpsführer', pp. 153–8.

published in 1934, depicted the frustration of secondary-school boys in the Great War wanting to be old enough to join the war:

Fear of being too late made many sixteen- or barely seventeen-year-olds begin to think about volunteering for military service. Why still hang about in this grammar school phoney existence, in the summer doing labour service in agriculture and in winter having 'coal [shortage] holidays'? In September 1918 the first of them volunteered. Before they were deployed in active service, there came—the Revolution.⁵³

Some of those who had been too young to see military action even in the closing months of the Great War now seized the chance to be part of a wider movement, a cause, experiencing the much-vaunted 'cameraderie', committing their lives to what they saw as defence of the Fatherland, and willingly facing the chance of dying a 'sacrificial' or 'hero's death'.

The highly educated young recruits were joined by men of a similar age drawn, it would appear, from across the social range: young aristocrats fought alongside men from bourgeois, peasant, and working-class backgrounds, a much publicized prequel to later Nazi claims of a 'classless' national-ethnic community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) coming together in service of the Fatherland. As one account of the battles of 1921, published in 1934 after the Nazis had already come to power, put it when recounting the funeral of three 'comrades':

The priest then said something about the peace that everyone yearns for. Senior Lieutenant von Jagow held a better funeral speech: 'Here rest in peace an aristocrat, a bourgeois and a worker. The representatives of the different strata of our society, that are always in conflict with each other, here died together for the common Fatherland, for the common Heimat. A people finds itself in deepest distress, and in death it finds its unity.' Three salvos are fired across the graves, and we head off to our quarters. We sing: 'I once had a comrade' and 'The Ehrhardt Brigade will one day rise again'.⁵⁴

Whatever such heavily ideological accounts might have wanted to suggest by way of painting the Free Corps as precursors of a classless society, with more than a whiff of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ideology about it, it is quite clear that some of the men who were initially attracted to these groups were simply poor and desperate. Once the Free Corps were officially disbanded, many continued a more shadowy underground existence: the Ehrhardt Brigade, for example, had a long after-life as the 'Organisation Consul'. And many of those who had been drawn into this penumbra of violence and life as part of illicit bands simply continued their activities under the guise of 'work commandos' on rural estates, particularly in Germany's troubled eastern provinces.

The disturbing atmosphere and the continuing underground activities of these groups was well captured by Carl P., a witness of secret rearmament and

⁵³ Johannes Jobel, *Zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Schüler als Freiwillige in Genzschutz und Freikorps*, 3rd edn (Berlin: R. Kittlers Verlag, 1934), p. 23.

⁵⁴ Manfred von Killinger, *Kampf um Oberschlesien 1921* (Leipzig: v. Hase und Koehler Verlag, 1934), p. 67.

paramilitary training. In his view, the great inflation had not only brought about 'the most disagreeable manifestations of corruption' but the nationalists were also:

energetically engaged in spreading the word that the Republic was a Jewish Republic and that one should finally do away with the 'filthy swine economy' . . .

Anyway, I can't say that it was very cosy [*gemütlich*] in the eastern areas of Germany from the autumn of 1920 onwards . . . People in fantastic garb and with reckless expressions could be seen carrying flags that generally bore a death's head symbol. On the streets and in hostels there was talk of 'work commandos' that were supposedly steering those in need of work towards the large estates. Since I had remained true to my habit of occasionally roaming through the woods at night, I often saw night-time exercises and secret transports of weapons. We—my friends and I—took considerable trouble to observe the perpetual shifting of weapons. There is no denying it: after the Kapp Putsch we German republicans had been pushed back onto the defensive . . .⁵⁵

While posing as part of the 'Black Army' (*schwarze Reichswehr*), and presenting themselves as a means of defending Germany, the reality of these groups was, in the view of Carl P., both more mundane and more murderous and inherently threatening:

The leaders of these work commandos were menial farm labourers of the worst sort. They were work-shy, rootless people hoping to use the adventure of perpetual civil war to battle their way through life. The national slogan was just a reframing of the question of bread.⁵⁶

But they were doing more: they were seeking also to 'win the peace' by assassinating their enemies, real and imagined. Carl P. noted that:

As a result of the brutality of this light-shy rabble many people disappeared without a trace . . . The secret leadership of the 'work commandos' set up its own system of justice and this with the knowledge and tacit approval of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. The formula according to which this 'court' passed sentence was short and to the point: 'Traitor, condemned by summary justice [*Feme*]!'—Anyone was a 'traitor' who was suspected of being one. At the behest of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, a handful of wild characters travelled around Germany putting the sentences passed by these kangaroo courts into effect.⁵⁷

There were literally hundreds of casualties of these gangs, with their imposition of the 'justice' of the *Fememorde* on perfectly ordinary citizens, as well as assassinations of better-known political figures.⁵⁸ The Minister of Justice (under-)estimated a total

⁵⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (174), Carl P., p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Bernhard Sauer, *Schwarze Reichswehr und Fememorde* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2004), claims that such murders were primarily targeted against people within their own ranks with whom they had fallen out, and not against political opponents. This was clearly not the case: see R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Historical Studies, Vol. LX, 1952), pp. 216–27; see also Irmela Nagel, *Fememorde und Fememordprozesse in der Weimarer Republik* (Köln u. Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1991).

of 354 individual political murders committed by the Free Corps during the short period from 1919 to June 1922, when Rathenau was assassinated; and one of the leaders of shock troop units, Heinz Oskar Hauenstein, later estimated that his own troops had killed around 200 people in Upper Silesia alone.⁵⁹

More significantly for the borderlands of Germany, there were specific battles over territory, particularly in the Baltic and in the Silesian borderlands with Poland at the time of the plebiscites seeking to finalize the boundaries in this strongly contested area.⁶⁰ A key, and perhaps final great battle as far as the mythology of the Free Corps was concerned was that of the Annaberg hill in Silesia. The local landed nobility appear to have provided considerable logistical support in terms of food and lodgings for the Germans fighting against Polish insurgents; and there were many with aristocratic names among the active German leaders of the fight.⁶¹ A decisive day of concerted attack by groups from different directions secured the Annaberg hill for the Germans by the evening. In the flowery but rather typical account of one former Free Corps member, at the end of the fighting on the historic day of 21 May 1921:

And as the rays of sunshine fall across the hillside, they light up the German flag on the highest point of the hill, proclaiming far and wide the glory of the Germans.

Great was the victory, great the volunteers' joy, now beaming from every face.

The brave self-defence force had to lament twenty dead and one hundred and twenty wounded. But the sacrifice had not been in vain. The Pole had been chased away as though driven by a storm wind.

... The spirit of German faith, German courage to make sacrifices, German honour, had set up a brightly shining beacon here too, on which the hopes of all Germans for a new future were firmly pinned.⁶²

The disagreeable sweat and blood of the day, the reality of young lives cut down brutally in face-to-face skirmishing on the side of a nondescript little hill in the Upper Silesian countryside, significant for nothing more than a disputed border, was thus transformed into some kind of transcendental experience in which the rays of the sun and the spirit of the few dozen volunteers were fused into a symbol of

⁵⁹ Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, pp. 216, 226–7.

⁶⁰ For an extremely clear account of the Silesian case, see T. Hunt Tooley, *National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the eastern border, 1918–1922* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). Hagen Schulze has suggested that there were colonial elements to some of the struggles in the Baltic and Silesia, and that it was 'no accident' that some of the Free Corps leaders had backgrounds including colonial experience: see Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik, 1918–1920* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1969), p. 329.

⁶¹ See the detailed, highly partisan account by Manfred von Killinger, *Kampf um Oberschlesien 1921* (Leipzig: v. Hase und Kochler Verlag, 1934).

⁶² Jobel, *Zwischen Krieg und Frieden*, pp. 139–40. See also e.g. the accounts in Bert Roth (ed.), *Kampf: Lebensdokumente deutscher Jugend von 1914–1934* (Leipzig: Philipp Reklam jun., 1934): 'Wir stürmen den Annaberg. Berichte von Freikorpskämpfern', pp. 85 ff.; 'Von einem Kämpfer des Korps Roßbach. Bei der Sturmabteilung Heinz', pp. 85–7; 'Das Freikorps Oberland greift an', pp. 87–9. See also Generalleutnant a. D. von Hülsen, 'Freikorps im Osten' and Rittmeister a. D. von Schaper, 'Freikorpsgeist—Annaberg', in Roden (ed.), *Deutsche Soldaten*, pp. 110–16, 161–9; and F. W. von Oertzen, *Kamerad reich mir die Hände. Freikorps und Grenzschutz Balitikum und Heimat* (Berlin: Im Verlag Ullstein, 1933), 'Das Ringen um O. S.', pp. 202–43.

national renewal. Given the significance of this victory for right-wing violence, a huge memorial to alleged German bravery and national pride, containing the bodies of fifty-one Free Corps fighters who had died in the cause (rather more than recounted by Jobel) was built on the site, acting as a shrine, a 'site of memory' and even tourist attraction during the Third Reich. As Dr Walter K., the *Landrat* (roughly, chief executive) of the county in which the Annaberg was located put it in the 1936 edition of the *Heimatkalender Groß Strehlitz*:

In our midst rises up the Annaberg, the landmark of Upper Silesia. It provides protection to this peaceful country. Its slopes are consecrated by the blood of the sons of all German regions [*Gaue*] who battled here for the freedom of our Upper Silesian Heimat.⁶³

And an article on 'the Annaberg and its surroundings' by one Ernst Mücke in the 1937 edition of the *Heimatkalender Groß Strehlitz* reiterated its importance, raising it now from regional to national significance:

In 1921 the Annaberg became the flaming symbol of the German spirit of heroism. Here it was that, on 21 May of that significant year, the first German armed victory since the Revolution and collapse was achieved. Since those days the *Annaberg has become the national shrine of the German people*, which recently has found visible expression through the construction of a memorial and a site for celebration.⁶⁴

The shrine to German national greatness achieved through the use of armed force was however pulled down by the new Polish government once it had taken over this territory after the Second World War.⁶⁵

Despite suggestive elements, not least the use of swastikas on the helmets of the Ehrhardt Brigade, there were no direct or simple lines of personal transmission, no compelling individual or organizational continuities, between the Free Corps and successor movements of the early 1920s and the violence of the Third Reich. Many individuals did indeed move from violence in the Free Corps through to membership of the SA and/or NSDAP; but many did not. Even among those who supported Nazism initially, some were casualties of Hitler's imposition of a new order once the army appeared to Hitler to be more significant than the radical violence of the rabble in achieving his goals in power. A significant number of former Free Corps members who had joined the SA and were close to the SA leader Ernst Röhm were later among those who were casualties of the slaughter of June 1934 in the so-called 'Night of the Long Knives'.⁶⁶ Yet there can be no doubt that the experiences and myths glorifying violence to which some young men were exposed at this time played a formative role, from which they learned lessons that

⁶³ *Heimatkalender Groß Strehlitz* no.161, 1936, p. 31.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* no.162, 1937, pp. 56–8, here p. 56 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁵ Thoms and Pochanke, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Freikorps*, pp. 39–45, 169–70; See also James Bjork and Robert Gerwarth, 'The Annaberg as a German-Polish Lieu de Mémoire', *German History* 2007, 25(3), 372–400.

⁶⁶ Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*, p. 333. See also, approaching these issues from a rather different angle, Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The storm troopers in eastern Germany 1925–1934* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

would shape their responses when violence had been appropriated and monopolized by the state under Hitler's regime.

This was a repertoire of experience and rhetoric that could be drawn upon selectively at a later date, garnished and reshaped as required. In the mid-1930s a number of accounts of the Free Corps activities were published which glorified their deeds and outlooks as precursors to Hitler's Third Reich, which was presented as the culmination of all they had struggled for.⁶⁷ Von Schmidt-Pauli even claimed in 1936 that what he was writing was:

an overview in time and place of the emergence, struggle and dissolution of the Free Corps, an encapsulation of the Free Corps idea in its first light, its blazing and heroic zenith, and its sinking beneath the ashes of its own bitterness in times of adversity,—until it could rise again from these ashes, a resurrected Phoenix, to bathe its glorious plumage in the sun of the new Germany . . . For the blood sacrifices of that time are redeemed and crowned only now, when Adolf Hitler has achieved that for which we fought and suffered: a well fortified, secure, free and proud Fatherland.⁶⁸

Less easy to document, however, are the influences which the Free Corps and the wider atmosphere of paramilitary violence had over the climate in which people lived at the time.

Some members of the war-youth generation were still too young to join the Free Corps actively, but were greatly influenced in their formative years by the use of violence as a political weapon. Dr Walter K.'s son, Udo K. (born 1910) was still only a schoolboy at the time of the famous storming of the Annaberg by Free Corps units in 1921, but was strongly influenced by the wider significance of this event. The Annaberg was not only geographically not far away from where he lived; his father, Walter K., at that time held the role of *Landrat* of Leobschütz, very close to the new post-war border with Poland, and was intrinsically affected both by the immediate violence of the clashes between German nationalists and Polish insurgents, and the larger concerns about territorial losses in this border region. Udo K.'s father, as *Landrat* at this troubled time, played a key role—or so his staff later claimed on the occasion of his retirement—in dealing with the threat of Polish and Czech renegades at the borders.⁶⁹ Although too young to be actively involved himself at this stage, Udo K. was hugely impressed by the Annaberg success, as he later recalled:

The most significant and very moving event at that time was the storming of the Annaberg, the landmark of Upper Silesia, the highest peak on the edge of the industrial

⁶⁷ See e.g. Roden (ed.), *Deutsche Soldaten*.

⁶⁸ Von Schmidt-Pauli, *Geschichte der Freikorps*, p. 10. See also e.g. Friedrich Glombowski, *Organisation Heinz (O.H.). Das Schicksal der Kameraden Schlageters* (Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1934).

⁶⁹ Landschaftsverband Rheinland, Rheinisches Archiv- und Museumsamt, Archiv des LVR, Nachlaß K., 185, Dr Walter K., *Seine Tätigkeit im Zusammenhang mit der Volksabstimmung in Oberschlesien* [1920], 1930. Udo K.'s father, Dr Walter K., later became *Landrat* of the nearby *Kreis* of Groß-Strehlitz, and, in the mid-1930s, adorned the *Heimatkalendar Groß Strehlitz* with small celebratory articles and praise for the Annaberg incident: see e.g. issue 161, 1936, p. 31 quoted above, p. 78; and issue 162, 1937, p. 29.

region, on which a much-visited pilgrimage chapel had stood for centuries. This conquest did really put things to rights again as far as power relations in Upper Silesia were concerned.⁷⁰

From the mid-1920s—by then in his mid- to later teenage years—Udo K. was increasingly involved in paramilitary activities.⁷¹ The organizational arrangements were at this time somewhat fluid: in part related to the increasingly militaristic interests of the local Scouts, but soon going well beyond these. Eventually, it was clear that those willing members of the youth in the area were to be secretly trained up in the use of weapons and strategic manoeuvres through former army officers and former Free Corps activists. One such youth group, in which Udo K. and a close friend, Hans K., were very actively involved, was known as the ‘Following’ (*Gefolgschaft*), assisted and trained by members of the so-called ‘Black Army’ (*schwarze Reichswehr*). Udo K. recalled with pleasure the camp fires where:

we swore to one another that we would remain faithful to the Fatherland . . . Then there were the tales of the Free Corps from the Baltic, where the last knights were fighting against Bolshevism . . . A time of idealism, a sense of sacrifice, having to rise to a challenge, a time in memory that I would not like to have missed, since we felt duty bound to a task that we saw as right and good: the protection of our borders.⁷²

In May 1932, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the referendum in Upper Silesia, Udo K.—by now a law student at Breslau University, somewhat further west in Silesia—and his father went along together to a ceremony on the Annaberg commemorating the significance of this location for the German nation. This turned out to be an occasion on which oppositional forces tried to heckle and shout down the nationalist speech, a commotion only ended by the singing of the national anthem.⁷³ And in late 1932, when Udo K. wanted to speed up his application for membership in the SA, he was able to call on his by now extensive experience of paramilitary training sessions—many of which he had personally led—as part of his application, appending a certificate of honour [*Ehrenurkunde*] detailing his service in nationalist causes in the borderlands:

The certificate of honour expresses recognition for my service since 1925 for the border protection of Silesia. First of all I was trained in weaponry and field exercises, later I served as an assistant trainer and was seen as a future leader of border defence troops. In the period from 1925 to 1933 I have taken part in around 120 training programmes of this sort.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ LVR, Nachlaß K., I. 208 ‘Erlebt—Davongekommen. Erinnerungen. Erlebt—überlebt. Erster Teil 1910–1948’, p. 16.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 26–36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁴ BAB ZA VI 265. A. 14, Akten betr. den Regierungs-Referendar Udo K., letter of 4 January 1941, from Udo K. to the Reich Interior Ministry in Berlin, ‘Zur Ergänzung meiner Personalakten’, claiming that since 1925 he was very active in a paramilitary group called the ‘*Gefolgschaft*’ which was a disguised school organization for the military protection and defence of Silesia; on his own account, membership of this effectively fast-tracked his SA application (it got him out of the ‘usual application waiting period’—‘*üblichen Anwärterzeit*’).

Such paramilitary activities were in his case, as for so many others from this generation, perfectly compatible with a seamless switch into a career in the civil service and, in due course, in the regular army.

The long-term significance of the war-youth generation was not confined to the right-wing youth in support of the rising Nazi tide, however; it was to see a later, second blossoming in the communist dictatorship that succeeded the Third Reich in one part of defeated Germany, the Soviet zone of occupation which became the GDR. In the shorter term, the willingness to countenance violence among members of the war-youth generation during the Weimar years was not only a phenomenon of the right. The tendency to seek radical solutions, deploying violence as a political means if necessary, was to be found on the left too, with consequences for the ways in which all those growing up in this period perceived the present and their hopes for changes in the future. We should therefore not simply read backwards from the striking preponderance of members of the war-youth generation who became carriers of the Nazi regime, appealing to some 'generational experience' which allegedly mobilized significant numbers to the right-wing cause. Rather, it was the specific historical constellation of 1933 which determined that those who had been mobilized for radical causes and who now took a disproportionate role in the historical record were on the right rather than the left. For in the short term, it was the forces of the right who won out, under the particular historical circumstances of the late Weimar years; after 1945, in the Soviet-controlled zone of defeated Germany, it would be a left-wing minority who were able to take a leading role.

IV. WEIMAR CRISES AND INDIVIDUAL LIFE STORIES

On a warm early summer day, 21 May 1920—exactly one year to the day before the storming of the Annaberg—Hans Paasche was bathing with his four children in the lake of their country home of Waldfrieden. At about three o'clock in the afternoon he was suddenly summonsed by the local gendarme, one Wendtland, to come back up to the house, as supposedly he wanted to talk with him about some matter. As Paasche, wearing only his swim trunks and a jacket, walked up the garden from the lake accompanied by the local gendarme, with a couple of his children following behind, he became aware of large numbers of armed men waiting half-hidden among the bushes and trees surrounding the open lawn. He was surrounded by somewhere in the region of sixty soldiers. Turning around suddenly, apparently in some anxiety, Paasche was unable to flee. Three shots were fired, and Hans Paasche was instantly dead.⁷⁵

No case was ever brought against those who had assassinated Hans Paasche. The local authorities in charge of police and justice had presumably already been

⁷⁵ Based on the account compiled by his closest friends and the children's governess, Frau Hadwig Lahrs-Dorsch, who was at home and witnessed the tragedy, as recounted in the Berlin daily newspaper *Freiheit*, 25 May 1920, No. 191, and reprinted in Magnus Schwantje, 'Hans Paasche: Sein Leben und Wirken', *Flugschriften des Bundes Neues Vaterland* Nr. 26(4), 1921, pp. 23–4.

irritated by the outcome of the case they had largely unsuccessfully brought against him in 1917, and saw little reason to investigate this one too closely. Moreover, the accusation was made that Paasche—a well-known pacifist!—had been collecting weapons in preparation for an armed communist uprising or even civil war, and that therefore a search of the house by sixty fully armed soldiers was clearly justified. In the event, all the search turned up by way of ‘incriminating’ material were a couple of left-wing newspapers and a list prepared for the impending local elections. Nevertheless extensive precautions and preparations for this search had been taken by the state authorities in the preceding days, including cutting off telephone wires in the neighbouring area and preventing access to the Paasche estate on the part of locals. The suggestion has been made that the group of five dozen soldiers who surrounded the house were members of the *Reichswehr Schutzregiment 4*, and had previously belonged to a Free Corps unit commanded by the military hero of German East Africa, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. After murdering Paasche, soldiers in the courtyard of his house were heard singing the ‘Ehrhardt song’ of the eponymous Free Corps unit: ‘Swastika on the helmet / Black-white-red band / The Ehrhardt Brigade / is our name’.⁷⁶ Paasche, too, had fallen victim to a targeted political murder; his case once again reveals the complex constraints of the time, in which violence, backed by the authority of the state, was repeatedly used to silence ‘those who thought differently’ (to adopt a phrase from Rosa Luxemburg, at whose funeral Paasche had acted as a wreath-bearer).

Paasche’s death was the cause of great mourning among friends and neighbours who knew him well. As the children’s governess, Frau Lahrs-Dohrsch, commented at his funeral, one of the reasons why locals held him to be ‘soft in the head’ was because of his remarkable goodness and generosity towards them, which must clearly be the mark of a fool. The other symptom of his ‘madness’ was held to be his ‘paranoia’, the fear that his life was in danger because of the cause for which he stood up; this anxiety now proved only too well justified.⁷⁷ There was briefly some outrage in the left-wing press of the day, and homages to Paasche were penned by Kurt Tucholsky and Carl von Ossietzky, among others.⁷⁸ The legal investigation, such as it was, into Paasche’s murder closed with the remark that ‘the death of Paasche was caused by a combination of unhappy circumstances which could not have been foreseen, and for which no-one is to be held criminally responsible’.⁷⁹ James B., who had cooperated with Paasche during his period in the Council

⁷⁶ P. Werner Lange, ‘Die Toten im Maisfeld. Hans Paasches Erkenntnisse aus dem Maji-Maji-Krieg’ in Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez (eds.), *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika 1905–1907* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2005), pp. 154–67, here p. 161.

⁷⁷ Schwantje, ‘Hans Paasche’, pp. 24–5.

⁷⁸ See Werner Lange, *Hans Paasche: Militant pacifist in Imperial Germany* (Oxford: Trafford Publishing, 2005), pp. 252 ff.; also Helmut Donat, ‘Hans Paasche—ein deutscher Revolutionär’ in Helmut Donat and Helga Paasche (eds.), *Hans Paasche, Ändert eueren Sinn! Schriften eines Revolutionärs* (Bremen: Donat Verlag, 1992), pp. 10–51.

⁷⁹ Decision of the Oberstaatsanwalt, November 1920, quoted by P. Werner Lange, ‘Die Toten im Maisfeld. Hans Paasches Erkenntnisse aus dem Maji-Maji-Krieg’ in Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez (eds.), *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika 1905–1907* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2005), pp. 154–67, here p. 161.

Executive of the revolutionary weeks after the armistice, recalled in his own memoirs, written in 1940:

On the Executive Council [*Vollzugsrat*] I particularly valued my party comrade Marine Lieutenant Hans Paasche. He was a well-known pacifist, one of the most prominent characters of those times . . . Then he soon withdrew completely from the Executive Council, although he remained faithful to the movement. Reason enough for the General Staff to have him murdered by the Army while he was in his idyllic property, just as he was fishing . . . In the Weimar Republic, this officially ordered murder was the most outrageous of all its scandalous deeds. As though the Third Reich had already begun, not even judicial or other proceedings were opened, as had after all still happened, at least pro forma, against the murderers of Karl Liebknecht. The murderer was supposedly not to be found! But it was quite clear: precisely because Paasche himself came from the circles claiming the sole right to rule in Germany, to them he appeared a particularly dangerous traitor to his class.⁸⁰

But Paasche's case and the causes for which he had fought were soon to be forgotten, submerged under the turmoil of the coming years. And James B., who was not only a committed socialist but of Jewish descent, penned these lines while in exile in Paris in March 1940. The last note in James B.'s file, dated 13 December 1940, was a letter from the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia, trying to make contact with him in France, but in vain. James B., born and brought up in the Prussian military virtues of Imperial Germany, a fully assimilated German patriot and lawyer, was to be one of the millions of casualties of that later use of political violence on a far greater scale.

Paasche's death was not so easily forgotten by his daughter, Helga, who was four years old at the time. When questioned about her life and asked about her experiences as a young person some eighty-seven years later, her memory of her youth was patchy apart from that one traumatic moment: she could not get over the image of her father lying dead on the lawn in the garden of her home.⁸¹ Who had looked after her in the following years, where she had gone to live, with which relatives, how she later came to attend the Staatliche Augusta Schule in Berlin, were all blanked or hazy in her failing memory. But the image of her father, and his words and appearance as enshrined in books and a few photographs displayed on her bedside table, were very present in old age; the troubles and legacies of Imperial Germany and its immediate aftermath were still highly emotive in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The penalty for the lessons drawn by Paasche from the hanging of four Africans in Mohoro in 1905 still distantly reverberated in a small room in an old peoples' home in the affluent Federal Republic of Germany more than a century later.⁸²

⁸⁰ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (39), James B., (1867) 'Memoiren eines deutschen Juden und Sozialisten', pp. 57–8.

⁸¹ Discussion with Helga Paasche, Bavaria, August 2007.

⁸² I in fact broke off trying to talking to Helga Paasche about her youth and later life precisely because she became so upset at the vivid memory of her father's death, and it seemed more appropriate to switch the conversation to entirely non-personal, more comforting topics.

Those of Helga Paasche's generation, who were subsequently to become the 'first Hitler Youth generation', born during or shortly after the Great War, too young to have consciously experienced or able to remember the war itself, were nevertheless mightily marked by its longer-term consequences. For all those born during or in the early years after the war, the historical context of their childhoods and youth was simply inescapable, even if not always as violent as in Helga Paasche's case. But their reactions to this context, and the longer-term 'lessons' they took from the experiences of these years, varied considerably according to location and social belonging as well as individual personality. This was also a relatively broad age range, spanning those who experienced the Weimar years as a period of early childhood to those who were already teenagers and on the verge of adulthood by the time the Republic came to its eventual chaotic end. For many, at least in the short term, personal awareness of Weimar's problems rendered them peculiarly available for mobilization. While those a few years older, the war-youth generation, were mobilized in the 1920s and were to become key carriers at the forefront of the Nazi project once in power, much of the energy behind the violence of youth in the 1930s would be drawn from these younger cohorts who had a greater or lesser degree of conscious exposure to a period 'before Hitler'.

At the older end of the age range of the first Hitler Youth generation were those born shortly before or during the Great War, shading over from the last cohorts of the war-youth generation. Their experiences of violence in the Weimar years were as people who were teenagers, verging on young adulthood by the time Hitler came to power. For them, in diverse ways, even vicarious experiences of violence could make a major difference in the development of attitudes, with individual variations in response.

Particularly for those young middle-class Germans whose households were still marked by patriarchal authority, the father figure was one to be reckoned with—whether as a powerful continuing influence, or one against whom young people would eventually, in one way or another, rebel. The political stance of the fathers thus carried over indirectly into the developing attitudes and actions of the younger generation. Ruth L., for example, was born in 1914, hence on the older cusp of what was to become the 'first Hitler Youth generation'. She came from a relatively well-to-do bourgeois family in Danzig, in the geopolitical borderlands of Germany where the perceived problems of the Weimar Republic were experienced most acutely. In her autobiographical account written in 1940, Ruth L. allotted a relatively central role to her father, and clearly suggests his formative influence on her own views. After the Great War her father, who worked in civil service administration, was posted first briefly to Magdeburg, and then to Marienwerder in East Prussia. Ruth L. recalled with horror the early years after the War, which she experienced during her father's stint working in Magdeburg:

The short period in Magdeburg fell in the frightful months of the revolution. The Spartacists were abroad in the town, plundering the shops and warehouses and rendering the streets unsafe. We children were not allowed out alone on the streets, and yet even so, often enough we were witnesses to street battles and assaults carried

out by the wild hordes against officers or people from the middle classes. There were scenes that, in their horrific brutality, made a deep impression on me, even though at that time I could barely understand the connections. I heard how my parents talked, how my father stood on the 'black list' of the Spartacists, and my mother was at that time constantly in a state of anxiety, fearing for his life.⁸³

Following the family's move to Marienwerder, Ruth claimed that she and her five siblings 'spent a perfectly carefree youth here'. Yet the political lessons of this borderland area of East Prussia were not lost on her. Her father took her with him on many of his travels in the course of his work as a state official and, on trips to villages on Polish border, sought to rub in the injustice of the loss of German territory to Poland, as well as to make clear his views on the alleged inferiority of the Poles. These views were conveyed in terms which Ruth L. repeated, quite uncritically, in her own descriptions of these trips. She depicted in some detail, for example, a farmstead that had been forced to lose some of its orchard to Poland on the territorial reorganization, and the farmer's family had not been allowed to pick up the apples that had fallen from the tree on the wrong side of the border. The Polish side, on her account, gave ample symbolic evidence of the classical stereotype of Polish 'sloppiness' (*Schlamperei*): 'A barrier closed off the road beyond the village of Gutsch. On the other [Polish] side of the barrier grew grass and weeds . . .'⁸⁴

By the later 1920s, Ruth's family was beginning to be adversely affected by the economic problems of East Prussian agriculture. In the recession following the economic crash of 1929, one of her family's estates was subjected to enforced sale, and was ultimately bought by Poles. Her father expressed the fear that 'Poland is just waiting for the moment to swallow up East Prussia'; he was also of the view that 'in the Reich' most Germans did not understand conditions in the eastern territories.⁸⁵ Ruth L. reported on a cycle trip that she undertook with school friends through East Prussia in the summer of 1931, in which farmers allegedly told her of the border protection troops (*Grenzschutz*)—'border protection or, rather, an advance warning service'—and the fear that Poland would invade and overwhelm East Prussia. Allegedly there were frequent Polish manoeuvres at the border, with particularly widespread rumours in 1932, accompanied by fears that 'an army of 100,000 men, as stipulated by the Versailles Treaty' was not going to be enough to defend German territory. Because of the growing economic crisis Ruth L.'s family had to sell up their 'beautiful house with the glorious park' in Marienwerder and move to a more modest house in Königsberg; they also had to cut down from 'several maidservants' to 'just one' and eventually to merely 'a cleaning lady twice a week'.⁸⁶

Ruth herself now moved to live with an aunt in Hamburg pending a delayed start to her studies (which her father could at this time not afford to support). The

⁸³ HHL, b MS 91 (128), Ruth L., p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–12.

aunt had benefited from a rich inheritance and was apparently devoting herself to doing good: she took Ruth to visit members of the unemployed and poor in Hamburg, opening up Ruth's eyes to poverty in a large city in a way she had never witnessed before. Ruth threw herself into trying to help a family of eight where the father was unemployed, and was aghast at the misery and need all around her, putting her own family background into some perspective. Yet at the same time she was horrified by the political representations on the part of the left. On witnessing 'clashes between Communists and National Socialists', she was most frightened by the former, describing a KPD demonstration in the following terms:

They were very badly dressed, their faces were stubborn, often brutal . . . I always felt a boundless sympathy for poor people . . . But when the communist mobs gathered together I was flooded with fear. You could almost feel the destructive hatred pouring out from these people, hatred against me as well as everyone else who was better off than them . . . Their greeting, the raised fist, seemed to me an expression of primitive force, and quite instinctively I realized with certainty that the fate of my Fatherland should never be allowed to fall into the hands of these people.

Among the communists there were also many people who came from circles other than the working class. There were many educated people among them, women too, who threw themselves into working for a Communist Party victory. I could understand these people least of all. The groundless hatred of a workers' movement without any rights, their bitterness, their desire for revenge, all of that I could understand among those living in need and misery. But the educated had, in my opinion, no reason to put the future of Germany into the hands of primitive violence.⁸⁷

Interestingly, Ruth saw the violence of the communists as 'primitive', against which the imposition of some form of civilizing order was required. The competing right-wing radicals, the National Socialist Party, by contrast, appeared to have given Ruth an impression of forceful security: the National Socialists potentially offered protection against the 'primitive violence' of the communists, and some hope of salvation of Germany from the present troubles:

From their marches and speeches one gained the impression of a strong will and a united power that wanted not to tear down but rather to build up . . . At the same time it was necessary to move with absolute ruthlessness against those elements who carried the seeds of destruction and who had led to the downfall of the German people.⁸⁸

Ruth's comments echoed the views of many people who turned to the violence of the Nazis as a form of 'protection' against something even worse—in line with the Nazis' own self-portrayal and claim to exercising merely 'defensive' violence, both then and later. Very many, but far from all members of Ruth's generation experienced the Nazi movement in terms of the promise of the restoration of 'order' by meeting violence with violence.

In part, of course, differences in political, cultural, and religious milieu played a major role in how people responded to the turbulence of the Weimar period. But

⁸⁷ HHL, b MS 91 (128), Ruth L., pp. 22, 23–4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 25–6.

individual reactions even within one family could be very different; so too could be the ways in which children from the same family continued or broke with their patriarchal home background.

A somewhat contrasting case is that of Hildegard B., who was one year older than Ruth L, having been born in 1913, and whose fascinating and ultimately tragic story reveals much about the tensions of the time and the ways in which broader historical forces could play out in individual lives. The daughter of a respectable Berlin professor, Hildegard B. grew up in a highly ordered household. Her mother died prematurely during the war, when she was two; her father was deeply committed to his work, and out of what she describes as modest means—the legacy from her mother was lost in the inflation of 1923—they were able to afford one maidservant (*Dienstmädchen*) and a separate study for her father, who was to be undisturbed during his work. He was very much a man of the imperial period: he never moved or talked outside the narrow status group of those he considered his equals, and was given to uttering his views or supporting his own position in brief aphorisms: ‘The woman belongs in the home’; ‘I am a Prussian state servant’; ‘I have sworn my oath to the Kaiser.’⁸⁹ Looking back at her 1920s childhood from the vantage point of 1940, Hildegard was only too aware that later far worse was to come; but at the time, the prevailing view in her family home was that of strong critique of Weimar conditions and a yearning for the restoration of order on imperial lines:

Neither the Republic nor the Kaiser meddled in peacetime in people’s private lives to the extent that the Nazi [*sic*] did. But at that time I did not know that, and was genuinely outraged about the evil people who had robbed us of the Kaiser and the pomp and power of the German Empire in favour of some dark criminals who had consorted with their foreign counterparts and had concluded the Versailles Treaty, which was why we were having such a hard life. Most younger people in Germany at that time believed something along those lines, since they heard this at home and in school and never got around to checking whether or not such assertions were right.⁹⁰

Hildegard’s father was so deeply convinced of the old status order that he found it well-nigh impossible to accept the reversals of authority brought by the new Republic. On one occasion, his sense of the ‘right ordering’ of the social world even overcame his equally strong sense of duty, as Hildegard recalled:

Once, I still remember, some Minister of the Interior was supposed to turn up to an academic ceremony, and my father, who happened at that time to hold a senior position in the faculty, was supposed to greet him; but, against his usual sense of duty, he took sick leave and arranged for a deputy to take his place. The Minister was formerly a working class man who had made a career with the Social Democrats—I can’t now remember his name—and my father simply could not comprehend that this man was now supposed to be his superior. He didn’t know how to talk to him. For him, a Minister was only ever an aristocrat, superior to him by virtue of birth, since in

⁸⁹ HHL, b MS 91 (33), ‘Hildegard B.’ (pseudonym), p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Prussia in former times only aristocrats became Ministers. This little episode has stuck in my memory so because it was one of the few occasions on which I saw my father in a conflict of conscience. He was otherwise always a person who simply followed a direct course of action, for whom in any given situation there was no other course. This simple and perhaps rather schematic and militaristic way of thinking, as it was seen, of which these circles were so proud, belongs to those characteristics that were drummed into the Prussian people by their kings across the centuries. I simply could not understand that Father could ever dither and have doubts about anything. But that began to occur ever more frequently from 1932 onwards.⁹¹

In Hildegard's view—looking back on her teenage years in the Weimar Republic, from the perspective of a 27-year-old in 1940—her father's experiences were fairly typical of his generation and social milieu. In the case of her family, and for those of many in similar situations, parental disapproval of the new order was not merely rooted in one's own social discomfiture, but compounded by the closure of previously traditional career routes for less than gifted male offspring:

For all these status groups that were so influential in Germany, all these officers, officials, teachers, now felt that their prestige was under threat. For the first time they faced existential problems that they had never previously known. My own brother was after all not the only one who in earlier times would have been put into a Cadet School, and who would certainly have become a competent officer rather than running around in dubious company.⁹²

Rather than being whisked off to a cadet school to be groomed as an officer, a route more or less closed off by the reduced size of the army after the Versailles settlement, Hildegard's brother 'Fritz' (as she called him, to preserve the anonymity of her account) had drifted on at school, and fallen in with a group of heavy-drinking SA members; he duly himself became a member of a storm-trooper section.

In contrast to Ruth L.'s perceptions in Hamburg, Hildegard did not see the violent activities of the National Socialist movement on the streets of Berlin as in any sense a potential path to the 'restoration of order'. Nevertheless, given his conservative nationalist critiques of Weimar, Hildegard's father found it difficult to discipline or condemn his son:

Fritz went as a sixteen-year-old to the group of storm troopers now called S.A. Father was not at all happy about this, but the troops were at that time nationalist, and that meant, so it was believed, that they wanted to restore the old monarchy, and so Father couldn't say anything against it.⁹³

Moreover, in Hildegard's perception her father held the somewhat sexist view that, while his daughter should behave 'appropriately' to her status, it was possible for a boy to 'sow his wild oats':

Although he [Fritz] had not yet finished with school, he was always running around agitating and electioneering, he always wore the brown uniform although it didn't suit

⁹¹ HHL, b MS 91 (33), 'Hildegard B.' (pseudonym), p. 10.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

him at all, and he came home at ever more irregular hours. He was involved in all sorts of brawls and held the wildest speeches. This annoyed me far more than it did Father, since he was of the view that boys could be allowed to get away with all manner of things as long as the core was not rotten.⁹⁴

Hildegard's perceptive comments draw attention also to the conflicting issues and problematic sense of social status on the part of her father. On the one hand, the disorderly behaviour of the brownshirts was anathema to her father, whose political and gender views overrode, in this case, his social distaste; but on the other hand, it was precisely this semi-legitimate transgressing of the boundaries, this officially sanctioned relief from previously weighty social taboos, which in part attracted Fritz and many others to the rowdy, youthful, Nazi movement. Hildegard recalled that her father also did not approve, but failed to enforce his objections, when Fritz brought his new SA comrades home with him:

Most of them were older than him, and all of them drank a great deal and held wild speeches. It was not at all the sort of society that should have belonged in our house. Listening to them, it sounded as if they did nothing else all day except slaughter Jews and rape girls. I am convinced that it only sounded like this, since most of them did not look nearly so dangerous. They puffed themselves up, as boys like to do, and for them National Socialism meant that the state and respectable society allowed them to. I believe that in general a major role was played by the fact that National Socialism let so many people to do things they wanted to do, and that otherwise were not actually allowed.⁹⁵

Hildegard herself, however, experienced increasing estrangement from her brother and the company he was now keeping, an estrangement exacerbated by her own social distaste for the rough speech and apparently crude expressions current among these circles, which clashed with her own sense of decency and orderly behaviour:

But at that time I was frightened by the way these boys talked, and I did not like being together with them. Perhaps I am not very shy by nature, rather by upbringing, but I had a very clear feeling that these people were not right for me, and I was uncomfortable with them. When I was then alone with my brother, Fritz used to ridicule me, asking whether I was too cowardly to trust myself among German youngsters, or whether perhaps I was even going with a Jewish boy. I don't want to repeat the original expressions that he always liked to use in this context—and anyway they are in the slang of Berlin [lower class] districts, and I would have first to try to translate them into respectable German [*ins Hochdeutsche*], which I simply can't do—but to him they probably sounded very impressive and grown-up.⁹⁶

Within one household, then, there were three different reactions to the 'new times'. While the father was exceedingly discomfited, but rendered incapable of strategic action—retreating into feigned illness rather than shaking the hand of a socially inferior but officially superior functionary, looking on but unable to exert any discipline over his son—the teenage brother threw himself into the enthusiasms of

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

a movement which seemed to promise adventure, a purpose in life, and a new 'adult' status through exaggerated claims of sexual prowess and violent deeds. Hildegard, caught in the constrained and tense atmosphere between these two poles, felt acutely discomfited. Yet she was also in some respects herself briefly a beneficiary of the new age, being able to enrol as a student in Berlin University and to a small degree rebel—or at least assert herself—against her father's wishes. Nevertheless, not long after Hitler came to power, despite—indeed even because of—this particular household configuration, Hildegard was soon to find herself a victim of the new regime, first betrayed and denounced by her own brother and then callously cast out by her father.⁹⁷

Those at the younger end of what was to become the first Hitler Youth generation often only had a somewhat derivative sense of the problems of the period, which were nevertheless very directly transmitted to them through their parents' actions and strategies. Their very existence and family structure was often connected directly to the historical conditions of the time even in their own much later accounts of their lives. Amalie H. (born 1922), for example, even when interviewed in her eighties in 2005, chose to introduce herself precisely in terms of the historical circumstances: 'I was born in 1922 in the inflation, that's already when it all started, didn't it.'⁹⁸ Similarly, Brigitte D. (born 1924), interviewed also in 2005, on being asked if she had any brothers and sisters, responded:

No, I had—was a single child, had no brothers or sisters, it was after all bad times then, my year of birth falls in the time of the inflation, you know, women went to collect the men at the factory gate in order to take the money and go shopping immediately because the next day it would already be worth even less. And so you didn't want any more children, that, well, that was after all the world economic crisis, in the twenties, that's why I remained an only child.⁹⁹

Clearly in this case the anxiety of parents about their capacity to feed additional children did not end with the inflation itself, and affected their reproductive behaviour even in the years when things started to improve. Many also recalled the difficulties their parents experienced in making ends meet, and continuing uncertainties even in the few 'good years'. Parental authority was constrained by economic crises as well as by ailing, psychologically or physically wounded fathers. For those members of the first Hitler Youth generation born in the early to mid-1920s, then, there was a direct, often even bodily, awareness of what were the problems to which, for some, Hitler seemed in the first instance to offer 'solutions' while for others redemption was later sought in left-wing causes. They were thus perhaps peculiarly receptive to messages of redemption offered in the coming years; and many of them, from whichever class background, experienced as teenagers the ways in which the return to full employment in the 1930s affected their own

⁹⁷ See further Ch. 4 below, pp. 104–6.

⁹⁸ Interview with 'Amalie H.' (not her real name), August 2005.

⁹⁹ Interview with 'Brigitte D.' (not her real name), August 2005.

family's fortunes, even if at the very basic level of the father having a regular income again after years of difficulty.

In this direct personal awareness of the crises of Weimar, however much this was gained from a child's-eye perspective, these cohorts differed crucially from those who were born in the closing years of Weimar, the '1929ers'. Most of the latter generation, who were to prove so vital in the attempts to build a new and better Germany after 1945, had conscious awareness of little or nothing before their socialization under Hitler; in this sense, the 1929ers, who were effectively a 'second Hitler Youth generation', not only had different experiences of the Hitler Youth organization itself in the later stages of the Third Reich when membership became compulsory for them, but also had from the outset, from the conditions in which their lives began, a rather different degree of receptiveness to the Nazi message. Although none of this was as yet preordained in the later Weimar years, the timing of birth during this short period did make a quite significant difference to the impact and longer-term significance of later experiences.

Experiences in the 1920s, in the long shadows of the Great War and in the later context of economic depression and political strife, predisposed Germans by the later 1920s and early 1930s to sharply polarized political positions. Which segments rose to the surface, and how people in different positions were constrained or chose to act and lead their lives, was very much a matter of politics. It was, then, subsequent circumstances—the character of the two succeeding dictatorial regimes—that determined which strands would rise to prominence, which social types would achieve historical visibility under different conditions, and who would be marginalized, suppressed or cast out. Meanwhile, the political and economic instability of the Weimar years provided key background experiences for those who were young at this time, predisposing at least a significant proportion of them to be more ardent and enthusiastic followers of Nazism during the subsequent decade than many of those who were already adults well before Hitler came to power.

However important age at the time may have been for later predispositions and susceptibility to the Nazi message, the tidal wave which swept Weimar Germany as its political system collapsed in face of severe economic and constitutional crises cannot be reduced to generational shifts. Carl P. was, as ever, a perceptive observer. He commented on his impressions as he travelled between Silesia and the Posen area in 1930 on SPD business:

In the summer of 1930 things looked sad in the German provinces. When I went to Vietz I saw that my party colleagues, but also my opponents, had changed . . . Businessmen stood with concern in front of the doors of their enterprises and asked me anxiously if things would soon get better. Former competitors . . . had been badly affected by the crisis; they complained to me about what they were suffering, and many broke down. Somewhat uncertainly Jewish tradespeople inquired whether there were swastikas elsewhere too; after 1924, they had only recently popped up again in this area. The unemployed stood around on the streets and in the squares, also in front of the employment office. They had a different expression from other people, their compartment too was different, and when I passed by I could feel how they

were looking at me and I felt a sense of shame that I was well dressed and not downtrodden.¹⁰⁰

As the depression deepened, so the Nazi movement grew, with a degree of status and a place in the world playing a role for some of those in social distress.

Across the country as a whole it was not primarily those who were actually unemployed, but predominantly those in fear of unemployment and loss of social status—the lower middle classes in small towns and rural areas, particularly in the Protestant, northern and eastern provinces of Germany—who disproportionately flocked to support the Nazi movement. Catholics generally tended to remain loyal to their own Catholic Centre Party. Much of the urban working class remained left-wing in orientation and voting behaviour, although, given the sheer size of the working class in this by now highly industrialized society, even a relatively small percentage of working class votes could yield quite high absolute numbers as far as electoral support for the NSDAP was concerned. But even among the dispossessed, the Nazis made inroads, and among what were perceived as the ‘rougher’ classes of youth—a fact which was particularly significant as far as their capacity for violent action was concerned, as Carl P. observed in the provinces of eastern Germany:

Fresh-baked National Socialists admitted to me personally why they had turned their backs on the KP [Communist Party]; they were unemployed, family life had been destroyed by having to live in want, and now the Nazis were coming as the saviours and offering them an SA uniform, 50 Marks and service in the SA barracks with free food and one Mark pocket money daily! It is interesting that, along with other properties, houses that belonged to the I.G. Farben industry have been turned into this sort of SA barracks. Anyway it is only this sort of conversion to National Socialism among a considerable portion of the working class that has for the first time given Adolf Hitler the punch that he needs to maintain his position on the streets. Up till then we had taken pleasure in chasing the grammar school and petty cash kids with swastika decorations into fear and terror, if they started to become too cheeky; but from now on it looked rather different.¹⁰¹

And historians would concur with Carl P.’s further observation that Hitler seemed to be offering something for everyone, and hence did to an extent succeed in garnering support across a relatively broad social spectrum, even if disproportionately more among some social groups than others. There was inevitably something of a snowball effect. As Carl P. commented:

Everyone now ran around with a party badge and declared himself already from a distance. The whole people seemed to be in some way wearing uniform and fell little by little into a frenzy of political passion. I had at that time the feeling that I was living through times similar to people in the Middle Ages when the plague raged. At that time, so the Chroniclers report, it happened that the still living danced upon the

¹⁰⁰ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (174), Carl P., p. 30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2.

dead. Here a despairing and starving people was dancing on the corpse of German prosperity.¹⁰²

The landscape was transformed as people flocked to the cause in terms simply of visual signs of belonging:

Now I had the impression that Germany consisted only at all any more in swastika flags, brown and black uniforms and grotesque, murderous faces, of the same ugly colour as the trousers of the SA. . . .

These people were so easy to steer! Their need was great, so great that there was no one who could at this moment give them anything more than words of consolation. So they became enthusiastic about appearances: a uniform gave a man the value that daily life could not give him, the 'watch' in the SA barracks or in the Reichsbanner hostelry lent him the appearance of importance, the political mottos of the day called him to their defence or implementation and gave him a sense of being valued in action. And just like the man, so also the woman. Her own ragged dress, old-fashioned hat, down-at-heel shoes, are covered up by the party badge, and the bright flags shining out of the windows throws a cheering light into her poverty . . . Whoever can offer more in terms of external appearances works more strongly on the undecided, who let themselves be captivated by the sheer quantity of what is on offer. Oh, it was so very simple, so simple, that the conquest of power was only a question of the propagandistic penetration of the country, but not a question of reason and reflection.¹⁰³

But Carl P. was not merely an observer of events; he was also highly politically active and increasingly in trouble for his work on behalf of the SPD.

However much aspects of the political and economic chaos affected all age groups, it was again young adults, particularly those of the war-youth generation, who were most readily mobilized into the active exercise of violence in conditions verging on civil war of this time. Udo K., for example, who was a student in Breslau from 1930, describes the way in which young people were drawn increasingly into street brawls following political arguments which got out of hand, and were mobilized to join one or another of the array of paramilitary groupings: the communist *Rote Frontkämpferbund* (Red Veterans League), the overwhelmingly social democratic *Reichsbanner Schwarz-rot-gold* (Reich Banner black-red-gold), and the right-wing nationalist *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet), as well as the Nazi SA.¹⁰⁴ On the nationalist end of the spectrum, Udo K. also continued his paramilitary training under the secret guidance of the 'Black Army', supported by local weighty individuals and the civilian authorities nationally and regionally.¹⁰⁵ In a period of rising unemployment, effective political deadlock and rule by presidential decree under the increasingly senile Hindenburg, it was the right-ring groupings that appeared to have the upper hand as far as support in high places was concerned.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁴ LVR, Nachlaß K., I. 208 'Erlebt—Davongekommen. Erinnerungen. Erlebt—überlebt. Erster Teil 1910–1948', pp. 66–7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6, 60–1.

In the summer of 1930, Carl P. came into possession of materials concerning the paramilitary organization of right-wing youth in Silesia. The local state authorities were determined that he should not make this material public:

When I came into possession of material concerning the secret training of young people in nationalist circles, I was ceremoniously informed by Count Degenfeld, the German nationalist Landrat of Reichenbach, who was instructed by the Commandant of the Fortress of Glatz on behalf of the Social Democratic President, that I was to desist from publication, otherwise the charge of national treason would be brought against me.

When it is a matter of the dear, good Army, the ponderous and cumbersome Prussian-German administrative apparatus could work surprisingly quickly. In this case the Landrat rang me up before I had even opened the letter containing the material, since it was of course very important that the Army, with the support of the Prussian administration, should secretly be training nationalist youth, especially as it was graciously allowing a few Reichsbanner people to participate too.¹⁰⁶

Paramilitary organization of youth was not the only issue in the area, and once Carl P. came into possession of compromising material over corruption in high places among the Silesian aristocracy his life came under threat. Further incidents led both to court proceedings and to right-wing attempts to assassinate him.

Carl P.'s account of the attack on him, planned for 8 August 1932, suggests a degree of continuity with earlier troubles in this area, only a few years beforehand. One Kurt J. had been given the task of disposing of him, using a bomb from army stocks:

He himself was the 'Press Advisor of the SA subdivision Middle Silesia-South'; in other words, he was the leader of Cell G., that was the Feme-Organisation [summary justice organization] of the NSDAP in this area . . . My murder . . . had been ordered by the party leadership.

. . . In general it turned out that the Silesian aristocracy did not have entirely clean fingers in this affair. Figures like Count Pückler-Burghaus and Count Hochburg made a less than pleasant impression in the Special Court in Schweidnitz. However: I had received from the wife of a Silesian magnate material about malpractices concerning the use of the moneys which had been made available through the 'Help for the East' programme; that was embarrassing, since my publications threatened to compromise further circles. And in the question of saving their own skins the feudal overlords were never very picky and choosy.¹⁰⁷

By the time the NSDAP actually came into power in January 1933, Carl P. had to flee for his life. He succeeded in crossing the border to Switzerland on 21 March 1933 calculating, correctly, the precise moment on the infamous 'Day of Potsdam'—the day of the celebratory opening and swearing in of Hitler's new government by President Hindenburg at Potsdam's garrison church—when border officials would have their mind on other matters:

¹⁰⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (174), Carl P., p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

It went quite smoothly; for in Germany at this precise time, as my friends—women, of course—had calculated, everyone was standing to attention to mark the moment that General Field Marshall von Hindenburg stood at the grave of Frederick the Great with his ‘Bohemian corporal’ [Hitler] and engaged in a national tearjerker. So of course the border guards had neither the time nor desire to take a closer look at the man with a brief case—I had taken nothing else with me—and dressed in traditional green Alpine clothing.

That was my farewell to Germany.

... I hardly need to say ... that I was happy ... to be finally among normal people again.¹⁰⁸

Millions of others remained, however, within the borders of a state that was now to be ruled with an extraordinary combination of violence, terror, and adulation, the consequences of which would throw a shadow far longer than the twelve-year existence of the ‘Thousand Year Reich’ itself.

Speaking of ‘the German as compliant and cheap cannon fodder’, Carl P. had suggested that: ‘Adolf Hitler offered him hope for a golden future; he dangled before him paradise on earth. The despairing had faith in him and faith can move mountains.’¹⁰⁹ In June 1932, Friedrich M., a theologian, teacher, and professor, wrote a little position paper purely to clarify his own thoughts, entitled ‘My position on National Socialism’. Having explored the reasons why he himself would never fall for National Socialism—dislike of racism and antisemitism, disapproval of the use of force rather than discussion as a means of resolving differences—he commented on the way in which young people were flocking to the cause:

That young people fall for Hitler, I understand; for youth always runs after resounding words. But I fear for the time when their honest faith ends in disenchantment. And this time must come, since the Party is promising the impossible. Those who are disenchanted either become dulled or throw themselves into the opposite cause.¹¹⁰

The views of this committed Christian, who viewed the rise of Nazism with some horror, as well as those of Carl P., who was lucky enough to get out in time, were to prove only too prescient.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹¹⁰ Kempowski BIO, 5482, Friedrich M. (1875–1947) ‘Meine Stellung zum Nationalsozialismus’.

4

Divided generations: State violence and the formation of ‘two worlds’ in Nazi Germany

Shortly after Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of Germany, the by now upcoming and young lawyer Dr F.R. moved lodgings in Berlin. He came home one day in February 1933 to find his landlady’s daughter, then aged fourteen, in a terrible state. While at school that day, she had participated in bullying one of her classmates, a girl by the name of Helga. According to the girl’s account, Helga had been wrestled to the floor, beaten and jumped on, simply for being Jewish, a newly relevant point of stigmatization. Thus trampled by her classmates, Helga had cried and screamed with pain, and eventually the girls decided it was time to release her. But at this point a teacher, who had been observing the fracas, intervened and asked: ‘Whose side are my German girls on?’ Thus encouraged—indeed effectively told by a person in authority to continue tormenting their friend—the schoolgirls resumed jumping up and down on Helga. Eventually Helga stopped screaming and fell silent. She had then been taken to hospital, where she died. That evening, back at home, the landlady’s daughter was utterly distraught about what had happened, crying and repeating over and over again ‘How could we do such a thing!’¹

This was a phrase which was to echo a millionfold over the decades after 1945—although often accompanied by the self-exculpatory plea that one had ‘known nothing about it’. But up until the military defeat of the Nazi regime in May 1945, such behaviour, such violence, and such acquiescence in the sponsoring voice of authority, sufficient to suppress any rising qualms, was to be repeated over and over and over again.

This small and deeply tragic incident epitomizes so much of the way in which Nazism was ‘possible’, and illustrates at a very early date the ways in which Nazism was so often enacted and experienced: the designation and stigmatization of victims; unleashing of violence as a means of dominant-group identification and expression of superiority; enactment by people who would arguably never, on their own, have been capable of becoming ‘perpetrators’; active encouragement by authorities, who gave some form of official ‘legitimation’, sanctioned from above; and often, too, a degree of individual disquiet, even horror, when, too late, those involved realized the full consequences of their actions.

¹ Harvard Houghton Library (henceforth HHL), b MS Ger 91 (184), Dr F. R., pp. 37–8.

Violence was all around from the very outset of the Nazi regime, experienced by innumerable opponents and victims, and visible for everyone with eyes to see. Even if the Third Reich had unexpectedly come to an end in the summer of 1939, before the wartime atrocities of the *Einsatzgruppen* (special execution squads) and the mass murders of the extermination camps, acts of violence and killing on an almost unthinkable scale had already been committed and innumerable suicides had been precipitated among victims who despaired and saw no other way out.² As one German-American businesswoman, of mixed Jewish and non-Jewish background, later commented:

The brutality of the Nazis beggars description and is hard to believe. In 1933, in Epstein im Taunus, a small town near Frankfurt, the Nazis tied an opponent to a cart, dragged him thru [*sic*] the streets until he was dead. The culprits were slightly punished for this deed.³

It is indeed almost remarkable, in view of later developments, that the 'culprits' were 'punished' at all; within a rather short time, such atrocities would be beyond the law entirely, indeed would become the desired practices of Hitler's Third Reich.

Hitler's programme for the so-called 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'—the attempted mass murder of all Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe, alongside many other 'racial' and political victims of Nazism—has, for very good reasons, overshadowed the history of the Third Reich. Given later patterns of self-exculpations among Germans who claimed they 'never knew', it is worth first making the effort to understand the period before the war in its own terms, to see how radically those living through even the peacetime years of the 1930s were affected by the progressive nazification of German society.

While some were able to sustain their blinkered view of Nazi Germany's alleged achievements in the peacetime years, murderous violence was built into the regime from the outset. What was new after 30 January 1933 was not the sheer existence, nor even the massively increased prevalence of violence as a political tool, but rather the rapid monopolization of force by the Nazi authorities, with the continuing but by no means instant or straightforward demotion of countervailing institutions of law and order, the progressive capitulation to Nazi rule on the part of traditional conservative nationalists, and the radical suppression of opposition. The trail of events in the spring and early summer of 1933—the Reichstag fire of 27 February, the mass arrests and clampdown on political opponents, the less-than-free elections of 5 March, the strategies of intimidation, cooption or suppression of political rivals, the famous 'Day of Potsdam' and the Enabling Law of late March, the abolition of trade unions in May, and the creation of a one-party state in June—is well known. So too is the chronology of the progressive concentration of the institutions of coercion through the 1930s, with renegotiations of the roles of the SA and the SS after the so-called 'Röhm Putsch' or 'Night of the Long Knives' in

² On suicides in Nazi Germany more generally, see Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (3) Erna A., English original, p. 9.

late June 1934, the cooption of the Army culminating in its oath of personal obedience to Hitler following the death of President Hindenburg in early August 1934, and the rise of Heinrich Himmler as effective leader of an increasingly centralized and coordinated system of terror, including the regular police forces and Gestapo, from 1936 onwards, achieving its most murderous form in the activities coordinated by the Reich Security Head Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) from 1939.⁴

Yet, for all the familiarity of the chronology of terror, debates continue to rage over the ways in which ‘ordinary Germans’ related to this system. Such debates have often been framed in terms of rather simple dichotomies: coercion and consent, repression and support, terror and commitment, resistance and conformity, although historians, whatever their positions on these debates, generally acknowledge the ambiguities of behaviour and attitudes across a wide and ever changing spectrum.⁵ Once explored in more depth, it becomes clear that we are dealing not with binary oppositions, but with a far more complex picture entirely, in which outward behaviours and inner states of mind were to varying degrees, and often entirely, at odds with each other. While outward patterns of behaviour can relatively readily be extrapolated from the sources, the real difficulty lies in getting at the ‘inner states’—and at the ways in which people’s perceptions, strategies, and sense of self changed over time.

Here, it would seem that an alternative approach is needed. Rather than—or perhaps in addition to—focusing on the distinctive combinations of terror and obedience, or congruence of interests and commitment to ideology, or social backgrounds and personal motives, it may be helpful to explore the Third Reich (and indeed other dictatorships, and not only dictatorships) with an eye as to how people adopted and learned how to play new roles; and how they developed the newly appropriate ‘manners of speaking and acting’ required of them under the new circumstances. For some, these were never lightly worn; for others, they were readily assimilated into an enhanced repertoire of standard attitudes, stock phrases, and routinized behaviour patterns, all of which could be selectively drawn upon as the occasion demanded; for a few, such patterns could become more or less second nature, with relatively unthinking commitment encouraged and confirmed by informal repetition among salient peer groups, enforced participation in mass rallies, party and state organizations and activities, and officially endorsed emotional

⁴ This is not the place to provide references to even a small selection of the relevant secondary literature. But see for recent overviews of relevant areas and guides to further reading: Jane Caplan (ed.), *Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (London: Penguin, 2006); Dietmar Süß and Winfried Süß (eds.), *Das ‘Dritte Reich’: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Pantheon, 2008).

⁵ For differing approaches to this area, see e.g. Eric Johnson, *The Nazi Terror: Gestapo, Jews and ordinary Germans* (London: John Murray, 2000); and Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). A still classic early contribution to the debates, emphasizing dissonance and ambivalence, is Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich. Bavaria, 1933–45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); see also, for the role of the charismatic *Führer* as a key integrative factor, Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

reactions to public events. It is always extremely difficult, under any regime, for ordinary people to 'speak truth to power', or even to step out against what peer group pressures dictate by way of the acceptable spectrum of attitudes and fashions at any given time; under the Third Reich, such attempts could be literally suicidal. 'Enactment', rather than commitment, may be at least one of the keys to understanding the avalanche that rolled over Germany from the very beginning of 1933, carrying with it not only those buried and crushed by the snow and ice but also those floating on the surface and riding high on the crest of the new wave, until the absolute destruction of the landscape eventually engulfed them all, leaving many victims and only a few dazed survivors.

Thus what was also new, and far less well conceptualized by historians to date, are the ways in which the Nazi project was assimilated and enacted by extraordinarily large numbers of people.⁶ Many Germans were relatively rapidly mobilized—for whatever combinations of reasons—to behave as though they believed in the cause, whatever their individual disagreements over particular issues or residual sense of inner distance from the ideology may have been. And these widespread patterns of conformist behaviour and mass mobilization—without necessarily any accompanying individual motivation—had massive consequences, not only for the conformists and careerists who rode the Nazi tide, but also, more fundamentally and eventually for millions fatally, for those on the receiving end of Nazi oppression. While the former found ways of developing a new 'social self', whatever their degrees of inner distance from their behaviour, the sheer physical survival of the latter was existentially threatened. No one could live through this period of history unaffected by world historical developments; and there was a relationship between capitulation and proactive conformity, on the one hand, and the capacity of the regime to put into effect the machinery of murder, on the other. The notion of 'bystander' is, with very few exceptions, predicated on a fundamental misapprehension of the way in which Nazism was not merely imposed by force on, but also pre-emptively carried by, millions of those living through these times.

The Third Reich was a regime which was imposed and sustained by force; but it was also one which succeeded in mobilizing significant sections of the population in such a way that, with startling speed, German society was fundamentally transformed from within: there was a rapid, progressive, 'racialization' and brutalization of German society from which no one could stand aside. While traditional distinctions of class and status did not disappear, new lines of stratification on 'racial' lines were introduced, not merely as an 'official' matter of law, policy, and ideology, but also as a matter of everyday behaviour in situations well beyond the sight of any authorities, within a matter of months. 'Politics' thus not only penetrated every last area of German society during this time through the

⁶ But see recently Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), which on the basis of a comparable attempt to evaluate subjective material from diaries, letters, and autobiographical writings, frequently comes to somewhat similar interpretations to those suggested here, but tends to cling to a notion of ideology rather than enactment.

monopolization of violence; it was also carried, enacted, and in part formed by the ways in which people internalized and proactively played, or at least ‘mimed’—and in too few instances refused to play, or subverted—the parts officially scripted for them. This delicate balance is exceedingly complex to apprehend and describe, and underlies repeated debates among historians about the balance between terror and consent in the Third Reich. Yet without understanding how the two were intrinsically linked, it is impossible to grasp the ways in which Nazi society fundamentally affected the lives of those who lived through it, and was also carried and sustained by the apparently spontaneous actions and behaviour of large numbers of people towards others—behaviour which, often unsupported by appropriate beliefs, many were later to disown.

Within this context, new opportunities were opened up for those young careerists who were willing to ride the tide; and in order to make a career at all within the new state, those on the brink of adulthood had to make the relevant compromises or show the right kinds of attitudes and attributes. Among younger cohorts, pools of enthusiasm for a better future could be whipped up into a frenzy in service of ‘the cause’. The rise to prominence of the war-youth generation and the ‘first Hitler Youth generation’ as carriers of the Nazi system and readily mobilized troops for the exercise of violence was a by-product of the very nature of that system: both dynamic and constraining, fostering certain kinds of behaviour and subduing others, producing the very social types it needed and forcing the rest into a stultified silence, sometimes sullen, sometimes agonized, rarely capable of breaking out of the repressive mould. But no one, absolutely no one could in the long term escape being affected by the nature of this state. And it made a massive mark on the character of German society, only somewhat refracted by issues of generation. We therefore have to start with exploring the ways in which German society was ‘nazified from within’, before looking at some of the more startling generational features of the era.

I. ‘HIDDEN VIOLENCE’? THE PROGRESSIVE ‘NAZIFICATION’ OF GERMAN SOCIETY

Within hours of Hitler’s coming to power Germans were jostling to reposition themselves—a repositioning which involved a more or less far-reaching redefinition of political, social, and ‘racial’ identities. This process of regrouping, realigning of social selves according to the now inescapable criterion of ‘race’, was in fact a form of ‘hidden violence’, not merely hurting those newly defined outsiders who registered its effects at the time but also, insidiously, producing over a longer period one of the key preconditions which ultimately made mass murder possible. The nazification of German society from within accompanied, and often even pre-empted, the more familiar history of the imposition of antisemitic policies from above.

The major phases of racist legislation and policy of course provided the official framework and external impetus for this nazification of informal social relations. The boycott of Jewish shops and businesses on 1 April 1933, in which SA thugs

stood menacingly beside shop windows smeared with antisemitic slogans and prevented 'Aryan' customers from entering, was the first major illustration of the kinds of brutal activism favoured by Goebbels and radical sections of the NSDAP; and it was far from popular.⁷ The euphemistically entitled 'Law for the Restitution of a Professional Civil Service' which followed a few days later, on 7 April 1933, excluding those of Jewish descent or the 'wrong' political opinions (socialists, communists) from jobs in the professional areas of the German *Beamtenum*, a far wider category of those employed by the state than that connoted by the narrower sense of the term civil service in English, provided the classic illustration of an attempted 'legalization' of discrimination, following tactical retreat from antisemitic measures which, in their more nakedly brutal form, had not gone down well with the wider German public and threatened to have adverse effects on Hitler's popular standing. By the early summer of 1933 the programme of mass compulsory sterilization of those deemed, on spuriously 'scientific', 'eugenic' grounds, to be unfit to reproduce soon demonstrated the regime's broader agenda of producing a 'racially' defined 'healthy national community' (*gesunde Volksgemeinschaft*) with implications for communities well beyond those covered by the 'Jewish question'. By the mid-1930s, the classic swing of the pendulum between brutality on the streets, favoured by Nazi radicals but unpopular with the wider public, and the 'legalization' of discrimination which seemed more broadly acceptable, was evidenced again. Rising violence on the streets during the summer of 1935 was soon followed by the Nuremberg Laws announced at the Nazi Party Conference in September, distinguishing between fully Jewish and various 'mixed-race' categories, and awarding second-class status, with all the attendant disadvantages and discrimination, to those now ousted from full German citizenship. Antisemitic measures continued, escalating rapidly through 1938, cumulatively robbing Jews of their rights, their possessions, their livelihoods, and their freedom of movement, making it ever less possible for them to live on German soil, even, in some cases—as for those caught in the worst violence of November pogrom of 1938, or incarcerated in concentration camps in its wake—to live at all.⁸ State-sponsored discrimination and violence was evident all around from the moment of Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933, even if, during this period of 'peacetime', it had not yet taken the ultimate form of the intended murder of every single person categorized as Jewish across Nazi-occupied Europe. Such was the broader context of political ideology and action in which informal social relations were radically transformed and personal identities renegotiated.

Antisemitism was, then, of course a matter of state policy. It was often also a matter of local authorities proactively introducing measures in advance of and

⁷ See e.g. the contemporary comments in Bernd Stöver, *Berichte über die Lage in Deutschland. Die Meldungen der Gruppe Neu Beginn aus dem Dritten Reich 1933–1936* (Bonn: Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1996), p. 575.

⁸ There is neither space nor need here to recount these developments in detail, since there are many excellent accounts available; see particularly Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The years of persecution, 1933–1939* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); and Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

irrespective of dictates from above.⁹ But the progressive enactment of the Nazi project of constructing what was deemed to be a racially defined *Volksgemeinschaft* was also effected through patterns of informal social relations, often proactively and frequently going way beyond what might have been 'purely' required by law.¹⁰ Had this not been the case, the pattern of developments might have been very different; unfortunately this remains in the realm of the hypothetical, not that of the historian.

If the state had impinged on people's lives with ever greater intensity from the Great War onwards, it was now utterly inescapable; a renegotiation of identity was inevitable, whether one welcomed it or not. As Martha L., a working-class woman, married with one son, summarized the situation: up until 1933 she and her partly Jewish husband, both committed socialists, had been able to live

purely in the service of the German workers' movement and our own family . . . [W]e were actually contented, despite frequent periods of unemployment, that is, we knew we were masters of our own fate and could make our own decisions about ourselves and our lives. But with one fell swoop all this changed. Namely from January 1933 life in Germany generally became less peaceful, and the life of every single citizen was no longer determined by himself but by the state.¹¹

Hidden violence, at an informal level beyond state policies and open practices of physical violence, entailed, first of all, the 'recognition' of who was now to be an insider and who an outsider, and, secondly, the severance of social ties, often with the utmost politeness and accompanied by expression of regret.

'Recognition' and 'self-designation' was often a complicated business, entailing considerable readjustments of identity. In the decades before the Nazi assumption of power in 1933, German Jews had been highly integrated: being Jewish in Germany was (with obvious variations depending on degrees of orthodoxy or secularism, and degrees of assimilation) a matter of culture, religion, family background, and not of 'national' identity. Gerhard M., born in 1911, into a family which had owned and run mines in the industrial area around Kattowitz in Upper Silesia for three generations, found this enforced reconceptualization of identity almost impossible; as he put it, right at the opening of his autobiographical sketch written in 1940, his awkwardness of expression reflecting the difficulties of imposed recategorization:

⁹ See e.g. Wolf Gruner, *Judenverfolgung in Berlin 1933–1945. Eine Chronologie der Behördenmassnahmen in der Reichshauptstadt* (Berlin: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, 1996), pp. 17–25, for the extraordinarily comprehensive and wide-ranging exclusionary measures in the months February to May 1933, which were at this stage applied in respect of both 'Mischlinge' and 'full Jews'.

¹⁰ I use the word '*Volksgemeinschaft*' here purely in the sense of the Nazi claim, making no assumptions about the extent to which Nazi goals were or were not translated into practice, whether in 'reality' or 'ideology'. For debates about attempts to deploy this concept not merely as an object of study but also as a heuristic device and an analytic tool, see Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung. Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz, 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2007); and Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt (eds.), *Volksgemeinschaft. Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2009).

¹¹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (137), Martha L., p. 1.

My personal outlook is that of a Jew who is not religious and felt more German than—well, I cannot say: Jewish, because I do not believe in a Jewish people or race, but, perhaps, better—who felt German only.¹²

Others who did feel Jewish, whether in terms of religious commitment or in the more secular variants of cultural legacies and familial affiliations, often had comparable difficulties in accepting that the notion of 'Germanness' was now to be redefined so as to exclude Jewish Germans from a more narrow 'racial' conception of 'Germanness', forcing an unwanted exclusion from their homeland and identity. The by now well-known philologist Victor Klemperer was not alone in being forced to rethink his identity and renew his sense of Jewish identification.¹³ Anna B., for example, was born in 1895 and lived in a small university town in southern Germany, where she and her husband ran a small factory and were the only Jewish family for miles around; they were well-integrated in the local community, and her children were happy, with many friends, at school. After 1933, things became progressively more difficult; but as she later put it:

We were so assimilated, that we replied to all religious Gentiles, who wondered, that we didn't consider to go to Palestine: 'We are Germans by nationality and Jews by religion, as you are Christian . . .'¹⁴

But unavoidably, from 1933 onwards 'race' and ancestry rapidly became highly salient; and the language of religious or cultural affiliation was displaced and overlain by the new terminology of 'racial science'.

Putting this into practice was not all that easy at first. There are many more or less humorous stories of misrecognition, as people rushed to try out their new 'knowledge', and teachers sought to impart the relevant distinctions to students, many of whom were not immediately inclined to take it all seriously. Erna A., a 'half-Jewish' businesswoman of American origins who ran a company in partnership with someone who was fully Jewish, recalled for example that:

In 1933 my [Jewish business] partner's daughter was a senior at school. She was eighteen, a tall, slim, blond girl with blue eyes. A new class in racial biology had been put on the curriculum. The teacher was new. She asked the girls to name one in their midst whom they thought would specify to the Nordic type. All, including the Nazis, suggested Liesel. The teacher beamed. She measured the circumference and the length of the skull, all the other measurements were taken, every one was perfect. Here was a case of the purest Aryan type. 'Where do your ancestors come from?' she asked. 'Palestine' was the answer amid the roar of the other girls.¹⁵

Such examples could readily be multiplied.

Yet as they began to learn who was 'in' and who 'out', many Germans seem, without a great deal of prompting or explicit threat of any specific penalties, to have

¹² HHL, b MS Ger 91 (158), Gerhard M., English original, p. 1.

¹³ See e.g. Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten. Tagebücher 1933–1945* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1995), pp. 15, 209–10, 220.

¹⁴ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (25), Anna B., English original, p. 32.

¹⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (3) Erna A., English original, p. 26.

more or less spontaneously ‘regrouped’ themselves, realigning their social networks in terms of the new racially defined criteria. In memoirs and contemporary writings there are numerous illustrations of friendships being explicitly broken off, social relations being dropped, and even avoidance of recognition when meeting accidentally on the street.¹⁶ Somehow, ‘Aryan’ Germans became aware that it was no longer ‘politic’ even to know, let alone be friendly with, fellow-Germans of Jewish background. This apparently spontaneous breaking off of formerly close friendships is one of the most curious aspects of the spread of Nazism through German society.

Hildegard B., the daughter of the Berlin professor who was very much of the old guard, recalled how her father began to drop his Jewish colleagues at university.¹⁷ His story is typical of the ways in which many on the conservative nationalist right responded to the new demands of the Nazi regime, and enacted the consequences in their own lives with few misgivings:

I was very surprised when Father replied to me that at my age you have to make concessions to the times, and even he had gradually had to limit his contacts with Jewish colleagues or lecturers . . . Today I can well understand that Father was more influenced by the opinions of others than he himself really knew. He had been proud of his nationalist convictions all his life and so he could not bring himself to resist inwardly when a dominant movement like National Socialism went further along the road that he did. For him—and I believe this is also true for many others—the Hitler party was never really something hostile, but rather just an exaggeration or an unhealthy malformation of the same thing as he himself wanted. I experienced it this way myself at the time, after all I had been brought up to believe that there could be nothing more beautiful and magnificent than the old Reich, that had of course been destroyed by criminals in 1918 and that Hitler wanted to resurrect. But you only have to live abroad for a couple of years for things to look quite different.¹⁸

By now aged twenty, and herself a student, it dawned on Hildegard with ever greater clarity that her father was far from infallible. Just how deep-rooted his prejudices were, and quite what an irresolvable conflict in her own and the family’s life the new regime was to bring, was not yet clear, but was to become so within a mere matter of weeks.

Hildegard unwittingly entered her brother’s room one day and witnessed, to her amazement, that he was involved in a homosexual encounter with her father’s trusted university assistant, Leonhard. Although shocked at Leonhard’s apparent abuse of her father’s trust, Hildegard thought nothing further of this incident, considering it a private matter between her brother and this man. But Leonhard or her brother—she was never sure who instigated the idea—decided to get some form of ‘pre-emptive revenge’ on her for having witnessed their behaviour. Hildegard had at the time a platonic friendship with a fellow university student, Wolfgang, of

¹⁶ On street greetings, see also Andrew Stuart Bergerson, *Ordinary Germans in Extraordinary Times: The Nazi revolution in Hildesheim* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ See above, Ch. 3, pp. 87–90.

¹⁸ HHL, b MS 91 (33), ‘Hildegard B.’ (pseudonym), pp. 22–3.

whose family background she was hardly aware; nor did it matter to her at all that, as it turned out, her friend was Jewish. But following an unfounded denunciation to the effect that he and Hildegard had been involved in a sexual relationship, Wolfgang was arrested in the middle of the night and taken to a concentration camp. Hildegard desperately tried to help, but all four lawyers whom she approached for assistance gave different reasons for why they had to refuse help. Then Hildegard's own house was subjected to a forcible search of the premises (*Haussuchung*) by SA members at night; she was torn out of her bed and taken to a makeshift jail, guarded by young thugs, with no evidence of either ordinary uniformed police or real officials; Hildegard noted that the man taking down her details was aged thirty at most, with the bureaucratic style but not the reality of law behind any of the decisions taken here. She did not dare to challenge what was happening but broke down in tears, alongside other women who were also the subject of rough handling. On a Sunday in April 1933, Hildegard was then made, with other women, to parade through the streets of Berlin bearing a placard saying 'Swine that I am, I gave myself to a Jew'. On her way from the jail to this public ritual of humiliation she saw Leonhard laughing cynically at the sight of her in this state ('Because of his mocking smile when I recognized him—he was a man who rarely smiled—I realized then for the first time that he saw me as his enemy and this day as his revenge').¹⁹ During the two hours or so during which she was humiliated by being paraded through the streets, Hildegard was repeatedly photographed; she subsequently heard that the photographs had been published in the Nazi newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, although she never herself saw a copy.

This sort of individual denunciation for purposes of 'revenge' and then public humiliation was a familiar pattern in Nazi Germany, inscribing new norms and codes of behaviour onto an ever more frightened public but also giving people additional public tools to wield in private disputes. The twist that Hildegard's story then takes is what perhaps makes it more unusual than other similar stories; it encapsulates, indeed, all that was wrong with the old as well as the new in her family. When the day of her public humiliation was over, Hildegard's Uncle Wilhelm appeared at the prison in his officer's uniform and informed her that she had been ousted from the family; if she did not accept this verdict, the 'honour' of her father demanded that he should shoot himself. In Hildegard's words:

He said to me . . . that I was a rejected creature, I had only brought shame on my father and my father wanted to hear no more of me. His voice sounded different from how it otherwise did in the family circle: he spoke harshly, in a clipped and militaristic style. I only cried and started to plead my innocence again. His answer was only that, after this incident, I could never return to my family. For my father as an Officer of the Reserve—I forgot to mention this earlier, that Father, like all people of a higher social status in Imperial Germany before 1918, had been an Officer in his youth—after this incident there were only two options, either he must immediately shoot a bullet into his head, or maintain the position that he had never had a daughter . . . Even if you suppose that my father really believed everything that people had probably said to him

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

about me—without ever having talked to me about it—even then I find his approach, even according to the Prussian military code of morals, excessive.²⁰

Hildegard's uncle Wilhelm brought her some money and her passport, and the next day she left Germany for ever. Her father died two years later, a fact which she only gleaned from the newspaper. Having started a new life under a new name in a new part of the world, Hildegard concluded her tale:

Since then I have emigrated to another part of the world, have taken another name, and started a new life. I am only a small piece of world history; I know that things have gone far worse for others. I have survived this—it wasn't always easy to start with—and have become a different person. But I also know now that there are criminals and underworlds elsewhere too, and yet my experiences would never have been possible anywhere else. That is why I want to have nothing more to do with my family, that threw me out, and nothing more to do with the German people either. That is all that I have to say about my life in Germany.²¹

Hildegard's tale is perhaps extreme in every respect, encapsulating as it does so many aspects of the transition from the old Germany to the new; it is also extremely well-written, making the reader wonder momentarily whether it was not crafted with an eye to novelistic creativity rather than autobiographical writing. Yet, penned just a few years after the painful events it describes, without the historian's 'benefit of hindsight', and in the midst of a World War where infinitely worse was developing on all sides, this seems unlikely. It simply epitomized, in the small compass of one family's story, what was happening in different ways all over Germany from the moment the Nazis came into power, as people interpreted and deployed the new 'rules of the game' in the light of their personal interests, social considerations and cultural codes.

The breaking off of social relations with colleagues and friends occurred from very early on, and occurred across age groups; even teenagers and young adults appear to have somehow sensed that an invisible form of social ghettoization and spontaneous segregation was in order. Such separation and severing of the ties of friendship is recounted in numerous memoirs: after 1933, the introduction of 'racial' categories overrode emotional ties that had withstood even differences of class, status, and politics.

Before January 1933, within a relatively broad spectrum of similarity of social background, precise differences of status—aristocratic or bourgeois, Jewish or Christian—seem to have played little role in friendships among schoolchildren. Class was perhaps a more major barrier to mutual understanding and friendship; even so, the segregation of residential districts and schooling according to class meant that, given the relatively high degree of assimilation that had taken place in Germany over preceding decades, non-Jewish and Jewish children of similar social backgrounds were more likely to coexist than were children from different, bourgeois and working-class backgrounds. What were still seen as 'religious' distinctions

²⁰ HHL, b MS 91 (33), 'Hildegard B.' (pseudonym), pp. 34–5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

could be readily overcome in the relatively neutral context of school playgrounds and classrooms within any particular social milieu. Margot L., for example, who was born in Posen in 1917, went to school in Königsberg, following her family's move there when Posen became Polish after the Great War. At Königsberg, she gained her first experiences of SA violence in 1924. Her schooldays in Königsberg were happy; in a class of around thirty-five, there were seven Jewish girls, including herself, and the question of whether or not one came from a Jewish family appeared totally irrelevant to the classmates. As Margot pointed out: 'We noticed nothing with respect to questions of race, any sort of discrimination or disregard. We were all brought up the same way as German.'²² Particularly important for Margot after her entry into the grammar school (*Gymnasium*) in 1930 was her close friendship with an aristocratic girl: 'That this girl was not only Aryan but also aristocratic was completely irrelevant.'²³ Even major political differences, including support of Nazism, did not seem to make a great difference to Margot's friendships prior to the Nazi assumption of power. Following her family's subsequent move to Breslau, Margot's best friend became one Anneliese, daughter of a high state official, and Anneliese's political views reflected her family's support of Nazism; but the two girls did not talk about politics. As Margot summarized it: 'She did not count me among those Jews against whom the Nazis were fighting. For her I was just German and her friend Margot.'²⁴ In her later reflections, written in 1940, Margot suggested that most people in her acquaintance who were pro-Nazi before 1933 took from Nazism what they wanted and ignored the rest; virtually no one actually saw what was coming, whether the struggle with the churches or antisemitism, and for most of them the most relevant point, given the areas in which she lived, was that they thought that a Nazi government would assist in regaining the 'Polish corridor' for Germany, and in fighting communism. Insofar as Jews were seen as a potential target, it was the distinctively different 'Eastern Jews' (*Ostjuden*) but not the German Jews that they thought would be attacked.

Gerhard M. from Kattowitz had similar experiences. He attended a vocational high school (*Oberrealschule*), where one of his best friends was a boy called Heinz, son of one of their teachers; and in the early 1930s Heinz became a Nazi supporter. At first, this did not affect the boys' friendship: it was only in the course of the months after January 1933 that Heinz realized quite what Nazism should mean in practice, as Gerhard later recalled:

Before Hitler came to power, the little controversy of race did not matter between Heinz and me. [At first] our friendship remained as firm as ever. On the boycott day, 1st April '33, he came to warn me in spite of the danger which it meant to him . . . Later he wrote in a long letter, explaining that 'our two peoples were locked in a desperate struggle and that we had no choice but to take sides'. He had become a party member . . . and was very active throwing bombs and making speeches.²⁵

²² HHL, b MS Ger 91(142), Margot L., p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (158), Gerhard M., English original, p. 3.

Gerhard proceeded to study at the Technical University in Breslau. While at university, he enjoyed a wide social life, as well as being deeply engaged with his studies; it was an excellent time for him, despite increasing restrictions on his movements and career prospects. But again, after 1933 Gerhard had the experience of the cordial ending of a formerly close friendship because of his Jewish background. One very good friend, according to Gerhard, collected old folksongs but was not really political. As Gerhard recalled:

What he loved most was his freedom, and [I] cannot to this day understand his change into a Nazi. But in 1933 he came to see me, we had a long discussion and came to the conclusion, that our friendship was no longer possible. He told me about the 'call of his blood' and 'the marvellous transformation of the German Nation', and I had pains not to show my grin when I looked into his dreamy blue eyes behind strong glasses. Later he wrote me, again saying how he regretted, but that our ways had to part and we should not be sorry as our time together had been splendid.²⁶

In these and countless other documents, it is clear how readily young people adopted the current slogans of the day and translated them into personal practice, thus 'legitimized'. In short, they learned, rehearsed, and enacted the new scripts.

Among adults, pragmatic considerations perhaps outweighed the ideological arguments adduced by newly convinced teenagers; or perhaps these were simply brought out more frequently in an attempt to rationalize break-ups in terms which the person breaking off the friendship thought might be more understandable, if not acceptable; adult friendships of some depth might also be sustained for somewhat longer, until the potential practical consequences became all too clear. Thus for example Hanna B., born in 1895, provides a lengthy description of a gentile friend who had tried to keep up the friendship with herself and her Jewish aunt, with increasing difficulty:

But about 1936 she once came to my aunt to tell her with tears in her eyes, that she was now obliged to be more cautious, as her husband was a professor at a vocational college, although she still felt the same way towards my aunt and always will. She was no longer allowed to take a walk or meet my aunt in public during the day. But she promised to come to see her sometimes in the evening. She did no longer dare to invite my aunt to her house, nor to phone from there and begged her, not to call her at the phone by name, as the telephone conversations of Jews were sometimes overheard. My aunt was deeply concerned and begged her not to see her anymore, as she loved her too much to do her any harm by their relation. They sometimes met with a nonarian [*sic*] friend, whose husband was a Gentile, but in the evening only.²⁷

At other times, it was the Jewish person who, out of consideration for his friends and the potentially deleterious consequences of a continued friendship which they appeared to be overlooking, initiated or first acted in such a way as to effect a break-up. Martin F., for example, was a Berlin lawyer born in 1875, who as a result of Nazi legislation lost his position and his clientele, and was forced to change jobs a

²⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (158), Gerhard M., English original, p. 7.

²⁷ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (25), Hanna B., p. 35, English original.

couple of times and move to Charlottenburg, away from the well-to-do and prestigious so-called 'privy councillors' quarter' (*Geheimratviertel*, on the south-east of the Tiergarten and west of Potsdamer Platz, in an area now the home of cultural institutions such as the New National Gallery). He saw less and less of his friends as his circumstances deteriorated. He still, however, frequented chess cafés on the broad, tree-lined main street of the Kurfürstendamm, where he met 'Aryan' friends who were left-wing in their views and very unwilling to give up old friendships. But gradually Martin F. himself came to the view that he should protect even these friends by not seeing too much of them, seeking to retain a strict separation in his mind between the regime and the German people:

It was only those currently in government who were bad—the German people was no worse than any other, despite the aberrations into which it had got itself, and not without some fault of its own. I soon began to avoid the little artists' pub, since I feared that I might cause difficulties for my good old acquaintances which they, in their light-hearted, outspoken way could for the time being not see.²⁸

The price, of course, was increasing social isolation.

Gerhard M. recounted in some detail the way social life developed under these circumstances:

Since 1933 a new era had begun. Social life was closed for the Jews. Former friends did not see and greet them, theaters or concerts were not safe places. So they retired behind their four walls, gave little parties, and had rather depressed conversations. Even that was not safe. The one or other house had been raided, and men led away without reason. The nervous strain was terrible. New friendships developed, Jews crept closer together. Alcohol consumption and playing cards for high stakes increased. My mother who had never before touched a cigarette started to smoke, talks centered around emigration, transfer of money abroad, new developments in anti-Jewish shops. Specially trying the difference of atmosphere at home and at the T.H. [Technical University of Breslau], for instance, where life went on as before. On the one side people who had faith in an alteration, on the other men with the only wish to leave Germany as soon as possible. Even our family was divided: my stepfather for emigration, me and my mother for waiting. But with the passing of time, even the most stubborn had to understand that remaining was not possible, that bonds had to be cut. Conditions became worse. Jews were no longer permitted to live in houses owned by Aryans, beer-gardens had signs with 'Jews not admitted', whole towns and villages bore these signboards, and nice paintings of a Jew driven out by a brawny SA man. Jews were virtually living in Ghettos.—And when speaking perchance to an Aryan he would say: 'Well, you know we do not like to be dictated and we don't like the antisemitic side and the foreign policy and the lack of good materials and the decline of decent art,—but business IS good.'²⁹

Sometimes the increasing separation of Germans of Jewish backgrounds—whether or not they were religious, whether or not they believed in theories of biological descent (in either the Nazi or the orthodox Jewish variants), whether or not they

²⁸ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (68), Martin F., p. 72.

²⁹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (158), Gerhard M., pp. 14–15, English original.

were held to be of ‘mixed descent’ (*Mischlinge*) or ‘fully Jewish’—from the social circles of their German compatriots was so gradual that the person barely noticed it at first, leaving no sediments in daily diaries of the time. As Inge C.-L., for example, recounted, she only registered after some considerable lapse of time that she was no longer invited to participate in social activities with her school classmates, and that her family was increasingly cut off from former circles; there was no one specific moment at which this assiduous diary-keeper noted this development in her records of daily events.³⁰ But other *Mischlinge*—perhaps because they were still rather younger at this time—found their social neighbourhoods and networks were highly supportive. Ilse J., for example, who was born in late November 1932, found that as a child in the 1930s her major difficulties were first of all, being refused permission to join the local sports group; and more generally, the regime discrimination against her mother, her aunt, and maternal grandmother, who were the Jewish side of the family.³¹ She also noted that she was aware of being an only child for political reasons, since her parents, fearful of the new regime and the uncertainties of the future, had not dared have further children after Hitler came to power in 1933.

The position for those of ‘mixed blood’ was somewhat unpredictable throughout the Nazi regime. The ‘Aryan Paragraph’ of the April 1933 ‘Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service’ stipulated that those ‘not of Aryan descent’ should lose their positions (with some exceptions to do with length of service to the state, and military service in the Great War), affecting also people from mixed marriages. In the first two years after Hitler came to power, the tendency among those imbued with racist prejudice was generally to treat anyone of ‘non-Aryan descent’, ‘mixed blood’, who was ‘half-Jewish’, with as much contempt as if they were ‘fully Jewish’, but this remained a vexed question among racist circles.³² Nazi policymakers sought to reach some compromise formulations in the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, with ‘clarification’ hinging on how many Jewish grandparents an individual had, and in cases where there were two ‘Aryans’ and two ‘non-Aryans’ bringing into play the questions of religious practice and affiliation through marriage; even so, the consequences in practice remained in some dispute as did the related issue of Jews in ‘mixed marriages’ with ‘Aryans’. These questions were still being debated during

³⁰ Interview with Inge Cohn-Lampert, 3 Dec. 2006.

³¹ Interview with Ilse J., Berlin, 26 Apr. 2007.

³² On policy developments with respect to *Mischlinge*, see Jeremy Noakes, ‘The development of Nazi policy towards the German-Jewish “Mischlinge” 1933–1945’, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 34(1) 1989, 291–354; on subjective experiences as refracted through oral history interviews, see Beate Meyer, *Jüdische Mischlinge: Rassenpolitik und Verfolgungserfahrung 1933–1945* (Hamburg: Dölling & Galitz, 1999); James F. Tent, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: Nazi persecution of Jewish-Christian Germans* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003). As a term which was already in use in the nineteenth century, but which was by this time deeply implicated in Nazi racial ideology, the word *Mischling* should in principle always be surrounded with scare quotes. The term should always be understood as a concept applied from a particular world view, and in one sense as ‘unreal’; unfortunately, however, like every kind of stigmatization, this particular form of categorization in terms of ‘mixed race’ had a very real impact on those so labelled and personally affected, however little they shared the mental paradigm from which it emanated. In this sense, however untenable the underlying world view, the consequences were very real and use of the label is unavoidable.

and after the Wannsee Conference coordinating the 'Final Solution' in January 1942, with differing views on whether persons designated as being in one of these 'mixed' categories should be deported to be gassed, sterilized, or for the time being 'merely' restricted in movement and activity pending a more propitious moment for definitive action. Needless to say, from the early 1930s perspective, the notion that anyone at all might within a matter of a few years be headed for murder in specially designed gas chambers was of course unthinkable: not conceivable within the universe as they knew it. The 'worst' was on a continuum with what had been happening since 1933, not what was to come in an as yet unknown and unimaginable future. In the 1930s, both *Mischlinge* and others found it difficult to predict what their position might be, as indeed the endless debates over whether to emigrate or stay and sit it out in one's own homeland amply demonstrate.

Gerhard M. summarized the situation with respect to one of his close friends, 'the daughter of a professor of Breslau University, a Jew [*sic*]. Her mother, Aryan, of noble birth':

New laws were passed, most important the Aryan and Official Laws. The existence of $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, or $\frac{3}{4}$ Aryans was introduced to the German people and indeed to the whole world for the first time. The actual facts, I suppose, are known. Not known is the terrible unhappiness and the high number of suicides which were the result. 'Mischlinge', children of mixed [*sic*] parentage did not know where they stood, regarded as Jews by the Nazis [*sic*] and with suspicion by the Jews [*sic*]. They had no rights only duties, as paying fees to some organisation where they were allowed to stay or even forced to do so, 'Deutsche Arbeitsfront' for instance.—A girlfriend of mine was Marion R. was one of the most charming and intelligent girls I have ever met... Her father married again after his wife's death, again a baroness; she brought 2 children with her out of her first marriage, pure Aryans, and they had two more children. They all got on splendidly till Hitler came. Then the situation developed that brother Hans had to become member of the Hitler Youth, brother Karl, however was not allowed to join. Same thing with the sisters. The father, as good a German as any, officer in the army, bearer of a famous name, was deprived of his post on account of the new laws and had to leave Germany. The girl remained faithful to her country. I often tried to convince her to leave but in vain. She had friends, both under Aryans and Jews, but was terribly unhappy about the fate of her family. Her case, I dare say, was typical for half-Aryans. Mixed marriages were forbidden, dissolving of such bonds encouraged. The idea of a 'Racial Disgrace', 'Rassenschande' was coined. Men, divorcing their wives [*sic*], but still loving them and having intercourse, were punished under this law. Old affairs were unearthed and 70-year old people put in Concentration Camps for disgracing Aryan girls.³³

'Legal' distinctions between 'full Jews' and people with varying degrees of 'mixed blood', introduced officially in the Decrees following the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 but never fully resolved, were not always clearly observed by members of the German population in the 1930s, more often to the disadvantage of the 'Mischling'

³³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (158), Gerhard M., p. 15, English original.

than otherwise. The fully 'Aryan' working class socialist, Martha L., whose husband was a 'Mischling', reported for example that:

My husband had been employed since June 1930 as an assembly operator in a large cigarette factory. Since he has a Jewish father, so is a half-Jew ['Mischling'], in July 33 he was dismissed as an 'enemy of the state', and this was not instigated by his managers but rather 'because of the state'.

Since in March 33 every state employee [*Beamter*] in Germany had to swear on oath a statement about their family relations and race [*Rassezugehörigkeit*], my sister, who has 9 years experience working in associations, and has for 12 years lived in Berlin as a social worker in state employment, was immediately dismissed, since German law states that: anyone who is married to or is an in-law of a Jew cannot be a state employee in public service [*Staatsbeamter*]. For two years she had neither support nor work...³⁴

Whether or not this working-class woman was quite accurate in her recall of details and dates—the letter was written in some anguish in 1940—the gist of her story continues in the same vein.

The story of the ways in which Martha L.'s teenage son, technically a 'quarter Jew', was also discriminated against, is highly revealing of the ways in which racism played out through institutions and everyday encounters and was systematically enacted by people across society, radically affecting the lives of those thus discriminated against. Before the Nazis came to power, Martha's son had attended a relatively progressive school, the Dürerschule.³⁵ In stark contrast to most of the academically oriented high schools (*Gymnasien*) in Germany, the Dürerschule had in the late 1920s drawn around one-third of its pupils from working-class backgrounds—in 1927 as many as 33 per cent, compared to only 3.2 per cent in the grammar schools. And, in contrast to the dominant ethos of many similarly academically oriented schools in the Weimar Republic, which played up the virtues of militarism and harked back to the lost monarchy, the Dürerschule emphasized the virtues of tolerance and pacifism. The school was accordingly closed down by the Nazis in 1933. Forced to leave this school, Martha L.'s son found difficulty in gaining a place at any other school. Once he did manage to re-enter formal education, despite his academic potential he was systematically given low grades by his teachers because of his background and specifically because of his obviously Jewish surname. Nor was his treatment any better on the streets, although here the brutality was more obvious and directly physical. At the age of sixteen, while pausing with his bicycle to chat to a female friend whom he met on the way home, he was subjected to an attack for alleged 'racial defilement' (*Rassenschande*). He arrived home, as his mother recalled:

with black eyes and a smashed up face. It had happened this way. Two S.A.-men came up to him and said: 'Well, you swine of a Jew, what are you doing standing around on

³⁴ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (137), Martha L., p. 2.

³⁵ Burkhard Poste, *Schulreform in Sachsen 1918–1923. Eine vergessene Tradition deutscher Schulgeschichte* (Frankfurt-am-Main, Berlin, Bern, NY, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 433–52.

the street here and committing racial defilement. We should beat the hell out of you!' Then they had already started punching him and pushed the lad with his bicycle onto the busy main road.

His mother, filled with a sense of outrage at this unprovoked and violent attack, still at this point thought she should complain to the authorities to seek redress—an indignation and a faith in legal procedures and justice which would not last long in this state:

So right away I went to the police and filed a charge against the 2 S.A.-men for physical assault. But the matter was dealt with already at the magistrate's level and I was informed in writing that: 'The two S.A.-men acted in the interests of the state!', in other words, the blows had been delivered with the backing of the law.³⁶

It was not only physical assault backed by the state, but also more subtle discrimination on the part of fellow citizens that further affected the future of this 'quarter-Jew'. Having decided to give up his ambition of being able to study to become a doctor, now blocked by the problems with schooling, Martha's son took an apprenticeship which he completed to a high standard; but, despite his clear intelligence and accomplishments, he was not subsequently offered any employment. On inquiring on behalf of her son with the relevant municipal organization, Martha L. was told: "We can't force any firm to take on someone of Jewish background!"³⁷

Experiences of violence were frequent, but this was not merely a question of 'state' versus 'society': the interrelations were more complex. Violence was often initiated and 'legitimated' by party, police, or judicial authorities, but exacerbated or complicated by the responses of the population following an incident, many of whom disapproved of physical violence while yet supporting the Nazi movement and its leader.³⁸ Wolfgang Y., the son of a Catholic father and Jewish mother from Kattowitz, who had moved to Berlin, went on the occasion of the boycott of 1 April 1933 to his mother's shop to keep her company on this difficult day.³⁹ He was brutally beaten up by SA men, and in the course of the fight his jaw was broken. The hospital in Berlin refused to admit him for treatment: 'I was told outside that a Jew who gets beaten up on the Day of the Boycott is certainly a Communist.' He was in the event relatively well looked after in a clinic somewhere outside Berlin by a group of, ironically, Nazi health workers, who at this stage did not wish to associate Hitler with the thuggish violence of the SA:

A little swastika flag stands on the table, a picture of Hitler hangs on the wall. The women belong to the middling sorts of state employee. They talk very nicely to me. They are all very sorry about my misfortune. That was certainly not what the Führer would have wanted [*nicht im Sinne des Führers*], the attack on me.⁴⁰

³⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (137), Martha L., p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁸ For this kind of complexity see also Kershaw, *Popular Opinion* and Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth'*.

³⁹ On his childhood and youth, see Ch. 3 above, pp. 69–71.

⁴⁰ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (251), Wolfgang Y., pp. 47–8.

Following this incident, he was advised not to return to his mother's shop for fear of endangering her; he was also advised to emigrate. Having taken the decision to leave the country, Wolfgang visited a former teacher in order to say goodbye. He found his former teacher—also at this very early moment in the regime—in a state of despair:

[H]e is deeply unhappy. His wife is Jewish. His second oldest son comes home one day in an absolute rage. Why did he marry a Jew? Now the future had been ruined for him, the son, he couldn't join the SA, the father had committed a crime. I was told that [the father] hit the boy horribly. He gives him money, tells him to get out of the house for ever, and has his room walled up. He sits in his armchair, a broken-down, ruined man . . .

Just as the train is reaching the border, tears roll down my face. I have lost my homeland. Why?⁴¹

For Germans of Jewish descent, then—whether practising Jews, Christians with a Jewish family background, or, to varying degrees, designated as people of 'mixed blood' (*Mischblütige* or '*Mischlinge*') and their relatives—from January 1933 onwards life became increasingly difficult, and in innumerable cases intolerable. And it became intolerable not merely on those occasions when the physical violence encouraged by the Nazi regime was unleashed—whether on 'official' and well-known occasions, such as the April 1933 boycott, or in the innumerable instances of thuggish behaviour on the streets—but also through the psychological pain wrought by the severing of ties of friendships, and the radical changes in informal social relations which Germans enacted, seemingly spontaneously, from below, and right from the very beginning of the regime.

Why did so many adults conform to the new regime? One rather a-historical answer which gained a wide popular hearing is that 'Germans' had allegedly always been antisemitic, that their brand of antisemitism was peculiarly radical, and that now Hitler and the Nazi regime served to sanction, support, and actively foster pre-existing tendencies towards an 'eliminationist antisemitism' which in other circumstances might be restrained.⁴² But this generalization fails to deal adequately with the historical evidence.⁴³ Other prevalent approaches emphasize either the significance of force and repression, such that Germans were effectively constrained to conform; or, conversely, the role of both ideology and self-interest in ensuring that large numbers of Germans apparently willingly cooperated with the regime, with this interpretation tending to underplay both the extent of resistance and the role of

⁴¹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (251), Wolfgang Y., pp. 49–50.

⁴² This is of course the thesis advanced by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

⁴³ For critiques and further discussion, see e.g. Geoff Eley (ed.), *The Goldhagen Effect: History, memory, Nazism—facing the German past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Norman Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation On Trial: The Goldhagen thesis and historical truth* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998); J. H. Schoeps (ed.), *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1996); Robert R. Shandley (ed.), *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen debate*, essays translated by Jeremiah Riemer (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

repression.⁴⁴ The historical realities are, as always, more complex, and no single summary will suffice—nor, indeed, is this the primary aim here, when the focus is rather on exploring the variety of ways in which people of different generations faced the challenges of living through the Nazi regime and the consequences of these experiences for outlooks and behaviour in later periods. However, it is important to emphasize that individual responses and processes of adaptation are not always well encapsulated in the dichotomies of coercion and consent, repression and ideology, fear and conviction, in which these issues have often been considered.

For many Germans, it was in large part a matter of following the herd as far as visible behaviour was concerned, with an eye both to peer-group pressure and considerations of personal advantage, without either great fear of repression or much by way of inner conviction on many matters—although this varied across different issues and times. In some respects, one could argue that many people behaved with apparent 'pre-emptive obedience' (*vorausseilende Gehorsam*), although the sanctions and strategies were rather different for 'Aryans' in relation to the Nazi regime than they were for those to whom this term has more usually been applied. The notion of 'pre-emptive obedience' has most frequently been applied to members of Jewish communities across the ages who, fearful of pogroms and enforced exile, allegedly developed a tendency to hurry to cooperate with whichever authorities were in power, in order to avert the worst potential catastrophes which might otherwise befall their people. It has frequently had pejorative overtones, as if 'passive victims' almost 'deserved' their fate (echoing some more recent debates on women and rape). The phrase has rarely been applied with respect to the German masses who cooperated so pre-emptively with Hitler's new racial order. Yet in some respects it is a highly apposite notion, at least in an amended form.

Contemporary accounts repeatedly give stories of the way in which people supported Nazism for all sorts of reasons and excuses. These included, for example, the former communist who told Albert D. that "Yes, outwardly I am brown, but inwardly I'm still as red as ever"; another was later arrested because his young son reported that in the evening he would take off his uniform, lay it over the chair, and say "Right then, the Nazi is now lying on the chair and the Kozi is going to bed!" [*Kozi* = Communist].⁴⁵ Outer conformity was for many people clearly compatible with a sense of inner distance.

For some, the new regime did clearly touch chords of prior conviction, or seem to answer felt needs. Rare glimpses into the inner convictions and doubts of someone who acted out a full Nazi role in public are afforded by the diary of one

⁴⁴ The emphasis on force and lack of viable alternatives in a highly repressive state with severe sanctions for nonconformity was favoured by many Germans and became embedded in historical consciousness and popular representations of the Third Reich after 1945, helping in the process to exonerate the part played by many 'ordinary Germans', and was echoed in much of the historiography up until the 1980s. The latter view, emphasizing cooperation, was argued most prominently with respect to denunciations by civilians to the Gestapo by Robert Gellately in his book, *The Gestapo and German Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), and developed more generally in his work on *Backing Hitler*. Richard J. Evans has strongly critiqued Gellately's interpretation and re-emphasized the changing role of the repressive forces as the regime developed.

⁴⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., p. 6.

Wilhelm B.⁴⁶ Born in Duisberg in 1896, Wilhelm B. attended only elementary school (*Volksschule*), followed by apprenticeship as a locksmith. He went through the Great War without incurring either serious injury or military decoration, and, despite training as an engineer in the Weimar Republic, clearly only came fully into his own once the NSDAP had gained power. In the mid-1930s he threw himself into work for the NSDAP cause with great enthusiasm, holding political offices and travelling extensively in the service of ‘educational’ functions. He had few illusions about the difficulty of his work, as he commented following an apparently poorly attended meeting in November 1935:

On the 8th I was in a nigger village (*Negerdorf*) in the Büren district, Niederntudorf. We have all of 3 party members there, and on top of it all they all come from the not much loved vintage of 1933 (March and May hares) [i.e. those who opportunistically jumped to join the NSDAP when it was possible to do so once in power]. The breed of this area is hereditarily burdened by religion. Otherwise the best of material. A shame. It will take another 10 years to achieve any improvement.⁴⁷

For all the difficulties involved, Wilhelm B.’s new role was a source of great satisfaction and pride, and one which constantly spurred him on to try to achieve even greater things. His diary entries capture the characteristic flavour of constant ‘movement’ without much clarity about the ultimate outcomes—perhaps something of a prefiguration of the later *Götterdämmerung* (twilight of the gods) mentality of the closing war months—that remained prevalent among many ordinary followers of the ‘Hitler movement’ even in power:

If you manage to battle your way out of the status of ‘proletariat’ and conquer the heights of education, knowledge and respect, if you become a leader [*Führer*] in your little circle and hold a leadership position within Adolf Hitler’s movement, that is always gratifying. But I am always driven further forwards. I see a long path before me, I know not whether it will take me to heights or depths, but I shall certainly not remain on the same level.⁴⁸

Something of an autodidact, despite his new rise to a clearly fulfilling position Wilhelm B. nevertheless plagued himself with private questions about his own ‘biological inheritance’. Deploying poorly internalized Nazi concepts and rather weak grammar (omitting expected punctuation), he engaged in some revealing, if awkward, private philosophizing in his diary:

This all has to be seen as determined by nature, if you even resist this thought, it shows you are an outsider! Perhaps I am one such. Since I reached maturity, I have had an inner urge for action. Viking blood wants to raise the world from ruins. Only one thing is always stopping me from doing this. That is the legacy of the warrior, putting oneself in a subordinate position. Like right now. And yet, you do what you have to. What drew me, as a seventeen-year-old volunteer in 1914, to join the German Army out

⁴⁶ Kempowski-BIO, 4842 / 1 + 2, Wilhelm B., (1896–1982).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, entry of 12 Nov. 1935, fol. 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of 27 Jan. 1936 (perhaps he should have thought more carefully about potential ‘depths’; this entry was written nine years to the day before the liberation of Auschwitz), fol. 22.

there, where there was want and misery, dead [*sic*] and destruction? What allowed me to hold out for four years. Was I, among the ranks, also an outsider who, treating death with contempt, sometimes went voluntarily into the heat of battle. One single thrust drove me onwards, my genetic inheritance! And then. Wailing and work in the pay of the Jew. And yet I managed to show them some teeth. Worked and made demands. Why did I break out again and create a new platform. Others made things comfortable for themselves, I had to learn . . .⁴⁹

In this case, there seems to have been no ironic distance at all (however terrified rather than playful any such 'irony' could have been at that time) from the new 'racial' or 'biological' interpretation of an essential, biologically based 'character'.

Moreover, for perhaps the first time in his life, Wilhelm B. saw his own individual life and mood (not to mention that of his horse) and the fate of history as rolling together towards future greatness, predicated on 'revenge' on those held responsible for previous downfall:

Now the avalanche of meetings is rolling again over Germany. Our soldiers are marching in the Rhineland. I think back to 1918 when, hungry and freezing, I returned from France across the Rhine bridge near Koblenz. My horse, on which I covered as anything but a 'proud rider', was in the same state as me. Now the time of revenge has come.⁵⁰

Like many others, Wilhelm B. allotted a large role to Hitler in this scheme of personal and historical time. Having witnessed Hitler's birthday celebrations on 20 April 1936, the most extravagant yet in the short history of the Third Reich, Wilhelm B. committed to his diary the following comments:

The feelings that overwhelm an old soldier on this occasion cannot be described. I am glad that I always [was] with the Führer, and never battled against him. Some—including those previously 'non-party'—must be blushing with shame today.

Overall, what is the condition of Germany today: A single great Reich has developed out of an anarchistic state of political confusion. The sham Treaty of Versailles [*sic*] has been torn to shreds. Both banks of the Rhine are free again. A strong army is protecting the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*]. The people have work again.⁵¹

Wilhelm B. may have been in a relatively small minority as far as his own definition of self in terms of a combination of biological inheritance and personal commitment to the greater historical cause was concerned. He was certainly far from alone in applauding Germany's apparent return to a state of national greatness and economic security in the mid-1930s. Social, economic, and international developments garnered widespread enthusiasm, in view not only of the horrendous depression since 1929 out of which Germany had appeared to recover so rapidly but also in view of the wobbles and difficulties in consumer satisfaction as recently as 1935.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. 20–1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, entry of 17 Mar. 1936, fol. 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, entry of 5 May 1936, fol. 35.

But for many others, it was a matter of what appeared to be opportune in their situation: status maintenance, fear of losing one's position, conforming to what was held to be appropriate. Anna B., surprised that one of her children's teachers had become 'undecided and restless' when talking to her in the street, discussed this with a friend, who commented that 'it was rather compromising and even dangerous for officials to be seen "associating" with Jewish people'.⁵² Quiescence included a combination of passive conformity accompanied by degrees of silent disagreement, as people appear to have shut down their critical faculties, allowed the propaganda to wash over them, and ceased to take issue with the daily drip and occasionally more vehement onslaught of ideology. The ways in which these processes affected behaviours are captured in many near contemporary accounts. Erna A., for example, recalled that:

At one of those delightful garden restaurants that used to make life so fascinating in Germany, I ran into a typical Nazi couple. They sat at my table and a conversation with them could not be avoided. . . . I tried to vere [*sic*] from politics but it could not be avoided. I tried to start a conversation with his wife, but she as a good German Hausfrau took no part in the conversation. Every word he uttered showed that he read his Nazi Paper very thoroughly. . . . I thought it best to gulp down my dinner and go.

Hitler was forever making speeches over the radio at that time. Everyone was forced to listen. The larger stores and factories had loudspeakers erected and everyone was forced to attend. The smaller stores were closed and sent their employees to cafes or street corners where they could listen. In private homes the servants were assembled to listen. They did not want to interrupt their work but the risk for the employer was too great if he did not see that Hitler's will was enforced. Not a word was ever spoken, one listened to the applause and the shouting, but not a muscle was moved. Later whispered comments could be made.⁵³

The radio certainly had a major impact on the views of many German, even if the saturation was greatest in cities, and some areas, such as rural Württemberg villages, remained virtually untouched.⁵⁴ From radio broadcasts, those who were so inclined could acquire stock phrases and ready explanations to be trotted out where relevant as 'their own' opinions on matters of the day—a point which became even more important during the war, when interpretive frameworks were so desperately needed.

By no means all adult Germans were taken in by or prepared to conform to the new patterns of social relations which were spreading with such pathological speed through the rapidly nazified German society. But the penalties for refusing to conform, or for actively working against the Hitler regime, were severe. The active socialist Martha L., for example, recalled that 'Up to 10 April 37 we managed to live in Germany, hounded and hungry.' But then her husband was arrested and 'taken

⁵² HHL, b MS Ger 91 (25), Anna B., p. 31, English original.

⁵³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (3), Erna A., p. 23, English original.

⁵⁴ A point made forcefully by Jill Stephenson in debate with Peter Fritzsche at a conference on the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, German Historical Institute London, 25–7 March 2010. See also Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, and Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg under the Nazis* (London: Hambledon Press, 2006).

into so-called “protective custody for re-education””: he was first incarcerated in Sachsenhausen, and then in Dachau. On 20 July of that year, he managed to obtain his release through the help of Quakers—who are again mentioned frequently in these reports for their very proactive assistance, which in cases such as this made all the difference between the possibility of release and subsequent emigration, or continued incarceration and possibly death.⁵⁵ Help on a smaller scale could make a significant difference too. Käthe Tacke, who was born in 1909 and brought up a Catholic, was in the 1930s working with children in Berlin.⁵⁶ She later recalled how her disagreement with the Nazi authorities, and her close relationships with a number of Jewish neighbours and friends, brought her ever closer to Quakers; she later converted to Quakerism. Now only in her twenties and an assistant in children’s care centres, Käthe Tacke’s scope for helping people persecuted by the regime was limited; but she did whatever she could on an individual level (bringing milk and food to Jews who were malnourished, hiding a suitcase for a communist friend), and also played a small role in the work of the Quaker office in sending food parcels to people who were imprisoned, and seeking to get individuals out of Germany at this time. The work, which included personal involvement on the part of American and British Quakers, was largely secretive: ‘they worked completely in secret, the whole group did not know what was going on there’. As Tacke later put it, ‘naturally as a young person I did not get to hear very much about these things, I only knew that many contacts were made with the authorities, were made with government, and were made with leading personalities’.⁵⁷ However small her own role, Käthe Tacke did not feel, after the war, any sense of a guilty conscience—with the sole exception of the night she failed to leave her apartment, where she had a visitor, and get to the Bahnhof Zoo in response to an urgent call from a Jewish couple whom she had been helping. Viewing her whole life in terms of a process of spiritual searching, she also did not, apparently, have the ‘zero hour’ need to rewrite her notion of her self; the inner dissonance had not been compromised by outer conformity with which she would have felt uncomfortable, even though, as she put it, ‘it always seemed to me in my work and also in my personal life as if I was always standing with one foot in the KZ’.⁵⁸ Other very committed members of the Christian Churches who are far more well known, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were not in the end lucky enough to survive.

It was not only that tiny minority of Quakers and others motivated by religious faith to oppose Nazism, or socialists, communists, and others motivated by political convictions, or those who by virtue of sexual orientation or for other reasons were the subject of discrimination, who held to their principles, refused to conform, and stood up against the Nazi regime or tried to alleviate its consequences for those individuals whom they could help. Others too, in far less influential positions, not

⁵⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (137), Martha L., p. 2; see also Hans Schmitt, *Quakers and Nazis: Inner light in outer darkness* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

⁵⁶ Käthe Tacke, interview with Roswitha Jarman, (East) Berlin, 7 August 1985, transcript pp. 6–7. I am very grateful to Roswitha Jarman for making a copy of this and other interviews available to me.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

apparently part of any organization or group, and for no apparent personal reason whatsoever—indeed often in face of considerable risk—nevertheless were simply, as individual human beings, also prepared to do what they could to alleviate suffering. Following her husband’s return from his imprisonment, Martha L. recounted that ‘my husband does not talk to me about what he experienced in both concentration camps’. But he did report that on his return journey, having been released from Dachau, he did not have enough money both to get home and also to eat while on the journey; he did not even have enough money for a ticket for the fast express train, prolonging the period of hunger. While he was sitting with another released prisoner on a bench, waiting for the cheaper stopping train, according to his wife’s account:

A railway official went up to them and said: ‘Well well, where do you come from, from Dachau?’ When both of them said yes, he went with them into the waiting room, bought them something to eat and drink, and gave each of them 1 RM [*Reichs Mark*] as well. That was a very big thing for him to do, particularly since in Germany you get imprisoned for giving this kind of help.⁵⁹

Such assistance on an individual basis could make a world of difference to those thus helped; but it did little even to divert, let alone destroy, the broader course on which the regime was embarked.

The experience of creeping racialization and growing violence in Nazi society was experienced rather differently by those who were younger at this time. Even within a relatively homogeneous milieu, the imposition of the new order through the means of socialization could have devastating consequences. While it tore apart what might otherwise have been a relatively cohesive group, in the longer term it also, in some sense, held them together by virtue of the challenges to which they had been exposed.

II. THE CLASS OF 1935

Hans Paasche’s daughter Helga, who had lost her mother in the influenza pandemic of 1918, and who had been a mere four years old when her father was murdered in 1920, was subsequently brought up by relatives in Berlin. The secondary school which she attended in the later 1920s and early 1930s was at that time called ‘Staatliche Augusta Schule’; it was formerly the *Königliche Augusta Schule*, with the state displacing the imperial reference in 1919. In Helga’s class, very close friendships were soon forged. The story of this group of friends, and their wider school class, reflects in microcosm the forces tearing German society apart in the 1930s—and holding the generational group together, although with considerable emotional tension and physically scattered across the world, through to the deaths of the majority of them several decades later.

⁵⁹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (137), Martha L., pp. 2–3.

The Augusta Schule catered particularly for well-to-do Berlin families who believed that not only their sons but even their daughters deserved to follow a classical education, with Greek and Latin, and to take the academic school-leaving examination, the *Abitur*, which gave entry to university studies. Attendance at such a school would bring with it not only the obvious consequences—academic achievements and the prospect of professional careers at a time and place when this was highly unusual for women—but also a degree of underlying self-confidence, intelligent energy and individual assertiveness in a male-dominated world. Alongside such attributes fostered by an academic, progressive education were common features of the Berlin social landscape from which many of the girls came: the notorious '*Berliner Witz*', or wit; an enjoyment of the regional Berlinese dialect (with its own verb, '*berlinern*'); a liveliness and commitment to a distinctive cultural and social life.

Beyond commonalities derived from shared social backgrounds, the school had a major impact on those who studied there in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Helene Lange (1848–1930), one of the early leading lights of the women's movement in Imperial Germany and a constant campaigner for women's education on a par with that offered to men, spent a year teaching there, and her pedagogic ideals became something of a model for the school. Significant directors included the redoubtable Lina Mayer-Kulenkampff, who lost her job in spring 1933 because she refused to swear an oath of obedience to Hitler or to raise the swastika in the school grounds. Girls who attended often went on to take up prominent positions in their own right. Well-known alumnae included Winifried Wagner, daughter-in-law of Richard Wagner, who throughout the Nazi period ran the Bayreuth festival and was a personal friend of Adolf Hitler; and, at the other end of the political spectrum, Annemarie Renger, who after the war became a Social Democratic member of the West German Parliament (*Bundestag*) from 1953 to 1990, and not only held leading roles within her own party but was the first female president of the *Bundestag* (1972–6) and as the SPD candidate in 1979 narrowly missed becoming the first female president of the Federal Republic of Germany.⁶¹

The drive and initiative shared by such very different characters appeared to have been common to a large proportion of far less prominent alumnae. Even a cursory survey of those former pupils of the school, or '*ehemalige Augustanerinnen*', who kept in touch with the Old Girls' Association throughout the post-war years, reveals an extraordinarily high number who had not merely pursued a university degree but had gone on to do postgraduate degrees and were active in a very wide range of professional fields, scattered all over the world.⁶² A certain shared style and outlook on life—educated in the broadest sense and valuing this education; articulate, inquisitive, humorous; proactive, determined to use one's talents and do good in

⁶⁰ I am very grateful to Bodo Förster, a senior teacher at the school, for letting me have a copy of his history of the school written for its 175th anniversary in September 2007.

⁶¹ Annemarie Renger, *Ein politisches Leben* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1993).

⁶² The letters to the Old Girls' Association (*Verein der ehemaligen Augustanerinnen*) are collected in the Schöneberg Heimatarchiv, Berlin.

the world—is evident in letters from former pupils from across the globe, from New York to Tel Aviv, from Switzerland to Australia, from the Federal Republic of Germany to the German Democratic Republic.

Commitment to education and learning certainly seemed to be a life-long endeavour for these women. One 90-year-old resident in a care home for the elderly in East Berlin in the later 1980s, for example, was taking pleasure in trying to teach Greek to a 21-year-old who had come to repair the hinges on her wardrobe door: as a conscientious objector to compulsory military service in the GDR, this young man had been first briefly imprisoned and then refused entry to university, but was determined to study archaeology and felt knowledge of Greek would be good preparation, despite currently having to work as a handyman undertaking repairs of all kinds.⁶³ Another pensioner, this time in West Germany, had always wanted to be a medical doctor in the mission field ‘working like Albert Schweitzer’, but had been thwarted at a crucial period in pursuing her professional goals by Hitler’s policies; now, in retirement, she was able to visit ‘a totally primitive hospital in Ruanda’ and was trying both to give practical help in the field and to raise awareness and funding at home.⁶⁴ Many similar examples could be given from the letters of these highly educated and active alumnae. The school certainly seemed to have stamped a characteristic mark on pupils who had attended it in the 1920s and early 1930s and were still corresponding amongst each other and attending (or, fortunately for the historian, writing lengthy letters updating fellow alumnae on the details of their lives and apologizing for not being able to attend) class reunions in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

There is however another, more particular angle binding former pupils together, which has to do with the experiences of those who attended the school when the Nazis came to power, and who were subsequently scattered less by personal choice than by the exigencies of Nazi racial policy and genocide. Hans Paasche’s daughter, Helga, joined the class from which a much reduced number were still able to take the *Abitur* exam in 1935. This class did not participate in the Old Girls’ Association, but kept together as an extremely close informal group, meeting at regular intervals in a collective *Klassentag* (class reunion) and corresponding with each other from the early post-war years, when news started circulating about who was living where and how they had spent the war years, right through to the period of their decline and deaths in the later twentieth and even into the twenty-first century.⁶⁵ The last time all members of this group were together at school was the term before Easter 1933, after which some of them did not return to school. Among members of this group, there formed a very close set of emotively laden and generationally specific bonds, rooted in what were actually highly diverse experiences of Nazism and genocide.

⁶³ Schöneberg Heimataarchiv, Letter of Hildegard B., 27 Nov. 1987.

⁶⁴ Schöneberg Heimataarchiv, Letter of Dr Irmgard K., 16 Nov. 1979.

⁶⁵ I am extremely grateful to members of the respective families for both talking to me and allowing me to use letters and diaries held in private family archives.

Members of the group to which Helga Paasche belonged were born in 1916–17: in the midst of the Great War, and on the cusp between significant generational cohorts. Those a few years older, members of the war-youth generation who witnessed but did not actively participate in the Great War, later provided the active functionaries of Nazi Germany: their socialization through the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, and their coming to maturity at a time of rising unemployment and political instability, led many to be susceptible to claims that Germany 'needed' a strong leader; their experiences as young adults in the 1930s often served to cement their faith in the *Führer* state. Those a decade or so younger, by contrast, born from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, were able to claim a degree of 'innocence by virtue of late birth': they disproportionately became the committed 'builders' of the two new German states founded in 1949. This particular cohort however, born in the middle years of the Great War, were not left untainted by their diverse experiences of the Third Reich; whatever they did, they could not fully escape the legacies or personal damage caused by their experiences of Nazism; they could not quite shake off questions concerning their very diverse roles and the marks left on them.

The girls in this group were in one respect typical of pre-1933 Berlin: drawn from a range of bourgeois, professional and upper-class backgrounds, the question of whether one was Jewish, partly Jewish, or Christian mattered, until January 1933, not much, if at all as far as friendships among the young people themselves were concerned (although of course such issues mattered a great deal in their families with respect to later marriage partners); and nor did parental politics, as long as there was the money to pay the school fees. Among Helga Paasche's group of close friends, and seen by her teachers as someone with 'leadership' qualities, was one Alexandra von S., whose conservative-nationalist upbringing emphasizing the 'Prussian' virtues of 'duty' and militarism, was in stark contrast to the idealistic outlook and reformist lifestyle of Helga's father Hans Paasche. Alexandra was a Prussian aristocrat related to the distinguished Boitzenburg line of von Arnims and the zu Eulenburgs; her grandfather had been a diplomat in St Petersburg on behalf of Bismarck's Germany; and she had herself been born in 1917 in the former aristocratic palace and then ministerial building owned by the royal family on Wilhelmstrasse, in the grand centre of the government quarter. Following the Revolution of 1918, the family had been forced to make way for the new president, Friedrich Ebert, and moved to the nearby Tiergarten area to live in a wing of Schloss Bellevue (a former palace which is now the seat of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany). Helga Paasche had perhaps more in common with Franziska, whose left-wing father, Alexander Schwab, had like Hans Paasche been involved in the pre-war youth movement, had been an active participant in the meeting on the Hohe Meißner in 1913, was a founding member of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in 1917, and remained very active in left-wing circles throughout the Weimar period and early years of the Third Reich. Many girls came from Jewish or mixed backgrounds, which were generally entirely irrelevant to them at the time. But massive changes were inaugurated with the

accession of Hitler to the chancellorship, as ‘race’ and ‘politics’ displaced ‘class’ as key overriding distinctions of status.

The moment when Hitler came to power signalled instantly a massive change for the school. Annemarie Renger (who was slightly younger than the ‘class of 1935’, being born in October 1919 and aged thirteen when Hitler came to power) vividly recalled the change of atmosphere:

The day when Hitler took over in power was a Monday, on which, as at the start of every week, students and the teaching staff gathered together in the school hall. On this 30th January there was a very singular atmosphere. Apparently in the morning it had already somehow leaked out that Paul von Hindenburg was going to name Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of the Reich. I had a sense of foreboding. Before the Director, Frau Dr. Mayer Kulenkampff, could start to speak, my long-term German teacher, with his NSDAP-Party badge on his collar, jumped up onto the stage and held a glowing impromptu speech about the ‘Saviour of his Fatherland’, which is what he thought his ‘Führer’ to be. And this was the very same teacher who in lessons had always talked a lot about humanism.

By contrast, I think with great admiration and gratitude of Frau Dr. Mayer-Kulenkampff, who following this outpouring from the German teacher calmly went up to the microphone, wearing a simple black silk dress and read out a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke as though all this had nothing to do with her.

I can’t now remember if this was on the same day, but I have a very clear memory that when the Nazis wanted to raise the swastika flag in place of the black-red-gold flag, our Director refused to take down the flag of the Weimar Republic. It was not long before the school got first an acting Head and then a Director who was acceptable to the Prussian Minister for Cultural Affairs, [Bernhard] Rust. Frau Mayer-Kulenkampff was demoted to a job in another school.⁶⁶

Mayer-Kulenkampff was in fact replaced by two strongly Nazi Directors in rapid succession, who took a far more radical line with respect to the pupils and the curriculum. Many girls were soon ‘forcefully persuaded’ to leave school, for both ‘racial’ and political reasons.

Renger came from a social democratic background: her father, Fritz Wildung, was active in the workers’ sports movement and from 1907 was editor of the Workers’ Gymnastics Magazine (*Arbeiter-Turnzeitung*). But like so many, he lost his job in the course of the Nazi takeover of the press and exclusion of Social Democrats from influential positions; and Renger’s family was no longer able to afford the Augusta Schule school fees. Renger recalls that for other Augusta Schule girls whose families found themselves in straitened financial circumstances, a scholarship would readily have been found; but this was not the case for someone

⁶⁶ Annemarie Renger, *Ein politisches Leben* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1993), pp. 33–4. In an undated letter to Inge Cohn-Lampert, Renger recalled that the teacher who held ‘eine glühende Rede auf Hitler’ was Dr Schochow, the class teacher of the ‘class of 1935’ that is under particular focus here. I am very grateful to Bodo Förster for passing this on to me. Bernhard Rust’s two daughters also attended this school, so that he had a personal interest in who was in charge of it and the character of the student body.

of her political background. What was perhaps even worse for her, as a young teenager at the time, were the responses of classmates:

I had to leave the grammar school because I was refused a scholarship. We could not pay the fees. Probably they would otherwise have found some other way to make me leave the school. But I did not let myself get discouraged, not even by the way my fellow students took their leave of me. I will probably not forget their snide advice: 'So Annemarie, now you will have to wash floors nicely. You have to get a bucket of water and first sprinkle the floor with it so the dust doesn't rise.' I was fuming with rage and injured pride.⁶⁷

Not all of Renger's fellow students were quite so harsh, however; and it was quite clear within the school that the reasons for her exclusion were primarily political. One former classmate, Gertraud S., later recalled:

I can recall quite clearly that [Renger] had to leave school early—'for reasons of state'—. That affected me as a c.12- or 13-year-old schoolgirl quite closely, because our English teacher told us about her leaving with particular regret and sympathy. [She said] the reason was the social-socialist attitude of the father. . .

At that time I had a class teacher who was fired with enthusiasm for National Socialism. That didn't really influence me, because I was bothered by this fantastic raving. That was the same with all the external brouhaha at the school: having to walk along the corridor with your arm raised in the Hitler greeting, etc., and loads of marching music. I also didn't like hearing Göbbels' [*sic*] voice. . . At home: just music and painting and creative writing.⁶⁸

Renger had clearly fallen foul of the political consequences of the Nazi takeover of power for her father's employment, and hence his income, which in combination with the school's now dominant Nazi attitudes forced her out. Many more were adversely affected by the rapid translation of racism into practice. This was again either 'indirectly', as a result of what were often represented as 'purely financial' reasons—which were of course caused politically, by loss of employment following the April 7 Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service; or blatantly and directly, through the proactive policies of the schools themselves.

As early as Easter 1933 and continuing through 1934, in an energetic pre-emption of exclusionary policies which only became a matter of official legislation years later, girls with a Jewish background (including not only those who were fully Jewish but also those of 'mixed descent', the so-called '*Mischlinge*') in the Augusta Schule and neighbouring schools were being forcefully eased out of school. The 'Aryan Paragraph' of the April 1933 Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service had already made it clear that no person with a Jewish grandparent (even only one) would be able to take up a professional position which came under the very broad German category of state employees (*Beamten*). Given the limitations on their children's chances of university study, and the denial of future professional careers imposed by this ban—as well as, in many cases, their own immediate loss of

⁶⁷ Renger, *Ein politisches Leben*, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Letter from Gertraud S., 17 Sep. 2006, to Bodo Förster.

livelihood through being ousted from professional positions—many parents were ‘persuaded’ that their children ‘had no future’ in any event, and that it was therefore no longer worth paying school fees for the coveted school-leaving exam, the *Abitur*, if they could no longer aspire to university studies or a professional career.

The figures in the annual reports from the neighbouring Chamisso Schule, also located in the ‘Bavarian quarter’ of Schöneberg with its relatively high Jewish population, reveals how pupils with any kind of Jewish background were removed from school already from the very start of the Third Reich.⁶⁹ In 1933 the Chamisso Schule had 513 pupils, including 162 who were counted in a column labelled ‘Jews’ (31.6 per cent), with as yet no distinction between ‘full’ Jews and those of ‘mixed descent’; by 1936, the columns in the Annual Report revealed that the school was down to 364 pupils, with only 25 ‘Jewish’ and 11 ‘Jewish-mixed blood’ (*jüdisch-mischblütige*) pupils remaining on roll. Of the 330 pupils remaining at this school in 1939, there were none in the ‘Jewish’ column, and a mere three clinging on in the ‘*jüdisch-mischblütige*’ column. One of these three had earlier been forced out of the highly academic Augusta Schule, but was taken on eagerly and held by the neighbouring Chamisso Schule because she was a champion swimmer, capable of winning all the cups in inter-school sports competitions.⁷⁰

Sudden departures from school could come as a shock to schoolmates who remained. Alexandra von S., who over the Easter break in 1933 was away attending her uncle’s funeral at Boitzenburg, in the Brandenburg countryside outside Berlin, could hardly believe the news when she heard that one of her best friends would not be returning to the Augusta Schule on its belated reopening under the new director after Easter. As she wrote:

But, you know, I’m shattered, I really never would have thought it! I probably always hoped you would stay at the school. . . . But that now you really are at the Lettehaus [secretarial college] is simply unbelievable! As for me, which really takes second place here, I will now have to mourn away my life in school all alone. . . . O-o-o-o-ooooh! Frightful,—*frightful!!!*. . . Well—but I’ll just have to get used to it—Nothing will help!⁷¹

But, as it turned out, it proved hard to sustain the innocent friendships of childhood and early adolescence under the new circumstances of Nazi Germany. Within a matter of less than a decade, when her former friend was already in exile, Alexandra was living in an area just twenty-five miles north of Auschwitz, married to a member of the Nazi civilian administration of this occupied Polish territory; and further members of the Berlin circle of young people who had played as children together in the 1920s and friends in the early 1930s were in fear of their lives and had emigrated without ever having wanted to leave their homeland, or had already been murdered.

When in December 1934 the ‘class of 1935’—or rather the much shrunken group of thirteen girls who had remained in school to take the final school leaving

⁶⁹ Schöneberg Heimataarchiv, file entitled ‘Chamisso-Schule 1900–1941’.

⁷⁰ Interview on 3 Dec. 2006 with Inge Cohn-Lampert, whose sister was the champion swimmer in the Chamisso School.

⁷¹ Letter from Alexandra von S., 23 Apr. 1933, private family archive. I am very grateful to her son for allowing me use of these letters.

exams—finally came towards the end of their time at the Augusta Schule and were preparing to take the *Abitur*, they had to write brief autobiographical sketches, which were neatly filed alongside their teachers' reports and records of their grades. This collection provides a glimpse of what a handful of Berlin girls, born into professional and socially privileged families in the midst of the Great War, thought important, or at least what they thought should be mentioned for the purposes of being allowed to take the *Abitur*, about their lives to date and their enthusiasms and aspirations nearly two years into Nazi Germany. It also shows just how their life paths prepared them—or not—for what was yet to come.

It is striking, when reading through this collection, to notice just how many of them mentioned how they were affected by having been 'war children' (*Kriegskinder*) with respect to the Great War. Most had spent the first years of their lives in temporary accommodation, with their mother and perhaps with grandparents or other relatives, while their fathers were away in military service; several had lost their fathers in the war, while others could recall the first time they consciously 'met' their father on his return from the front or following a period as a prisoner of war. A significant proportion had experienced lengthy periods of ill-health as a child, necessitating long absences from school, or periods sent for recuperation in the country. The war and its impact was clearly sufficiently 'present' in their minds to be considered worthy of mention in these brief autobiographical essays of the mid-1930s.

They were also quite consciously young women 'caught in the middle' with respect to emancipatory trends. Virtually all mention, in one way or another, how their own well-educated, professional parents had brought them up with a love of learning and a desire for a humanistic education. Several then go on to mention what it was that they would ideally have liked to study, or what profession they would in principle have liked to follow. But several then rather sadly go on to qualify this, saying that now, as a young woman, this was no longer possible for them; so they would instead like to follow what the new regime had designated as an occupation more appropriate to women, such as baby- or child-care of some sort. What is interesting here is the way in which the recent restrictions on opportunities about which they had earlier been enthusiastic seem to have been quite simply internalized and accepted as constrained horizons and reduced aspirations.⁷²

⁷² For broader discussion of controversies over women and gender in Nazi Germany, see e.g. Gisela Bock, 'Antinatalism, maternity and paternity in National Socialist racism' in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987); Mary Nolan, 'Work, gender and everyday life: Reflections on continuity, normality and agency in twentieth-century Germany' in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Dagmar Reese, *Growing up Female in Nazi Germany*, trans. William Templer (University of Michigan Press, 2006; orig. 1989); Eve Rosenhaft, 'Women in modern Germany' in Gordon Martel (ed.), *Modern Germany Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 1992); Adelheid von Saldern, 'Victims or perpetrators? Controversies about the role of women in the Nazi state' in David Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society, 1933–45* (London: Routledge, 1994); Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1975); Stephenson, *The Nazi Organisation of Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); and Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Pearson, 2001).

Most striking is, perhaps, the way in which so many of them speak about the German lands and people in an incipiently nationalist way, talking of ‘Germanness’ (*Deutschtum*) and the ways in which German borderlands require protection against neighbours who are portrayed as both inferior and threatening. Many speak from the personal experiences of their families and with a real sense of place, having visited some of the border regions or having family backgrounds which had been affected by the redrawing of boundaries in the Versailles settlement. This is a compelling combination of ‘lived experience’ and family traditions as related in the home, on the one hand, and the significations, vocabulary and aspirations of the Nazi state, on the other.

Ulrike B., for example, the daughter of a senior teacher in the school, was born in 1916 to parents who both came from Pomeranian pastors’ houses ‘in which Prussian tradition and understanding for German-Protestant culture as well as for humanistic education was cultivated’. She recalls that her parents’ families ‘had already been living for generations on this eastern German colonial territory. And even in my earliest childhood I had heard from my father about the historical development and the national significance of this area.’ Her love of her Fatherland, and its eastern provinces and lost territories, had been further strengthened by school trips:

Other class trips in recent years took us to the wonderful brick buildings in the Altmark, to East Prussia, and to the Harz area. We came to understand the singular historical and national significance of the German lands in the east that are threatened by the Poles and Lithuanians. Here, for the first time, I gained an impression of the frightful danger in which the Germans in border regions [*Grenzlanddeutschum*] have to live, and of our duty to stand by them. In the same way we experienced the great affection and friendliness there with which they greet anyone coming from the innermost part of the Reich.

Although she was too young to remember the Great War and Revolution, she claims: ‘I experienced the national renewal with full consciousness and great enthusiasm, since it was for me the first time that political developments of such incredible significance for the fate of our people had swept me up.’⁷³

Many took the opportunity not merely to profess their values, but also to claim active engagement in service of the German national cause. Hildegaard H., the daughter of a lawyer, reported that:

Right at the start of my schooldays in the Augusta School I joined the V.D.A. [Association for Germans Abroad, *Verein für das Deutschum im Ausland*, which in 1933 was renamed the *Volksbund für das Deutschum im Ausland*, National League for Germans Abroad]. Since already before that I had cultivated a lively interest for German communities abroad [*Auslandsdeutschum*], this gave me the opportunity to engage in practical work. I worked a lot in the V.D.A. Later my work was made easier by many visits to the border regions. Particularly in Czechoslovakia I got to know many members of German communities abroad and could convince myself of the difficulties they experienced in these foreign countries; situated close to their mother

⁷³ Schöneberg Heimatarchiv, ‘Lebenslauf der Oberprimanerin Ulrike B.’, 1 Dec. 1934.

country and yet exposed without any protection to every kind of capricious action just because of a senseless drawing of the borders. In October I joined the Eastern Section [*Oststaffel*] of the V.D.A. and after that was dissolved I went over to the B.D.M. [*Bund deutscher Mädel*, the girls' section of the Hitler Youth organization].⁷⁴

Irmtraut D., who introduces herself as the daughter of a ministerial official (*Ministerialrat*) in the Ministry for Science, Art and Education (*Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung*), also professes her concern for lost territories and borderlands: 'I belong to the Association for Germans Abroad. My interest in this Association had been particularly stimulated by the fact that my family on my father's side had for generations up to the World War been resident as owners of a landed estate in an area which has now been given up to Poland.'⁷⁵

That such professions of commitment to the German national cause were not essential for permission to enter the *Abitur* exam is evident from other cases where there are no such mentions of commitment to Nazi political goals and ideology. Dorothea F., for example, the daughter of a single mother—her father had been killed by a British tank attack at Cambrai on 20 November 1917—wrote only of her love of books from an early age, her difficulties in making the transition in October 1929 'from the little town of Kreuznach to the big city' when she and her mother moved to Berlin, a city rendered attractive for her only through 'the possibility of a grammar school education', and, following a gesture towards the need to extend her 'knowledge of housework through half a year of [domestic] labour service or training on a landed estate', her long-term goal and desire to study medicine.⁷⁶

The differences among these girls soon began to become evident, as racism was, even in this small and socially close-knit group, translated into practice in interpersonal relations. Despite her initial reaction of shock, Alexandra von S.—like so many other Germans—soon began to drift away from former friends with a Jewish background; views on the crucial events of the year in which Hitler came to power, particularly the burning of the books on Unter den Linden, just across the road from what is now the Humboldt University (at that time called the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität), on 10 May 1933, were simply too far apart for friendships to be sustained in the earlier carefree and un-political manner. Alexandra von S. also appears to have had to work hard on overcoming hesitations about being close friends with anyone who was in Nazi terms 'racially impure'. In a letter to one of her formerly closest friends, while continuing to assert her friendship, the nearly seventeen-year-old aristocrat sought to explain the theoretical background for a growing distance and cooling of relations—arguably precipitated by political differences, which were of course now impossible to separate from questions of 'race':

As long as the Jews in Germany lived apart, that means, consciously as a foreign people, everything went alright. But as soon as they began to mix themselves with the Germans

⁷⁴ Schöneberg Heimatachiv, Hildegard H., 'Lebenslauf', 1 Dec. 1934.

⁷⁵ Schöneberg Heimatachiv, Irmtraut D., 'Gesuch um Zulassung zur Reifeprüfung. Anlage: Lebenslauf', Berlin, 1 Dec. 1934.

⁷⁶ Schöneberg Heimatachiv, Dorothea F., Lebenslauf.

biologically, and later even came into leadership positions, then it was all over, then they brought only trouble to our people. Democratic, materialist ideas, etc., that are in essence Jewish and not German . . . It took a Hitler to show the people again what was German and what was foreign, and that the foreign element must be removed. The conservatives always fought against Jewish ideas, but precisely only against the ideas, and did not grasp the evil by its roots. Therefore they had to fail. Only Hitler, who saw the right path, could be successful. If we now seek to cleanse the people from everything Jewish, then that is not directed against the individual Jew; we simply want to be German and not a mixed race.⁷⁷

This is an extraordinarily striking example of the translation of Hitlerite ideology into everyday practice—all the more appalling because there is no evidence here of ‘working towards the *Führer*’ (that is, pre-emptively or proactively carrying out what people thought the *Führer* would like to see accomplished), or seeking personal advancement or gain. This is simply the unthinking wholesale adoption of an ideological outlook of biological racism, building on and expanding a pre-existing and less well-articulated climate of racism that was widely prevalent and socially enacted in many circles, with lifetime consequences for subsequent pathways and self-perceptions in each case.

These two may be unique only in the survival of the documents; their story was repeated a thousand fold in 1930s Germany. Breaking up of friendships and beginning to think of each other as ‘different’, no longer in the category of those with whom one could be friends, was moreover institutionally furthered by the excessively rapid and proactive translation of regime ideals into everyday practices.

What happened to other close friendships that had been forged while at school? Slowly, people with the ‘wrong’ background became increasingly isolated, excluded from social invitations and the round of social events associated with the Hitler Youth organizations. Inge Cohn-Lampert describes this process of social exclusion as sufficiently gradual as to be barely perceptible at first; but there then came a moment, in the later 1930s, when she suddenly realized she probably would never be able to marry: as a Christian but of ‘racially mixed descent’, she could marry neither a Jewish boy, nor an ‘Aryan’ one.⁷⁸ Others, of ‘Aryan’ descent but political opponents of the regime, survived through ‘half-lives’, outwardly conforming—making the gestures demanded of them by way of *Heil Hitler* salutes and appropriate appearances on different occasions, but inwardly sensing a vast gulf between their thoughts and their actions. Franziska, for example, whose father Alexander Schwab was active in a left-wing opposition group and was incarcerated by the Nazis from 1935 until his death in prison some eight years later, subsequently confessed that she felt guilty that she had tried to lead an outwardly ‘normal’ life at this time. So did many others who inwardly felt opposed to the regime, but could see little way of actively mounting any effective resistance. Some left the country entirely. Others, conforming to the new demands of the regime, settled into the lives scripted for them: doing their Reich Labour Service, marrying, taking up

⁷⁷ Letter from Alexandra von S., 11 Jul. 1934, private family archive; her emphasis.

⁷⁸ Interview with Inge Cohn-Lampert, 3 Dec. 2006.

positions in, for example, charity work as befitting their status as wives, and in the process losing touch with those of their former class mates who were not to be part of the racially and politically defined '*Volksgemeinschaft*'.

Some of those who were scattered across the racial ravines of Nazi Germany sought to retain some form of contact, even during the war years. Even a fleeting gesture of recognition and greeting to an old schoolmate now dressed in rags and wearing the yellow star could mean an awful lot in those circumstances. As one alumna, a Jewish survivor of the concentration camps who subsequently emigrated to the USA, wrote more than two decades later to the convenor of the Old Girls Association:

Many thanks for sending me Renata R.'s address. I'm very pleased that I can now write to her. She happened to meet me in 1941, when I was wearing the Jewish star, and times were hard for us in Berlin, and she had the heart and the courage to greet me in a friendly way on the open street. Since at that moment I was very ragged and because of that very impolite, but because it also at that moment meant a great deal to me, I always wanted to thank her for this action, I am very grateful to you for now giving me the opportunity for this.⁷⁹

It is a sad irony that it was the victim of racist policies who, more than two decades later, felt the need to apologize for lack of politeness in returning a greeting.

But among others, the newly introduced racial divides of the Third Reich ran sufficiently deep for a quite different trajectory to be possible.

III. THE MOBILIZATION OF THE WAR-YOUTH GENERATION AND THE FIRST HITLER YOUTH GENERATION

Once the state had channelled and made only certain kinds and directions of violence possible, there was a progressive and rapid narrowing of what voices could be heard, with the silencing of others, legitimating and instigating certain sorts of violence and seeking to disarm others. After 1933 the picture of the 'violent society' inherited from the 1920s was quite different: one side alone had a virtual monopoly on the deployment of physical force. There nevertheless continued to be tensions and strains between different factions after 1933, and even well into the wartime years, with shifts in the balance of power among different elements within the radical and conservative right, and in the character and issues involved over time.

In the early years of the Third Reich, there continued to be disputes between different elements of the judiciary and civil service—though already from April 1933 pruned of socialist and Jewish lawyers—and the new Nazi *loci* of brutish and overt violence. Even as any notion of 'decency' should have been seen to be slipping away under the guise of state-sanctioned discrimination, distinctions between 'legal' measures and 'terroristic' violence continued to be made, with a fine line

⁷⁹ Schöneberg Heimatarchiv, letter from Hedwig K., New York, 28 Sep. 1962.

drawn between what were held to be 'decent' and legally sanctioned acts of discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion—which in practice amounted to robbery, degradation, and denial of human rights—and acts of overt physical violence or thuggery on the streets. Yet at the same time many educated young men, those of the war-youth generation born in the first decade of the century, were just embarking on careers within the civil service, broadly defined. Many of these saw political violence and the legal profession as perfectly compatible. It is remarkable just how many of those who later made careers in the Nazi apparatus of military occupation and genocide were undergoing legal and professional training and experiencing rapid rises in their careers in the course of the 1930s, riding on the tide of the new political wave, fostered by the new elites. For some, then, the dynamism of the Third Reich appeared to offer unprecedented opportunities for rising in a career, receiving recognition and distinctions.

Sebastian Haffner was one of the very few who could not make peace with the new regime, and, although not in any obvious category to be persecuted by the regime—of impeccable 'Aryan' descent, not homosexual, not disabled, not 'asocial', not even particularly active as far as politics was concerned—nevertheless felt an uneasy conscience however they behaved under the new circumstances.⁸⁰ Haffner himself left for Britain. But his scruples, doubts, and determination at an early stage to make no compromises in facing the challenges of the new Nazi regime were highly unusual for young up-and-coming professionals of his generation. The vast majority of those in this generation, just making career choices and entering positions of responsibility in young adulthood, simply conformed to the demands of the time and made their way through the various rungs of the career ladder. Many seamlessly switched from the radical violence of the Weimar years to the 'legal violence' entailed by service to the Nazi state, whether in civilian administration or through the newly compliant army.

One such was Udo K., who in 1938 married the former Augusta Schule pupil, Alexandra von S. Born in 1910, and growing up in the troubled Silesian borderlands with paramilitary violence all around, Udo K.'s career provided a classic example of the ways in which the Nazi regime affected the lives of those who in other times might have developed in quite different directions. Following his successful application of late 1932 for membership of the SA, building on his previous experience in the paramilitary organization of the '*Gefolgschaft*' in the Silesian-Polish borderlands, in February 1933, three weeks after Hitler's appointment as chancellor, Udo K. applied to join the NSDAP, receiving the party membership number 1,9411,466.⁸¹ By the summer of 1938 he was still a member of the SA—despite the dwindling national membership figures at this time—but

⁸⁰ Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen*.

⁸¹ Bundesarchiv 1050088525, letter from Udo K. to the Reichsschatzmeister der NSDAP München, Berlin, 31 Jan. 1935, claiming that 'Am 22.II.33 beantragte ich in Breslau meine Aufnahme in die NSDAP'; Bundesarchiv ZA VI 265. A. 14, Letter from Udo K, Bendzin, 4 Jan. 1941, to RMI Berlin 'Zur Ergänzung meiner Personalakten', and 'Abschrift' of an affidavit from a functionary of the Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund München, 15 Dec. 1932, in support of his application to join the SA. See also Ch. 3 above, pp 79–81.

his activities had definitively shifted towards the more central activities of the army and his own chosen profession as a legally trained local government official.⁸² His career in the course of the 1930s was relatively typical for men of his background and generation, if perhaps somewhat accelerated in light of his relative acuity, energy and intellectual gifts, which he demonstrated in apparently exemplary service of the new state. A reference by Dr Bode, a senior government official (*Oberregierungsrat*), supporting Udo K.'s promotion in 1937 highlights what were deemed to be virtues among young civil servants of his generation, drawing attention to the close links between paramilitary, military and state service even within one person's career. Udo K. had proved himself to be 'a particularly capable civil servant';

K. is a government civil servant [*Regierungsreferendar*] of good appearance, combining natural confidence and elegant bearing with good etiquette. He has the gift of being able to understand things quickly, has a feel for practical matters, demonstrates healthy ambition and great assiduity, and works fast. There is no doubt that he has a great interest in making a career as an administrative civil servant, yet without this preference making him one-sided. Alongside his actual professional training K. has, for years, dedicated himself with great interest to military matters, and during the period 1925–1933 was active in the border protection troops of Upper Silesia. Later he happily took up the opportunity of doing military service, so that by 1936 he was already a Lieutenant of the Reserve in the I.R.9 [Potsdam Infantry Regiment 9]. His interest in military matters has also found expression in his writings. . . . He is the author of a pamphlet on 'Race and Military Law' which appeared with Kohlhammer in 1936. And on other matters too K. has occasionally written essays for publication. He is the Reich Group Organizer for mid-level government civil servants in the National Socialist League of Jurists [*Reichsgruppenverwalter für Regierungsreferendare im nationalsozialistischen Rechtswahrerbund*] and has published in the journal of the 'Youth and Law' publishing house. It should also be mentioned here that K. has belonged to the NSDAP since 22.2.33 and is also a member of the SA and here holds the post of a Senior Assault Group Leader [*Obersturnführer*].⁸³

This positive evaluation of Udo K.'s ability and track record was supported by others. The *Landrat* of Teltow (a district bordering on the southern fringes of Berlin, where Udo K. had done some of his practical training), for example, 'evaluates him in words of high praise as reliable by character and naturally cut out for a leadership role, and counts him "among the best of the up-and-coming generation"'. Additionally, Udo K. had devoted his legal talents to the racial cause in a rather difficult case:

Even in carrying out a special task that was not entirely easy, sifting material from the Foreign Office for the Cairo Jews' Case [*Kairoer Judenprozess*] on the instructions of the Reich Minister for Enlightenment and Propaganda, K. worked with great assiduity and ability as well as success.⁸⁴

⁸² Bundesarchiv SA / 4000002271.

⁸³ Bundesarchiv ZA VI 265. A. 14, Akten betr. den Regierungs-Referendar Udo K. vom 16. Oktober 1933 bis—, p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

It is worth for a moment considering what was involved in this particular demonstration of commitment to the racist cause, even (perhaps especially) within an international spotlight.

The 'Kairoer Judenprozess' in which Udo K. had demonstrated his skills was a court case held in Egypt following accusations of antisemitism made by one Léon Castro and the 'Egyptian League for fighting antisemitism' (*Ägyptische Liga zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus*) against a German publication. According to Wolfgang Diewerge, the Nazi journalist covering the case, the publication in question was 'guilty' merely of factual and accurate reporting; 'The unduly large influence of Jews in Germany was demonstrated through the use of impeccable statistics' and the publication had demonstrated that Jews 'had exercised a corrosive influence on the economic and cultural life of Germany . . . [and] also were beginning to show symptoms of degeneration'.⁸⁵ But the results of this legal action were by no means foreordained, so far outside Germany's borders, with the eyes of the world on the trial, which was reported on across Europe, including by *The Times* in London. A success for the Nazi cause was only pulled off by fast legal footwork and the extensive preparation of materials in Berlin to support the case, in which task Udo K. had assisted to such notable effect. According to Diewerge, the seventy-page long brief sent by the German lawyers demonstrated 'with German thoroughness and scientific precision' that 'Jews in Germany were active as parasites, that they had exerted a destructive influence on cultural life, that Jewish business morality was expressed in the crime statistics and that they finally showed symptoms of degeneration'.⁸⁶ Diewerge was of the opinion that this was decisive in the case:

Using this analysis, the Jewish interpretation of the political and legal bases for the complaint was illuminated and opposed with scientific precision, superior knowledge and subtle humour.⁸⁷

Yet Castro mounted a highly convincing response, which made the further turn of events even more surprising:

In the most careful examination all possibilities of a Jewish response were thought through and ways of arguing against them worked out. Thus it was possible—and this was seen in legal circles as a sensation—for the German side to produce, within a matter of a few days, an additional piece, the so-called 'Note additionelle', which was handed over to the court and the opponent. This 'Note additionelle' was also, following the practices of large trials, printed and amounted to the impressive total of 94 pages. This piece of work too demonstrated such mental superiority on the part of the German side, and at the same time . . . presented outstanding arguments for dealing with the Jewish Question . . .⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Wolfgang Diewerge, *Als Sonderberichterstatter zum Kairoer Judenprozess. Gerichtlich erhärtetes Material zur Judenfrage* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP. Franz Eher Nachf., 1935), pp. 18–19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Whatever Udo K.'s own, possibly only modest, contribution to this legal 'sensation' might have been, given the early stage of his career, even to have received an explicit mention in this connection certainly assisted his promotion; and the fact that he assisted at all in what was clearly an explicit construction of a detailed case against what was seen as 'undue Jewish influence' in Germany suggests that Udo K. was not merely willing to support the Nazi cause, but could have had no illusions whatsoever about its intrinsically racist character. This was not, then, a case of supporting Nazism primarily for reasons of the revision of the Versailles settlement, apparently dealing with 'chaos' on the streets, or achieving a return to full employment, factors which were widely popular among many who later professed they had barely noticed evidence of racism in the 1930s or that it had played little or no role in their support for the regime.

This incident also provides ample demonstration of the fact that lawyers of this generation could readily combine deployment of their intellectual skills with offering their physical strength to the Nazi state. Udo K. was far from alone among the cohort who came to maturity in the 1930s and, more importantly, were 'culturally available' for mobilization, willing and eager to put both their minds and bodies at the service of the Nazi cause, however accompanied by momentary qualms and doubts about precisely which direction they should take. In the course of the mid- and later 1930s, Udo K. combined a rapidly rising career in the civil service with periodic stints of military training in the Potsdam Infantry Regiment Number 9—through which he met one of the girls from the Augusta Schule class, Alexandra von S., whose brother Viktor was active in the same regiment. Like so many others of his generation, Udo K. continuously oscillated between service to the Nazi state in the army and in civilian administration.

At the same time, a far more radical system of brutality and physical violence was being built up—again drawing from the war-youth generation, although from rather different elements and with rather different responsibilities in what became a division of labour between 'legal' repression and physical violence. From 1936 onwards, Himmler and his SS empire were increasingly set loose from the inherited legal system, increasingly independent, although still operating under some restraint. Such restraints only truly began to be dissolved after the start of the war in 1939, and even then there was both a stepwise progression towards cold-blooded mass murder and a degree of working in tandem with civilian administration in ways which have not as yet been adequately explicated.

Who was at the forefront of the apparatus of internal repression, charged with carrying out new state-sanctioned violence which escalated in the course of the mid to later 1930s? Here, there is a major generational divide to be observed: younger Germans were charged with locking up and controlling older Germans. Physical violence was predominantly exercised by those drawn from slightly younger cohorts than the war-youth generation: the 'first Hitler youth generation', those born during and shortly after the Great War and who were too young to remember the war but who experienced its legacies in the 1920s and were only too well aware of the crises of the late Weimar years.

Table 4.1 Analysis of *SS-Totenkopfverbände* membership by year of birth

Birth cohorts	Number	Comments
1899 and before	58	
1900–4	61	
1905–9	237	
1910–14	1,554	
1915–19	3,839	
1920–22	3,370	Of which: 1920: 1,705 1921: 1,286 1922: 389

The generational aspect of the Third Reich is evident in startling clarity in the personnel of the SS groups guarding the concentration camps of the peacetime years.⁸⁹ With the expansion of Himmler's control over the repressive forces of the Third Reich in 1936 came a shift in the character of these forces. From 29 March 1936 the *SS-Wachverbände* were renamed *SS-Totenkopfverbände* on Himmler's orders. By 1938, with the escalation of violence and acquisition of new territories in Austria and the Sudetenland that year, considerable expansion of the repressive forces for the control of those imprisoned in concentration camps was planned. As Himmler put it in a speech on 8 November 1938 speech in Munich to *SS-Standarte 'Deutschland'*, clarifying Hitler's Decree of August 1938: in the next ten years the regime would 'certainly enter into as yet unheard-of conflicts'; a struggle of world views was developing in which the 'whole of the Jewry, Freemasonry, Marxists and Churches of the world' would be 'annihilated'.⁹⁰ The *SS-Totenkopfverbände* accordingly recruited predominantly young men, born during or in the first years after the Great War. Of the 9,126 men in the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* in 1938, 6,820 were born in the years 1915–1921; including the 389 born in 1922 fully 7,209 of the total of 9,119 were drawn from the 'first HJ generation'. (See Table 4.1.)

It might be argued that this striking age profile is simply an outcome of the SS recruitment policy, and of course there is an element of truth to this. Recruitment works best among those who have not yet settled into an established career pattern. But those recruited have also to be willing and 'psychologically available' for the tasks to which they are being recruited; and here the cohorts of 1915–21 stood out, not only within the organizational structure of the Third Reich, but also within the wider sphere of the exercise of violence on the streets.

⁸⁹ See further Karin Orth, *Die Konzentrationslager-SS. Sozialstrukturelle Analysen und biographische Studien* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000).

⁹⁰ The table and Himmler quotation in this paragraph are derived from: Klaus Drobisch and Günther Wieland, *System der NS-Konzentrationslager 1933–1939* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), pp. 256–7, based on *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1937*, p. 51, and *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1938*, p. 79.

Young people of these cohorts were the most easily mobilized for the 'spontaneous' acts of violence which the Nazis periodically whipped up on the streets during the 1930s. But even for those who kept well away from brutality and affray on the streets, it was difficult to escape a degree of mobilization for the Nazi cause. The 'first Hitler Youth generation'—roughly, those who were teenagers in the 1930s—is often written about in terms of youth non-conformity. There were certainly significant numbers of young people who resisted all attempts by the Nazi organizations to co-opt them for the Nazi cause and who were impervious to attempts to instil Nazi ideology. Unofficial dissenting and oppositional youth groups, such as the 'Edelweiss Pirates', the Munich 'Blasen', and the Hamburg jazz fans, have received well-deserved places in history and memorialization.⁹¹ However, viewed in terms of differences in relative support for Nazism across age cohorts, the very widespread conformity of most young people is far more striking than the dissent of a minority; and there is abundant evidence of active commitment to the Nazi cause among many young people, often with apparently very little sense of inner distance from the regime's demands, unlike those who were rather older and had already developed other positions. Even where it might be overstating matters to talk of active commitment, there is evidence of widespread conformity rooted not so much in any desire to realign oneself with newly dominant discourses and practices, but rather simply because of the absence of alternative frameworks of belief, or support for alternative patterns of behaviour. Young people were the most vulnerable, susceptible, and exposed to nazification, unless growing up in milieus which provided active and strong alternatives.

A wide range of sources, particularly those produced by left-wing opponents of Nazism who viewed the enthusiasm of the young with growing concern, repeatedly comment that young people in the 1930s were much more positive about National Socialism than those a few years older.⁹² One socialist in Munich, for example, reporting to the Social Democratic Party in exile (Sopade), claimed that

it's the young people who bring real enthusiasm into the Nazi stable . . . I would almost say: the secret of Nazism is the secret of its youth. The fellows are simply so fanatical that they believe in nothing so much as their Hitler. Sometimes it seems to me as if only a war could bring them to their senses.⁹³

He went on to complain on rather different grounds about those who were already adults in the 1930s—in the process predicting rather accurately the future course of German opinion: 'they sometimes just make me sick, these whiners. Just as they

⁹¹ On dissenting youth subcultures, see e.g. Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany* (London: Batsford, 1987), and Peukert, 'Youth in the Third Reich' in Richard Bessel (ed.), *Life in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); see also the discussion in Johnson, *The Nazi Terror*.

⁹² I discuss some of the following examples and further evidence of youth involvement in violence in an essay on 'Changing states, changing selves: Violence and social generations in the transition from Nazism to communism' in M. Fulbrook (ed.), *Un-Civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Culture and Society: Perspectives debating with Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

⁹³ *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934–1940* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck und Zweitausendeins, 1980), Vol. 1, No. 2, May–June 1934, p. 118.

earlier swore at the economic bigwigs, so today they are swearing at the Nazis and tomorrow they will swear at our socialist dictatorship.⁹⁴ Members of the left-wing resistance group, *Neu Beginnen*, were equally clear about the way young people were disproportionately supporting the Nazi cause. As one put it:

It would be mistaken to count on any victories or successes for opposition among young people. Given the very strong power of attraction that fascism exerts on youth, as shown by the Italian example, it must by contrast be expected that young people will deliver the strongest support for the regime.⁹⁵

Similar comments were made by a Social Democrat:

Let us not forget that fascism does not draw its strength solely from economic conditions, but that its power lies in its ideology. We have to overcome fascism ideologically. It is clear that it is precisely the young people, [who are] the nation's strength, who are still completely caught in the fascist way of thinking.⁹⁶

Young people appear to have internalized Nazi ideology to a higher degree than did older Germans who had prior belief systems in the light of which to assess the Nazi onslaught. While adults who were less than happy about the course of events seem to have simply withdrawn into a more-or-less sullen silence, it was the young who showed active enthusiasm. As one radical left-winger commented:

The labour front has been brought into line as far as organization goes, but not ideologically, particularly among older people. One could say that there is rather a depoliticization, a tendency towards indifference and passivity. Fascist activism is only among the younger ones.⁹⁷

In the view of one worker: 'Old socialists' like him 'could not be won by the Nazis; they had been brought up in the spirit of socialism and had grown old with it and they were not to be parted from it.'⁹⁸ But the situation among the young, who had known little or nothing else, was very different.

Young people were in several respects the most susceptible members of Nazi society. For one thing, simply by virtue of age they had no prior experiences and fully developed views on which to draw, which could act as a counterbalance to what they were now being offered—and were being offered everywhere, in schools, in organized activities, in their free time, and in open spaces. There were, for many young people, ever fewer alternative points of view to which they could be authoritatively exposed. The young were also structurally more readily available for mobilization by persons in authority, and hence were more likely to be actively involved in the numerous Nazi-organized 'spontaneous' acts of violence against Jews in the 1930s.⁹⁹ Reports on the growing

⁹⁴ *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934–1940* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck und Zweitausendeins, 1980), Vol. 1, No. 2, May–June 1934, p. 117.

⁹⁵ Stöver, *Berichte über die Lage in Deutschland*, pp. 65–6.

⁹⁶ *Deutschland-Berichte*, Vol. 1, April–May 1934, p. 13.

⁹⁷ Stöver, *Bericht über die Lage in Deutschland*, Nr. 6, Feb. 1934, April 1934, pp. 102–3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁹⁹ See also the generational distinctions showing up in interviews decades later, in Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, mass murder and everyday life in Nazi Germany* (London:

number of violent incidents on the streets of Berlin in the summer of 1935, for example, repeatedly point out the prevalence of young people, as on the evening when, on the Kurfürstendamm, an elderly Jew was beaten up following which the 'to some extent very young demonstrators then charged after each other through various cafés, threw over tables and chairs, and shattered windows'.¹⁰⁰ On occasion, the violence of youth was not even condoned, let alone instigated, by their own Hitler Youth leaders, as in other incidents in the summer of 1935:

Since around the end of June it may be observed that, at both Hermannsplatz and Kottbusser Damm, ice cream parlours owned by Jews have been systematically attacked by Hitler Youths... On 5 July at the Bayerischer Platz around twenty youngsters [*Halbwüchsigen*] gathered around in front of an ice cream stall and started chanting 'anyone who buys from a Jew is a traitor to the Volk'. Then the flying squad [*Überfallkommando*] arrived and the youths disappeared.¹⁰¹

But on other occasions, older Nazis criticized those of their number who were not prepared to get involved as actively as youth; one was reported as saying, for example, 'that they were "cowardly dogs" and should follow the example of youth'.¹⁰² Glancing ahead, young people were again massively involved in the violence of the 1938 November pogrom, again accompanied by widespread disapproval among adults; and the experiences of war after 1939 were also quite distinctive for those cohorts who were teenagers in the 1930s and who, if they were male, were thrown into battle from the outset of the war. By this time, they had been well trained and indeed drenched in the violent ideology and practices of Nazism, in distinctive ways not shared by any other generation at this time.

More broadly, there were not merely pressures but also incentives to increased involvement in Nazi organizations and activities, as one social democratic observer commented:

Youth is, now as before, in support of the system: the novelty; military drills, uniform, camp life, so that the youthful community comes above home and school, that's all wonderful. Big times without danger. Many believe that they have new economic opportunities as a result of the persecution of Jews and Marxists. The more enthusiastic they become, the easier are the exams, and so the easier it is to get a position, a job. Peasant youth in the HJ and the SA are for the first time incorporated in the state. Young workers are also going along with it... The young people of today have never had much interest in education and reading. Now nothing much is being asked of them, quite the contrary, knowledge is being openly condemned.

Parents are also involved in this. One cannot forbid a child from doing what all children are doing, one cannot refuse him the uniform that the others have. One cannot forbid it, that would be dangerous.

Hodder, 2005). Note that participation in what were often collectively organized acts of violence is not the same thing as engaging in individual denunciations, which young people were less likely to do. On the prevalence of denunciations among adults, see Gellately, *Gestapo and German Society*.

¹⁰⁰ Stöver (ed.), *Berichte über die Lage in Deutschland*, Nr. 16, July 1935, p. 574.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 575.

Children and young people, led on by the HJ, then demand of their parents that they should be good Nazis, that they should give up Marxism, Reaction, and dealings with Jews.¹⁰³

The pressures to join the Hitler Youth organization were considerable, even before it became compulsory. As Erna A. put it:

The Hitler boys and girls are caught in the same vise [sic] as the adults. A few years ago many parents did not wish to have their children join. I know of cases where boys could not find jobs when they left school because they were not in the Hitler Youth. The bosses would take them but their 'cell' men would veto the decision. The boys had to show their party papers to get the job. Of course they enlisted. Their friends heard about it and they joined. Now it is compulsory and no Aryan child is not a member.¹⁰⁴

Remarkably, the Hitler Youth often managed to override any moral socialization within the family.

The proactive co-option of the young, along with the increased demands on the time of adults, taking time away from family life, thus led to new tensions and strains within families, particularly where parents held different views from those in which the young were being inculcated. As Miriam A. put it, reflecting on the situation in a family she had recently visited: 'What of the proud Catholic boast that given a child until his sixth year and he was theirs forever? The Nazi appeal to adolescence had prevailed. . . There were constant conflicts, recriminations and unhappy political discussions.'¹⁰⁵ Inevitably, then, the pressures of the wider world led either to splits within families, or to tensions between families which succeeded, against the odds, in sustaining an alternative vantage point, and the external world in which they had to operate. As one observer, Albert D.—a medical doctor who was, as a German of Jewish background, himself increasingly excluded from the '*Volkgemeinschaft*'—put it:

The rift which the Nazi party cut through the German people, who were still suffering badly from the consequences of the war and the peace treaty, divided them ever more deeply and ominously. These clashes even broke into the final cell, the family at home. Often worried parents told me the following: ever since you began to hear and read of nothing but politics, whether at work, in free time, on the street, in society, on posters, our family too has become politicized. In not a few families the father was organized on the left, the adult son was however a right-wing radical. So even at the dinner table it often came to quarrels. Young people—always and everywhere inclined towards the radical and new—saw in the Hitler movement the 'renewal of Germany'. Every word of calculated propaganda seemed to become their argument.¹⁰⁶

Albert D. was far from the only person to comment on the ways in which young people were often willing to denounce their teachers and even their own parents as

¹⁰³ *Deutschland-Berichte*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May–June 1934, p. 117.

¹⁰⁴ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (3) Erna A., p. 25, English original.

¹⁰⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (9), Miriam A., p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., pp. 8–9.

'opponents of Hitler' (*Hitlergegner*). One patient even—extraordinarily, in the circumstances—found that for once the situation of Jews was in this respect enviable. As he commented to Albert D.: “You Jews have it good, at least in your families at home you have the opportunity to talk as you like and don't need to be wary even in front of your very own children!”¹⁰⁷

Even where parents were not necessarily opposed to the regime but simply passively conformed, increasing involvement in political activities and public meetings meant that there was ever less available to children by way of a countervailing balance to the influence of authority figures in schools and youth organizations, or peer-group pressure, exposure to public propaganda and so on. This was of course exacerbated in families where there were strong political disagreements and where dissenting parents felt ever less able to speak out in front of their children. Whichever way one looks at it, family life was extremely strained; even—or perhaps especially—where families held closely together and sought to maintain some kind of alternative reality, there were enormous strains and tensions arising from the necessity of sustaining a double life. At the same time, the spread of the Hitler Youth organizations and activities (weekly activities, weekend hikes, longer camps) and the for several months all-encompassing activities in virtually compulsory Labour Service (*Arbeitsdienst*) meant that young people were ever more exposed to the offerings of the National Socialist world view. Even when they were not in any real sense convinced, they were constrained to act 'as if' they were supporters of the cause.

Elisabeth B. was dubious about the real commitment of young people to Nazism; she comments that 'young people in today's Germany are far from all as reliable as the Nazi leadership would like to think'.¹⁰⁸ But Elisabeth B. also suggests that many young people were simply not exposed to alternative views, materials, and ways of thinking, so tended to go along with what was expected and demanded of them; and, when they felt uncomfortable, to resort to the pleasures of oblivion provided by excessive drinking. According to one young man to whom Elisabeth B. had talked: 'At a big "comradeship evening" of the regiment it became very apparent that young people didn't want to have to think, but rather they sought, by much loud bellowing and boozing, to create the kind of atmosphere that no Nazi "uplifting celebration" could produce.'¹⁰⁹ This was of course the same cohort of young males who resorted to similar means of seeking to survive, by this time as soldiers, the war into which they were sent just a few years later.

It took a very determined parent to withstand the demands of school and Nazi youth organizations and provide alternative support for the children. Maria K. (born 1893), a former schoolteacher, a mother and wife of a university professor, was not at first sight a woman of strong moral opinions or religious convictions—although she had experienced some qualms when she first overcame her traditional standards of obedience to authority to go 'hamstering' after the Great War.¹¹⁰ But

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (18), Elisabeth B., p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–10.

¹¹⁰ On Maria K.'s experience of the Great War and its aftermath, see above, pp. 43, 62.

the challenges of Nazi regime served to reveal extraordinary qualities in this, at first sight, ordinary middle-class woman; and her case illustrates not only the ways in which it was possible to stand out against Nazism but also, ultimately, the potential penalties and costs of maintaining common principles of humanity in this political context. Maria K. successfully resisted having any of her sons join the Hitler Youth for most of the 1930s, until, for the youngest who had turned ten in 1937, membership finally became compulsory. Maria K. firmly resisted the cajoling comments of neighbours and relatives:

All my relatives and acquaintances tried to argue with me: ‘You’ll be thrown into prison. Your husband will lose his position. You can’t take this kind of responsibility, it’s ridiculous to try to oppose such a movement, your sons will later only reproach you for this’, and so on.¹¹¹

Despite constant pressure, Maria K. stood firm. She decided she had to devote a considerable amount of time to her sons, to ensure that she was giving them an active alternative to the activities and worldviews being propagated through school and, via their classmates, also indirectly rubbing off from the Hitler Youth organization: she organized cycle tours, swimming and boating outings, and weekend ‘philosophizing’ over an extended breakfast:

In those hours everything came out that they had learnt in school in terms of Nazi wisdom. Everything was talked through and we owe it to these peaceful, harmonious and joyful times together that none of my sons fell victim to the influence of the Nazis.¹¹²

Even so, the attempt to combine authentically held views at home with survival through school meant a degree of duplicity and acquiescence in school demands, which too had its costs in terms of learning to lead something of a double life and disguising one’s private opinions when at school. This learning to be somewhat dishonest—a demand rooted in the attempt to survive and stay in one’s home and native country until the regime blew over—was in itself experienced by Maria K. as something of a moral compromise: ‘The only thing that often bothered me was whether it is right to teach children quite consciously to engage in dissimulation; since at school and on the street they obviously had to go along with things . . .’¹¹³

Even despite Maria K.’s best efforts to provide, very proactively, an alternative base of belief and moral compass, she noticed that when her youngest son was forcibly joined up in the Hitler Youth he was relatively soon being subtly influenced in his moral views. She managed, after three months, to withdraw him from HJ outings and ‘service’ activities, ‘because I could see that the boy was slowly falling prey to the influence of the HJ . . . One day he came home from the HJ filled with enthusiasm . . . Theft on orders!’ But she could only withdraw him from labour service with the Hitler Youth on ‘health’ grounds, which had

¹¹¹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (101), Maria K., p. 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

then to be extended to withdrawal from school attendance too: 'On the basis of a doctor's note I was able to free him from service in the Hitler Youth and but at the same time I had to take him out of school.'¹¹⁴

During the course of 1937–8 her oldest two sons were unavoidably called up in the Labour Service. Again, Maria did everything she could to support them through this by regular visits and bringing in extra food. According to her description, conditions in the Labour Service camp were terrible, including very early rising, a great deal of sport and 'national-political education' (*nationalpolitische Schulung*) in between the periods of heavy manual labour, with virtually no time or space to themselves, and inadequate food of poor quality. When Maria's second son was in camp, one of his comrades died of meningitis, while twenty-five others suffered from scarlet fever or diphtheria and had to be hospitalized.¹¹⁵ It turned out that in the same camp in the previous year there had been two deaths from diphtheria and one from meningitis, and a further batch of 250 young people had been sent to the camp without any attempt at disinfection. On this occasion, Maria's husband and a couple of other parents, including a lawyer, succeeded in having the camp closed, quarantined, and disinfected.

Even for this fully 'Aryan' family, disagreement with and disapproval of the regime led to progressive social isolation. This became even more the case from the autumn of 1938, when the developments became ever more radical. As Maria put it: 'After the disappointment of Munich for us, we tried as far as possible to cut ourselves off from the outside world.'¹¹⁶ Very soon, Maria K. and her family were going to find themselves even more at odds with the Nazi regime and the surrounding society that appeared to have capitulated so easily to its demands; and cutting herself off while continuing to live in Germany were no longer viable options.

Children born from, roughly, the mid- or later 1920s into the early 1930s—the '1929ers'—were the most exposed to state propaganda, the most influenced and socialized within the framework of Nazi worldviews and organizations, and had the least by way of fall-backs, alternative bases, countervailing forces on which to draw—unless, of course, they had been born into families of the 'wrong race' or very strong alternative politics and ethics. Even the variations in individual experiences and responses to the nazification of German society did not entirely override a degree of homogenization (and later sense of generational belonging) among significant numbers of those who grew up and came to maturity at this time. As it turned out in the longer term, however, it was the responses to the experience of violence in war and the structure of their opportunities after the war that most moulded the paths they took in later life. All the apparent success of Nazi attempts to influence the 1929ers at this time was blown to the winds when they discovered just how deeply they had been, as so many of them later saw it, misled and 'betrayed'.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

IV. 'ASHAMED TO BE GERMAN'? THE RADICALIZATION OF VIOLENCE, 1938–9

The year 1938 was a turning point, in which brutality and violence escalated, and Nazi oppression was extended dramatically, both territorially and with respect to individuals. It changed many people's lives and their views of Nazism dramatically; and in the course of this year, the divisions between generations within the Nazi '*Volkgemeinschaft*', particularly with respect to the exercise of violence, became more apparent than previously.

The *Anschluss* of Austria in March 1938 brought significant extra territory into the Third Reich, precipitated initial reactions of apparent wild enthusiasm and support among many Austrians, and unleashed a reign of terror for those Austrians who were potential opponents or racial victims of Nazism—socialists, communists, people of Jewish descent. The reactions of the population in Austria provide almost a speeded-up version of what had taken place in the 'old Reich' areas of Germany during the preceding five years: from enthusiasm and fear, accommodation and resignation, conformity and fright, support, flight, and destruction. The invasion destroyed lives and split families; and the wild flag-waving of the early weeks was soon transformed into the dull acquiescence and enactment of the demands of the Nazi regime of the following years. All these elements played a role in the later problematic cultures of repression and remembrance in post-war Austria.

On 12 March 1938 Hitler's troops marched over the Austrian border, following a day of intense politicking culminating in the enforced resignation of Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg, whose plans for a referendum to garner support for Austria as a separate, independent state were sabotaged even before the voting could begin. The outcome of this planned referendum had not been certain and the ballot papers had been constructed to elicit the most desired answer. The voting age had also been raised to twenty-four, as one perceptive observer, Stephen J. (son of an Austrian Christian mother and a non-practising Jewish father) put it, 'in order to cut youthful elements, who form a large part of the Nazi party following, out of having a vote'.¹¹⁷ But there was in the event no chance to test Austrian opinion. Hitler's machinations ensured that Nazi supporters within Austria were able to take control of the government in the preceding hours, and the *Wehrmacht* troops were able to cross the borders into Austria uncontested. For many Austrian troops, who had been ready and waiting in their barracks to defend their country from what they saw as 'invasion', this situation was at first almost unbearable. Reactions over the following days and weeks varied dramatically—providing something of the basis for contesting representations of Austria as 'Hitler's first victim' and yet as having welcomed in the Austrian-born *Führer* with hysterical demonstrations of support, waving arms and bunches of flowers as his 'invasion' turned into more of a

¹¹⁷ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (100), Stephen J., p. 67.

triumphal procession towards Austria's capital, Vienna, which he had left before the Great War as a failed art student, twice rejected from art courses.¹¹⁸

Terror and enthusiasm were two sides of the same coin, with a fairly rapid change in the atmosphere over the coming months. Henry A. was a 27-year-old Catholic who held a post as assistant lecturer at Vienna University; he was a patriotic Austrian who also served in the Austrian army and witnessed with horror the way in which the troops were commanded not to put up any resistance to the entry of the German troops in March 1938. He also, now more to the point, had a Jewish father, and was thus considered a 'Mischling'. Following his later escape from his homeland, Henry vividly recalled (in an account written in English) the first days after Hitler's entry into Vienna:

In town were thousands of people. Reflectors illuminated enormous red swastika-banners. Pictures of Hitler were to be seen in many windows. Nazis in Uniforms [*sic*] or similar dresses marched around and cheered police and army. . . Women sobbed hysterically. Children cried and yelled. Youths climbed the monuments and columns around the place and waved swastika-banners, the air rung with roar.

I succeeded in finding a taxi. When I sat in the dark cab and the driver speeded up, I felt like rescued [*sic*]. I had the feeling that now I was safe. When I reached home all the doors were locked carefully. I pulled down the shades to shut myself off from the world. When I had huddled on the studio couch, tightly wrapped in a blanket, and the deep quietness of my home surrounded me, I felt relieved. There was an idea that this was the only safe place now. The first 24 hours of the Nazi regime had already caused what might be called a serious psychic restriction. This certain state of mind, feeling secure only alone, at home, possibly covered up in a dark room, was like a psychotic disease. I met hundreds of people showing these symptoms. Fright and terrified nervousness were the first two reactions of the indifferent or anti-Nazi circles of the public.¹¹⁹

Similarly, Stephen J. expressed his initial shock at hearing the initial declaration of the takeover:

At first I was as if struck dumb. My wife burst out in tears. One moment had served to ruin my existence, all the travails of twelve years, all the suffering and toiling had been in vain. It was clear that because of my ancestry I would not be able to remain a lawyer.¹²⁰

Stephen J. too went on to describe the scenes of mass demonstrations with waving crowds of swastikas, Hitler's speech in Vienna, and the ways in which Jews were forced to get down on their knees and scrub the streets with little brushes. By the next morning, Vienna's appearance had changed radically: 'Over night the whole country had shrouded itself in swastika flags.' Any conventional notion of 'law and order' was radically pre-empted or displaced by the new state-ordained rule of force:

¹¹⁸ See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998).

¹¹⁹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (4), Henry A., no pagination, excerpts retyped as 'pp. 45–50', English original.

¹²⁰ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (100). Stephen J., p. 69.

Gangs of young SA people simply went into shops and stole the money from the cash-till . . . The Nazi gangs, drunk with victory and greedy for spoils, took the law into their own hands and stole wherever they could.¹²¹

The experiences of Austrian Jews encapsulated within a matter of weeks and months what had unfolded far more slowly and gradually in Germany over the preceding years, and indeed soon overtook anything as yet tried out within the previous borders of the German Reich.

Many male Austrian Jews were arrested and transported to the rapidly expanded concentration camp of Dachau, experiencing for the first time the sadism and disregard for law which was so characteristic of the Nazi state. Stephen J. was among those arrested, for some considerable time imprisoned—along with former socialist members of parliament, prominent intellectuals, and many others, all of whom still had at this point some faith in the due process of law—and then sent on a train to Dachau, maltreated, taunted, and assaulted by the SS guards along the way, experiences echoed in other accounts of the time.¹²² Within Dachau, intolerable living and working conditions were rendered worse by their consequences for relationships among the prisoners:

With this sort of life, it was no wonder that the nerves of many prisoners gave out, and in the mornings on more than one occasion someone was found in the washroom who had hanged himself. The mood among the prisoners was edgy, and there was continuous quarrelling and arguing. The dangers of war produce good and firm friendship, [but] imprisonment in a concentration camp creates hatred and mistrust among the individual prisoners.¹²³

A few weeks later new transports of Jews arrived, ‘who had simply been caught in the street or dragged out of their flats. There was never one of these transports without several people who were already dead [on arrival].’¹²⁴ But on being moved to the equally rapidly expanding concentration camp of Buchenwald, Stephen J. realized for the first time that things could actually be even worse than in Dachau:

We had a shock when we saw the prisoners there. They looked pale and hollow-cheeked, like ghosts . . . They moved much more slowly and paused more frequently than would ever have been possible in Dachau.¹²⁵

Conditions of overcrowding, lack of water and food, were all much worse in Buchenwald than in Dachau, further exacerbated by what Stephen J saw as the crazy, nonsensical commands and reprisals repeatedly being carried out, such as killing 200 Jews for the shooting of one SS guard by an ‘Aryan’ prisoner.¹²⁶ Stephen J. summarized his experiences thus: ‘we were in a madhouse, in which those who were normal were being guarded by the mad’.¹²⁷

¹²¹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (100). Stephen J., p. 72.

¹²² See also e.g. the account in HHL, b MS Ger 91 (99), Ernst J., letter of 30 May 1939 describing his trip to Dachau in 1938.

¹²³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (100). Stephen J., p. 90.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98. ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

At this stage, it was still possible for a few—very few—to survive and be released from a concentration camp. Suddenly on 15 October 1938 Stephen J. was one of only eight men (out of the then 10,000 inmates) who were released. He had to sign a form with a 'gagging clause', promising 'not to say anything about what I had seen in the camp, neither in Germany nor abroad'.¹²⁸ On his return to Vienna, his father, his wife and his stepmother were at the station to meet him—but none of them recognized him. Moreover, for him, too, the altered mood made Vienna itself almost unrecognizable:

The Vienna that I saw again was yet again just covered with flags to mark the incorporation of the Sudeten territories. But there was nothing to be seen of the clear enthusiasm of the March days. People were groaning under the burden of the Nazi yoke . . . Vienna was a conquered city.¹²⁹

Managing to survive the following few weeks unscathed (including a period in hiding), Stephen J. and his family succeeded in emigrating to Australia, where his account was written. Unlike many other Germans and Austrians with a Jewish background, Stephen J. was able to end his account on a note which, while registering a severe sense of loss, expulsion, and radical change, nevertheless still contained a small element of self-confidence and hope:

Here ends the story of my life, insofar as it concerns Germany, or more specifically my homeland of Austria. I have to start again from scratch and the further course of my life lies in darkness and has not as yet gained any firm contours. First I have to apply myself to building up a material basis for existence, but the spiritual world within me is not destroyed and one day must shape my life again in some discernible way.¹³⁰

Millions of others were not to have even this small chance of starting anew.

Even for all the violence consequent on the annexation of Austria, the vast majority of Germans seem at the time to have registered even this only as a 'peaceful foreign policy triumph'. Perhaps the enforced silence over what was really happening to those Jews who disappeared from their homes, workplaces, and streets in the following months was readily ignored by the 'Aryan' majority.

But Germans could not so easily ignore the massive outburst of public violence on the streets that erupted with the 'November pogrom' of 1938, commonly known as '*Kristallnacht*' in view of the prevalence of broken glass on the pavements as the windows of Jewish shops and businesses were smashed.¹³¹ This was, also, the moment when generational distinctions in reactions to violence perhaps became most apparent; and when the notion of being 'ashamed to be German' first became more widely uttered.

In the preceding weeks, the German government had sought to oust Jews of Polish origin; yet Poland as of late October 1938 refused to accept them. The plight of those deported was horrendous. One German Jew whose parents had been

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³¹ This term has become something of a taboo in Germany, and is now widely no longer considered 'politically correct'.

expelled kept extracts of his mother's letters recounting their experiences. The Germans had taken their papers away so they were considered 'illegals' in Poland and roughly sent back to the German border; but there they were either attacked by Germans with bloodhounds—one woman had her baby torn to shreds (*zerrissen*) by dogs—or sent back to the Polish side of the frontier where they were again refused entry as being 'illegal'.¹³² Some Polish peasants had helped by providing food and coffee, but this could not continue over the long run. They were left without money, papers, or identity passes; they could not arrange a postal address to pick up money from relatives if it could even be sent; they had only the clothes they had been arrested in, which were by now drenched and turning to rags. Others in their group had been even less fortunate: 'Some of the older people have already died, since the physical and emotional strain was too much for them.' Henry I.'s parents had been trying to obtain exit visas to emigrate before this had happened, and had even already paid half of the cost of their planned travel to Shanghai, but had found no one willing or able to pay the remaining half, which they could not muster themselves; they had encountered all manner of difficulties with the visa authorities. Henry I.'s father had tried all sources of potential help, as his mother explained: 'He spoke to Professor G., who said to him that he could do nothing for Germans who had been excluded from their country. When my husband asked him if we should poison ourselves, he shrugged his shoulders and said he did not know.'¹³³ The sad tale ended with Henry I.'s mother knowing all too well what sort of fate would soon befall them:

There is no other country any more that would take us. If we are not now legalized by one or another side, it is to be feared that we will be deported again—to the German border.

WHAT THAT MEANS...¹³⁴

The fate of Henry I.'s family was shared by perhaps 12,000 others, including the family of Herschel Grynszpan. Born in Germany to parents who had emigrated from Poland before the Great War and had taken on German citizenship, Grynszpan was incensed by the forced expulsion and brutal treatment of his family. Lacking in any means to give them practical assistance, Grynszpan resorted to an act which was not so much one of revenge but rather of attempting to draw the world's attention to the plight of these people: at that time resident in Paris, he simply walked into the German Embassy and shot into the abdomen of an embassy official in Paris, Ernst vom Rath, who died two days later from his wounds.

This incident was used as the pretext for an already planned orgy of violence (presented as the supposedly spontaneous reaction of the German people) largely incited by Goebbels. Although Hitler gave his blessing to the pogrom, on seeing the generally disapproving public response he was quick to distance himself from any responsibility for it; others in his entourage were also highly critical of Goebbels'

¹³² HHL, b MS Ger 91 (98), Henry I., p. 2.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

tactics.¹³⁵ Nazis—often members of the SA but in plain clothes—set fire to synagogues, while police and firefighters were instructed to desist from intervention, dousing only flames which threatened nearby non-Jewish buildings. Large numbers of Jews were beaten up on the night itself and scores murdered, while tens of thousands of adult males were subsequently arrested and taken to the concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen.

The exercise of violence, and expressions of repugnance, appear to have sharply divided the generations. Thuggish behaviour on the streets was particularly prevalent and carried out in the main by youngsters in their teens and early twenties—as would be expected given the involvement of the Hitler Youth, whether in or out of uniform. But perhaps more surprising than the relatively easy mobilization of young people was the rather widespread disapproval of violence among older Germans where, for more or less the first time since Hitler came to power, the phrase 'ashamed to be German' was widely used.

There is ample contemporary evidence of the ways in which acts of physical violence on the streets met with disapproval on the part of large numbers of adult Germans. Immediate reactions of disgust included, for example, an old lady in Saxony of high social status:

There were a lot of jeers [*Pfuirufe*] as the Nazis came past. An older lady, supposedly a Baroness, who was going for a walk with her daughters and observed these events, cried out loud: 'It's a scandal to still be a German in these circumstances'. She was taken away, kept repeating her protest, and all attempts of the daughters to silence their mother foundered on the old lady's attitude. As she was being arrested, a group of people gathered around, who were then scattered by the police, and here too there was no lack of loud and very disparaging criticism.¹³⁶

Similarly, in Silesia, there appears to have been initial public support for the attempt of a railway official to protect an elderly Jewish woman who was being attacked by members of the Hitler Youth:

When during the November pogrom a railway worker in Hindenburg spoke out against these shameful actions and protected an elderly Jewish woman who had been attacked by the Hitler Youth, nothing happened to him at that time. But now, for defamation of the Hitler Youth, he was sentenced to 6 months in prison. At the same time he lost his job.¹³⁷

A few months later, in February 1939, it remained clear 'just how deeply these incidents have affected people and how they will not so soon let the National Socialists forget this'.¹³⁸ Disapproval was widespread, as many reports of the time confirmed:

The attitude of the population is unusually uniform. The reports that were coming in to us already in the first few days after the pogrom are repeatedly confirmed: the

¹³⁵ See e.g. the accounts in Kershaw, *Hitler*, and Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The years of persecution*.

¹³⁶ *Deutschland-Berichte*, Vol. 6, February 1939, p. 225.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

overwhelming majority of the German people reject the antisemitic acts of violence, and are also outraged by the current wave of robbery.¹³⁹

Even well into the summer of 1939, as the secret reports to the German Social Democrats in exile commented: ‘This action has stirred up public opinion which will be laid to rest and it has also entailed a severe loss of prestige for the regime among the German people.’¹⁴⁰ In his account written in 1940, Albert D. recalled how, following the events of November 1938 (in which he narrowly escaped arrest and deportation to a concentration camp), he made arrangements to leave his home and managed to hand over the remaining rental agreement to a German aristocrat who had befriended him. Albert D. quotes this friend as saying to him: ‘‘Doctor, I assure you, after what has happened I am ashamed to be a German’’.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Rudolf B., a former senior lawyer in Nuremberg had, along with his wife, narrowly escaped from their first floor flat on the night of the pogrom by throwing a mattress out of the window, making a sort of rope with sheets, jumping and breaking their fall on the mattress, and running through back yards until they finally found refuge in a barn storing Christmas trees. In the dawn hours they knocked on the door of a Christian house they could trust and were told that the mob had left their house. When they returned to their home, everything had been destroyed. The same sorts of sight were to be seen in all the Jewish houses and places of work across the whole town, accompanied by numerous reports of suicides, deaths, and brutalities. Rudolf B. commented on the way the events had affected the population:

When, on the morning after this unholy night, the population who had not been involved as members of the police or SA forces woke up and saw the destruction that had been wrought, there were consequences that the instigators had not expected. Unmistakably a deep feeling of depression and shame overcame the public. For the first time circles of the remaining population dared to come out and demonstrate their sympathy. You could hear people saying ‘I’m ashamed to be a German’. I know of a teacher in a higher public education institution who, because of the destruction of flats in his housing block, called in sick to his manager and then immediately sent in his application for retirement since he no longer wanted to serve such a state.¹⁴²

‘Ashamed to be a German’ was, after such widespread physical violence against the lives and property of neighbours and compatriots, a phrase heard from many adults who had previously quite readily gone along with the insidious ‘hidden violence’ that was a logical consequence of adopting the new norms and behaviour patterns fostered by this deeply racist regime.¹⁴³ Even so, once violence against Jews and other victims of Nazi hatred was whipped up on a far greater scale in the east in the following wartime years, such shame was no longer on the public agenda.

At this time, it was highly striking that young people constituted an exception to such feelings of shame. They were apparently the most susceptible to Nazi

¹³⁹ *Deutschland-Berichte*, Vol. 6, February 1939, p. 223.

¹⁴¹ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., p. 40.

¹⁴² HHL, b MS Ger 91 (28), Rudolf B., p. 44.

¹⁴³ See also David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution: Public opinion under Nazism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 73, 77.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, July 1939, p. 918.

propaganda and the most willing to engage in or condone violence, as contemporary reports suggest:

There is little that is new to be said about the inflammatory propaganda against the Jews, other than that this has remained constant and despite the complete 'victory' has in no way declined. The National Socialists know that, as far as their violence against the Jews is concerned, they have the population not with but against them, and their continued hate propaganda represents a constantly renewed attempt, despite this, still to produce the desired mass mood.

As for young people, the constant barrage they are subjected to in school, in the Hitler Youth, on the street, in newspapers, naturally has a strong impact. Children and young people also distinguished themselves—as the following reports repeatedly confirm—by demonstrating particular brutality in the days of the pogrom.¹⁴⁴

While it was only a minority of young people who were mobilized into violence on the streets, it is nevertheless notable that they could be so mobilized, in a way that most adults, it would appear, at this time could not. In part, this may have to do with the fact that those against whom violence was being directed were—still—in a sense part of the local community, however much they may have been excluded, with much or little by way of expressions of regret, from informal social circles as well as formal organizations and institutions. To see one's next door neighbours being beaten up, their possessions ransacked, and items thrown out of windows, was still shocking for adult Germans, as was the 'wanton' waste of goods in the destruction of shop windows and looting by people on the streets. These all occasioned disapproval among adults who upheld notions of a certain degree of law and order with respect to buildings and property, and disapproved of visible violence, even if they were prepared to cut off former friendships and banish former colleagues from their social and work spheres. Young people of 'Aryan' backgrounds had by this time perhaps less by way of a sense of belonging to the same community as their compatriots of Jewish descent.

The sense of shame among adults also had to do with the sheer visibility of this physical violence, in contrast to the 'hidden violence' of the social exclusion which had been enacted, one might almost want to say, in private between consenting adults ever since 1933. One of those who had herself been affected by both sorts of violence was sharply aware of this distinction. Erna A., the 'half-Jewish' businesswoman of American origins who had already remarked on the difficulties with introduction of 'racial' categories in the classroom, had noted in the summer of 1938 that local 'Aryans' barely seemed to notice what was happening to Jews, even when they were arrested, taken to concentration camps, and ten days or so later relatives were offered their ashes. Erna A.'s explanation for this apparent indifference was that the 'Aryan' population simply did not know how bad things were for Jews because their lives were by now so segregated:

Aryans, not in contact with Jews, had not the faintest idea of what was going on. Those who did find out were generally shocked, but could do nothing. They would harm

¹⁴⁴ *Deutschland-Berichte*, Vol. 6, p. 211.

themselves and the Jews even more. That is one of the important reasons for keeping Aryans segregated from the Jews.¹⁴⁵

Erna A. was herself injured while her store was smashed up in the November pogrom; as she pointed out, it was accomplished not by young thugs or hooligans, but by men drawn from the war-youth generation, ‘all very well dressed in civilian clothes, between twenty-five and thirty-five years old—not riffraff off the streets’.¹⁴⁶ The owner of a neighbouring store, ‘a very nice old Jewish gentleman’, died three days later as a result of the violent attack on his premises. In the following days, Erna A. commented:

For the first time I heard open criticism. The people were shocked and disgusted. Before that if they had no contact with Jews, they thought that they were being treated well; they saw them on the streets, in their stores. Some even thought that they were being treated with too much consideration. Now, their eyes were opened. If they made a remark, in public, they were arrested. You could hear more whispering than formerly.¹⁴⁷

Somewhat later, Erna A. was shocked by the appearance of those Jews who returned from periods of incarceration, clearly having gone through experiences comparable to those of Stephen J., but unwilling—since they had not escaped from Germany to a place where they could speak or write freely about their experiences—to break their vow of silence for fear of the consequences. Erna A. described people returning from what she called ‘Weimar’ (Buchenwald):

I could never find out what happened to them there. It must beggar all description. No one would tell me about it. They were not allowed to talk as it was. When they were discharged, they had to sign a paper on which was written that they would tell nothing of what had happened; they would state that they had just been to a health resort (*waren in einem Luftkurort*), otherwise, if it were found out that they had talked, they would be sent back to the concentration camp, never to be released. While in Germany, none of them said a word, just perhaps a remark dropped here or there. You could easily put two and two together, especially when you saw them—pale, a frightened look in their eyes, shorn heads, and hands and face usually swollen and sore by frostbite.¹⁴⁸

For Erna A. and so many others, the events of November 1938 formed something of a turning point. Soon, she admits, she was ‘on the brink of a nervous breakdown’. But, with much difficulty about her passport, her papers, her company, her house, her property, her ‘fully Jewish’ daughter (having three Jewish grandparents), her passage, her tickets, Erna A. finally made it back to her native USA on 27 January 1939—six years to the day before the liberation of Auschwitz, a phenomenon as yet to come, and on a scale of violence and murder as yet undreamt of.¹⁴⁹ The nightmare seemed already, to people such as Erna A. and Stephen J., writing their autobiographical reflections in 1940, bad enough.

¹⁴⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (3), Erna A., p. 42, English original.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 61.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The 1929ers were not the youths of the first Hitler Youth generation who were involved in acts of violence; they were a few years younger, still children or only just teenagers at this time. They often recall a sense of bafflement at witnessing these scenes of violence.¹⁵⁰ Fritz E., for example, was born in 1928 and was by 1938 an enthusiastic member of the younger children's section of the Hitler Youth, the *Jungvolk*. He later recalled the deep impression these events made on him as a child: 'as for me, what, what still looms very large in my memory, that was the Night of Broken Glass [*Kristallnacht*']'. But as a child he had been particularly deeply impressed for what might seem a relatively trivial reason:

There was in Teltow a shoe shop, where the owner was a Jew, and there all the shoes, brand new shoe boxes, just as they were, thrown onto the street, the windows of the shop were broken in, and the shoes, this heap of shoes with absolutely new shoes, was set on fire, petrol poured over it and set on fire. And we youngsters found that really terrible, well for us that really—the new shoes there!, and then I went over and pulled out a pair of shoes for myself, that I wanted to have, that weren't yet burnt, and then an SS man, or an SA man, hit my fingers and said, a German boy does not take things from a Jew and then threw the shoes back in the fire. That really was for me—well, that I still remember today, that he took the shoes away from me and then I cried. I was after all a child. I cried. The lovely shoes so brand new and they are throwing them into the fire because it, because it was from the Jew, and that I could not understand.¹⁵¹

Generally brought up to believe in the Nazi cause as something essentially good, the violence nevertheless shocked the 1929ers at an age where they were both impressionable and yet at the same time confused and effectively powerless. But it is notable that, whatever their initial reactions, they were nevertheless urged to conform to the regime ideals of 'a German child' who would 'take nothing from a Jew'.

If older Germans were 'ashamed', they also often seem to have felt that there was very little they could do about the situation. It was only very few among those who were unaffected personally by the Nazi attacks who had the courage to try to aid their Jewish fellow citizens. Maria K., who had earlier tried so hard to insulate her children from the influence of Hitler Youth, now found that not only she but also her sons, at first quite independently of each other, had come to the assistance of local Jewish shopkeepers whose stores had been ransacked.¹⁵² On 10 November, as news reached them of two of Bonn's synagogues going up in flames, she had taken possession of a manuscript brought to her by the wife of one her husband's Jewish colleagues for safe-keeping. One of her sons rushed off to help a Jewish watchmaker's wife hide the valuables from their store, and then went to perform similar services for the Jewish owner of a chocolate shop. Over the following days and weeks, Maria and her sons helped these shopkeepers by secretly selling their wares for them and smuggling the money back to them, so that they still had some means

¹⁵⁰ See also, for generational differences in patterns of memory, Johnson, *Nazi Terror*, p. 257.

¹⁵¹ Fritz E. (1928), interview, summer 2005.

¹⁵² HHL, b MS Ger 91 (101), Maria K.

of livelihood. But on one of her visits, along with her eldest son, they were caught by the police.

Maria's husband was immediately dismissed from his university chair; her son, at that time a music student, was expelled from his university place; their house was attacked, and windows broken. On the street outside the house was written 'Traitor to the People! Friend of the Jews!' As German commandos approached with a car, Maria made a rapid escape on her bicycle, since, as she put it in her account written a little over a year later: 'I did not want to be beaten to death in the sight of my children and I was also, after all, just a danger for my family.'¹⁵³ For a time she was protected by nuns, who kept her in their convent well out of reach or sight; eventually she felt it was safe to return home again. But Maria was now given clear 'professional advice' that there was really only one way out for her, if she cared at all about her family: in January 1939 she was advised by a neurologist that the whole family was being endangered by her sheer existence:

Particularly important in this whole period was a visit in January 1939 from a well-known neurologist, who as Reich Training Manager was knowledgeable about the Jewish Question. While we were alone over the course of two afternoons he told me what would happen to me and my family, according to the motto 'Jews and friends of Jews must be eradicated' [*ausgerotet*]. 'We eradicate friends of Jews and all their progeny.' Then he said that I was not to be saved, but my family might be. When I asked him what I should do, in answer he told me several stories in which the woman committed suicide and thus saved her family . . .

At this point the doctor gave Maria a prescription for Veronal, a barbiturate at that time often prescribed for insomnia but which in higher doses is fatal, and she went through one of the lowest points in her life before coming to a decision:

I carried the Veronal around with me for several days but then I decided not to die but rather to try to flee abroad with my family.¹⁵⁴

Only three colleagues visited Maria and her family during the four months they remained in Germany after the events of November 1938. But by a variety of routes the entire family managed, in different ways, to leave Germany, and on 2 April 1939 they left the European continent for Britain. Maria was a woman of no great religious or political convictions, but had steadfastly sought to maintain her own sense of morality throughout the 1930s; now for her sympathy with fellow Germans in times of trouble, she too had finally to leave her homeland.

Cases such as that of Maria are very rare. More representative was the comment of the wife of one of Maria's husband's colleagues, explaining why she was unable to visit or support Maria: 'It's not cowardice, we're just recognizing the way things are.'¹⁵⁵ Depressingly standard, too, were the responses of the university authorities. In expelling Maria's son, the disciplinary committee set up by his university explained that:

¹⁵³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (101), Maria K., p. 11.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the conduct of the student [is] thoroughly reprehensible. Because he thought it right after the well-known incidents to take himself into a Jewish shop, he has massively compromised the reputation and dignity of the university and thus contravened his academic duties.¹⁵⁶

Nor were university colleagues any kinder to Maria's husband when he lost his university chair. As a former colleague from another university put it, perhaps not unkindly in intention but highly revealing of the widespread capitulation of the intelligentsia in face of the brute force of Nazism:

We younger colleagues all regret the fact that, because of the conduct of your lady wife, which was against all instincts, you have been denied an honourable departure from the university.¹⁵⁷

There was merely one, tellingly anonymous, letter of support to Maria, which she received on 20 November 1938:

My dear lady,
Please allow me to express my heartfelt admiration for your magnanimous and courageous deed. All decent people would have liked to have done the same, but we lack the courage, as demonstrated by this letter with disguised handwriting and without signature.¹⁵⁸

Some individuals were clearly deeply troubled by more than just the smashing of property on the night itself; but by this time they hardly dared to make themselves known and the consequences even for registering sympathy could be severe.

One of the oddest aspects of the November pogrom and its after-effects, however, is the way in which some adults seem to have failed even to register what was going on, let alone reflect explicitly on it. One searches in vain for any mention of the November pogrom in the diaries of the highly intelligent and well-educated Thea L. (born 1907), for example, who in November 1938 was back working in a medical clinic in Vienna, where she had previously studied medicine. Extremely lonely and dissatisfied with her life, Thea L. confided her many miseries to her diary; the entries of November 1938 all circle around her own problems and relationships, with no mention whatsoever of *Kristallnacht* or antisemitism or anything else in the wider social and political world. Her entry of 28 November 1938 is relatively typical:

I am restless, without happiness or friends. Work does not satisfy me or fulfil me. My inner loneliness drives me into infatuation with P. One cannot live by letters alone. My aggressive vivacity towards P. is loathsome even to me.¹⁵⁹

Some relatively apolitical adults thus seem to form something of an exception in terms of the way in which they seem to have failed to register the enormity of the

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Appendix p. 3, letter of 23 Nov. 1938 from Prof H., Göttingen.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Appendix.

¹⁵⁹ Kempowski-BIO 2918, I-II, Diaries of Dr med. Thea L. (1907–90), entry of 28 Nov. 1938.

violence which was so publicly fomented and orchestrated that night—or, in retrospect, they play down their own perceptions of the time, in order to account for their continued support for Nazism.

In many accounts of committed Nazis too, there is little or no mention of *Kristallnacht*. It is as though it either never happened; or it did not impinge on their consciousness at the time, so they could be ‘forgiven’ for being unaware of the darker side of Nazism at this time; or they simply were oblivious to the sufferings of those they had already excluded from their moral universe as creatures for whom there need be no compassion. Ruth L., for example, who had earlier been so impressed by the Nazi use of violence to impose, as she saw it, law and order against the ‘primitive violence’ of the communists, makes no mention of *Kristallnacht*, nor indeed of the Nuremberg Laws or other major steps in the progressive antisemitic measures of the later 1930s, which she appears barely to have noticed.¹⁶⁰ In the case of Ruth L., perhaps the increasing segregation between the racially excluded and the now dominant ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*’ could be held up as an excuse for her failing to register the events of November 1938, possibly compounded by living at some distance from any Jewish synagogues or affected communities—although even so, the general outcry and the official publicity surrounding the allegedly spontaneous ‘actions’ following vom Rath’s death at the hands of a young Polish Jew in Paris render such an explanation implausible.

There is a similarly odd absence of full memory of the November pogrom in the memoirs of Udo K., whose later self-representations throw interesting light on the ways in which it was possible for members of his generation—the war-youth generation—to see their support to the system as in some sense justified, despite all that was going on all around them and despite the policies they were themselves upholding and enacting.¹⁶¹ In September 1938 he had married Alexandra von S., who had left the Augusta Schule following her *Abitur* exam in 1935. By November 1938, he was an up-and-coming civil servant assisting in the administration of the newly occupied Sudetenland, based in the town of Aussig (now Ústí nad Labem). Key to the occupation of this area—as in Austria earlier in the year—was the introduction, very rapidly, of Nazi policies against Jews.¹⁶² Yet Udo appears here—as did so many other ‘ordinary Nazis’—to have made a distinction between what were seen as in some sense ‘legitimate’ policies of conquest, occupation, repression, and exclusion, and more radical, sporadic acts of visible physical violence. Thus while on the one hand assisting in effecting racial policies in every area of life, on the other hand Udo subsequently distanced himself from support for, and to some considerable degree even any knowledge of, the pogrom of November 1938. In his memoirs written in 1980—by which time he must clearly have known far more of what the Nazi invasion and occupation of Austria and the Sudetenland had meant

¹⁶⁰ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (128), Ruth L. See also Ch. 3 above, pp. 84–6.

¹⁶¹ For later developments in more detail, see Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis: Reflections on memory, terror, and a small town in Poland* (Oxford University Press, in preparation).

¹⁶² See generally Jörg Osterloh, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung im Reichsgau Sudetenland 1938–1945* (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2006).

for Jews, socialists, and others who were subjected to Nazi brutality, torture, enforced emigration or death—Udo seeks to convey a sense of how he felt at the time. He comments that 'the foreign policy successes of 1938 . . . conveyed the feeling that Hitler had after all done an enormous amount for the German people, which was also recognized abroad' (arguably illustrating continuing assumptions about both the existence, and the intrinsic value, of the 'German Volk', no matter at what cost to those excluded from this concept).¹⁶³ Reflecting more broadly on the Nazi 'successes' of the 1930s—not only in foreign policy, but also in the reduction of unemployment—Udo also recalls that '[a]part from the gutter press that was not to be taken seriously (*Der Stürmer*, produced by Julius Streicher, who was soon to fall into disgrace), as an outsider one noticed relatively little by way of antisemitic agitation'.¹⁶⁴ Such successes were only marred by the 'night of broken glass': 'The night from 8 to 9 November 1938 dealt a major blow to all such reflections!'¹⁶⁵ These juxtapositions are worthy of further reflection.

Udo K. claimed in his memoirs that the events of 9 November 1938 were dreadful. His wife, Alexandra, had allegedly been driven by taxi through Berlin's Friedrichstrasse shortly after *Kristallnacht*, and had emitted the cry of 'Oh my God!', whereupon she and the taxi driver—who had supposedly turned around 'with a serious expression on his face' and remarked, presumably with heavy irony, 'yes, yes, we Germans are the foremost cultural nation on earth!'—had exchanged glances and 'understood' each other. This was supposedly a turning point for Udo (who was, we should remember, by now a relatively long-standing member of both the SA and the NSDAP):

And what one then heard from all round Germany was so catastrophic that you had to give up hope of any improvement in conditions. So whoever had not already registered this on 30 June 1934 [the 'night of the long knives' against the SA]: on 9 November 1938 there was nothing more to be done to whitewash the image of this state.

The only resort now, according to Udo K. in his memoirs, was to turn to the army: 'This was the only source of power that appeared to us to be capable of providing any redress. What an illusion!'¹⁶⁶ We see here already the typical pattern of a cautionary tale to indicate distance, and an appeal to what might be seen as the 'acceptable illusion' of retreat to the supposed 'decency' of the army, a topos repeated many times later in Udo's account of life under Nazism.

At the same time, however, Udo claimed that he personally had witnessed nothing of *Kristallnacht* in Aussig, a claim accompanied by a small concession to the possibility of psychologically beneficial failings of memory:

I cannot remember anything at all as far as my own personal experience is concerned. I don't think or believe that the Jewish synagogue in Aussig was set on fire. It would be a bad case of repression if it turned out that this was indeed the case.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Archiv des Landesverband Rheinland (LVR), Nr. I-208: Udo K., *Erlebt-Überlebt*, p. 132a.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132a.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

What did in fact happen in Aussig on the night of the November pogrom? On closer inspection, Udo's story certainly requires some amendment.

The spacious and fairly new Aussig synagogue, built in 1880 and extended in the early twentieth century, was indeed set on fire on 9 November 1938. While the inside was entirely destroyed, including the holy scrolls and other objects, the walls, windows and roof were damaged but remained standing, witness to the Nazi-instigated atrocity. The Nazi-run municipal authorities duly complained to the Jewish religious community that: 'The roof which was destroyed by the heat of the fire and the broken windows, as well as the façade which was in part blackened by the smoke, form an eyesore not only for the immediate surroundings but also for the image of this part of the city.'¹⁶⁸ The organ, which had been purchased at the beginning of the twentieth century when the synagogue was extended, was then destroyed by the Nazis at the end of December 1938, and the outer shell of the building was handed over to a butcher for a sausage-production workshop and butcher's staff premises—presumably in deliberate affront to Jewish sensitivities.¹⁶⁹ In towns in the surrounding area for which Aussig was the administrative centre, it was—as elsewhere in the Reich—generally only those synagogues which might, if set ablaze, present a fire risk for neighbouring buildings which were spared from destruction. Again, as elsewhere in the Reich, the destruction was met with widespread popular disapproval, as noted, for example, by an anonymous writer for the émigré newspaper *Die Weltbühne*:

It can be said without exaggeration that the ninth of November was not a day of success for the Nazis. The pogroms contributed significantly to driving forwards a process of disillusionment and disenchantment among the Sudeten German population. It is characteristic of the mood that in a gathering of tradespeople from Aussig the phrase was heard: 'Preferably more Jews and fewer taxes!'¹⁷⁰

The erasure of any memory of personal exposure to these events, while acknowledging indirect knowledge and registering distance and personal distaste, on the part of a civil servant who was in the thick of administration of the debris, both physical and human, of Nazi policies of destruction, is not entirely plausible. Far from being overlooked, the events were actively monitored by the *Landrat's* office in which Udo K. then worked. In February 1939, the Aussig *Landrat's* office produced a list of figures, reporting that 'in the town of Aussig the Jewish temple was burned down or rather annihilated [*vernichtet*]'.¹⁷¹ Oddly, it may be that this report was produced in a rather specific context which Udo K. does remember in some considerable detail, that of an official visitation from an inspection team; but whether or not it was for this particular occasion, it seems likely that very little of

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Osterloh, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung im Reichsgau Sudetenland 1938–1945*, p. 212.

¹⁶⁹ <<http://www.martinkrenn.net/projects/49.htm>>, accessed on 20 Apr. 2008.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Osterloh, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung im Reichsgau Sudetenland*, p. 220.

¹⁷¹ Quoted *Ibid.*, p. 213. See also the collection of documents in *Intoleranz: Tschechen, Deutsche und Juden in Aussig und Umgebung 1938–1948. Edition der Dokumente aus den Beständen des Archivs der Stadt Aussig*, 1998.

substance could have escaped the attention of these assiduous local government officials:

The whole morning long the Landrat, I and the senior officials in the office were examined, files were presented for inspection, figures made available. At that time the administration was held on a very tight rein.¹⁷²

And Udo can barely have overlooked the main tasks of the *Landrat's* office over the following weeks, as a census was taken; registers of births, marriages, and deaths seized and collated; and the population monitored and divided into Jews, half-Jews, even quarter-Jews, and non-Jews, for treatment accordingly.¹⁷³ This was an exercise that was to be repeated in every succeeding occupation, including the Warthegau and Eastern Upper Silesia—with, ultimately, murderous consequences.

It appears, then, that it was possible for an intelligent Nazi civil servant to continue the business of racist administration as usual, while bracketing off the immediately visible signs of physical violence and ignoring the wider context and consequences of the administration of Nazi policies on the ground. It also appears to have been possible, at this stage, to have continued working with a strong sense of duty to a state the leadership of which had already visibly stepped beyond the limits of civilized conduct. A sense of 'inner decency' could, on this view, be preserved by distancing oneself from visible acts of physical violence while continuing to go through the outward motions of the state service that kept the regime functioning.

Others at this time had perhaps a far greater awareness of both the deadly nature of the regime and the general character of what was about to come—particularly those who were being persecuted and seeking, with increasingly difficulty, to flee for their lives. This was true not only across the great divides by which German society was now riven but also, in microcosm, in the little world of the Augusta Schule class of 1935, which had but a few years earlier seemed socially and culturally such a homogeneous group. Helga Paasche, the 'racially mixed' daughter of Hans Paasche and his Jewish wife Ellen, had by now fled to Mexico; many of her relatives on the Jewish side of the family were in Palestine.¹⁷⁴ A handful of others from the Augusta Schule too had gone into exile in the USA, the UK, or Switzerland; and one had been incarcerated, along with her partner, for left-wing political activities in opposition to the Nazi regime. Others who were internally opposed to the regime gritted their teeth and sought to live through it as best they could, as in the case of Franziska, whose father, Alexander Schwab, a former colleague of Hans Paasche in the pre-1914 youth movement, was by now in prison for his political activities. Within a matter of years he too would have died in imprisonment.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Archiv des Landesverband Rheinland (LVR), Nr. I-208: Udo K., *Erlebt—Überlebt*, pp. 130–1.

¹⁷³ See Osterloh, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung im Reichsgau Sudetenland*, pp. 231–51.

¹⁷⁴ I am very grateful for this information received by personal communication from a distant relative of Ellen Paasche by marriage, who was surprisingly present in the audience when I gave a lecture on this topic in Paris in October 2009.

¹⁷⁵ Based on personal letters; I am grateful to the respective families. It is likely that the majority of these young women from bourgeois and professional backgrounds, whom I have not discussed

The atmosphere perhaps changed most rapidly and dramatically in Austria, even within the first six months after having become part of the expanded German Reich. Henry A., who had been so shocked by the widespread flag-waving and apparent enthusiasm of his fellow Austrians at the entry of Hitler in March, noted how rapidly the atmosphere had changed within a matter of weeks:

It was tragicomic to watch how everybody tried to change and to adapt to the situation . . . A muddy flood of hypocrisy, lie [*sic*] deceit and falsehood drowned every decent feeling [here spelt 'felling'] and behind all this was pale fright . . .¹⁷⁶

Henry himself barely dared make notes in his diary:

The leaves of diary [*sic*] of these days are blank. Who dared to make a note concerning general ideas? A few sentences express the pain of these days: 'Constricted. Bound up in oneself and struck dumb in self-contradictory experiences. Wanting to make a reckoning with oneself at the moment as painful as the most frightful overcoming [of this urge]. One wrestles with staying silent . . .'

Even today I find it bold that I dared to write down these words.¹⁷⁷

Oddly, given his own difficult situation as a 'Mischling' and that of the fully Jewish members of his immediate family, Henry was acutely perceptive about the mindset of fellow Austrians who were opposed to Nazism but not threatened on 'racial' grounds:

It is hard to recollect or to describe this pandemonium of psychic confusion and subversive trends. The conflicts arose everywhere. They split families, parted lovers, and really made it difficult or even impossible to differ [*sic*] between right or wrong . . . But the conditions made it impossible to decide, more impossible to carry out. There was the horror of being arrested, tortured or killed; there was the general hopelessness in social life and in professional regards. One was denied the basic suppositions of existence, one was eliminated as a human being. The most original forms of the struggle for existence revived. It was no more a question of honest or dishonest, of morally allowed or forbidden, of right or wrong; it was the very 'to be or not to be' that was at stake.¹⁷⁸

Henry A. continued:

Some people actually were at their wit's end. (This refers not only to Jews but to all who were not actually Nazis.) Many developed a certain dull rigidity which had something definitely dis-normal. For hours they sat and stared just into a corner, they had stopped worrying. 'I do not care any more. No matter what happens, I am through . . .' a friend said . . . A detailed description of the inner discussions every single one of us

explicitly here, simply conformed and went along with the new society, much like their aristocratic schoolmate Alexandra, while also distancing themselves from the physical thuggery of those Nazis who were in any case deemed to be far lower in the social spectrum.

¹⁷⁶ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (4), Henry A., pp. 52–3, English original, except for the embedded quotation which was in German.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Where I have typed 'pain', the word was actually spelt 'apin'; I assume this was simply a typographical error.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

went through, could fill pages . . . But I only want to emphasise that the average citizen, the indifferent, the less persecuted non-Aryans and similar large groups suffered more psychically than in any other respect.¹⁷⁹

With help from some of his 'Aryan' former colleagues in the army, Henry A. managed to obtain the relevant emigration papers, just before 9 November 1938. This, to him, seemed like the last straw for both Jews and non-Jews alike:

Just when I felt thankful for the serious comradeship of my former superiors this positive impression . . . was once more—and finally—dimmed by the horrifying happenings of those November days after the killing of Herr von Rath in Paris . . . A government under the regime of which such events are possible, not to speak of one which favors such atrocities, is sentenced from whichever angle one may look . . . I did not try to see more of the terror than I had to see. For a last time I went through all the psychic torture, the nervous shock of a terrified public. I will never forget the general sad expressions the pale faces showed. Everybody seemed concerned. Strange how brutality causes cast-down feelings even in those not directly concerned.¹⁸⁰

But these feelings were shared only by those who were not in a position to affect how things would develop. Power lay elsewhere.

Not only those who were persecuted but other Nazis too had a better sense of the character and future of the regime than Udo K. later professed to have had, as did the wider public; Hitler's views were, after all, no secret, and some of his wilder goals were even turned into the status of a repeated 'prophecy', as was most notably the case with his January 1939 Reichstag speech announcing that any future war would bring about the 'extermination' of the 'Jewish race'. Wilhelm B., an infinitely less well-educated person than Udo K., and a relatively insignificant cog in the party machine, summarized in his diaries in the winter of 1938–9 where he saw Germany going. Looking back on the momentous events of the past years and his own life and role in the future, he commented that 1938 had been:

The greatest year in history for Germany ever. All comparisons, all other times, pale in comparison with the year of 1938.

I am glad that my healthy instincts led me in the right direction, so that I could help in leading this march into such a beautiful future. I am also glad, however, that the great God gave me gifts that, after the battles in the trenches and the street, as well as the speaker's platform in the times of struggle [*Kampfzeit*], also charged me with working towards the carrying out of the inner revolution.¹⁸¹

A month later, as Wilhelm B. looked forward to the future at the start of 1939, he commented, presciently:

If 1938 was the great historical turning point and year of harvesting, so we are grateful for destiny. Many people believe that now there will be peace in the German lands. They will find they are mistaken. This generation will not reach this goal for a long

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–7. ¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁸¹ Kempowski-BIO, 4842 / 1 + 2, Wilhelm B., (1896–1982), entry of 10 Dec. 1938, fol. 53.

time yet, even the next generation not yet, perhaps not even in a hundred years. Greater Germany is ridiculously small in comparison with the strength beaming from its manhood . . . So new tasks lie before us. 1939 will therefore have to bring preparations in order to extend our currently too cramped space towards the east.¹⁸²

In the diary of this insignificant Nazi, representative of probably only a small minority in the 1930s, the rantings of the national leader were faithfully reproduced as though they were his own thoughts. But while most adult Germans had arguably only conformed or partially supported Hitler's policies to date—maintaining their distance or expressing reservations when they were adversely affected, paying their dues where they could not avoid this, taking opportunities where these were presented if the personal costs were not too great, or suffering the consequences for seeking to uphold a sense of personal integrity against the grain—the situation would be very different with the coming of the war that was so inevitably built into Hitler's cause.

By 1939, vast numbers of Germany's Jewish population had fled for other shores; many non-Jewish Germans had been sentenced for 'political' offences, or incarcerated without trial. The character of the regime was not lost on them, nor on the millions of others in less obvious opposition but fearful of the consequences of nonconformist behaviour, such as those who knew but failed to support Maria K. or engage in comparable acts of kindness and support to their Jewish neighbours. At the same time, terror was being exported by apparently more traditional and quasi-legalistic means. The classic civil servant's separation between the 'unacceptable' face of wild terror, as evidenced in the events of the night of 9–10 November 1938, and the planned terror of invasion and occupation of foreign territory allowed members of the war-youth generation to march into and administer new areas of Europe on Nazi racial lines. Following the Munich Conference of September 1938, the expansion of the German Reich into first the Sudetenland and, the following spring, Bohemia and Moravia, inaugurated, the following autumn when the Allies finally took a firm stance with respect to Poland, what was to become the Second World War.

V. 'ORDINARY NAZIS' AND THE SOCIAL SELF IN THE LATE 1930s

A mere six years of Nazi rule had dramatically transformed not only the character of state and social organization in Germany, but also the nature of informal social relations, and hence the ways in which people constructed their sense of self. New distinctions had been introduced, creating chasms where previously there had been only minimal fault lines; suspicions, fears, enthusiasms, and commitments had turned Germans into sharply different directions. While the development of Nazi policies and their practical impact have been well and frequently

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, entry of 11 Jan. 1939.

documented, it is far harder, for all sorts of reasons, to assess the ways in which these developments affected a sense of self. There can be no unmediated means of accessing this; but self-representations at the time and later, as well as the depictions of social context in autobiographical accounts, provide some glimpses and subjective insights into quite how much had changed, what compromises and constructions had developed, over this short period of time in which so much had happened.

Gradually, during the period since 1933, people had learned to form distinctions between what they saw as their 'private' and hence presumably 'authentic' selves, and their public behaviours. Albert D. describes, for example, how social relations changed in the relatively small Franconian town in which he had previously so successfully practised medicine, and where his practice effectively collapsed through loss of patients long before the introduction in 1938 of a law forbidding Jewish doctors to treat 'Aryan' patients. In private people remained pleasant towards him, but:

In public by contrast people are cautious, short-sighted and constrained. In this sort of small town everyone knows everyone, everyone thinks himself under observation and spied upon and nothing is more feared than a denunciation to the Nazi authorities. Then you are rapidly branded in public as a 'Jewish lackey' [*Judenknecht*], as an 'enemy of the people' and similar.¹⁸³

By the later 1930s, everyone was, in Albert D.'s view, terrified of expressing their true opinions. He was fortunate enough to have remained in contact with many decent Germans who refused to break off connections with him, and so perhaps he overestimated the extent of oppositional feeling and the significance of fear in preventing its expression, but his descriptions of the general atmosphere are nevertheless illuminating. Even on public transport people dared not express their opinions openly:

In contrast to previous times it was now obvious to everyone on all sides how cautious, how reserved and even reticent the public had become, even when together over long periods of time. Apart from this one also noticed that during and after reading official pronouncements on posters no one even dared to make a face from which someone else nearby could draw any conclusions. Such posters were stuck up at virtually all places where there was considerable traffic.¹⁸⁴

The twenty-year-old son of a close acquaintance of his must have laughed cynically while reading one such poster, for shortly afterwards he was arrested and sent to Dachau for 're-education'. Albert D. commented further:

The fear of these concentration camps quite understandably dominated the masses and kept them quiet. Despite the secrecy with which these camps were surrounded and despite the fact that the press was naturally strictly forbidden to publish anything about life there, for a long time now it had become known how barbarically the unhappy and

¹⁸³ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D., p. 17.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

defenceless people in the camps were dealt with and what sorts of atrocities were taking place. In the meantime the whole wide world knows about this.¹⁸⁵

This comment too, it must be remembered, was made well before the extermination sites in the east were set up and put into operation.

By the summer of 1936, Albert D.'s son had emigrated to the USA and his daughter was working in a distant town in the north of Germany. Albert D. moved into a smaller apartment and was for a while able to run a more or less viable private practice, including Christian patients who came via an entrance on a side road where they could not be seen. Through his patients, who simply by virtue of remaining loyal to a Jewish doctor were far from representative of the broader population, Albert D. heard a lot about the mood of people who were not entirely enamoured of the regime. These included a man in good health who came to Albert D. to request a sick note in order to get out of compulsory attendance at demonstrations; participants were now being issued with numbered tickets, so the party could control who had stayed away, and then inflict unwanted consequences; so the appearance of 'gigantic marches, gigantic gatherings, gigantic demonstrations' was being forcefully created against the will of at least some people.¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the effect it had on those who did attend was often precisely as intended by the Nazi authorities; a sense of excitement and willingness to be part, even if for only a few hours, of a wider community; behaviour signifying wild enthusiasm, and hence complicit in enacting precisely the sort of 'national community' the Nazis sought to evoke.

Albert D. finally decided to give up his practice just a few months before he would have been forced out, and moved to live with his daughter, her husband, and their small baby in a large city in the north. He immediately registered the contrast in atmosphere, sensing that there was far less evidence of Nazi propaganda and oppression. As he commented on the experiences of the first few months after leaving Franconia for the north: 'When we now came to rest here, we felt for the first time how highly strung our nerves had become in the previous few years.'¹⁸⁷ But this sense of some relief and relaxation of tension did not last long. Within a few months the 'Jews not wanted here' [*Juden unerwünscht*] type of placard began to appear everywhere, even in what Albert D. had hoped would be a last bastion of apparent non-Nazism, and optimists realized worse was coming after all. His daughter and son-in-law, with their baby, managed to emigrate to the USA in the summer of 1938, and Albert D. too prepared to get out. Following the Sudeten crisis, many 'Aryan' Germans said to them that they were the lucky ones to be leaving, the Aryans remaining in Germany would eventually be worse off. As Albert D. summarized it:

Just how much the people generally already reckoned with war as the consequence of Hitler's politics of violence is apparent from a remark that we heard again and again as a form of speech in a range of variations . . . They are taking away your property from

¹⁸⁵ HHL, b MS Ger 91 (54), Albert D.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

you Jews, it is true, but the dear God will still get you out in time—whereas they will certainly take away from us Christians our children in the next war!¹⁸⁸

Other repeatedly heard comments included variations on: 'Be glad that you are getting out, nothing good awaits us lot. Our beautiful Germany has just turned into nothing but a prison.'¹⁸⁹

Can one generalize at all about reactions and responses to the challenges faced by Germans in the peacetime years of the 1930s? In view of the myriad stories told by contemporaries of daily incidents of abuse, maltreatment, denigration, and denunciation by their fellow citizens, and the tragic tales of those who were forced to abandon their lives and homes, were murdered, or who ultimately took their own lives when they could no longer bear a situation in which there seemed no other way out, it seems almost beyond the capacity of historians to summarize, even to select illustrations, on any sensible basis. The subjective experiences of contemporaries seem, moreover, more complex, on occasion more ambiguous, than the later debates of historians about the respective weighting to be given to 'consent' and 'coercion', to support and terror, can encapsulate. Participation and behavioural evidence of commitment to the regime was always accompanied by a very real sense of peer-group pressure and the possible penalties for failing to conform, as even the request to obtain a sick note in order to avoid a demonstration indicated. But that the character of social relations had changed dramatically under six years of Nazi rule in Germany is beyond doubt. And it was not only fear, but also the more or less willing cooperation—ranging from genuine enthusiasm to an oppressed sense of capitulation—of ordinary Germans, who put into daily effect the new 'rules of the game' and enacted the new 'racial' identity scripts, that played a major role in this transformation. At the same time, large numbers (precision here is simply impossible) did not at the same time necessarily identify with the roles they felt required to play in public. A sense of at least some degree of dissonance as people's private lives were so dramatically constrained, shaped, and channelled by national policies, pressures, and norms was inevitable.

There are many ways of looking at patterns of response beyond the level of individual choices—according to class, religion, region, gender, prior political commitments, all of which shaped not only which options were open but which options were perceived to be acceptable. For all Germans, the penalties for transgressing the newly imposed boundaries of the racial state were severe, and any attempt to go against the dominant norms, any aspect of 'difference' on racial or political grounds, could lead to the most horrendous consequences. The capacity for repression in a state ultimately ruled by force even while it still maintained a façade of the rule of law should never be underestimated, least of all when that state was the Third Reich. Yet the capacity for this state also to mobilize those who were, for whatever reasons, susceptible to its lures should also not be overlooked. And here, there were distinctive generational differences.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

One further factor was important, in addition to the obvious questions of class, politics, religious affiliation, and the like: for those born in the early years of the twentieth century, anyone who wanted to make a career would have to hitch their star to that of the state. Members of the war-youth generation were, then, particularly susceptible to the lures and compromises which were necessary to make their way up the social scale and realize ambitions which might well have been formed in rather different times. Many had also been socialized at a time, and in particular areas, where violence not only appeared in some way to be acceptable as a political tool, but where the 'hero's death' was glorified, and revenge for Versailles a major priority. Furthermore, those a few years younger, the 'first Hitler Youth generation', were also particularly susceptible. They had experienced as youngsters the crises of the later Weimar years and were open to the search for a 'solution'; and, once Hitler was in power, they were perhaps uniquely exposed to the full onslaught of Nazi propaganda. It is clear that the influence of Nazi youth organizations was never complete, and that many failed to heed the Nazi message or indeed risked their own lives and well-being through overt acts of non-conformity. But it is equally clear that young people were highly vulnerable, over-exposed, and hence more readily mobilized, and ultimately disproportionately willing to go along with the Nazi cause. They had least by way of prior experience or firm convictions; the support of the family was dented, while educational and religious institutions by and large capitulated to the demands of the regime and exerted further pressure on the choices of young people.

This does not mean that all those who appeared to be mobilized, in terms of their outward behaviours, also actually agreed with every aspect of Hitler's policies or had individual motives for action which were rooted in principled commitment to Nazi ideology rather than pragmatic considerations about conformity and survival. The Nazi party activist Wilhelm B. was arguably a rare individual (certainly as far as willingness of family members to deposit such materials in archives are concerned), one whose whole identity seemed to be defined within the framework of Nazi discourse and whose personal fulfilment and sense of self-worth was confirmed by his participation, in however small a role, in the national cause. Far more prevalent, perhaps, were those who metaphorically hung their Nazi uniforms over the back of the chair when they got home and reverted to other identities, retaining a sense of distance between themselves and the 'real' Nazis—and having to bear the consequences later, if denounced by their children or others during the Third Reich, or when being forced after 1945 to account for their previous participation in Nazi organizations. 'Real Nazis', particularly after the war, were conventionally defined in rather narrow terms, with a particular focus on the SS and Gestapo; a sense of dissonance could allow many who had actually upheld the Nazi state to believe in their own personal morality and their inner distance from the regime, however much their outward behaviours may have belied their alleged private convictions.

Up until 1939, in some areas and among some groups—those who were not forcibly excluded, or in opposition for whatever reason—the demands of the state could frequently be ignored, although at the price of also ignoring the fates of fellow citizens in less fortunate positions. However bad some contemporaries may have

felt at the time, it was still easy for others to support the state and its policies without, apparently, experiencing anything by way of a guilty conscience. The mobilization of the people was a very different matter when it was a question of the national conscription of bodies for warfare and not merely of outward behaviours on a periodic basis. It was perhaps as the war reached its worst stages that the social self was most deeply defined in terms of its 'racial' belonging and participation in a 'national' cause.

5

The escalation of violence: War and genocide

Death and brutality were hallmarks of National Socialist rule throughout Hitler's period in office as chancellor and *Führer*. The claim that 'we did not know' is, if one pauses only for a moment, quite absurd in view of the highly visible violence perpetrated by the party in power from the very outset—violence that was condoned and tolerated by wide sections of German society, including the army and the (continually pruned and selected) civil service. The army leadership indeed swore a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler, following the death of President Hindenburg in August 1934, only *after* the intentional and retrospectively 'legally sanctioned' use of murder as a political tool in the 'beheading' (not an inappropriate word, in this instance) of the SA in the days of late June and early July 1934. After 1936, with Himmler's growing control of his expanding SS and police empire, the exercise of state-sanctioned violence was ever less under the control of the traditional judicial authorities, ever more an affair of the party. Violent expressions of racism might not have been widely popular, as disapproving reactions to the boycott of Jewish shops on 1 April 1933 or the violent pogrom of 9 November 1938 demonstrated; but no one could really say they 'did not know' that the Nazi regime had unleashed, perpetrated, and sanctioned violence on a massive scale—even before Germany went to war in September 1939.

Under any 'normal' circumstances—say, a democratic state of the later twentieth or early twenty-first century—the violence of the 'peacetime' years would have been seen as murder and brutality on a massive scale. But in light of what was to come, this appeared to pale in comparison with the 6 million victims of Nazi policies of murderous racism and the more than 50 million casualties of Hitler's war. And where in September 1939 a 'mere' 21,400 people were imprisoned in the then six principal concentration camps, by the start of 1945—even despite the millions who had been murdered in the meantime—a staggering total of more than 700,000 people were held prisoner in the expanded concentration camp network.¹ To sustain and implement brutality on this scale involved millions of Germans; yet many later claimed they had never 'really known' anything about the brutal character of the Hitler regime and its murderous policies.

Once the country was at war, Germans were drawn into experiences of violence on an unprecedented scale.² To many people, the war might initially have appeared

¹ Figures taken from Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi rule in occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 11.

² The detailed course and character of the war will not be traced here. For a clear overview and summary, see Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2008).

to be a 'normal' war, with the 'lightning strikes' and the easy occupations of large areas of Europe during 1939–40. It was even successfully and repeatedly presented as a pre-emptive or 'defensive' war, with Hitler portraying himself as the peace-loving *Führer* seeking to protect the German people against aggressors abroad at all costs, with some apparent success. As Luise S. put it on 10 September 1939 in a letter to her husband, Fritz, on the occasion of his birthday, when he had already been called away from home on clerical duties associated with the military campaign:

Your 40th birthday—how differently we had thought we would spend it. Now we are in the middle of war and my Fritz is so far away from here. But I am, despite all, very close to you and so send you my most heartfelt good wishes for your birthday. May the dear God always protect you and let you remain healthy and come home to us again! . . . It is beyond comprehension that governments like the French and English can so recklessly and without reason take their people into war, while our *Führer* right up to the last was concerned to maintain peace.³

But right from the outset, with the invasion and occupation of Poland, Hitler's war was fought with unprecedented brutality against civilians, fuelled by ferocious ideological ambitions, and informed by racial hatred. And as the war expanded into a pan-European and then a World War, ever more Germans were caught up in it, their lives radically affected whether through being mobilized to fight at the front or through the impact of 'total war' on the home front.

Moreover, knowledge of atrocities at the time was far more widespread than post-war protestations of ignorance and innocence would suggest. The 'euthanasia' campaign of 1939–41 was indeed at least publicly halted because of popular protestations. In the dedicated extermination camps which were developed from late 1941 and expanded massively in 1942, several thousand people could be murdered *daily* when the gas chambers and crematoria were in full operation. But it is worth remembering that more 'racial' victims of the regime were murdered outside the gas chambers than within, often not merely within sight of, but with the active participation of 'ordinary Germans'. Hundreds of thousands of letters home from the front reported on atrocities against civilians in the occupied territories as well as on the eastern front. But in the minds of self-defensive Germans later determined to prove their 'innocence' through 'ignorance', a sharp line was drawn, metaphorically, at the gates of Auschwitz. The SS and the concentration camp personnel later served as convenient, narrowly defined scapegoats; the myth of the 'decent' *Wehrmacht* was sustained in public for half a century after the end of the war. And, for a long time in both West and East Germany, a dominant focus on those who made policy at the top, and those who were at the front line of 'bestial' physical brutality, served to deflect attention from lower levels of the administration and from the wider context of racist policies of stigmatization, exclusion, and premature deaths, whether as a direct result of killing or as an indirect result of

³ Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Kempowski-Biographienarchiv (henceforth Kempowski-BIO), 7076, Correspondence of Fritz S. (1899–1991), letter from Luise S. of 10 Sep. 1939.

Nazi maltreatment, including through the overcrowding, enforced starvation, and disease of the ghettos.

No one, however far from direct military action, could emerge from this period untouched or unscathed in some way, emotionally, psychologically, or physically. But experiences of war and genocide were obviously significant in entirely different ways for different groups. There was all the world of difference—literally, the difference between life and death—between those who actively considered themselves members of a ‘master race’ and those destined for the gas chambers. There were gradations of difference among different victim groups, oppositionalists, old and young, males and females, committed or ‘fanatical’ Nazis, and ‘fellow travellers’, those who exploited forced labourers and those who were in fear of their own lives or simply sought to survive.

Here, perhaps even more than in any other period of twentieth-century German history, people faced massive common challenges. The ways in which they sought to make sense of their experiences, and to give meaning to what they were being required to do, or make it acceptable in terms with which they could live, varied not only with individual personalities, and particular political, moral, religious, and cultural commitments and heritages, but also betrayed the massive impact of Nazi propaganda, ideology, and peer-group pressure, as well as critical responses to these. It is remarkable how many common elements feature across quite different individual expressions and responses; and just how deeply individual perceptions and ‘subjective experiences’ were informed and framed by current discourses, despite registration of dissonance or discomfort. The character of the challenges and the impact of both ideology and experience varied not only with milieu and gender, but also according to generation: responses depended markedly on age and hence the character of an individual’s exposure to different aspects of this genocidal war. And age-related experiences at this time gave way to different ‘lessons’ that were later drawn, different degrees of dissonance in post-war lives, and different possibilities for making new lives after the cataclysm.

I. MASS MOBILIZATION

The most homogeneous experiences were arguably those of adult males. But even here, age played a role in varying patterns of involvement and reaction to war, given the changing character of an increasingly violent war and the ways in which different age cohorts were called up at different stages of the war. Self-mobilization was accompanied by forcible mobilization.

The totals of those called up to fight for the Fatherland, or to serve in the Reich civil service in the occupied territories or at home, were staggering. In all, somewhere in the region of 17 to 18 million men were called up at one time or another to fight; around 11 million were at some point held as prisoners of war; a million or more were implicated in civilian administration of Nazi policies. Soldiers on the ground constituted around 90 per cent of all the armed forces of the Third Reich.

Involvement in military service was in large measure structured according to social origins, with men from upper-class backgrounds having different expectations and experiences from those of the ordinary 'Landser'. Around 99 per cent of these soldiers were enlisted men, non-commissioned officers, or junior officers; only around 1 per cent were officers in the narrow sense of holding higher office in the army, at the level of major or above.⁴ Only 3 per cent were ever intended to become officers at some point, although this level was never in fact reached; and only around 0.3 per cent were members of the real military elite, the generals, and admirals, whose memoirs and related publications have tended to shape later perceptions of 'what the war was like'.⁵ What soldiers all had in common was experience of a war of ideologically driven brutality, however differently they drew on cultural frameworks to process and make sense of their experiences, and however differently they sieved these experiences internally. The marks left, on a personal level, were highly complex.

If there had been some degree of selection and choice involved at earlier stages with respect to involvement in state-sanctioned violence, this was no longer the case once war was declared and conscription was an unavoidable fact of life, even (perhaps especially) for those with no desire to be involved. Prior to 1939, both structural and cultural availability were important as selection mechanisms for those who were successfully mobilized for the Nazi project. After 1939, cultural responses continued to be significant as far as internal perceptions and strategies of reaction were concerned, but for millions of young men caught in the relevant age groups—which widened as the war proceeded and the need for manpower became more intense—'structural availability' became increasingly important, ultimately overriding all else; millions of Germans were sent, whether or not against their will, to participate in what was a highly ideologically driven fight. And the experience of participation in this most brutal war inevitably had an indelible impact on those who were lucky enough to survive.

Notions of who was held to be 'available for mobilization' in the military sense broadened as the war progressed. Even people in occupations where one could previously claim to be 'indispensable' (*unabkömmlich* or *uk*) on the home front found themselves subject to an embargo on leave with effect from 1 June 1941, given the need for manpower in 'Operation Barbarossa'.⁶ More than 3 million men were involved in the June 1941 invasion of the USSR alone.⁷ Not far short of

⁴ Stephen Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), p. 3. Despite the non-analytic style and approach, and the heavy dependence on a small selection of published sources, this book contains very useful and suggestive material on the experiences of 'ordinary soldiers'.

⁵ Wolfram Wette, *Die Wehrmacht: Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (Frankfurt-am-Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2002), pp. 74, 176–7.

⁶ Bernhard Kroener, 'The manpower resources of the Third Reich in the area of conflict between Wehrmacht, bureaucracy and war economy, 1939–1942' in *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt* (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000; orig. German 1998), Vol. V, Pt 3, p. 913.

⁷ Richard Bessel, *Nazism and War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), p. 94.

1 million (900,000) men served at some time as member of the ever expanding *Waffen-SS*.⁸ In the autumn of 1944, given enormously heavy losses in the preceding months—more than one-third of a million German soldiers were killed in August 1944 alone—the so-called ‘People’s Fighting Force’ (*Volkssturm*) was created, encompassing all males deemed fit to fight between the ages of sixteen and sixty. This last-ditch effort simultaneously brought into the war the cohorts born in both 1928 and 1929, with an entirely callous disregard for the lives of these youngsters.⁹ Both their prior preparation and their experiences of war were distinctively different from those who had been involved from the start.

The experience of war thus differed quite markedly according to the different military campaigns at different stages of the war, and to time of call-up—which, of course, related directly to an individual’s year of birth. Different birth cohorts thus could experience ‘war’ quite differently, in part because of the character of their prior socialization, as well as age-related degrees of responsibility and expectations, and because of the particular stages of the war and theatres of combat in which they were involved.

Many males who were already young adults in 1939 were moved widely across and around Europe, experiencing not only the easy victories of the early ‘*Blitzkrieg*’ period, the invasion and occupation of areas of both eastern and western Europe, but also the atrocities of the racial war in the east and the long-drawn out suffering of the Russian campaign, as well as late, suicidal fighting for survival against all the odds on all fronts. Their responses to the experience of war shifted accordingly; but many of them appear also to have been strongly affected by the messages which Hitler, Goebbels, and others sought to put across, even in face of the most awful conditions. There were of course major differences according to political and moral viewpoints, family background, and levels of education. But the pervasiveness of Nazi ideology in the letters of soldiers from this generation when faced with perpetration of violence on those designated as ‘the enemy’ is quite extraordinary.

For many adults, this was a moment when careers could be made or destroyed; and active military service did not necessarily preclude other forms of involvement in the ever expanding machinery of the Third Reich. For many, stints at the front alternated with periods in the administration of racial policies across Europe.¹⁰ Even those adults who were not called up into active military service were often involved in highly ideological practices in the employment of forced labourers in their farms and businesses, or in the ‘Germanization’ of the expanded Greater German Reich, putting racial policies into deadly practice through the oppression, exploitation, starvation, forced movement, and on occasion outright murder of subjugated peoples. Millions of Hitler’s victims lost their lives as a result not of

⁸ Evans, *Third Reich at War*, p. 505.

⁹ Bessel, *Nazism and War*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Cf. Michael Mann, ‘Were the perpetrators of genocide “ordinary men” or “real Nazis”? Results from fifteen hundred biographies’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 14(3) (2000), pp. 331–66; and M. Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

military combat but rather as a consequence of policies of terrorization, 'reprisals', exploitation, and malnutrition under Nazi 'civilian' rule.¹¹

For the men called up to fight and if necessary die for the Fatherland, the demands of the state could not be evaded and the effects were inescapable. This was the ultimate moment of mobilization. Yet for all the training and effort put into producing an ideologically homogeneous fighting force, responses varied. Many became convinced by their experiences and ideological training that the propaganda they had been subjected to before 1939 was 'true', and that the cause they were fighting for was just; others capitulated to peer-group pressure, and went along with the demands of the day, often alleviated by the periodic oblivion provided by alcohol; a few managed against the odds to retain some sense of inner distance, particularly if they already held strong inner convictions which provided a counter-vailing force to the demands of the Nazi regime.

Even so, there is a remarkable degree of patterning to the ways in which people wrote to each other about what they were witnessing and involved in. Mobilized as never before, Germans were constantly on the move, separated from families and friends; and they wrote to each other as never before. Although we can never know what went on inside people's heads, we certainly have vast quantities of evidence about the ways in which they were prepared to express their thoughts to others, and commit their views to paper.

Letters home (known as 'letters from the field', *Feldpostbriefe*) provide only veiled clues to soldiers' experiences; and they provide little by way of evidence of the longer-term impact or intergenerational transmission of wartime experiences.¹² Yet they are crucial to any understanding of the immediate impact of war on those mobilized to fight it, and the ways in which they sought to interpret and represent their experiences at the time.¹³ They provide insights into how soldiers experienced different phases and arenas of war, insofar as men at the front were capable of articulating their experiences and tried to convey them to those at home, in face of both military censorship and the self-censorship entailed in not wanting to worry their loved ones. Letters from home to the front similarly provide valuable clues as to frameworks of interpretation, beliefs, values, and 'knowledge' of what was going on; and they provide glimpses of contemporary responses to what was later recognized as crime on such a scale that people subsequently professed that 'they knew nothing about it'.

¹¹ See Hans Umbreit, 'Towards continental domination' in *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt* (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. V, Pt 1, p. 11.

¹² There is a frequent methodological problem encountered by researchers in this area, who rarely have access both to war-time material and later 'ego-documents' for the same individuals across long stretches of time.

¹³ See e.g. the use made of soldiers' letters in Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and war in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) and the analyses in Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtsoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998); Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten—nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis – Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1998); Hans Joachim Schröder, *Die gestohlenen Jahre. Erzählgeschichten und Geschichtserzählung im Interview: Der zweite Weltkrieg aus der Sicht ehemaliger Mannschaftssoldaten* (Tübingen: Max Niemayer Verlag, 1992).

While millions of such letters have perished or still moulder in attics and cellars, large numbers of such letters have been collected, and some selections published; these, of course, have been pre-selected with certain aspects in mind.¹⁴ Even the far vaster unpublished collections to be found in the archives are the result of almost arbitrary survival, selection, and deposit: no amount of trawling through the massive archival holdings will ever be able to provide any kind of comprehensive picture of mentalities and changing perceptions; there can, in short, be no 'inductive' method for writing about the changing subjectivities of this period. Nevertheless, key general issues and trends among certain groups of letter writers are very striking. It is difficult to ascertain precisely the extent to which they are representative. But the sheer prevalence of certain world views, reactions, and interpretative frameworks among ordinary soldiers is striking. It suggests, for all the differences in individual backgrounds and personalities, that there were certain common discourses which allowed soldiers and their friends and relatives at home to think about the war in certain ways, helping to construct notions of the self as part of a wider, often ethnically and culturally defined, community. Letters vary in terms of the degree of dissonance, distance, or internalization of dominant norms and values they express; the degrees of (generally rather unreflective) expression or surprised 'confirmation' of Nazi stereotypes; and the ways in which writers appeal to broader, quasi-philosophical considerations in seeking to overcome or deal with the challenges, discomforts, and fears of everyday life at war. On this evidence, the nazification of mentalities among a significant proportion of German adults in the preceding years had apparently run remarkably deep.

II. EARLY ATROCITIES

This was, right from the very start, a war like no previous war. It was not merely, as in all wars, a matter of soldiers fighting soldiers: it was, from the moment of the invasion of Poland in September 1939, a war against the whole Polish population, including civilians, who right from the start were construed as intrinsically dangerous, potential '*Freischarler*' (frequently translated into the quasi-French term, '*franc tireurs*' or sharpshooters, also roughly translatable as 'insurgents', 'guerrillas', or 'terrorists', but in the German usage of the time going way beyond the Anglophone meaning of these terms). Ignoring all notions of taking defeated soldiers captive, German orders of September 1939 announced that '*Freischarler*' were liable to an instant death sentence: '*Franc tireurs* are categorically subject to the death sentence.' (*Auf Freischärlererei steht grundsätzlich Todesstrafe.*)¹⁵ Further orders

¹⁴ See particularly Walther Bähr and Hans Bähr (eds.), *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten 1939–1945* (Tübingen and Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag, 1952); Ortwin Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz (eds.), *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe 1939–1945* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982); Walter Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum: Vernichtung. Das Judenbild in deutschen Soldatenbriefen 1939–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995).

¹⁵ Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz (henceforth GStPK), HA XVII Rep. 201e. Ost 4 Reg. Kattowitz Nr. 3, Einrichtung einer deutschen Verwaltung nach Besetzung Ostoberschlesiens durch

authorized the taking of prominent civilians as hostages, who were—again in contravention of the previous conventions of warfare—to be shot dead on the slightest of pretexts, thus effectively seeking to terrorize the population into acquiescence with the German invasion:

In order to combat any excesses on the part of the civilian population, prominent persons from among the civilian population can be arrested and held as hostages. The population is to be informed immediately that in the event of the slightest attack or act of sabotage against the troops the hostages will be shot dead.¹⁶

Civilians found or suspected of being in possession of weapons were to be shot dead instantly, without mercy:

Anyone found with a weapon about him . . . is to be shot dead on the spot. Any attempts at escape are to be ruthlessly prevented by use of firearms, whether or not the perpetrator is armed while trying to escape.¹⁷

Interestingly, anyone trying to escape from German force was, in their construction of the situation, in principle designated a '*Täter*', here translated as 'perpetrator', a wholly inappropriate term in the circumstances—but one which is indicative of the prevalent German view that all victims of their violent aggression were legitimate prey if they failed to give in to German domination.

It was not only those who appeared to be actively engaged in a struggle to defend their invaded homeland who were to be arrested and if necessary murdered on the spot. In a remarkably vague phrasing, the order was given that all the males of any particular village or town should be rounded up and locked away in a suitable place, without any reason whatsoever and whether or not they were in possession of weapons; and that anyone should be shot if they tried to resist or escape:

Under certain circumstances it can be necessary for the protection of the troops to hold the male population in a barn or other suitable place. Those held are to be guarded, and anyone trying to escape or to resist is to be shot.¹⁸

The photograph albums produced by ordinary soldiers, commemorating their time together during the invasion of Poland, contain horrifying scenes of barns burning, villages destroyed, and terrified civilians. In one such album, entitled 'For my comrade Franz D. in memory of the Polish campaign', photographs are adorned with captions such as 'On the march with hostages', 'Burning villages', 'A filthy Jew', and 'The Jews of Goworovo'. A series of photographs of scenes of utter devastation, with totally bombed-out houses and destruction are proudly labelled

deutsche Truppen—Anordnungen, Geschäftsverteilung und Stellenplan, Verwaltungsgliederung, Bd. 1 26. August – 20. September 1939. O.U. Kattowitz, 8.9.1939, Abschnittstagebefehl Nr. 2, Auszug aus dem Korpstagebuch Nr. 10, fol. 81.

¹⁶ GStPK, HA XVII Rep. 201e. Ost 4 Reg. Kattowitz Nr. 3, Grenzabschnittskommando 3, Gleiwitz, den 3.9.1939, 'Richtlinien für die Tätigkeit der Ortskommandaturen', fol. 99.

¹⁷ GStPK, HA XVII Rep. 201e. Ost 4 Reg. Kattowitz Nr. 3, 'Richtlinien für die Tätigkeit der Ortskommandaturen', fol. 100.

¹⁸ GStPK, HA XVII Rep. 201e. Ost 4 Reg. Kattowitz Nr. 3, 'Befehl über die Bekämpfung von bewaffneten Zivilpersonen!', fol. 55.

'The complete works of our dive bombers on the way to Warsaw', culminating in a further series over the caption 'Warsaw's suburb of Praga burning'.¹⁹ For ordinary soldiers, the use of violence against civilians had been unleashed with a vengeance. This approach to the rapidly defeated and ill-prepared Poland clearly prefigured the approach adopted in the campaign against Russia two years later.²⁰

The devastation of Polish villages and towns, taking of hostages, and wanton murder of anyone resisting arrest or incarceration went way beyond previously accepted rules of warfare. But acts of violence were also targeted specifically against Jewish civilians. Immediately following the invasion of Poland, atrocities were committed against those perceived as 'racially' inferior, whether or not they could (also) be plausibly construed as dangerous in a political or military sense. Somewhat overlooked by accounts which focus on the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen*, or Special Task Forces, during the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, there were already *Einsatzgruppen* active in Poland in the first weeks of the war.²¹ On some views the atrocities committed by these units, sometimes assisted by ethnic German 'self-defence' (*Selbst-Schutz*) units, already constituted the start of the 'war of extermination'.²² Lists of people who were held to be members of the Polish political elites and intelligentsia were compiled already in June 1939; on Heydrich's orders four *Einsatzgruppen* were established by early July, and two additional ones set up in early September.

In September and early October 1939, in an orgy of violence several thousand Jewish civilians in Poland were killed: Jewish men, women and children were burnt alive in their houses or shot 'while trying to escape'; and synagogues were burnt down in towns and villages by the *Einsatzgruppen*, who on occasion sought to pin the blame on local Polish 'insurgents' who were later also murdered as 'culprits'. In the small Polish-Silesian border town of Będzin, for example, on the night of 8 September 1939 some 200 or more Jews were burnt alive in the synagogue, or in the surrounding houses, or shot while trying to save themselves by plunging into the nearby river—an incident still etched in the memories of Jewish survivors and elderly local Poles some seventy years later.²³ While the selective terrorization of the Jewish population was perhaps to persuade them to flee out of areas to be

¹⁹ Feldpostsammlung Museum für Kommunikation (henceforth FMK), 3.2002.1325, Franz D., photographs numbered 83, 89, 101, 124, 131–8.

²⁰ Indeed, the description given by Omer Bartov of the treatment of 'partisans' and 'bandits' in Russia in 1941 could readily be transposed backwards to the Polish campaign of September 1939. See Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and war in the Third Reich*, Ch. 4, particularly pp. 89–90.

²¹ Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Jochen Böhrer, and Jürgen Matthäus, *Einsatzgruppen in Polen: Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008); Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm (eds.), *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981); Alexander Rossino, 'Nazi anti-Jewish policy during the Polish campaign: The case of the Einsatzgruppe von Woysch', *German Studies Review*, 24(1) (2001), 35–53.

²² Mallmann, Böhrer, and Matthäus, *Einsatzgruppen in Polen*, p. 15. Cf. also Alexander Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, ideology and atrocity* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), pp. 135–6, who suggests lines of continuity with the atrocities of the Great War and even the genocidal practices in Africa a decade earlier; but see the discussion of this in previous chapters.

²³ On the case of Będzin, see Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

incorporated by an expanded Reich—though in practice most Jews who initially fled eastwards found conditions no better elsewhere and soon returned—one of Hitler's principal aims at this time was the total destruction of the Polish elites, a goal he made quite clear to the leadership of the army in August, and which was discussed in detail by Himmler, Heydrich, and Best with the *Einsatzgruppen*. To this end, from the very start of the war Polish notables were rounded up, imprisoned, held as hostage, and in some instances murdered by members of these *Einsatzgruppen*, in cooperation with the army whose own orders were, as indicated, entirely in line with these aims.

Those primarily involved in leading positions at this early stage of proactive extreme violence were still what one might call 'self-mobilized' men. The biographical profiles of the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders reveal that the vast majority had been associated with the Free Corps movement after the Great War, and had already at that stage participated actively in violence on the German–Polish border, or in the Kapp putsch.²⁴ Around one-third had gained prior experience in warfare as members of the 'front generation'; around two-thirds were born in the first decade of the twentieth century, and were classic exemplars of the radical-right elements of the 'war-youth generation'. They had generally joined the NSDAP relatively early, either before or during 1933; many had academic qualifications, including doctorates; they had made their careers during the Third Reich with a degree of ideological commitment to the racial project, including working as police officers or civil servants at the forefront of driving racial policies.

In a context where there was clearly a general congruence of aims, army leaders were both well aware of and frequently provided the conditions for, but were also at times rather critical of, the radical violence of the *Einsatzgruppen*; the military also on occasion disapproved of the actions of the *Selbst-Schutz*. Yet they took no serious action against members of their own troops who participated in atrocities, and indeed often actively facilitated and participated in mass murders from the earliest days after the invasion of Poland; moreover, young soldiers, infused with ideological enthusiasm and no previous experience of warfare, seem to have been well-prepared for engaging in brutality sanctioned from above.²⁵ At the start, too, even with official encouragement and backing, the regular troops were somewhat uncertain of their role; but there seems to have been a relatively rapid development of ways of making disagreeable actions palatable, picking up on notions prevalent in the early weeks of the Great War. Fear of the activity of 'franc tireurs' or 'bandits'—people who looked like civilians and thus not legitimate military targets, but who might unexpectedly shoot at soldiers—was clearly high; and such fears were clearly encouraged, in order that German troops should respond mercilessly, casting aside

²⁴ See Mallmann, Böhler, and Matthäus, *Einsatzgruppen in Polen*, pp. 20 ff. for age profiles of *Einsatzgruppen*; pp. 42–5 for the more general biographical data.

²⁵ Hans Umbreit, 'Towards continental domination' in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. V, Pt 1, p. 57; Wette, *Wehrmacht*, pp. 104–7; Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1998), pp. 247–8; Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Bogdan Musiał (eds.), *Genesis des Genozids: Polen 1939–1941* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), p. 40.

any notion of protecting civilians, including women and children. As one soldier put it in a letter home, writing from East Prussia on 10 September:

The war is hard and the Poles are fighting very viciously. We have ourselves been shot at by guerrillas [*franc tireurs*, *Franktireurs*] and have finally come to the view that we have been too good-natured . . . The regular battle against the Polish army will probably soon be over, but the war against the gangs, which is no less bloody and is above all loathsome because it also often affects women and children here, will probably still go on for a while yet . . .²⁶

Not yet two weeks into the war, this soldier was clearly echoing a collective framework of perception that supposedly ‘legitimized’ what might otherwise have been seen as excess violence, going beyond conceptions of ‘regular’ warfare.

The army and the *Einsatzgruppen* often worked together to try to impose order through policies of terror and mass reprisals. *Einsatzgruppen* reports—which cannot always be trusted as accurate—include, for example, comments such as the following:

The shootings in Tschenstochau [Częstochowa, re-named by the Germans] on 4.9.1939 lasted into the late evening. On the part of the Wehrmacht [German army] we have to mourn for 9 dead and 40 injured. On top of this the Wehrmacht shot dead around 100 civilians. The Einsatzkommando 1 shot dead two franc tireurs who were caught in the act. The military command in Tschenstochau is very nervous. Even if it is a fact that the German troops are being shot at by civilians, even so it was not in the end possible to determine who shot at whom . . . Apparently it is not a matter of a concerted attack but rather a nervousness and a desire on the part of the troops to shoot, noticeable here as everywhere else. I am of the view that through ruthless intervention the franc tireur war will soon be brought to an end.²⁷

Within a matter of days, according to these reports, the mutual cooperation of *Wehrmacht* and *Einsatzgruppe* had ensured a ‘total pacification’ of the area: ‘Through the energetic, ruthless intervention of the Wehrmacht and the Einsatzkommando total peace has been brought to Tschenstochau.’²⁸ Yet there remained uncertainties and hesitations about the ‘legality’ of such an approach, at least as far as the paper trail of reporting was concerned. On 14 September 1939, one group found a way of making a mass shooting which was carried out as a reprisal measure for the death of a German appear almost like due legal process:

The murder commission that was set up to investigate the murder of the Major General of the Order Police, General Rüttig, has come to the following conclusions:
 . . . By order of the AOK [*Armeeoberkommando*, Army High Command] shootings are strictly forbidden as a reprisal for the death of Major General Rüttig. The AOK in

²⁶ Buchbender and Sterz (eds.), *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges*, letter from Private W.K., 10 Sep. 1939, p. 40.

²⁷ Bundesarchiv Berlin (henceforth BAB) R / 58 / 7001, ‘Meldung’ of Einsatzgruppe II, 6 Sep. 1939, fol. 6. The inaccuracy of some reports can be demonstrated in cases where other sources reveal a dramatic underestimation of the damage caused by an *Einsatzgruppe* and its subsequent unwillingness to be associated, on paper at least, with the high numbers of casualties and actual destruction it had caused.

²⁸ BAB R / 58 / 7001, ‘Meldung’ of Einsatzgruppe II, bis 8.9.1939 8:00 Uhr, fol. 18.

this instance therefore arrested all male civilians from the age of 18 in Konskie and the surrounding area, in total about 5,000 individuals, and had them brought to a camp in Konskie. In agreement with the commandant for the locality and the camp, the prisoners were thoroughly searched. Then 20 individuals, Jews, Poles, and soldiers wearing civilian clothing, who although not injured wore clothes with blood on them and were in possession of German money and therefore could be seen as initiators of the slaughter of German soldiers, were shot dead.²⁹

This was a transitional moment. Under peacetime circumstances, or under conditions of 'traditional' or 'regular' warfare, such indirect circumstantial evidence would hardly be considered sufficient to warrant an instant death penalty; and only a little later into the war, even this pretence at due legal process would be deemed unnecessary before carrying out mass 'reprisal' murders of people known to be entirely unconnected with an alleged offence. On 4 October 1939 Hitler effectively pronounced any 'excesses' as justified, amnestying anyone who might face disciplinary proceedings, and justifying the killings as appropriate responses to the behaviour of the Polish population who were resisting German conquest.

The notion of shooting 'partisans' or people 'while trying to escape' (*auf der Flucht erschossen*), and exercising 'collective retaliation', thus very soon became 'standard military practices', again well before the Russian campaign.³⁰ But interestingly, the responses of at least some 'ordinary soldiers' to the early activities of *Einsatzgruppen* were on occasion critical for a very different reason: they appear to have felt that those attacking defenceless civilians were not really proving anything at all by way of real courage, compared to those fighting against armed opponents.³¹ Similarly, ordinary soldiers on occasion appear to have felt some sympathy for those they saw as innocent victims of German military action. As one soldier put it on 2 October 1939, on entering the devastated ruins of Warsaw:

Yesterday we arrived in Warsaw, the saddest city in Europe... Misery in all its gruesome awfulness is nowhere as great as in this badly stricken heap of rubble. Our bombers and artillery have done their work too thoroughly... We often share our meagre rations because the misery of the children and women tears your heart-strings... That is the horror, the awfulness of the city...³²

Yet the initial shock of witnessing the effects of violence was, it seems, increasingly displaced by a blunting of reactions among some of those who were soldiers in the early stages of the war, even a brutalization.

Although much has been made of the fact that there were isolated protests on the part of the army at this stage, in contrast to the situation two years later in Russia, actually what is far more striking is the fact that such terror worried really very few people in the higher ranks of the military at the time. An exception was General Blaskowitz, an experienced veteran of the Great War and from October 1939

²⁹ BAB R / 58 / 7001, 'Meldung' of Einsatzgruppe II, EK II, 14.9.39, 8:00 Uhr, fol. 69.

³⁰ Cf. Rossino, *Hitler strikes Poland*, Ch. 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.

³² Buchbender and Sterz (eds.), *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges*, Soldat J.S., 2 Oct 1939, pp. 40–1.

commander-in-chief in the east (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost*). He repeatedly raised his voice in criticism of the levels of excessive brutality characterizing the war in the east. Even so, and with all due allowances for the situation and what it was that he 'could say' in this context, it is also notable that Blaskowitz' criticisms were not so much of the horrendous consequences for the victims but rather the implications of such actions for the troops who were actively involved in perpetrating acts which went, in his view, way beyond the 'normal rules of warfare':

The worst damage, however, that will be done to the German people by the current situation is the boundless brutalization and moral degeneration that will break out like the plague within a short space of time among this valuable resource, the German people. If people holding high office in the SS and the police demand acts of violence and brutality and openly praise such acts in public, then very soon only the violent will rule . . . There will be virtually no possibility of holding them in check; for they must consider themselves authorized by virtue of their office and feel they have a right to commit any atrocity.³³

For voicing his concerns—and indeed articulating what proved to be a highly prescient criticism—Blaskowitz reaped the wrath of Hitler and was relieved of his command in May 1940; but he soon found himself engaged in other fronts of the war in the west. The brutalities in the east continued; and, as Blaskowitz predicted, those prepared and willing to carry out acts of brutality rose to dominance in the new structures of power. But physical brutality was not the only form that violence could take.

III. THE ROUTINIZATION OF SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE

The *Einsatzgruppen* were wound up within a matter of weeks, as the rapid conquest of Poland was followed by the installation of civilian occupation regimes. Military force, and the atrocities associated with the invasion, were soon augmented by routine daily violence, as new administrative systems were established to rule over the conquered territories. The character of German occupation differed between the rump Polish state of the so-called General Government under the German Governor Hans Frank, and those areas that were incorporated within the expanded German Reich—the new provinces of Wartheland and Danzig-West Prussia, and the enlarged provinces of East Prussia and Upper Silesia. But the fact that the *Einsatzgruppen* were no longer marauding across the countryside setting fire to houses, villages, or synagogues did not mean the end of violence, brutality, and murder in these areas: it was simply institutionalized and routinized. Similarly, much attention has rightly been devoted to the programme of 'euthanasia' or murdering those whose lives were considered by the Nazis to be 'lives unworthy of living' (*lebensunwertes Leben*), a programme which officially ran from 1939 to

³³ Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, 'Vortragsnotiz für Vortrag Oberost beim Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres am 15.2. in Spala, 6.2.1940', repr. in *Topographie des Terrors: Eine Dokumentation*, 2nd edn (Berlin, 2009), p. 147.

1941. This should not however serve to deflect attention from the far wider system of brutality, exercised by far more people than the terror specialists of the *Einsatzgruppen* or the ‘medical’ specialists involved in murdering innocent people in institutions for the mentally ill and physically disabled.

The routine exercise of violence was a matter not only of continued acts of physical brutality committed by German troops, the SS, the Gestapo, or the regular police forces all the way through to local gendarmes; it was also, although in different and less obvious ways, a question of systemic violence carried by civilian administrators, employers, and ‘ethnic Germans’ out to make a profit from the exploitation and expropriation of Polish people—whether or not they were also Jewish, but especially if they were.³⁴ Individual acts of humiliation—jeering at Jews, pulling and cutting their beards—were frequent. ‘Recrimination measures’, or ‘reprisals’, were a standard means of imposing German domination and seeking to secure ‘effective administration’. Thus for example in June 1940, thirty-two entirely innocent Poles were shot in the small hamlet of Celiny, in eastern Upper Silesia, in reprisal for the death of one German gendarme; on ‘Bloody Wednesday’, at the end of July 1940, all the adult males of the nearby small town of Olkusz were forced to lie flat face down on the ground in public places, as they were jeered at, trodden on, and in some cases murdered by German troops, with especially brutal treatment meted out to the Jewish residents of the town, many of whom were later taken away by truck and did not return.³⁵

Such individual incidents of violence were complemented by forceful measures geared towards the attempted ‘Germanization’ of the incorporated territories. Already on 21 September 1939 Himmler had issued orders that the newly occupied territories should be made ‘free of Jews’. Jews should be collected into what were at this time called ‘concentration towns’ (*Konzentrationsstädte*) close to railways stations or railway lines, pending deportation into the General Government.³⁶ ‘Jewish Councils’ (*Judenräte*) were set up with whom the German authorities could liaise and through whom the systematic robbery and restraint of Jewish communities could be organized at one remove; many victims later only remembered (often with

³⁴ See e.g. Isabel Heinemann, ‘Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut’. *Die Rasse- und Siedlungspolitik der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003); Diemut Majer, ‘Non-Germans’ under the Third Reich: *The Nazi judicial and administrative system in Germany and occupied Eastern Europe with special regard to occupied Poland, 1939–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Bogdan Musiał, *Deutsche Zivilverwaltung und Judenverfolgung im Generalgouvernement. Eine Fallstudie zum Distrikt Lublin 1939–1944* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1999); Hans Umbreit, *Deutsche Militärverwaltungen. Die militärische Besetzung der Tschechoslowakei und Polens* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1977). Martin Broszat, *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1961), despite shortcomings in a variety of respects including evaluation of the role of the army, remains a classic and indeed path-breaking early study.

³⁵ For further details on these and related incidents, Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*; on Olkusz, Ernst Klee, Willi Drefen, and Volker Rieß (eds.), ‘Schöne Zeiten’. *Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1988).

³⁶ See e.g. Ingo Haar, ‘Biopolitische Differenzkonstruktionen als bevölkerungspolitisches Ordnungsinstrument in den Ostgauen: Raum- und Bevölkerungsplanung im Spannungsfeld zwischen regionaler Verankerung und zentralstaatlichem Planungsanspruch’ in Jürgen John, Horst Möller, and Thomas Schaarschmidt (eds.), *Die NS-Gaue. Regionale Mittelinstanzen im zentralistischen ‘Führerstaat’* (München: Oldenbourg, 2007).

hatred and contempt) their own ‘leaders’ who, they felt, had blocked attempts at resistance or escape, and failed to recognize the full parameters of a horrendous situation. In a desperate attempt to alleviate distress and ameliorate the conditions of their communities, Jewish leaders were effectively forced to collude in the systematic destruction of their own people; for some, this drove them beyond the limits of bearable despair, and they took their own lives even before the Germans disposed of them once they could no longer be of use.³⁷ Similarly, Jewish militia were deployed by the Germans to identify Jews for forced labour (and later for murder) and to maintain order, again at one remove from the German authorities overseeing and masterminding the apparatus of exploitation and brutality.

With variations according to area, civilian authorities made plans for the forced expulsion of Jews, and in many cases also Poles, from their homes, making way for the immigration of ‘ethnic Germans’. The fulfilment of this policy in practice, which took place in fits and starts over the following months, was the official responsibility of the civilian authorities. Ordinary civil servants were thus involved at all levels in the implementation of racial policy: carrying out census exercises and drawing up registration lists of those in different ‘racial’ categories; forcing Jews out of their homes; confiscating their possessions and means of livelihood; rounding them up for forced labour; ‘resettling’ them in poorer housing, restricted living areas, or ghettos; cutting rations; tightening regulations on where or when they could shop; forbidding the use of public transport; and subjecting them to highly restrictive regulations about curfew times, wearing armbands, even crossing the street at certain angles, and the appropriate manner of greeting Germans. Transgression of any of these regulations could incur severe penalties, including incarceration, deportation to a labour camp, or being shot dead on the spot. Horrendous living conditions and starvation rations, with Poles being given the basic minimum on which to live and work, and Jews even less, meant very high rates of mortality from malnutrition and disease, with variations depending on locality.

Conditions were worst in the enclosed ghettos such as Warsaw (in the General Government) or Łódź (in Wartheland), and somewhat less atrocious in the highly industrial region of eastern Upper Silesia, where Jews were initially deployed in industries crucial to military purposes, including the production of armaments and uniforms.³⁸ Conditions for forced labourers varied: while some were able to remain living with their families—though rarely in their own homes, from which they had been ousted to make way for ‘resettled’ Germans—the majority were, over time, squeezed into ghettos or snatched and deported to dedicated labour camps. Death by overwork, disease, and malnutrition was common. But whichever area is looked at, the policies of occupation caused immense suffering and in very many cases

³⁷ See e.g. Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

³⁸ A point emphasized in Sibylle Steinbacher, ‘Musterstadt Auschwitz’. The literature on ghettos is large and growing; see e.g. the edited selection of sources for one ghetto, Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried, and Jörg Riecke, *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz / Litzmannstadt* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007); and more generally Gustavo Corni, *Hitler’s Ghettos: Voices from a beleaguered society 1939–1944* (London: Arnold, 2002).

premature death, whether by shooting, burning, hanging, maltreatment, or starvation. The later development of a well-organized system of mass extermination by bringing large groups of victims to places where execution was more rapid and 'efficient' should not blind us to the inherently murderous quality of Nazi rule in the years before the dedicated extermination centres were established.

Increasing impoverishment was often accompanied by a growing sense of hopelessness and apathy; or, in order simply to survive, a resort to what were designated by the occupying authorities as 'criminal activities', including fiddling with ration cards and black-market dealing. Processes of degradation and their inevitable outcome—a population living in squalor, filth, and misery—did not simply exist, to be 'witnessed' by 'bystanders'; they were actively created by the Germans who were administering these territories. And those targets of oppression who sought to resist or contest their fate were liable to be subjected to rapid, brutal measures: arrested, beaten up, imprisoned, shot, hanged. Civilian administrators later often appealed to the fact that it was the Gestapo or SS who had meted out such physical brutality, and sought thereby to protest their own 'innocence'.³⁹ But historians should not take such self-exculpatory sentiments as an accurate summary of the Nazi system, with its myriad of newly imposed repressive and exploitative regulations, which ultimately crushed its victims mercilessly for any minor infringement or transgression. Nor are post-war legal systems, with their emphasis on individual acts of extreme physical violence, a very good guide to the real system of power and enforcement of ultimately murderous rule. Involvement in the imposition of systemic violence went far beyond individual acts of brutality.

The new civilian administrations set up in the newly occupied territories, unlike in some area of the 'Old Reich' (*Altreich*), not only worked hand in hand with the local NSDAP organizations but were frequently synonymous.⁴⁰ In the occupied and incorporated territories in particular it was a complete myth that the 'civil service' remained a somehow untainted and honourable occupation (somewhat on the lines of the myth of the 'clean *Wehrmacht*'), separate from the party, the SS and the Gestapo, who could be blamed for doing all the dirty work. The overlap between party and state in these areas was almost complete. Thus the state role of president of the Province of Upper Silesia, for example, was at the same time coterminous with the party role of *Gauleiter*; and the incumbents of these posts, first Josef Wagner then from 1941 Fritz Bracht, were determined to build up a model Nazi province under the motto 'Upper Silesia—the new Ruhr area'.⁴¹

And here it was that those members of the war-youth generation who were willing to be mobilized in service of the Nazi cause found unprecedented

³⁹ Cf. the various defence statements and testimonies in Ludwigsburg, discussed further in Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

⁴⁰ On the rather different situation in Württemberg, a rather distinctive area of the Old Reich (for many historical reasons) and where local functionaries could only hesitatingly be brought into line, retaining primary loyalties to relatives, friends and neighbours, see Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front*.

⁴¹ Ryszard Kaczmarek, 'Zwischen Altreich und Besatzungsgebiet. Der Gau Oberschlesien 1939/41–1945' in Jürgen John, Horst Möller, and Thomas Schaarschmidt (eds.), *Die NS-Gaue. Regionale Mittelinstanzen im zentralistischen 'Führerstaat'*, p. 352.

opportunities for very rapid promotion. The newly appointed district officials (*Landräte*) in the area of eastern Upper Silesia, a strip of land east of Katowice (Kattowitz) taken over beyond what had formerly been Prussian/German territory, were almost entirely young, keen, up-and-coming civil servants who were at the same time loyal party members. As many as ten of the eleven *Landräte* in this area, including by now Udo K., were born in the decade 1900–10, a pattern which was very typical for those holding leading positions in newly incorporated territories.⁴² Very typically, again including Udo K., many of them alternated periods of military service at the front with periods administering the politics of occupation; only a few were successful in attempts at gaining, for longer or shorter periods of time, the status of ‘indispensable’ (*uk*) on the home front, and with varying degrees of ambivalence at that.⁴³ These civilian officials were responsible for implementing the new racial hierarchy and the associated ‘resettlement’ of populations within their territories—moving Jews and Poles out, moving ‘ethnic Germans’ in—and for issuing the decrees and regulations which governed who could go where, when, and how: passing down and ensuring the enforcement of decrees to do with curfews, wearing of armbands with the Star of David, policing restricted access areas and prohibitions on using public transport, and cutting allotted rations and access to shops and services. They implemented the racial system on the ground.

Involvement in the racial system thus went way beyond the physical violence exercised by the *Einsatzgruppen*, the SS, the Gestapo, and the various police forces down to the level of the local gendarmes. And it was not limited to people in the civilian administration. Racial oppression and systemic violence also involved large numbers of German entrepreneurs who took over ‘Aryanized’ Jewish businesses, or who ran factories and firms using slave labour ‘bought’ from the SS. Indirectly, but no less wittingly, it also involved those who knowingly benefited from the ‘Aryanization’ of Jewish property, living in formerly Jewish houses and buying furniture, clothes, and other goods at knock-down prices from the inappropriately named German ‘trustees’ (*Treuhändler*). Any German benefiting from these ‘bargains’ and windfalls was well aware of their background, but arguably chose to notice only the personal benefits and advantages of this system, and not think too hard about those from whom the property had been taken.

Even for those Germans who were not settling in these areas, the conditions under which Jews were forced to live, whether in the newly created ghettos or in still ‘open’ areas of restricted residence, were no secret at this time. Soldiers passing through, civilians coming to do business, people visiting friends and family,

⁴² Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach, Regierung Kattowitz, 119/703, fols. 17–18, for the ages of *Landräte* in Ostoberschlesien. See also more generally, Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 36–50, and particularly pp. 38–9; and see also Lothar Kettenacker, ‘Die Chefs der Zivilverwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg’ in Dieter Rebentisch and Karl Teppe (eds.), *Verwaltung contra Menschenführung im Staat Hitlers. Studien zum politisch-administrativen System* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986), pp. 403–4, pointing out that the *Landräte* in the newly annexed province of Alsace were also all very young: most of them less than thirty-five years old, and only one aged sixty.

⁴³ See further Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

frequently commented on the horrendous state of the impoverished population, with generally little conscious or at least explicit registration of the fact that it was German conquest and German policies that had caused this degree of poverty and degradation, bringing into physical effect the previous metaphorical claim that 'the Jews' were a 'danger' to the 'healthy German racial community'. Rather, they seemed to interpret what they saw as evidence that Nazi propaganda had been right all along. As one soldier put it in a letter home on 12 August 1940:

This place [near Lublin] has around 16,000 inhabitants, of whom 14,000 are Jews. But real Jews, with beards and filthy, to be precise even worse than they are always described in *Der Stürmer* . . . The whole population is infested and filthy. You really can't imagine what one gets to see here. And this people of culture wanted to conquer Berlin!⁴⁴

The gulf between 'two worlds' which had been gradually created between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans through the peacetime years was thus apparently 'confirmed' with a vengeance by exposure to the horrendous state to which the Jews of Eastern Europe had been reduced even within the first few months of Nazi occupation. Moreover, those reacting in this way further betrayed the influence of Nazi propaganda in apparently thinking they were fighting a 'defensive war' against potentially dangerous enemies in the east. The reactions of Germans who witnessed these conditions appear to have been virtually untouched by the human tragedies. There was instead a widespread sense of distaste at having to live among 'creatures' whom they appear to have viewed in much the same way as animals about to go to the slaughterhouse, but with little evidence of any sense of common humanity. The fact that this was already a system which involved effective mass murder—deaths caused directly or indirectly by Nazi policies—seems to have escaped their attention.

Following Udo K.'s appointment as *Landrat* of Będzin in February 1940, Alexandra went in August with her husband to choose an appropriate house in which to live—in the event, the 'villa of the Jew Schein'—and, as she wrote to her mother, was not impressed by her new environment:

The town is incredibly hideous, wretched, dilapidated, dirty, I've never seen anything like it. The streets are teeming with grimy, ragged, disgusting Jews. There is hardly anyone not wearing white armbands [bearing the Jewish star], but even they are filthy. Some of the Jews talk German, everyone else Polish.⁴⁵

There seemed little evidence here of the 'humanist education' of the Augusta Schule days, and little conscious recognition that the all too visible impoverishment of a previously thriving and diverse Jewish community—including wealthy philanthropists such as the Scheins, in whose villa Alexandra and Udo were now to live—was directly due to the Nazi policies of seizing the housing, businesses, possessions, and livelihoods of the Jews. And as conditions worsened for those Jews subjected to

⁴⁴ Walter Manoschek (ed), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum: Vernichtung: Das Judenbild in deutschen Soldatenbriefen 1939–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995), 12.8.1940 Montag, Gefr. H.K., 3.Kp./Inf.Rgt.527, 298.Inf.Div., FPN 18 292D, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Letter from Alexandra to her mother, 28 August 1940, private family archive.

oppression, so the Germans became ever more willing to contemplate their 'removal' through 'resettlement' as a means of making these areas 'Jew free', and hence pleasanter for the remaining 'Aryan' population. This was a crucial precondition that made the 'Final Solution' eventually possible. The complicity of adults involved at this stage ranged from the passing 'witnesses', through the witting beneficiaries, to the willing functionaries of racist rule.

IV. IDEOLOGICAL WAR AND COLLECTIVE FRAMEWORKS OF INTERPRETATION

For all the ambivalence of Germans about going to war once again, the easy victories of the *'Blitzkrieg'* period, when the German army invaded and conquered vast swathes of Europe, from Poland in the east around through Denmark and Norway in the north to France in the west, allowed a sense of optimism to permeate even letters complaining about conditions at the front. For those serving under the relatively 'easy' conditions on the western front, the physical deprivations occasioned by living under military conditions were perhaps outweighed by the emotional deprivations of missing those at home. But even at this point, collective frameworks of interpretation and the notion of the self as part of a wider collectivity against an enemy (frequently caricatured and portrayed in the singular) helped to inform the sense of a social self as part of a national community.

Gerhard R. (born 1912), for example, was initially stationed in Western Europe, spending a considerable amount of time in Holland. Gerhard R. had a wife and young family at the time of his call up. His letters are full of love and concern for his wife and children, and memories of their times together; receiving a parcel of food reminds him of happy evenings at home; and, as he put it, 'There is always a beautiful memory, and a memory can keep you going for a long time.'⁴⁶ The dangers of warfare are treated relatively lightly, with a degree of distancing humour, a stereotyping of 'the enemy' in the singular ('Tommy'), and radically downplaying of the very real risks of warfare:

Well, Tommy has recently been hiding himself away like a mouse, it's time that he got a rap on the head again soon. Here in our area he has recently also caused a few little eggs to fall, so among the civilian population there were quite a few dead, I haven't heard of any soldiers yet. Well, soon there'll be real pressure on him again, so that should take away any desire on his part to engage in this sort of fun and games.⁴⁷

Even though the sentiments expressed here are likely to have been at least in part designed to reassure his wife, the confidence in German victory and the lack of any questioning of the broader project were relatively widespread at this time.

Moreover, once the victory over France was assured, many soldiers appear to have enjoyed their time as a form of tourism combined with licensed robbery. Even

⁴⁶ FMK, 3.2002.0990, Gerhard R., letter of 15 April 1942.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, letter of 30 April 1942.

young women seem to have gone along with the military in much this spirit, as evidenced by a rare sequence of letters. A school class of thirteen women from Chemnitz born in the last years of the Great War stayed in touch with each other after leaving school, and continued writing over a span of more than sixty years, in a series stretching from 1943 to 2004, including also many photos of their developments and exploits. One of these, Gretel, volunteered for the German Labour Front, and was sent to France with the *Wehrmacht*; her letters back to her school friends register a degree of apprehension at her new-found independence and need to make her way among predominantly male company, but also a great sense of excitement at and enjoyment of this unexpected foreign travel as a young woman.⁴⁸ The enjoyment by German soldiers of the riches of plunder following the invasion of France is evident too from other contemporary sources.⁴⁹ But matters changed once Hitler's attention turned eastwards; and letters to and from the eastern front betray an extraordinarily widespread internalization of official propaganda.

The announcement of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, after nearly two years in which the Hitler–Stalin pact had seemed to obviate any such possibility, was greeted in many quarters with a degree of surprise; and yet the official theory of an honourable and indeed 'defensive' or 'pre-emptive war' was widely prevalent. As one young soldier, Walter E., put it in a letter home:

You will probably have been astonished when the news came, war with Russia. It was to be foreseen, and it was something that had to be. What we have seen up to now was always one and the same thing, Russia and England want to annihilate Germany. But the Führer got in before them.⁵⁰

Within a matter of weeks, the parents of this particular 24-year old had to post his death notice, according to which: 'In faithful fulfilment of his duty [Walter] gave his young life for Führer, nation [*Volk*] and Fatherland in the fight against Bolshevism.'⁵¹ Solace was to be sought by relativizing the worth of the individual life in relation to the national ethnic collective and its ideologically driven struggles—an attempt which arguably increasingly wore thin as the war progressed.

Initially at least, a spirit of what might be called joyous apprehension at finally tackling the 'real enemy' is evident. Sergeant (*Feldwebel*) Hans M., for example, rhetorically asked his wife 'Well, what do you say about our new enemy?' and reminded her that he had already said, on his last leave at home, 'that in the long term there's no way of maintaining friendly relations with the Bolsheviks. On top of that, there are still far too many Jews there.'⁵² On the same day, Kurt U. wrote home that:

⁴⁸ Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Stuttgart, 'Klassenbriefe', Vol. I, 30.5.43–6.10.53, fols. 40–6.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2005); but see also Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The making and breaking of the Nazi economy* (London: Penguin, 2007).

⁵⁰ Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Stuttgart, Sammlung Sterz (henceforth BfZ, SSt), O'Gefr. Walter E., 28816 E, 8.Kp./Inf.Rgt.499, 268.Inf.Div., 9 Jul. 1941.

⁵¹ BfZ, SSt, O'Gefr. Walter E., 28816 E, 8.Kp./Inf.Rgt.499, 268.Inf.Div., death notice, Heidelberg, 29 Aug. 1941.

⁵² BfZ, SSt, Fw. Hans M., 28193 B, 9.Kp./Inf.Reg.226, 79.Inf.Div., Sunday 22 Jul. 1941.

Early today thank God we finally got going against our deadly enemy, Bolshevism. I felt like a weight had been lifted from my heart. Finally this uncertainty has come to an end and we know what we are about.⁵³

Soldiers seem to have felt it relevant to rehearse in some detail in their letters home what they had obviously taken from propagandistic representations of the 'preventive war', although writers portrayed such interpretations as being entirely their own:

But who would have thought that we would now be fighting against the Bolsheviks? The whole thing was kept fabulously secret! But when I think about it properly, then the Führer has yet again done the best thing he could have done . . . And now it's all stations go in the east, and it's definitely a good thing that this is so. Because in the shorter or longer term it would have come to this clash . . . Now Jewry has declared war on us all along the line, from one extreme to the other, from the plutocrats in London and New York to the Bolsheviks. All that is Jewish stands together in one front against us. The Marxists are fighting shoulder to shoulder with High Finance—just like in Germany before 1933 . . . But we managed to get a nose-length ahead of the Reds by our preventive attack . . .

If you might perhaps be thinking that we've all broken out into cheering enthusiasm, then that would be mistaken. We ourselves know exactly what's at stake, and that this is one of the most decisive armed combats, yes if it turns out victorious [for us], the most decisive.⁵⁴

In the event, for all the ideological posturing and in retrospect extraordinary statements in these letters, betraying deep internalization of Nazi world views in some quarters, no one really knew exactly what they were about to face. What from this point on developed in the east proved virtually beyond imagining, and for many of these soldiers it was almost beyond description too.

At this stage, even the smaller everyday difficulties of war, whether at home or at the front, were widely put into a broader, heavily ideological perspective. Appeals to a notion of a community above the self, and constructions of a 'real soldier' as one who would defend the Fatherland in order to return to peacetime work could help people in facing the new challenges. As Annaliese N., in a letter of letter of 22 June 1941, wrote to her husband:

When I turned on the radio this morning and then, totally without any idea [this would happen], heard the Führer's proclamation, I was at first quite speechless . . . Today I have just realized in wonderment the greatness of his diplomacy . . . And if you stop to think about it, you feel quite small. What is our little bit of suffering, our cares and the tiny privations that arise from the war economy. But that's the way we are, actually we don't really think about things enough, and then we get so caught up by personal matters and so we just live without really thinking. In any event, the struggle will likely be hard, and yet many will breathe more easily after the long weeks of waiting, for a real soldier yearns, after all, for battle and for victory, in order then to be able to turn again to his [peacetime] work . . .⁵⁵

⁵³ BfZ, SSr, Sold. Kurt U., 31040, 1.San.Kp.91, 6.Geb.Div., Sunday 22 Jun. 1941.

⁵⁴ BfZ, SSr, Uffz. Alfred N., L 33281, Fliegerhorst Lyon, 23 Jun. 1941.

⁵⁵ BfZ, SSr, Annaliese N., Haisberge / Porta, 22 Jun. 1941.

Anneliese N. clearly felt she had to rise beyond her personal experiences, the worries and cares of her own daily life, and appropriate a broader current framework of interpretation to deal with the new developments. These interpretive frameworks included both notions of a 'hard struggle' and a decent soldier: a particular construction of a social self, not purely as an individual following personal concerns but one committed to and part of a wider national community; and one, moreover, which was at heart a peace-loving self, fighting only temporarily in order to create the conditions for a peaceful life.

Similar sentiments placing the community above the individual are to be found in the framework appropriated by Private Wilhelm H.:

today a great struggle began, of great world historical significance, against a traitor to Germany, a bitter enemy of people bent on building for the future . . . And only the Führer and his closest followers, who always have trust in him and will give their last for him, have taken this danger from us, and just in time. This is why I find it ever harder to understand why there are still German people who do not have blind trust in this Führer, who either can't or won't believe in him, if not absolutely everything is going just as they imagined or as they would like from their own egocentric perspective [*ichsüchtigen Standpunkt*].⁵⁶

While it is clear that letters to and from the field were censored, such that soldiers were hardly likely to write critical comments, it was certainly not necessary from the censorship point of view to write in these overwhelmingly enthusiastic, indeed quasi-religious, terms.⁵⁷

Letters such as these can be seen not (or not only) as supposed evidence of political attitudes or degrees of faith in the *Führer*; they betray rather (or also) a real and very personal urgency in trying to 'make sense' of what people were being mobilized to do, and to make sense of this mobilization in ways with which individuals could live, even by which they could feel enthusiastic. This might otherwise have seemed an appalling way to spend what, in purely personal terms as young adults, would potentially have been seen under 'normal' peacetime circumstances as the 'best years of one's life'. Commitment to a wider sense of community and purpose was arguably the only way to deal with the deprivations of the self; or rather, constructions of the self at this point had repeatedly to emphasize the self as part of this wider community, and not as an individual entitled to the happiness of the privacy of family and work, now denounced or demoted as 'self-serving'. The private idyll had to be postponed until after the 'final victory' (*Endsieg*). External mobilization, in short, was for at least some of these soldiers and their families accompanied by an astonishing reflection of official frameworks of interpretation in personal strategies of self-mobilization along the prescribed lines.

⁵⁶ BfZ, SSr, Gefr. Wilhelm H., 13063, Stab/Bau-Btl.46, Monday 23 Jun. 1941.

⁵⁷ To point to elements arguably appropriated from and certainly having something in common with the imagery and practices of religious faith communities does not also necessarily entail buying into broader interpretations of Nazism as a 'political religion', a topic that has intermittently been the subject of much debate among historians; see e.g. Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A new history* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

Thus what is striking in a large number of letters following the invasion of the Soviet Union in the early summer of 1941 is the way in which soldiers were imbued with an ideological outlook betraying both the influence of recent Nazi propaganda and ideological training, and of longer-term notions of being a 'decent soldier' doing one's 'duty', drawing on pre-Nazi traditions—on which of course Hitler had also drawn in gaining a following for the Nazi cause. Another soldier justified his return to his division precisely in terms of a triple, and to him apparently mutually confirming, set of allotted collective self-identifications:

I have reported back to my Division . . . Now, I will do everything I can to make it [in time] for the attack. Ultimately, as a soldier, Nazi and East Prussian I am trebly bound to fight against the Reds.⁵⁸

A young soldier, Erwin Z., wrote home to his mother: 'You write that you are very proud of me, I'm very glad about that but I am doing no more than my duty as a German youth, helping to protect the homeland [*Heimat*].'⁵⁹ Here, any justification for his mother's pride in her son as an individual was explicitly rejected in terms of his internalized sense of doing nothing more than his 'duty' as a 'German youth' helping to 'defend' his 'homeland'.

An appeal to selected historical traditions could also help in making the connections between the *Führer* and the self. As Lance Corporal Gerhard S. put it in a letter of 22 June 1941:

Recently in a 46° degree heat we had a 20 km march . . . But I am nevertheless still the old marcher. It should never be possible to say that the 'boys' are the first to hit the wall [*schlapp machen*, reach the point of total exhaustion]. I'm doing my duty as a decent soldier. May the little part that I play do its bit for Germany's victory in the war. Look, right now it is ever more a matter of being hard with oneself. Personal wishes have to be suppressed. We have gradually to become ever more like the front soldiers of 1918. I will gladly give everything for our people, for in these fateful times this is our highest and purest experience . . .

I believe in our German people, because in these hours of difficulty it shows itself to be so powerful and radiant. The spirit of freedom of 1813 is blowing through the German lands. 'And if you do not venture your own life, you will never have gained it for yourself' [quotation from Friedrich Schiller, 1797].⁶⁰

Nazi emphases on 'hardness' are here tacked lightly on to appeals to long-standing German military experiences and traditions, with successful wars of 'liberation' and unacceptable defeats coming together with traditions of German high culture in the new campaign against the east.

At the most basic physical level, the campaign in the east was from the outset far harder than that in the west. Soldiers needed every shred of ideological commitment they could muster simply to keep going. Letters contain innumerable

⁵⁸ BfZ, SSt, Lt. Curt J., Höh.Kdo.XXXII, 23 Jun. 1941.

⁵⁹ BfZ, SSt, O'Gefr. Erwin Z., 07 226 C, 10.Kp./Inf.Rgr.447, 137 Inf.Div., 19 Jul. 1941.

⁶⁰ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Gerhard S., 38002, 1.Kp./Inf.Div.Nachr.Ab.198, 98.Inf.Div., Sunday 22 Jun. 1941.

complaints about heat and dust and thirst and mosquitoes. As one soldier put it in a letter home of 8 July 1941:

You can hardly imagine how much we are sweating. As wet as if we had just been pulled out of the water. Crazy! And on top of that, this dust! We look as black as niggers, or better, as stripy as zebras, since the sweat runs down our faces in broad streams and slowly makes wave marks on our hands.⁶¹

And as another soldier put it in his diary: 'Marching on through Ostrog. Indescribable pictures. Houses destroyed, barren and deserted, everywhere the smell of burning and corpses . . . The numbers of dead can't even be imagined.'⁶² But even in face of basic discomforts, belief in the *Führer* seemed not merely to survive, but to provide some form of comfort or support, as another letter suggested:

Amongst much dust and much heat and much thirst and many mosquitoes Stalin's pupils are retreating . . . Again and again it is something unfathomable and powerful—this faith in the *Führer* in the midst of all this deprivation and exertion . . .⁶³

Everything could be thrown in together—the physical discomforts and the significance of the ideological fight—as illustrated by a letter from Paul B:

It is a battle against all the elements that the Asiatic peoples, Jewry, Bolshevism etc. can throw up. And we can thank the *Führer* and the German soldiers for the fact that the Heimat and Europe have been spared these. And then the battle against the mosquitoes. Swarms beyond counting and huge specimens descend on us, the beasts can get through anything, even gloves on your fingers and a turban on your head, and all of this in this extreme heat. But we keep on going: forwards, into battle, to victory.⁶⁴

In this state of physical distress and exhaustion, constantly struggling with heat and dust, and plagued by mosquitoes, young German males marched into terrain where they would be mobilized for mass murder in ways for which they were, to a startling degree, already ideologically softened up.

As they travelled further east, for many soldiers a sense of self as part of a supposedly superior national-ethnic community was constantly reaffirmed by 'confirmation' of the 'primitivity' of the 'inferior' peoples about whom they had previously heard but were now encountering personally for the first time. Quasi-anthropological travelogues begin to pervade soldiers' accounts:

The mosquitoes that have already made these woods famous and notorious since the World War were the most annoying thing . . . The image of war is always the same, piteous yet all the same always overpowering; burning villages, churned up streets, people chased away, cattle without masters, dust, smoke, gunfire . . . Small low wooden houses along long village-like streets. The people meeting us in the villages ragged, filthy, bare-footed, the women dressed colourfully, headscarves and blouses . . .⁶⁵

⁶¹ BfZ, SSt, Sold. Manfred V., 02544, 3.Kp./Pz.Jäg.Abt.32, 32. Inf.Div., 8 Jul. 1941.

⁶² BfZ, SSt, Tagebuch, Gefr. G., 13517 A, Stab III/Art.Reg.119, 11.Pz.Div., 2 Jul. 1941.

⁶³ BfZ, SSt, Mj. Hans Sch., 33691, Stab/Pi.Btl.652, 24 Jun. 1941.

⁶⁴ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Paul B., L 46 281, Flak-Sondergeräte-Werkst.Zug 13., 16 Jul. 1941.

⁶⁵ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Heinrich V., 07405, Stab/Beob.Abt.9, 23 Jun. 1941.

Such observations of ill-clad, dirty, bare-foot and hence clearly ‘inferior’ peoples inevitably shored up notions of the supposed cultural superiority of the Germans. As Private Paul H. expressed it: ‘We could never in our lives manage to get as dirty as the Russians are, we would have to live all over again in order to catch up on that front.’⁶⁶

In the early weeks following the invasion of the Soviet Union, there was apparent confirmation of Goebbels’ propaganda about the ‘Soviet paradise’, and a sense of German superiority as a ‘people of culture’ (*Kulturvolk*) in contrast to ‘Asiatic primitivity’. As one soldier put it: ‘Finally we are in the Soviet paradise... It looks dismal here, the people are impoverished and covered in dirt. The roads here are indescribable, it’s impossible to write about, you can’t even talk about it.’⁶⁷ Or in the words of another: ‘Ruins of churches, . . . ragged, listless people, filth and decay everywhere, a nice paradise. We can thank our dear God that we live in Germany.’⁶⁸ Such views remained closely linked to continuing notions of a ‘defensive’ or ‘preventive’ war: an essentially pre-emptive war against what the Russians and ‘Jews’ would, it was assumed, have done to Germany if Hitler had not chosen the right time to take action in order to ‘prevent’ it.

This interpretation was furthermore echoed back through letters from those at home. Similar views were expressed by people who were clearly influenced by the *Wochenschau* newsreels and Nazi-dominated newspaper reports, and had no personal experience of any such encounters, as expressed for example in a letter from Frau W., resident in Hamburg, on 6 July 1941:

Isn’t it all ghastly, what they are experiencing in the east? The newspaper reports made me feel quite sick, these aren’t people any more, but beasts. And they want to bring culture and civilization to Europe? What would it have been like if they had invaded us? I believe we would really have had an experience then. Well, thank God the Führer went on the attack first . . .⁶⁹

But soldiers often felt they were experiencing ‘more’ than mere propaganda, and that those at home could not really imagine what it was, in their interpretation of their perceptions, ‘really’ like. Their attempts to deal with new experiences were sometimes faltering.

It is hard to gauge whether, on occasion, soldiers really held to any coherent framework of interpretation; sometimes it appears that the almost overwhelming impressions they gained on their travel to the east were too much for them to describe. As Emil E. put it: ‘But nevertheless there are still a great many incidents [*Zwischenfälle*], it’s simply beyond description. Later, if we get together again sometime in a fit state, [I’ll tell you] the details.’⁷⁰ But soldiers clearly clutched at any attempt to make sense of what they were witnessing—and to make sense in a way that would also seem to justify their own actions. Letters often included a not

⁶⁶ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Paul H., 21663, 12.Kp./Geb.Jäg.Rgt.98, 1.Geb.Div., 23 Jun. 1941.

⁶⁷ BfZ, SSt, Sold. Siegfried Sch., 02 466 E, 4.Kp./Inf.Rgt.34, 35.Inf.Div., Monday 14 Jul. 1941.

⁶⁸ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Paul Sch., 21 046, Bäck.Kp.54, 1.Geb.Div., 13 Jul. 1941, 19 Jul. 1941.

⁶⁹ BfZ, SSt, Frau W., Hamburg, 6 Jul. 1941.

⁷⁰ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Emil E., 37 664 C, 2.Kp./Ldsschtz.Btl.874, 14 Jul. 1941.

entirely logical leap to reiteration of faith in the *Führer* and the 'preventive' war, as in the following letter, first describing the Warsaw ghetto:

We drive through the disease-ridden Jewish quarter, fenced off with barbed wire, the state of this area and its inhabitants is beyond description . . . As we were driving by we saw a man collapse without any obvious cause, it was probably hunger that caused the collapse, since every day a number of this rabble [*Gesinde*] die of starvation. A few are still well dressed in pre-war clothing, most are shrouded in sacks and rags, a frightful picture of hunger and misery. Children and women run after us crying 'bread, bread'.⁷¹

Despite traces of racist terminology here (*'Gesindel'* is a pejorative term that can also be translated as trash, riff-raff, or vermin), the letter writer is clearly shocked by these scenes. He even implicitly registers that the rags in which the Jews are dressed are a product of wartime conditions, since some people still provide evidence of a pre-war life in which they were well-dressed. Yet he fails to reach the obvious conclusion that the current situation is the result of Nazi maltreatment of the Jewish population in the ghetto; and he arrives at safer ideological territory later on in the letter, when he finally manages to draw more securely on prevalent Nazi discourse in the description of his subsequent experiences:

Our first destination was Siedlce, a medium-sized town . . . 80% of the population are Jews, the appearance of the whole town correspondingly [awful] . . . the houses ooze with dirt and decay . . . Then we reached somewhere close to the Russian border . . . 52 Russian and 31 Polish snipers were shot dead here yesterday . . . So yet again the *Führer* has struck at precisely the right moment.⁷²

Here, the filthy appearance of the town can readily be put down to the high percentage of the Jewish population, with no apparent shift from pre-war to current conditions; and the onset of 'real' warfare, with the shooting dead of some eighty-three snipers, can be slotted without further problems into the concept of the *Führer's* pre-emptive strike.

For all the influence of propaganda and prior ideological training, soldiers were on occasion aware of discrepancies between what they were now witnessing, and what they had expected—certainly what they assumed those still at home would be imagining, based on war reports. As one soldier put it:

All around us is war and horror, struggle and sacrifice. The newspaper will describe the victory more easily than the experience of it is really like. Later we will be in the same position as many from the other Great War. Only we know what happened!—But loyalty remains!—⁷³

Soldiers often registered both a 'recognition' of Nazi stereotypes, and at the same time a degree of shock about what they were seeing, as well as a sense that all was not being accurately reported home. The dissonance between perceptions cast in

⁷¹ BfZ, SSt, Uffz. Heinrich Z., 07794, Stab/Heeres-San.Abt.601, 30 Jun. 1941.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ BfZ, SSt, Gefr. Heinz Sch., 20 158, Pi.Rgts.Stab 514 z.b.V., Sunday, 13 Jul. 1941.

the terms of ideological stereotypes, and more immediate personal reactions of revulsion at scenes of horror, was often difficult to convey, particularly when aware of the very different images being screened at home. In the words of Manfred V.:

In the little town here live almost exclusively Jews. Revolting people; typical caftan Jews; they simply talk too much with their hands as well as their mouths . . . One sees frightful and terrible scenes. But this can never be written about in letters; it can hardly be captured in words. It's just a good thing that you don't get to see such scenes in the newsreel. Many a young man would lose all desire to go to war.⁷⁴

However difficult this was to describe, the reality or prospect of atrocities against Jews could nevertheless still be twisted and incorporated into the wider version of the 'defensive war', as another soldier, Christoph B., intimated:

Now I've already been here on Russian soil for two days . . . In the towns the population generally consists of 50–80% Jews. This gives you an idea of what the members of the chosen people are like. The Jews are also the ones who led the way in committing atrocities against Ukrainians. And not a few German soldiers have fallen prey to the deviousness of these filthy rats. We Germans therefore have no reason to go about treating these creatures with any kind of consideration. For this reason they are lower than dogs as far as we are concerned. For us soldiers this is taken for granted.⁷⁵

Again, the appeal to the self as part of a wider collective—'we Germans' and 'us soldiers'—as well as explicit repetition of the allegedly reasonable grounds for severe maltreatment of those no longer considered even to be human beings, are used to assist this individual in coping with what it is he is being mobilized to do, and in trying to explain it to those back home.

One letter more or less summed up the entire gamut of topoi evident across a wide range of letters to and from the front. It is worth quoting in full, for the way in which it configures these various elements into one relatively coherent whole, and stands for a dominant world view which, on this evidence, was not only a matter of propagandistic pronouncements. To write a private letter home in this way, going well beyond the 'individual' messages of greetings and cares for family members, suggests that the official interpretive framework was apparently internalized to a high degree in some quarters, or at least learnt and rehearsed sufficiently to explain actions which the soldier was being constrained to engage in. These sorts of dissonant rationalizations are found repeatedly in letters home, and appear to have been widely prevalent among collectively informed subjectivities and constructions of the social self at the time. On Thursday 10 July 1941, a little over two weeks into the Russian campaign, Heinz B. wrote home:

One thing we know for certain, particularly we soldiers, and that is the absolute fact and certainty that we are heading towards a great and glorious victory, one that will outshine all that has gone before in its greatness, achievements and sacrifice. And being able to be a small cog in the great machine helps us to forget a lot and relieve the pain.

⁷⁴ BfZ, SSt, Sold. Manfred V., 02544, 3.Kp./Pz.Jäg. Abt.32, 32. Inf.Div., 2 Jul. 1941.

⁷⁵ BfZ, SS, St'Fw. Christoph B., L34215, Trsp. Kol.d.Lw.9/VII, 7 Jul. 1941.

For each day that breaks afresh always has something new to show us, partly human, partly cultural, and one thing always stands out large and clear, how endlessly proud and joyful we can be that we are Germans and that our Heimat is called Germany. Only we can so precisely confirm anew, every day, that there are many countries and peoples with culture and education, but that there is only one German people and that this is many classes higher than anything else in the world. Every German, even the poorest, has it a hundred times better, yes, he lives magnificently in comparison to the lower cultures and lives of other peoples. When we come eventually to take off our uniform, then we'll have a life before us that we know how to treasure, however stormy the times ahead may be. But the German people has an enormous indebtedness towards our Führer, since if these beasts who are our enemies here had come to Germany, there would have been murder on a scale the world has not yet seen. If countless thousands of their own inhabitants are already being murdered by the Soviets, and Ukrainians, a people without any defence, are being brutally mutilated and killed, how would they have even begun to deal with the Germans? What we have seen can't be described by any newspaper. It borders on the unbelievable, even the Middle Ages can't compete with what has happened here. And even if in Germany you read the *Stürmer* and see the pictures, that is only a tiny glimpse of what we are seeing here and of what Jews are committing here by way of crimes. Believe me, even the most sensationalist reports in the newspapers convey only a fraction of what is going on here.⁷⁶

In this one long passage, in which Heinz B. does not even use the first person voice in the singular but rather speaks in the plural throughout, the entire set of collective representations are present. For all the heaping of guilt for atrocities on the Soviets, and hence reiterating the significance of the allegedly defensive war, this is not least an extraordinary testimony to the power which could, even if only among a minority, be exercised by the dominant mentalities of the time.⁷⁷ However much others may have managed to retain some sense of individuality and even internal distance from the regime, clearly among many soldiers the only way to deal with the horrendous scenes they were not merely witnessing, but in which they were also actively participating, was to engage in explicit reiteration of the received views and the collective identities as soldiers and Germans that appeared to legitimize this venture.

There were exceptions: how atypical these were we cannot know. One such voice is that of Siegbert Stehmann, a theologian and poet whose letters to his wife are full of a tenderness, thoughtfulness, and a sense of utter isolation.⁷⁸ It is clear that endless exposure to violence had a numbing effect on Stehmann:

We ourselves are staggering with tiredness, hunger and exhaustion, a little heap of soldiers against a mighty enemy. The air is filled with the repulsive sweet smell of the rotting corpses which lie on the roads. It is gruesome. The only strange thing is how

⁷⁶ BfZ, SSt, Uffz. Heinz B., 29 524 C, 11. Btr./Art.Rgt.125, 125.Inf.Div., 10 Jul. 1941.

⁷⁷ As ever, it is not possible to make statements on percentages or the degrees to which any testimony is 'representative'.

⁷⁸ Siegbert Stehmann, *Die Bitternis verschweigen wir. Feldpostbriefe 1940–1945* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1992). See also Konrad Jarausch and Klaus Jochen Arnold (eds.), *Das stille Sterben . . . Feldpostbriefe von Konrad Jarausch aus Polen und Russland 1939–1942* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008).

one can look at this all without being touched by it. Yesterday at midnight I sat for a couple of minutes on the side of the road in order to rest, next to a dead Russian, and ate up my last piece of bread. The image of war here is how it is depicted in Goya's 'Horrors of War'.⁷⁹

But there is no evidence in Stehmann's letters of either the 'brutalization' that often accompanied involvement in violence on the eastern front, nor of a sense of 'comradeship' (*Kameradschaft*) that was alleged to exist among soldiers sharing a common fate. As he ruminated in late August 1941:

In these days of late summer I feel more alone than ever before. Heavy personal disappointments and bitterness, repeatedly poisoned by the troop of those united in quiet, silently fulfilled duty; personal misunderstandings, from which I suffer more than from the fact of war, lead me to yearn dreadfully for a return to the realm of orderliness, thoughts, love and friendship. Despite sobering experiences, hearts are fundamentally on idle. Egoism and thoughtlessness are growing in strange contrast to the natural recognition of the truly essential, a recognition that everyone should have in a state of emergency.⁸⁰

A week later, Stehmann continued:

Clouds of grief are hanging over tens of thousands. The pace of war has grown from month to month and it has become lonely around those who see such a fate from the inside, yes, who are destined to participate in it with their lives. I sense this in myself to a frightening degree. One lives totally isolated, even as a comrade who is in a relationship of comradeship. Existence would no longer be existence without this cloak of isolation, which provides protection against the floods dragging you down. Within this however is the connection with values, thoughts, love, friendship. Within this I have unison with you, who would otherwise become an almost foreign image of memory. Within this the spirit thinks, dreams and creates, as though that still had any sense. Yes, it does probably have sense, hidden, muted, and one day a new world will arise from it. But perhaps that belongs more in the realm of fantasy and poetic imagination than in the realm of reality. Let God decide.⁸¹

Like so many of his compatriots, Stehmann—who bore no responsibility at all for this war or the way it was carried out—did not survive to reflect on his experiences later, or to help bring up the son whom he never knew. He died in January 1945. Even if Stehmann was far from typical, and indeed his sense of isolation was rooted precisely in the capacity of the majority of his comrades to go along with the prevailing tide, it is important that voices such as his should also be heard.

⁷⁹ Stehmann, *Die Bitternis verschweigen wir*, entry of 23 Jul. 1941, p. 116. The original Goya title is generally translated as 'The Disasters of War', but this does not accurately convey the flavour of the German term '*Schrecknisse*' used by Stehmann in this context.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, entry of 24 Aug. 1941, p. 123. On the notion of '*Kameradschaft*' more generally, see Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2006); and on the question of 'brutalization' see also Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German army and Soviet partisans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁸¹ Stehmann, *Die Bitternis verschweigen wir*, entry of 1 Sep. 1941, p. 126.

Many letters provide only snapshots or moments in time; we know little or nothing about the longer-term developments of an individual's views and attitudes. But some sequences do allow insights into the ways in which people of different ages developed and changed with their experiences through the war. And they suggest that patterns were not entirely dissimilar across the older age groups, although there were differences in perceptions between those older soldiers who were already family men, and younger ones, members of the 'first Hitler Youth generation', who were often both highly influenced by the conditions of their upbringing and had not as yet made long-term commitments with respect to marriage partners or children.

Once Gerhard R., who had begun to come to terms with military life on the western front, was moved to the east, the tone of the letters shifts distinctly, and concern about family is but one theme among many.⁸² For one thing, the physical discomforts were now much greater:

for the first time in 35 hours we have a period of rest and now would like to sleep, but the heat and the flies do not allow it . . . The dust and ever more dust is the same, day and night . . . When you get out of the carriage you look like a chimney sweep and then on top of that no water to wash with, barely any for cooking or drinking.⁸³

Nor was the landscape of much solace, although the Germans themselves were doing little to improve matters:

Otherwise the area here is everywhere equally barren, no trees, no shrubs far and wide. For kilometres not a single human habitation . . . Well, when we finally get to Stalin-grad, we'll get to see something of culture again, since that is a big city with more than a million inhabitants. That is, if it hasn't all been burnt down. Since it has been burning now for several days. We can observe it well from here, by day the gigantic clouds of smoke and by night the fiery glow that can be seen from far away.⁸⁴

Altogether, Gerhard R. was only now beginning to realize quite how good conditions had been on the western front, by comparison:

those were also different and I think better times. Yes, if I think back on the time in Holland or even in Belgium, then I realize for the first time really how good we still had it then despite all, and we already thought things were bad. Today I can understand already why those comrades who came from the east looked a little askance at the soldiers who were stationed in the west, you get tempted into this view yourself now and then. At the same time it is of course clear to me that even there one has to be on one's guard, but only someone who has been here too can get any real idea of life at the front and any real idea of this Russian campaign. And already we have experienced and also had to withstand an awful, awful lot here.⁸⁵

Gerhard R. remained relatively quiet on what it was that the Germans themselves were doing, and what was implied by the last sentence of this letter. But he

⁸² See above, p. 186.

⁸³ FMK, 3.2002.0990, Gerhard R., letter of 10 Aug. 1942.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, letter of 13 Sep 1942. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

remained clear that the Germans were culturally 'superior', and, without much further reflection, entirely entitled to do what they were doing. Even the burial customs (or lack of them) of the Russians during a period of heavy fighting gave cause for criticism:

Here in our section the Russian has, alongside his last eastern-asiatic butt of an army, already mobilized quite young, 15-year-old youths, who have hardly been given any military training yet . . . How often already we have been amazed by the fact that dead Russians lie around in the villages after battle, none of the civilians even think of burying them, absolutely no one is bothered by this, they can stay lying there like dead animals . . . Well, there is scarcely anything here that one could describe as culture, the people are completely apathetic.⁸⁶

It is a sad irony that an appeal to the superiority of German 'culture' is here, even as late as September 1942, evidenced with respect to the perceived Russian practice of leaving dead bodies to lie around 'like dead animals'. Gerhard R. made no reference to the other heaps of corpses caused by murderous German policies: openly hung on trees as a warning, burned alive in barns, houses, and synagogues, rounded up, shot and buried in mass graves in the woods, or gassed and burned in open fires or specially designed crematoria and scattered as ashes.

Appeals to related and more specific notions within the broader categories of the cultural superiority of the Germans were also of some use. When writing to his parents Gerhard R. sought to make it clear how a sense of 'comradeship' was a very real experience, and indeed essential given the conditions under which the soldiers were living. For Gerhard R., a young member of the war-youth generation, it also provided some sort of bond with his father and echoed with what he assumed was his father's experience and understanding of the Great War:

But a person can endure a lot and adapt to changed living conditions, however different . . . Here everyone is in practice dependent on everyone else and so a quite different sort of comradeship develops. If it were not for this, then a number of things could not have been accomplished which have already been accomplished. Well, Father will know too how things look when you only have Mother Earth as your quarters.⁸⁷

Perhaps the reference to his father's experience in the Great War was momentarily of some comfort to this particular member of the war-youth generation. But it was not to be of very enduring solace.

Like so many of his comrades, Gerhard R. did not survive Stalingrad to return to his wife and children. The last letter he wrote was on New Year's Day 1943. The version retained in the archival collection is, unlike the handwritten originals of all the other letters, a typed up copy sent to the family posthumously, stamped as authentic (*beglaubigt*) by the NSDAP, and including what might have been the somewhat embellished sentiments that:

Even if things don't look too rosy for us here at the moment, nevertheless our belief in the final victory remains unshakable. And with faith in God, who will certainly not

⁸⁶ FMK, 3.2002.0990, Gerhard R., letter of 4 Sep. 1942.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, letter of 6 Sep. 1942.

desert us, and faith in our Führer, who will not leave us in the lurch, we will simply persevere here until we can breathe somewhat more freely again.⁸⁸

Gerhard R. had, up to this point, been what one might call ‘apolitically nationalist’ in his letters. He had not queried the purpose of war, implicitly assuming natural superiority over the various enemies, and was in that sense an uncritical representative of German nationalist and Nazi discourses; for all the individuality of his experiences, reactions, and selection of points for commentary, he had also echoed tropes that were widely current at the time. But he had also not explicitly paraded any enthusiastic pro-Nazi sentiments. He had simply been effectively mobilized, going wherever he was sent, doing the best he could for himself and his ‘comrades’, seeking to make the best sense of it all that he could, in the context of the frameworks available to him, while continually yearning for his family at home. In some respects, this is a relatively typical profile, often found among the vast numbers of letter-writers whose relatively mundane letters did not make it out of the archives and into the edited and published selections.⁸⁹ The phrase alluding to faith in the *Führer*, highly uncharacteristic in light of Gerhard’s earlier letters, may well have been written in by the Nazi stenographer. It was in any event a spin which the NSDAP sought desperately to get across to the millions of German soldiers and their families who shared similar fates—falling in the senseless slaughter of Stalingrad, or waiting anxiously at home for news of sons, husbands, brothers, friends, lovers, relatives, and neighbours away at the front—and yet who were expected, in face of it all, to retain an absolute and unconditional faith in the *Führer*. Whether or not Gerhard R. penned these sentiments himself in the last letter before he died, these were the ways in which such deaths were to be interpreted by those of his compatriots who were part of the exclusive national ethnic community.

Karl S., born in late November 1922 and some ten years younger than Gerhard R. (born 1912), was desperate to be allowed to join in the war. An enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth organization, he joined the NSDAP straight from the HJ. In early August 1941, when still only eighteen, he was involved in pre-military training and had already applied to join the SS. His early experiences of the war were registered as little more than a free railcard around Europe; even his arrival in Russia was almost like a holiday to him, with the occasional roughing it built in for an extra sense of adventure:

It was a wonderful journey from Wednesday to Sunday. It seemed to me like a holiday trip. The journey led in a curve like on a fever chart via the Reich capital city to the granary of Prussia, from here up again to the capital of Lithuania and then south-east to the capital of White Russia, a town that has now been annexed to the German Reich. A wonderful region, in midst of woods . . . But [the roads], they are simply indescribable. Our field paths at home are golden in comparison . . . And then the Russian economy.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, letter of 1 Jan. 1943.

⁸⁹ For a variety of fairly obvious methodological reasons, it would be impossible to guess at percentages or degrees of ‘typicality’. But Gerhard R.’s letters have been chosen as representing a highly prevalent profile.

I've already seen some of the houses close by to us. I can only say that I would feel more comfortable in our chicken coop.⁹⁰

As far as the social and racial hierarchy in the camp was concerned, Karl S. repeated the ideological sentiments about both Jews and Russians—his reference is unclear, though the two seem more or less coterminous for him—in which he had been socialized: 'Jews and prisoners of war are now working in this camp. I can tell you, a people even worse than the gypsies.'⁹¹ And he remained delighted with his own career and rapid progress in comparison to others from his school class and age group: 'That I'm the first to go to the front, or at least near the front is for me a quite special honour. I am proud of it.'⁹² Even a year later, when he had experienced a great deal more by way of military service across Europe, this highly committed member of the 'first Hitler Youth generation' was apparently very happy with his lot, still seeing it more in terms of adventure and tourism than as the tragedy of war. Most of his letters are to his parents, and he did not have the kinds of family ties of those men a few years older. The spirit of adventurous travel seems to have taken precedence for Karl S. over family ties or other relationships. In a letter to a girl by the name of Liesel of 9 September 1942 he commented:

I greatly liked Paris, which was excellent. You feel like a real bon viveur. Today in Russia, tomorrow in France and the day after tomorrow God knows where. Days spent lying around in fast trains, seeing all the beautiful towns of every country, learning about the languages, customs and traditions of foreign peoples. I am only 28 km away from one of the most beautiful and well-known palaces of France.⁹³

Along with around half of his age group, Karl S.'s adventures were to be short-lived, his youthful enthusiasm for the Nazi cause ultimately bearing little fruit. He was killed in action on the eastern front on 15 February 1943.

Karl S. clearly came from a family of highly committed Nazis. His younger brother Walter S., born 1924, seems equally keen to have been called up. Walter's letters home are purely formulaic: he generally restricts his remarks to comments about the weather, and repeatedly asserts that all is well with him. In March 1944, for example, and despite the loss of his brother the previous autumn, he writes home that:

Otherwise everything is tip-top here with me. It is a quite glorious day again today. It all looks wonderful in this area. The fruit trees are nearly all in bloom. The meadows are also full of flowers already. And at home where you are there is still snow on the ground.⁹⁴

Even allowing for the evidently limited capacity for expression of this young man, his repeated expressions of delight in landscapes and weather and seasons suggest that enjoyment of life took precedence over any thoughts about the project in which he was engaged. In the summer of 1944, when Walter S. was uncharacteristically

⁹⁰ FMK, 3.2002.1276, Karl S., letter of 9 Sep. 1941.

⁹² *Ibid.* ⁹³ *Ibid.*, letter of 9 Sep. 1942.

⁹⁴ FMK, 3.2002.1277, Walter S., letter of 13 Mar. 1944.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, letter of 21 Sep. 1941.

registering real news of the numbers of wounded troops and lost planes, he retained a staggering kind of dumb optimism:

Everything is still tip-top here with me . . . Well I guess in England too it's not looking so rosy now . . . I'll get leave once the war is over and that won't last long now.⁹⁵

On 15 September 1944 Walter S. too died, at the age of twenty, following an unsuccessful attempt at amputation of one of his limbs in a field hospital.

It is instructive to place the evidence of these letters in a comparative context, looking at a selection coming from more highly educated Germans. Given the way in which the German system of higher education still operated, even in the 1930s, an academic university degree (let alone a doctorate) was also a proxy for higher social standing, allowing something of a glimpse of class differences in perceptions.

A collection of selected letters was published a few years after the end of the war when there was a strong concern to be able to grieve for 'honourable' or 'decent' soldiers, providing evidence from a small number of generally well-educated and literate young men mainly from the 'first Hitler Youth generation' born towards or just after the end of the Great War.⁹⁶ This collection is of some considerable interest for what it reveals about the mentalities of those educated and 'decent' young men whose letters were included. It has of course to be remembered that there were also later, post-war processes of selection of which letters to forward for publication, and which to include in the final volume, which may have served somewhat to present a more 'acceptable' rather than fully representative sample of the young soldiers' writings. Nevertheless, certain features stand out. It is clear from the letters that for many of these young soldiers knowledge of the Great War—including often specific reference to what their fathers had or might have experienced—played a considerable role in both their anticipation of and in some cases eventual disillusionment with Hitler's War. This generation appears at first to have been less fearful of, more excited about, the prospect of war than were those of an older generation who had experienced the Great War at first hand and had viewed the prospect of another war with foreboding. Yet very soon many of these letters register a sense, not exactly of disappointment, but rather of disillusion: that war was not all a matter of heroism (*Heldentum*), or as spiritual and glorious as they felt they had been led to expect, but both more mundane and more awful. These 'fallen students' were of the same generation as those who participated in the youth gangs perpetrating 'spontaneous' acts of violence in the 1930s. The violent youth gangs were of course only a minority of the age group, and—although the sources do not allow complete certainty on this point—probably less likely to have come from the kind of educated, professional, and bourgeois backgrounds from which the 'fallen students' had emerged. The 'fallen students' were very probably not themselves participants in the street violence of the 1930s; and, before being called up, all had

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, letter of 28 Jun. 1944.

⁹⁶ Walther Bähr and Hans Bähr (eds.), *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten 1939–1945* (Tübingen and Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag, 1952).

been in some way involved in the education system, whether as students, researchers, or junior teaching assistants. But nevertheless, they would have been exposed to the Hitler Youth organization and Nazi propaganda throughout the 1930s. It is, then, quite striking just how patchily this seems to have affected the ways in which they described their perceptions of and responses to the physical experience of brutality in war once at the front.

Shattered by the atrocious physical conditions in which they sought to survive, and horrified by the evidence of brutality and slaughter all around, many of these student letter-writers sought solace in 'Nature', God, and the German classics. Letters are filled with quotations from well-known German poets from Goethe onwards. A few seek reassurance—in also reassuring their loved ones at home—that they will have fallen for the Fatherland; some suggest that their death will not have been in vain; but relatively little of this is couched in Nazi propaganda terms.⁹⁷ A source of comfort, or at least momentary escapism, for some was to indulge in day-dreaming, mentally escaping into happy memories of home, childhood, and everyday things. In the atrocious physical conditions in which they had to struggle, young soldiers empathized with fallen comrades and even dead horses, pitying themselves for having to live among the hideous evidence of so much death and destruction, rather than explicitly reflecting on why they were there and what they were doing to their own victims and enemies. Yet when mentioned, the latter are not universally shunned or presented in the Nazi stereotypes, even in the ideologically highly charged Russian campaign against the Slavic, Bolshevik *Untermenschen* (inferior beings). There are occasionally remarkably kind words about individual Russians; and also positive comments about Russian culture, the works of great Russian writers, and the Russian landscape—although the latter was perhaps more frequently contrasted unfavourably with the familiar German *Heimat*, and once winter set in with a vengeance the climate was experienced as unbearably harsh.

These 'letters from the field' were of course effectively trebly censored: first by the writers of the letters exerting a degree of self-restraint in what they wrote (although this would have been unlikely to excise any authentic pro-Nazi sentiments); secondly by the military censorship of the time (again, this would not have filtered out pro-Nazi expressions); and finally by the editors' selection of letters for publication which would seem acceptable in the climate of the early 1950s, when there was a desire to be able to mourn fallen youngsters without the complications entailed by any taint of Nazism (which would have exercised a filter in the opposite direction from the first two). Nevertheless, and even taking this treble sieving into account, it is striking how little space is given in any of these letters to querying the purpose of war or critiquing those who inaugurated and steered it. Even among those who appear most disaffected at the experiences of war, any anger at 'those who are responsible' is utterly non-specific. If anything, the dominant mood in the letters runs in the other direction: a sense of pride in the *Vaterland* is often palpable. Again, with all due recognition not merely for the constraints of censorship but also

⁹⁷ See also Michael Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

for the enhancing effects of 'cognitive dissonance' among letter writers at the time—if one has to die, then the cause has to be worth it—the rhetoric seems to have been sufficiently entrenched inside soldiers' heads for relatively plausible attempts to be made at persuasion of both oneself and those at home that the battles and sacrifices were not (and could not be) in vain. Even so, overall in these private letters there is perhaps more about survival and 'getting through' by sheer strength of character and attitude (*durchhalten*), and about the unimaginably awful conditions the soldier himself was enduring, than about any high ideals which might make it all worthwhile.

Letters from a more general selection published in 1982 illustrate to a greater extent the impact of Nazi propaganda and ways of seeing things. Russians, for example, are described as 'these uncultivated, multi-racial people'; the fight is an ideological one, since 'We are not fighting against the Russian people, but against the world enemy, Bolshevism.'⁹⁸ Ordinary soldiers seem to have had greater difficulties in finding words for communicating the horrors all around. Key concerns revolve around how to remain 'decent' (*anständig*) under conditions of warfare. 'Decency' was closely related to 'comradeship' (*Kameradschaft*): it related basically to one's fellow soldiers, to the small group of peers with whom one lived and might die; it related to 'doing one's duty' (*Pflicht*), being prepared to sacrifice oneself, and having the 'hardness' required in order to keep fighting despite numerous deprivations and atrocious physical conditions.⁹⁹

But perhaps what is most striking about the vast majority of field-post letters is what is most absent. There is virtually no apparent sense of shame at what they were doing; and they appear to have raised no real questions about the ultimate morality of the enterprise, mostly—if they addressed this at all—merely parroting contemporary propaganda about why they were doing what they were doing. The repetition of these reasons, however, does give some cause for wondering whether there was indeed on occasion an inner sense of dissonance, or at least fear that those at home would have little understanding, psychologically perhaps requiring the explicit reproduction of reasons which did not necessarily quite match the horror of the situation. As far as the 'racial war' was explicitly mentioned, soldiers appear either to have largely internalized the Nazi world view (*Weltanschauung*) before arriving in the field, or to have interpreted what they now saw as confirmation or 'proof' of what they had previously viewed more sceptically as merely propaganda, or perhaps to have sought, through writing, to adopt the prevalent language and line of interpretation and hence by repetition to convince themselves about the rightness of the actions in this new and awful world. In other letters, there are hints that what has been witnessed cannot be described in writing, or needs talking about at length; such hints provide intimations of a substantial group who witnessed but

⁹⁸ Buchbender and Sterz (eds.), *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges*, pp. 78, 81.

⁹⁹ See the summary in Wette, *Die Wehrmacht*, p. 179. For detailed analyses of the processes of brutalization on the eastern front and the extent of army involvement in atrocities, see e.g. Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German troops and the barbarisation of warfare*, 2nd edn (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001; orig. 1985); and Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*.

were, for whatever reasons (including of course censorship and self-censorship), not prepared or able to commit their reactions to writing. It is again impossible to quantify the relative proportions. Yet had it not been for the significant numbers who willingly went along with the regime propaganda or the peer-group pressures of the moment to interpret their encounters with 'eastern Jews' in the sense provided by Hitler, the architects of genocide would have had a far harder job in finding willing agents of destruction in the field.

V. FROM MASS MURDER TO THE 'FINAL SOLUTION'

The invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 is generally held to represent something of a turning point in the character of the ideological and racial war.¹⁰⁰ It was made clear from the spring of 1941 that this was to be a campaign of a different character from the conventional notions of warfare. As *Generaloberst* (Colonel-General) Franz Halder noted in his diary, on 30 March 1941, following a speech of Hitler's which lasted some two and a half hours:

The struggle of two worldviews against each other. A verdict of annihilation against Bolshevism, it's equivalent to asocial criminality. Communism a great danger for the future. We have to distance ourselves from the standpoint of soldierly comradeship. The Communist is not a comrade—neither beforehand nor afterwards. It's about a war of extermination [Vernichtungskampf]. If we don't conceive of it in this way, then we may well beat the enemy, but in 30 years time the communist enemy will stand against us yet again. We are not waging war in such a way as to preserve the enemy . . .

Halder noted further at the side of this entry:

The battle will be very different from the war in the west. In the east ruthlessness now means lenience for the future.
The leaders must ask of themselves the sacrifice of suppressing their qualms.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ There has been a recent tendency to query these sharp distinctions, however. See e.g. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Bogdan Musial (eds.), *Genesis des Genozids: Polen 1939–1941* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 'Einleitung'. Historians over the decades have debated intensively over when, if at all, Hitler may have reached a definitive decision that the 'final solution' of the 'Jewish question' should be not simply the exclusion but rather the active extermination of all Jews in Europe. Current historiography on the whole prefers to approach this in terms of an evolving process rather than seeking to identify a key turning point, although it is clear that there were significant moments of escalation. See e.g. the magisterial narrative by Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–45*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), Vol. II; and for significant earlier contributions, Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Philippe Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews: The genesis of the Holocaust* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994); and Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung*.

¹⁰¹ Reprinted in Gerhard Ueberschar and Wolfram Wette (eds.), *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'. Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1984), p. 303, from *Generaloberst Halder: Kriegstagebuch Bd II* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962–4), pp. 335 ff.; emphasis in the original.

As at the start of the Polish campaign, special orders were issued concerning the necessity for special task forces: 'The deployment of special commandos of the Security Police in the area of operations is necessary in order to carry out exceptional security police tasks . . .' These special units were to work together closely with the military forces in the area:

An appointee of the Chief of the Security Police and the SD will be deployed to provide central guidance to these Commandos in the region covered by each Army . . . The appointees are constantly to work closely with the Ic . . . The Ic is to ensure that the tasks of the Special Commandos are coordinated with military intelligence and the activities of the secret field police and in line with the demands of the operations.¹⁰²

Thus from the outset the actions of the special task force units were fully coordinated with the actions of the army with the role of the 'Ic' officer acting as official go-between.

Furthermore, right from the outset the rules of regular warfare and distinctions between criminal acts and 'acceptable' violence were lifted. On 13 May 1941, a special order explicitly removed any legal penalties for committing acts of violence against civilians, including shooting civilians 'while trying to escape' (*auf der Flucht erschossen*), and 'extermination' (*Vernichtung*) of anyone representing a threat to the Germans:

Also all *other attacks by enemy civilians on the Army*, their associated members and entourage, are to be combated on the spot by the most extreme means possible including the annihilation of the assailant . . .

For *treatment meted out by members of the Army and its retinue against enemy civilians*, there is *no need for prosecution*, even when the action is at the same time equivalent to a military crime or misdemeanour.¹⁰³

On 19 May, a further set of 'Guidelines for the Behaviour of Troops in Russia' was issued, once more underlining the ideological character of warfare in this arena:

1. *Bolshevism is the deadly enemy of the National Socialist people. Germany's struggle is directed against this destructive worldview and its carriers.*
2. This struggle demands ruthless, energetic and drastic measures against *Bolshevik rabble-rousers, fractireurs, saboteurs, Jews* and total elimination of every form of active or passive resistance.¹⁰⁴

In effect, Germans had been given the official go ahead to engage in indiscriminate murder, unbound by any previous constraints of law, or considerations of possible

¹⁰² 'Regelung des Einsatzes der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD im Verbands des Heeres' signed by von Brauchitsch, and 'Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Sonderkommandos und den militärischen Kommandobehörden im rückwärtigen Armeegebiet', repr. in Ueberschar and Wette (eds.), *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, pp. 303–4.

¹⁰³ Der Führer und Oberste-Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht, 13. Mai 1941, 'Erlaß über die Ausübung der Kriegserichterbarkeit im Gebiet 'Barbarossa' und über besondere Maßnahmen der Truppe', repr. in Ueberschar and Wette (eds.), *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, p. 306, emphases in original.

¹⁰⁴ 'Anlage 3 zur Weisung Nr. 21 (Fall Barbarossa) von 19.5.1941: Richtlinien für das Verhalten der Truppe in Rußland', repr. in Ueberschar and Wette (eds.), *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, p. 312, emphases in original.

penalties for their actions, or conventional guidelines for appropriate conduct and distinctions between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' targets in times of war.

Such boundaries had in practice already been crossed, by the thousandfold, since the invasion of Poland in September 1939; but now they were the subject of further, highly explicit emphasis and widespread distribution. The 'anti-partisan' warfare following the invasion of the Soviet Union was fought with extraordinary ferocity and brutality, with inevitable consequences for all involved, however diverse their initial reactions. And there is some evidence to suggest that here, as in so many aspects of the tale of Nazi brutality, officers who themselves came from the eastern provinces of Germany and were brought up among the anti-Slav sentiments of the post-Versailles era, were among the most ideologically committed to brutal notions of racial war in the east.¹⁰⁵ Yet as the war proceeded, more and more troops, of an ever widening age distribution, were called up to replace those who were maimed, captured, or killed in combat. Individual variations in degrees of willingness or otherwise to be involved were increasingly swept away by the wider logic of the escalating situation.

Moreover, military conquest was followed by brutal civilian administration of occupied territories, again accompanied by violence and the administrative facilitation of policies of exploitation and genocide.¹⁰⁶ Massacres of Jews from whole villages often took place in open-air sites, where they were forced to dig their own graves before being shot into them. Sometimes preparations for such killings took several days, and involved the cooperation of significant numbers of the local non-Jewish populations, as well as being widely witnessed by civilians who were not directly involved.¹⁰⁷

What accompanied and followed the invasion of Russia is not only by now well known, but was also extremely widely known at the time.¹⁰⁸ The convenient post-war myth that, in the convenient and widely used phrase, 'we never knew anything about it' (*davon haben wir nichts gewusst!*) was predicated on a widespread failure to register and respond appropriately to what was known, on a failure of imagination or empathy, and on a lack of willingness to put different details of the mosaic

¹⁰⁵ Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁶ There are growing numbers of regional and local studies; see e.g. Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and death in the Ukraine under Nazi rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire Building and the Holocaust in the Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Much of this has escaped official memorialization, while remaining highly alive in the memories of local residents; see for recent attempts to raise such sites of mass killing to a higher public consciousness, Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A priest's journey to uncover the truth behind the murder of 1.5 million Jews* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); see also Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (eds.), *The Shoah in the Ukraine: History, testimony, memorialisation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ See also Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006); Bernward Dörner, *Die Deutschen und der Holocaust. Was niemand wissen wollte, aber jeder wissen konnte* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2007); Peter Longerich, *Davon haben wir nichts gewusst! Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2006); and the more general collection, Otto Dov Kulka and Eberhard Jäckel (eds.), *Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1933–1945* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2004).

together to form a wider picture; in short, on an unwillingness to construct what precisely was implied by the 'about it' (*davon*) of which one had allegedly 'known nothing', until confronted with the full horrors and forced to acknowledge the wider picture after the war. 'Ignorance' was not a lack of knowledge with respect to individual atrocities, nor a lack of knowledge that civilians were being murdered in extraordinarily large numbers, but rather an incapacity or unwillingness on the part of many, but by no means all, Germans to recognize what these atrocities cumulatively amounted to. It was also, in part, rooted in an extreme narrowing down in post-war conceptions of 'responsibility' to the legal sense of acts of individually motivated, excessive brutality, and to a related if rarely explicit view that responsibility somehow only 'really' began at the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and not in any prior acts of extreme inhumanity (maltreatment, forced labour, expropriation, ghettoization, and rationing amounting to enforced starvation) or killing 'while trying to escape' (without asking from what). It also has to be remembered that only a fraction—perhaps around one-fifth—of the total number of victims of what has come to be known collectively as the 'Holocaust' were actually killed in Auschwitz itself, however iconic that particular site has become. Violence against Jews more generally was certainly well-known, even if the details were (a not always well-kept) secret.

In effect, then, what people did not 'know' was what all the small acts of inhumanity and brutality would cumulatively amount to; and what they did not consciously register, then or later, was the part that their own actions and roles, however small, played in the larger scheme of things. Most of those involved were merely tiny cogs in the system, with no responsibility for the direction or character of policy-making. Neither the overall shape and functioning of this system, nor the ultimate and cumulative results of disparate 'actions' across Europe, were within the scope of most people's knowledge or imaginings at the time (or indeed later). Having been caught up and complicit in the preconditions and practices of this system, people could subsequently only appeal to the lack of 'knowledge' of the whole in order to exonerate themselves from blame for their own small, often tiny, part in it.

What changed in the summer and autumn of 1941? The notion of Jewish life as being in principle 'unworthy of living' had been prevalent in the Third Reich for many years, with individual deaths being caused, directly and indirectly, by acts of brutality and maltreatment as well as suicides arising out of despair, and had escalated dramatically already with the annexation of Austria; the pogrom of November 1938; the occupation of the Sudetenland, Bohemia, and Moravia; and, more dramatically and on a larger scale, with the invasion of Poland in the September 1939. The major shifts of 1941–2 were not so much a matter of transgressing a moral boundary in principle, but rather of the scale, methods, and ultimate explicit goal of killing civilians on 'racial' grounds, as well as the concomitant prevention of emigration and the progressive concentration of intended victims in specific locations. There were also a series of escalations in the programme, in part related to the changing fortunes of the Russian campaign in the summer and autumn of 1941, in part related to the transition from a European

to a World War in December 1941, and in part related to the death in early June 1942 of Himmler's close collaborator in the persecution and extermination of Jews, Reinhard Heydrich, following the assassination attack a week earlier.¹⁰⁹

With the invasion of Russia far larger numbers of Jewish civilians were encountered, and almost immediately murdered. Not only members of the SS special squads or *Einsatzgruppen*, but also 'ordinary soldiers' and Order Police units were involved in mass killings, whether by shooting into graves which the victims themselves had been forced to dig, or through a variety of other means, including locking victims up in barns and buildings and burning them alive. Troops were readily mobilized to carry out Hitler's orders through a combination of the brutalizing effects of existence at the front and a heightened susceptibility for cultural mobilization, especially as a result of the ideological work of relatively young, highly convinced, junior officers in enhancing and consolidating a Nazi world view 'legitimizing' actions of utmost brutality against civilians through appeals to notions of 'inferior races', 'reprisals' for 'partisan activity', and the like.¹¹⁰ But none of the methods of killing current on the eastern front in the summer of 1941 was, from the point of view of the murderers, very 'efficient', for a range of physical, material, political, and psychological reasons.

In the autumn of 1941, major new developments in the methods of murderous violence occurred. In addition to killing large numbers of Jews in the places where they were found (being shot, hanged, burned, or beaten to death in or near the villages and towns of Eastern Europe in which they lived), or proactively encouraging their deaths by policy-created 'natural causes' such as starvation, disease, and exploitation in places where they had been brought together (concentration camps, slave labour camps, and ghettos), the scope and potential goals of mass murder were massively expanded by the construction of specifically designed extermination centres, and the deportation of Jews from their places of residence (or refuge) to these designated centres of death. In this way, the killers themselves did not have to go to find their prey; the victims were brought to the specialists in killing. And both the physical methods and psychological procedures of the killing centres were constantly subject to review and enhancement, such that the scale of killing could be hugely increased, lending a degree of wild credibility to the most extreme Nazi aspiration that, by murdering every last member of what was defined as a discrete 'racial' community, the very 'final solution' to the self-defined 'Jewish question' could be achieved. This ultimate aspiration was summarized in the Wannsee conference of January 1942, a meeting which implicated virtually all the key state authorities in the coordination of practical arrangements for mass murder as the mutually agreed 'final solution' of the 'Jewish question', explicitly replacing the previous programme of enforced emigration which had been finally

¹⁰⁹ On Heydrich, see e.g. Mario Dederichs, *Heydrich: The face of evil* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006; orig. German Piper Verlag, 2005).

¹¹⁰ See Bartov, *The eastern front*, Chs. 2–3, for the relatively young age range of the junior officers, committed to the Nazi cause and responsible for ideological indoctrination, and the character and impact of the material they presented.

forbidden the previous autumn. The discussion also revisited some of the ambiguities persisting around the definition of who actually was to be included in the 'biological community' designated for murder, including startlingly bureaucratic distinctions between 'Mischlinge' of various 'degrees', within and outside of marriage with others in a similar variety of categories, with and without children, and with and without extenuating circumstances and distinctions, and turning over the possible 'choices' for 'Mischlinge' between 'voluntary' or 'forced' sterilization or deportation and murder.

If the senior civil servants were involved in detailed planning at the top, so too were civil servants, political leaders, and technical experts as well as a multiplicity of other interested parties at regional and lower levels of the apparatus. For to implement the movement, exploitation and murder of people on this scale had massive logistical implications, even beyond the coordination of train timetables which implicated every station master along rail routes across Europe.¹¹¹ By the time the 'Final Solution' was officially implemented, the prior work of population counting—deciding who was in which of many possible categories for varying degrees of disadvantage, reduction of rations, loss of the means of livelihood, restrictions on movement, ghettoization—had already been largely carried out in the areas which were already firmly under German occupation and administration. Now, those Jews who had not yet fallen prey to disease and starvation, or died as a result of random shootings, hangings, and other forms of 'retribution', and who were deemed not still 'useful' as slave labour for the Germans, had to be rounded up under pretexts ranging from 'resettlement' to the 'stamping' or 'reissue' of identity cards; held in guarded temporary waiting areas if the trains and trucks available could not cope with the numbers involved; policed and shot at if trying to escape. The remaining property and valuables had to be collected and 'disposed of', and housing reallocated. Nor were the forces of brutality the only ones to be involved; logistics demanded a great deal by way of detailed planning and coordination among technical experts, political officials, and civil servants, as well as the SS, particularly as, during the course of 1942, dedicated extermination centres were set up to develop ever more 'efficient' ways of killing. The existing extermination facilities of the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek, and the gas vans of Chelmno (put into operation in December 1941), were in 1942 rapidly augmented by the killing centres of Bełżec (construction of which had already begun the previous autumn), Sobibór and Treblinka, as part of 'Operation Reinhard', so named after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. And all these brought with them—as at every previous stage in this monstrous project—new 'problems' which had to be 'solved', involving the efforts of far wider circles of people than the front-line killers themselves.

The extension of involvement, and the corresponding extension of 'knowledge', may be illustrated by what might at first glance seem a very banal and, in the

¹¹¹ A point made particularly by Raul Hilberg: see his classic work on *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Yale: Yale University Press, updated edn, 2003; orig 1961). On the Auschwitz area in particular, see Sybille Steinbacher, *'Musterstadt' Auschwitz. Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien* (München: K. G. Saur, 2000).

context, almost trivial example. Yet it is precisely in the detailed logistics of these operations at the grass roots that so many beyond the front-line killers were involved. The presence of large numbers of people forced to live in highly unsanitary conditions in the Auschwitz concentration camp at Oświęcim (the Polish name of the town), and the construction in 1942 of the huge extermination and slave labour camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau in a little village on the outskirts of the town, had major implications for the supply of fresh water and the removal of waste water from an area where the health not only of the local Polish population but also increasing numbers of Germans was being endangered by the spread of disease. Not only members of the SS, but also civilian workers in the large chemical works of IG Farben in the neighbouring hamlet of Monowitz, and many other Germans were now living and working in the area. The discussion of town planning and engineering questions relating to drains—which might seem the most grotesquely mundane of subjects in this connection—is highly illuminating with respect to the sheer extent of the wider circles involved.¹¹² The difficulties of deciding where to put a waste-water disposal plant near the concentration camp complex that would not carry with it disease and water pollution issues absorbed the energies of a wide range of groups and individuals. Members of the SS, the civilian administration of the town, the *Landrat* of the district of Bielitz, regional government representatives including *Gauleiter* Bracht and regional government president Springorum (Udo K.'s immediate superior in Kattowitz), consulted extensively with technical experts about the possible siting of a large waste-water disposal area in relation to the railway station, the concentration camp areas, the Sola and Weichsel rivers, the huge IG Farben plant at Monowitz (on the other side of town from Birkenau), while also taking into consideration the extension of the SS and railway personnel residential areas, and the building of a new railway shunting station (*Verschiebungsbahnhof*) in the area. Discussions were slowed not merely by technical considerations which were difficult to resolve, but also by questions of the respective responsibility of the concentration camp administration, the industrial managers of IG Farben and the civilian town administration with respect to decisions over where to site the new drainage facilities, who was responsible for their upkeep, and how they should be maintained. The files of correspondence between different offices, including back and forth to Berlin as well as extensively through these local networks, make it quite clear that large numbers of people were involved in all these discussions, which included periodic site visits to see the scale and details of the problem at first hand. Discussions rumbled on from 1940 through 1941 and 1942, with continuing postponements in finding any kind of solution or reaching practical decisions as the scale of the problem itself grew ever larger.

The minutes of a meeting followed by a site visit to Auschwitz on 23 September 1942 listed among those present not only Camp Commandant Rudolf Höss and several senior SS officials, and the regional political hierarchy from *Gauleiter* Bracht

¹¹² Archivum Państwowe w Katowicach, Rejencja Katowicje / Regierung Kattowitz, 119 / 2909, 'Wasserversorgung und Abwasserbeseitigung'.

and Regional District President Springorum down to the local district administrator (*Landrat*) Ziegler and even more local functionary (*Amtskommissar*) Butz, but also a number of technical experts including building advisors, engineers, and architects, as well as representatives from the Reich Ministry of the Interior, the town planning department of the Reich Ministry for Employment, and several experts from the Reich Water and Light Office in Berlin-Dahlem.¹¹³ By now, it seemed that it was almost a matter of pride (or indication of political status) to show that one was included among the group of those possessed of knowledge that was still held in some way to be 'secret' or at least a matter of being privy to top level *Führer* orders. *SS-Brigadeführer* Dr Ing. Kammler explained that the problem of water supplies and drainage had now been under discussion for over a year, but that in view of the dramatically increased numbers now passing through the camp the question was becoming increasingly urgent:

In view of the extraordinary growth by leaps and bounds of the number of inhabitants of the K.L. [Concentration Camp] Auschwitz, an independent water supply for the K.L. Auschwitz would be and is necessary. . . Disposal of the sewage from this high number of inhabitants via a special facility of the K.L. Auschwitz is urgently required.¹¹⁴

SS-Obergruppenführer Pohl underlined the fact that the coming year would bring even larger numbers into the area, making it even more essential to ensure 'an adequate water supply even with the highest average occupancy numbers of the year 1943'.¹¹⁵ Further supporting the urgency of this issue and not awaiting a major health catastrophe, it was noted in the minutes of this meeting that 'Gauleiter Bracht here confided that he is aware of the *Führer's* order with respect to the special task that is currently in hand.'¹¹⁶

Gauleiter Bracht was not merely 'aware': he had indeed been personally present when Himmler toured Auschwitz on 17 July 1942, and had hosted a dinner for him that evening at his residence near Katowice. On 18 July Himmler returned to Auschwitz, this time making an inspection with senior officials from IG Farben. Clearly the topic of mass killing was the subject of explicit discussion among wider circles at Bracht's dinner party that evening. The Bracht villa was owned by a firm called Giesche, under the management of one Eduard Schulte, who appears on this occasion to have acquired remarkably detailed knowledge about the precise methods of killing, down to the use of what he called 'Prussic acid'. This was apparently the occasion for an attempt by Schulte to get the news out to the wider world, and particularly the USA, by way of senior Jewish connections in Switzerland.¹¹⁷ Whether or not Himmler actually witnessed the gassing of some 449 Jews in

¹¹³ Archivum Państwowe w Katowicach, Rejencja Katowicje / Regierung Kattowitz, 119 / 2909, Niederschrift über die Besprechung in Auschwitz am 23.9.1942 betr. K.L. Auschwitz, Berlin 26.9.1942, fols. 93–100.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 99.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 100.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Walter Laqueur and Richard Breitman, *Breaking the Silence: The secret mission of Eduard Schulte, who brought the world news of the Final Solution* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986).

what was known as Bunker 2, a converted farm building, he now authorized the building of specifically designed crematoria. For, as Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss explained in his early post-war biography:

It became apparent during the first cremations in the open air that in the long run it would not be possible to continue in that manner. During bad weather or when a strong wind was blowing, the stench of burning flesh was carried for many miles and caused the whole neighbourhood to talk about the burning of Jews, despite official counter-propaganda. It is true that all members of the SS detailed for the extermination were bound to the strictest secrecy over the whole operation, but . . . [e]ven the most severe punishment was not able to stop their love of gossip.¹¹⁸

Moreover, the killings were by this time due to escalate massively in scale: the very day after this visit, on 19 July 1942, Himmler issued an order that the entire Jewish population of Poland should have been removed and dealt with by the end of the year: 'I hereby order that the resettlement of the entire Jewish population of the General Government is to be carried out and completed by 31 December 1942.'¹¹⁹

Just as the engineers employed by the Erfurt-based firm of Topf and Sons were figuring out the technically most efficient means for constructing crematoria which could 'process' several hundreds of bodies *daily*, so too the various officials and experts involving planning for a 'Jew-free' living area for Germans in Europe were considering it from all the relevant practical angles, as were the municipal authorities who administered the disposal of housing, valuables, and other possessions that had been stolen from those who were deported, without ever being willing to acknowledge explicitly quite what sort of a murderous enterprise they were engaged in supporting. The surrounding exploitation of slave labour—in which the average life expectancy of those 'selected' for work rather than instant death was around three months—was no secret either. As one person employed at IG Farben wrote home, after giving a remarkably precise description of conditions in the plant: 'Here is a murderous enterprise, everything is topsy-turvy . . . In Poland it doesn't take much to get yourself into a striped suit'¹²⁰

It hardly needs saying that from the perspective of those who were victims of Nazi persecution, what was meant by 'Auschwitz' was not even an 'open secret'; it was an ever present threat, known about intimately among Polish people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, living for miles around. Numerous survivor accounts report how they themselves managed to escape, or were forced to witness the transport of loved ones to their certain deaths during this period. Nor were 'selections' carried out only on the infamous 'ramp' at Auschwitz, which has gained notoriety through associations with the 'medical' selections by Josef Mengele: for many Jews, 'selections' already took place in their ghetto or home town, at 'collection points' where

¹¹⁸ *Autobiography of Rudolf Höss*, repr. in *Kl Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (Oświęcim: Publications of Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1972), p. 122.

¹¹⁹ Helmut Heiber (ed.), *Reichsführer! . . . Briefe an und von Himmler* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), p. 131, Himmler's letter of 19 Jul. 1942.

¹²⁰ Feldpostsammlung Museum für Kommunikation, 3.2002.1277, Walter S., letter of 16 Feb. 1942.

members of the SS, Gestapo and often also local employers distinguished between those who were still 'useful' for labour and those who should immediately be sent to their deaths. The significance of the distinctions being made between the very young, very old, ill, and weak on the one hand, and the able-bodied young on the other, were not lost on anyone involved in these processes. It hardly bears saying that the Holocaust, too, was a phenomenon patterned by generations: survivors tend predominantly to be those who were strong young adults at the time. Nor was the fact that, unlike in the case of those who had earlier been sent away to camps for forced labour, there were rarely postcards or any further signs of life from those who had been shipped to Auschwitz or the other death camps.¹²¹ Meanwhile, of course, surrounding populations were often actively involved in the process, whether through forms of collusion with the Germans, including betrayal of Jews living under 'Aryan' identities, or attempts at resistance, sometimes in collaboration and sometimes in conflict with Jewish resistance activities. It is notable that, alongside well-known incidents such as the massacre of Jews by non-Jewish Polish neighbours in Jedwabne, tending to confirm the stereotype of Poles as antisemitic, it is also the case that Polish people have received the single largest number of nominations by Yad Vashem for the status of 'Righteous among Nations' for attempts to help persecuted Jews.¹²²

As far as German soldiers at the front were concerned, it was not only the special task forces, or *Einsatzgruppen*, who were involved in mass murder; many ordinary soldiers were also actively involved or witnessed—and wrote home about—incidents of mass murder on an extraordinary scale.¹²³ While it is difficult to obtain exact figures or percentages, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a significant number of ordinary soldiers in the army were caught up in racial atrocities and became more or less willing participants in actions of mass murder, and many interpreted what they saw as confirmation of previous Nazi teachings about the alleged 'inferior people' (*Untermenschen*).¹²⁴ Some echoed regime propaganda in representing the murder of Jews as appropriate 'punishment' for their presumed collective misdeeds, such as the soldier who wrote home from Tarnopol on 6 July 1941: 'Up to now we have dispatched around 1,000 Jews [with clubs and spades] into eternity but that is far too little for what they have done.'¹²⁵ There were staggering details given at the time of the mass murder of Jews in the Ukraine with the full cooperation of the *Wehrmacht* in the summer of 1941.¹²⁶ In Kameneč

¹²¹ Oral history interviews in the area, 2008 and 2009; see also e.g. testimonies in the Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; and for further references to survivor testimonies, Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

¹²² Jan T. Gross, *Neighbours: The destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941* (London: Random House, Arrow, 2003; orig. Princeton University Press, 2003); for Yad Vashem, see <<http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/index.asp>>.

¹²³ See e.g. the printed selections in Klee, Dreßen, Rieß (eds.), *Schöne Zeiten*; Walter Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum: Vernichtung' Das Judenbild in deutschen Soldatenbriefen 1939–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995).

¹²⁴ Wetze, *Die Wehrmacht*, p. 180.

¹²⁵ Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, Tarnopol, 6 Jul. 1941, p. 33.

¹²⁶ Dieter Pohl, 'Schauplatz Ukraine: Der Massenmord an den Juden im Militärverwaltungsgebiet und im Reichskommissariat 1941–1943' in Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher, and Bernd C. Wagner

Podol'skij, 4,200 Jews were murdered on 27 August 1941; on the next day, a further 11,000 were killed; and the final total reported to Berlin was in the region of 23,600. There were also mass shootings further south, on the north shore of Black Sea area; the local military administration was fully involved in and aware of these incidents, which were far from being the allegedly hidden, well disguised operations of the later extermination camps of eastern Poland.¹²⁷

There are horrifying passages in large numbers of soldiers' letters, providing more than ample evidence of the prevalence of antisemitic views and actions among ordinary soldiers.¹²⁸ As one described an incident of mass murder in extraordinarily trivializing terms:

In Bereza-Kartuska, where I stopped for lunch, they had just shot dead around 1,300 Jews the previous day. They were brought to a pit outside the place. Men, women and children had to get totally undressed there and were dispatched with a shot in the back of the neck. The clothes were disinfected and put to new use. I am convinced: if the war lasts for much longer, the Jews will also have to be turned into sausages and set before the Russian prisoners of war or the Jewish skilled workers.¹²⁹

We cannot be sure how typical these excerpts are of *Landser* views more generally. They do however suggest that the soldiers' experience of 'eastern Jews' (*Ostjuden*) in the state to which they had been reduced by Nazi occupation policies had successfully strengthened the attitudes that pre-war propaganda had sought less successfully to induce. There is repeated evidence to suggest that the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* was now believed more readily. Previously, many soldiers had had no real conception of what 'the Jew' was 'really like'; now they were for the first time exposed to large numbers of Jews in Eastern Europe, some of whom had genuinely been extremely poor, but many of whom had been herded by the Nazis into ghettos, expropriated from their own homes and means of livelihood, and starved on rations insufficient to sustain life. It was hardly surprising that their appearance now seemed to conform to Nazi stereotypes, confirming for the unthinking *Landser* the caricatures of propaganda; pre-existing 'taught' antisemitism thus became 'experienced' antisemitism. As one put it, in a letter home on 6 August 1941:

You won't find conditions like these in any German town. I can't describe to you how the Jewish quarter looks, since you wouldn't believe it anyway. Images of Jews like those we already had in the STÜRMER, you can find masses of here in reality. Shrouded in rags, which are mostly torn as well, they run around here by the dozen. We in the Main region couldn't really get a proper idea of the Jew. But here in the east you only need to look at the wretches and you know what sorts of wretches you have

(eds.) *Ausbeutung, Vernichtung, Öffentlichkeit. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik* (München: K. G. Saur, 2000), pp. 140–3.

¹²⁷ Pohl, 'Schauplatz Ukraine', pp. 135–73.

¹²⁸ Manoschek (ed.), 'Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum'.

¹²⁹ Manoschek (ed.), 'Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum', 18.7.1942, *Zahlm.d.R. H.K., H.K.P.* 610 (Brest/Bug), FPN 37 634, p. 58. On this incident see also the Groscurth diaries, and the discussions in: Friedländer, *Years of Extermination*; and Klee, Dreßen, and Rieß, 'Schöne Zeiten'.

before you, without even having had to speak to them. Anyone who is German doesn't talk at all to this vermin.¹³⁰

Some appear now to have seen what they called, in the stereotypical singular, 'the Jew', as the feared enemy to be fought at all costs: they seem to have approved of and thought within the discourse of 'revenge' killings of communists, Jews, partisans, all of which were constructed as acceptable targets for killing even on the slightest pretext. The notion propagated by Hitler of a 'defensive war' persisted. In the words of one clearly highly committed party man as well as soldier:

As an SA man I have long recognized the Jewish poison in our people; we are seeing how far this could have gone only now, in this campaign. . . . [E]ven the last doubter must be cured here, in the light of the facts. We must and will succeed in freeing the world from this pest, the German soldier at the eastern front stands as guarantee of this, and we won't return before we have ripped out the roots of all evil here and the central headquarters of the Jewish-Bolshevik 'world benefactor' has been exterminated.¹³¹

Or, as another put it:

The great task which has been set us in the fight against Bolshevism lies in the extermination of eternal Jewry. If one sees what the Russian has set up here in Russia then one can for the first time really understand why the Führer began the fight against Jewry. What manner of suffering would have befallen our Fatherland if this beast of a human had kept the upper hand?¹³²

Caution only started to enter much later in the war, with fear for what the position would be after a lost war. In many such letters, there is barely a whispering of conscience; few seemed to see—or dared to write in terms of—the Jews as human beings. And the Home Front was certainly well aware of mass killings of Jews, shootings of large groups, and shootings of individuals, as well as maltreatment through slave labour—an issue which was very present even at the heart of the old Reich too.

What effects did participation in such a war have on people? The answer has to be manifold. But that it had effects (beyond the sheer physical question of survival without serious injury) was unquestionable. As one soldier put it, writing home in January 1943:

The beautiful time of our youth is passed and will not come again. You will all be surprised at what sorts of 'old men' in the truest sense of the word your sons have become. . . . One has no interest in anything any more, no desire for anything. . . .¹³³

It is also possible to trace, through the letter of Gertrud S. to one of her female friends, the long-term effects on her husband Hans of involvement in mass killings.

¹³⁰ Manoschek (ed), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, 6.8.1941, Sold. J.Z. 3. Kp./Ldsschtz. Btl.619, FPN 20 355 D, p. 40.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.8.1942, Uffz. F.K., 4. Kp./Bau-Btl. 55, p. 61.

¹³² *Ibid.*, San.Uffz. K.G., Stab/Lw.Bau-Btl.6/VII, FPN L 08 440, p. 59.

¹³³ BFZ, SSr 1943-1, Sold. Hans-Joachim H., 28 942 C, 10.Kp. / Gren. (Feldausb.) Div., 10 Jan 1943.

Referring back to the ‘November days’, it seems that Hans had been asked to play some administrative role in the November pogrom of 1938; he also had a role, though not one of direct shooting, in the mass killings on the eastern front. It is clear that he was plagued by his part in these murderous operations, and continually plagued by the images he had witnessed and which he could not get out of his mind; he seems also to have suffered from—presumably—pangs of conscience over what was going on; and while he appealed to religion, this seemed only to serve to strengthen and uphold his sense of obedience to worldly authority with respect to the tasks which he was being asked to carry out. The reaction of Hans’s wife Gertrud is interesting for the way in which she pities her husband for having to be directly involved in scenes of gruesome murders, and wishes ‘younger men’ could have been co-opted instead; but she does not seem to have queried, at least on paper, the ghastly developments themselves as being, in the long run, the right policies. There is of course the question of what could actually be said in such a context, given that even though such letters between female civilians were not subject to the military censorship of letters home from the front, they might nevertheless be opened and read, with predictable adverse consequences if crucial lines had been overstepped. It is all the more interesting, then, that Gertrud ruminates even as explicitly as she does to her friend on the cumulative effects on her husband of his involvement in violence—although without going into details on what precisely he was asked to do—from the November pogrom of 1938 through to the current atrocities on the eastern front:

Now Hans has admitted it to me: even if this meant he would have been shot, he does not believe that he would have carried out orders expected of him in pursuit of this handiwork which has nothing to do with war. That was the key moment which, after he knew about the anti-partisan campaign, no longer let him sleep a wink! . . . We lay awake nights, as he moaned into the pillow: ‘Why always me, always me for such tasks? In November [1938] (at the time when the soul of the people was seething) I was given the order to blow up the mortuary of the Synagogue community! Will I never again lose the images of Charkow [Kharkov, Ukraine, a site of atrocities] from my mind? Oh, how can you know what scenes one is exposed to during the interrogation and rounding up of hostages? No—no—I won’t go along with it; no—they’ll have to send someone else!’ . . . In those November days Hans had suffered dreadfully, he lay awake at night just like now and stared into the darkness and asked himself and asked his God and then did what his conscience and his heart suggested to him: before carrying out these orders he went to the Head of the Synagogue Community, Prof F., a—well, let’s not go into that now! Anyway I had been friends with his daughters since my childhood and every single person in Königsberg respected and valued this meritorious doctor.—Hans wrote to me from Charkow: ‘You cannot possibly imagine what it means to have to walk through streets in which the bodies of people who have been hanged are bundled together like bunches of grapes hanging from windows and balconies. When these images plague me at night, then I flee ever more into the world of the abstract, that’s the image of my father, the image of you; these are my altars, before which I have always been able to find myself again, in order to be able to stand up straight the next morning and not have to disobey orders . . .’ And so during that time I was, just like Hans, simply choked up. I was equally horrified, and everything in

me cried out: Why don't they send out to these commandos 'young, insensitive officers, to whom it means nothing if women are tied up to trees and thrashed and shot dead' (as Frau M. once wrote to me . . .), why do they use for this task men who are soldiers but not hangmen?¹³⁴

It is interesting that both Gertrud S. and a mutual friend, Frau M., whose letter she quotes here, appear to have registered generational differences in reactions to having to be involved in such acts of brutality and murder: younger men, building on their experiences and socialization in the 1930s, were more likely to see it as part of their ideologically defined roles as soldiers in a 'racial war' in a way that older, more traditional military men apparently did not. It is also somewhat curious, to say the least, that Gertrud S. appears to have been opposed to her husband having to do the dirty work, given the consequences for his psychological state, and yet—at least on the evidence of this letter—did not appear to have been against what was being done in principle, which she seems to have considered an appropriate task not for 'soldiers' but for 'hangmen'. Yet she is unable fully to complete her thoughts on what happened in November 1938, acts of brutality that clearly affected those whom she knew and valued personally.

This is a reaction found in the letters of other women too, who protest at having to witness frightful scenes themselves but do not seem to register any sense of outrage at what is being done; they would simply rather not have to see it for themselves, or not register explicitly quite what they knew it really entailed in a broader picture. Similar responses can be seen, for example, in Alexandra von S.'s letters to her mother about the violent mass 'resettlement' of the Jews of Będzin in May 1942 and again in June 1943. In early May 1942, Udo K.'s wife Alexandra wrote to her mother about the 'resettlement' of 1,500 Jews from Będzin, eastern Upper Silesia, adding the comment that 'Russia is as nothing to this'—a betrayal of her knowledge (and that of her mother) of what had been going on in Russia since the invasion of the previous summer.¹³⁵ In her case, the response both now and during the bloody mass clearance of the ghetto the following summer was essentially one of distaste at having to witness the scenes in person, having to hear screams and shots and see dead bodies lying everywhere, but in her letters there is no evidence of any disagreement with the policy of forcible removal of Jews from their home town; the programme in principle of rendering Będzin 'Jew-free', however distasteful such scenes appeared to be in practice, did not appear to occasion any adverse comments on the part of the *Landrat's* wife at the time.¹³⁶

There seems, then, to have been for some time an arguably widespread acceptance of the ultimate ends, even if the means were seen as particularly distasteful—or at least, there appears to have been an explicit attempt to persuade oneself and others of this standpoint, however hard this might be. It is possible that the anguish—not too extreme a word in some cases—apparently experienced when registering or witnessing or having to participate in the brutality of this racial war,

¹³⁴ BfZ, SS 1943-1, Gertrud S., Königsberg/Ostpr., 2 Jan. 1943.

¹³⁵ Alexandra K., letter to her mother, 12 May 1942, private family archive.

¹³⁶ See for further discussion Fulbrook, *Ordinary Nazis*.

often having to act in ways which were in conflict with other personal values, led to a need to register one's feelings about the means while not daring to query the ultimate goals. At the time, arguably, the theory of the 'defensive war' may have helped many to accept the apparent need for such violence. Later, after the war, the individual incidents would not be packaged as part of the bundle that was collectively castigated—more easily accomplished if brutality was condensed into the iconic gas chambers, away from the shooting on the streets or the corpses dangling from trees and balconies.

These dissonances and difficulties in terms of personal responses to violence were even explicitly addressed by Himmler in his 'Posen speeches', first to SS leaders on 4 October and then again two days later to a group of central and regional political leaders (*Reichs-* and *Gauleiter*) on 6 October 1943. Arguing for the separation of immediate emotional reactions from recognition of the allegedly long-term 'service' being performed for the 'national community' by these murders, Himmler acknowledged the difficulties of dealing with this topic:

Allow me, in this connection and in this very close circle, to touch on a question that you, my Party comrades, have all taken for granted, but which has become the most difficult question of my life, the Jewish question.¹³⁷

At this stage, and despite his reference to the small circle of comrades, Himmler appears to have been quite consciously seeking to draw wider circles into the community of the explicitly implicated.¹³⁸ He simultaneously acknowledged both that the mass murder of civilians was widely known about, and yet that it should not be discussed or only under conditions of strictest secrecy, thus effectively binding in the circle of those complicit both in the project of mass murder and in its attempted cover-up and denial. Moreover, for once, he 'translated' the typical Nazi euphemisms shrouding murder into words explicitly saying what was meant:

I beg you really only to listen to what I am saying to you in this circle, and never to talk about it. The question has been put to us: But what about the women and children?—I decided to find a quite clear solution here too. For I did not think it justifiable to exterminate the men—in other words, then, to kill them or to have them killed—and yet allow the children to grow up to take revenge against our sons and grandchildren. The hard decision had to be taken that this people should be wiped from the face of the earth.¹³⁹

At the end of these remarkable comments, Himmler again emphasized both the significance and the inherent difficulty of the task, and the long-term significance of what was being done:

With this I would like to end the discussion of the Jewish question. You now know for certain, and you will keep it to yourselves. Much later, perhaps, we may be able to

¹³⁷ Bradley Smith and Agnes Peterson (eds.), *Heinrich Himmler. Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945* (Propyläen Verlag, 1974), p. 169.

¹³⁸ See also Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Siedler Verlag, 2008), pp. 709–10.

¹³⁹ Smith and Peterson (eds.), *Himmler. Geheimreden*, p. 169.

consider whether the German people should be told somewhat more about it. I believe it is better that we—we collectively—have done this for our people, have taken the responsibility upon ourselves (the responsibility for an action, not for an idea) and that we take the secret with us into our graves.¹⁴⁰

Yet even at this stage, as wider political circles were formally implicated in 'knowledge' of that which they later sought to claim was the sole responsibility of the SS and about which they had 'known nothing', what was going on was far from being the 'secret' that Himmler claimed and intended.

VI. BEYOND TWO WORLDS

Reports of the Nazi murder of Europe's Jews reached the outside world already at a relatively early stage. The routes by which news travelled ranged from accounts by individuals to the more official reports of organizations, whether Jewish, Red Cross, or governmental.¹⁴¹ Readers of any international newspaper of note could be well-informed of what was going on in Nazi-occupied Europe; *The Daily Telegraph* reported on extermination as early as June 1942, as did the BBC; by early July, *The New York Times* was carrying similar reports.

Merely going through the files of one internationally reputable newspaper indicates just how widespread and relatively accurate—in gist if not in detail—knowledge was of the unfolding horror of mass murder under Nazi auspices. Readers of the London-based British newspaper, *The Times*, were as well informed as could be under the conditions of war that murder of civilians was taking place on a simply massive scale, and by a wide variety of means. Nor, without the historian's 'benefit of hindsight', did they represent 1941 as a significant turning point: murder by a wide variety of means had, after all, been going on for a long time before this, and it was rather the rapid escalation in killings as well as enhancement of methods of killing that was worthy of note in 1942. As early as 16 December 1939, there was an article under the prescient title 'Lublin for the Jews. The Nazi plan. A stony road to extermination'. Describing Nazi plans for the 'barren district around Lublin' designated as a 'Jewish reserve', the *Times*' correspondent noted that 'it is clear that the scheme envisages a place for gradual extermination, and not what the Germans would describe as *Lebensraum*'. Reviewing the sheer numbers of Jews to be deported from the Reich (180,000), Austria (65,000), the Czech Protectorate (75,000), the annexed parts of Poland (450,000), and the rump Polish state (1,500,000) *The Times* commented that already 'the number of the dead rises into tens of thousands, and of refugees into hundreds of thousands. But again the size of the programme is very nearly irrelevant: it amounts to a mass massacre such as Nazi imagination can conceive but even Nazi practice can hardly carry through

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1.

¹⁴¹ See e.g. Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the truth about Hitler's 'Final Solution'* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1980).

in full.¹⁴² While commenting with remarkable foresight on the ‘Nazi imagination’, on the point concerning impossibility in practice the correspondent proved to be wildly wrong. Subsequent issues documented the unfolding programme in striking detail. An article of 20 May 1941 on ‘German Atrocities in Poland’ reported on ‘photographs unfit for publication in a newspaper’, including pictures of people ‘hanged by the Germans in front of their own houses or hanged in public squares with children grouped around . . . women being taken off by the execution squad; men rounded up for forced labour’, and spoke of the way in which even German newspapers, such as the *Krakauer Zeitung*, reported on the internment and deaths of Poles in Oświęcim—Auschwitz, although *The Times* did not as yet call it by this name, and stayed with the Polish name of the town where the infamous concentration camp was based, and where, the following year, the extermination facilities of Birkenau would be developed.¹⁴³ And indeed, by the end of 1942, the reports were even more grim. On 11 December 1942 *The Times* reported in some detail the Polish government’s ‘Note on the German Persecution of the Jews’. The article included:

The new methods of mass slaughter applied during the last few months confirm the fact that the German authorities aim with systematic deliberation at the total extermination of the Jewish population of Poland and of the many thousands of Jews deported . . . The Note gives details already published in the Press about Himmler’s decree of March, 1942, for the extermination of 50 per cent. of Polish Jews by the end of 1942, liquidation of the ghettos, the suicide of Mr. Czerniakow, chairman of the Jewish Council, on receiving an order to deliver up 7,000 persons daily, and the transports to the ‘Extermination Camps’.¹⁴⁴

The Note included the estimate that ‘of the 3,130,000 Jews in Poland before the war over one third have perished during the last three years’.¹⁴⁵ Ten days later, on 21 December 1942, summarizing a statement released by the Inter-Allied Information Committee, *The Times* carried an article entitled ‘Persecution of the Jews’ and again subtitled ‘Plan of Extermination’. This summarized the way in which, from ‘the middle of 1942 there was a general intensification of measures against Jews . . . [A] plan of extermination which transcends anything in history.’ The article quoted the figure given by Dr Stephen F. Wise, president of the American Jewish Congress, to President Roosevelt on 8 December, to the effect that some 2,000,000 Jews had been deported and perished, and that ‘another 5,000,000 were in danger of extermination’.¹⁴⁶ Four years to the day after the invasion of Poland, on 1 September 1943, *The Times* carried an article headed: ‘Poland’s Martyrdom. Four Years of Nazi Occupation and Terror. A Policy of Extermination.’ Referring to Polish men who had sought to escape from Nazi forced labour or conscription in the army, the correspondent noted that:

To discourage them from this the Nazis retaliated on their families. Wives, mothers or daughters of men reported to have deserted were taken to a camp at Oświęcim and

¹⁴² *The Times*, Issue 48490, Saturday 16 Dec. 1939, p. 9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Issue 48930, 20 May 1941, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Issue 49416, 11 Dec. 1942, p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* ¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Issue 49424, 21 Dec. 1942, p. 3.

there murdered in gas chambers. Six thousand are said to have died in this way up to date.¹⁴⁷

Although this report—expressed with a sense of restrained outrage—concentrated on the fate of the non-Jewish Polish population, it is clear that knowledge of the gas chambers as a method of killing was explicit. On 8 July 1944, under the heading ‘Hungarian Jews’ Fate. Murder in Gas Chambers’, more details were given to *Times* readers of figures, methods and locations of killing. *The Times* reported on the ‘fate of more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews’ who were deported to Poland, including ‘62 railway carriages filled with Jewish children, aged between two and eight years’. Reports suggested that the majority ‘were sent to Oświęcim, and most of them have been put to death in the gas chambers of that dreaded concentration camp’. Again, the details available to *The Times* were hazy and slightly inaccurate, but the gist of the message was entirely clear:

In 1942 the Germans erected in Oświęcim gas chambers with installations enabling them to kill daily 6,000 and even more of their victims. Many prominent Poles and thousands of Jews were sent to Oświęcim and put to death there.

When the Germans, in the second half of 1942, started their extermination of Polish Jewry the gas chambers of Oświęcim could not cope with all the victims, so two more death camps were erected—Tremblinka [*sic*] and Rawa Ruska, near Lwow. In these three camps more than 2,000,000 Polish Jews have been murdered since 1939.¹⁴⁸

No educated reader in Britain of just this one newspaper alone—leaving aside comparable (and indeed earlier) reports in the *Daily Telegraph* and elsewhere—could have failed to ‘know’ that murder on a major scale was underway in German-occupied Europe. *The Guardian* too had reported in similar terms, carrying for example an article in December 1942 which summarized the situation as conveyed by the Polish government in exile:

The Note on Jewish persecution in Poland which the Polish Government in London has addressed to the respective Governments of the United Nations contains a comprehensive account of the horrors being perpetrated by the Germans on Polish soil. The Note mentions ‘new methods of mass slaughter’ and tells the ghastly story of the Warsaw Ghetto. It declares that the total number of Jews killed in Poland since the German occupation runs into many hundreds of thousands and that of the 3,130,000 Jews in Poland before the war over one-third have perished in the last three years whilst many millions of the Polish population have been either deported to Germany as slave labour or evicted from their homes and lands, and many of their leaders murdered.¹⁴⁹

Yet Germans claimed in their millions after the war that ‘we never knew anything about it’.

One thing Germans certainly did know was the Jews were being ‘resettled’ and areas of the Reich rendered ‘Jew-free’. This was evident for many Germans through

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Issue 49639, 1 Sep. 1943, p. 5.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Issue 49903, 8 Jul. 1944, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, ‘The German massacres of Jews in Poland’, 11 Dec. 1942.

witnessing deportations from neighbouring houses and streets, particularly in cities such as Berlin where many Jewish Germans were still resident—evidenced now in the ubiquitous ‘*Stolpersteine*’ or golden ‘stumbling stones’ set among the cobbles in the pavements outside the former residences of Jews who were forcibly ousted from their homes and transported to their deaths. As the journalist Ursula von Kardorff commented in a letter to a friend, Hanna Boye, on the deportation of the Jews from Berlin:

Here the most depressing things are happening at the moment, All Jews up to the age of 80 are being deported to Poland. You see only tear-stained figures on the streets. It is beyond measure and quite heartbreaking. Above all that one has to stand by and watch so helplessly and can do so frightfully little to help. They are only allowed to take with them a very small bundle the size of a briefcase. And this in face of all the world-shattering things, beyond measure, which are going on out there.¹⁵⁰

Not merely were deportations open for all to see; the results were even trumpeted in German newspapers when particular locations were rendered ‘Jew free’.¹⁵¹

The claim was later made that people believed Jews were indeed simply being ‘resettled’ in their ‘own’ areas in the east; but this claim too was being undermined by reports at the time. Even given the difficulties of obtaining news from outside sources in Nazi Germany, including severe penalties for listening to foreign radio broadcasts, there was plenty enough by way of first-hand knowledge—indeed knowledge gained from active involvement—to ensure that Germans, too, knew full well what was going on, even if not in all the details, and even if they could not or did not want to believe what they were hearing. There can be no doubt at all, despite the widespread claims to the contrary made after the war, that very many adults in Germany knew very well that Jews were being murdered in large numbers. On 13 January 1942, for example, Viktor Klemperer, now living in the ‘Jews’ house’ in Dresden, confided in his diary the rumours that were coming back about the fate of Jews who were being ‘resettled’ in the east: ‘Paul Kreidl reports—a rumour, but very credibly conveyed from various quarters—, that evacuated Jews were *shot dead* in rows as they left the train in Riga.’¹⁵² While victims of racial persecution might be more aware than most of rumours, these circulated too among ‘Aryan’ Germans with little to fear as far as they themselves were concerned. Interestingly, even they seem to have known about planned transports in advance. Daniel L., an elderly German who had retained a capacity to empathize with the fates of others, and who lived in Bavaria far away from the eastern front, wrote in his diary as early as 21 March 1942:

Tomorrow morning the rest of the Jewish people still abiding in Furth will be taken away on a transport. The fate which awaits them is terrifying. Many have preferred to take their

¹⁵⁰ Ursula von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen 1942 bis 1945*, ed. Peter Hartl (München: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), p. 44, fn 1.

¹⁵¹ See e.g. the *Ostdeutscher Beobachter*, Nr. 135, 17 May 1942, article on ‘Krakau wird wieder rein deutsch’.

¹⁵² Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten. Tagebücher 1942–1945*, ed. Walter Nowojski with Hadwig Klemperer (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1995), entry of 13 Jan. 1942, p. 9, emphasis in the original.

own lives. Certain rumours are emerging, the truth of which can hardly be doubted any more, that report that thousands of Jewish men, women and children have been and are being murdered in Poland. The executors of this inhumanity are allegedly the SS. Woe to those who lower German soldiers to the accomplices of hangmen!

Interestingly Daniel L. was concerned not only about the fate of those 'Jewish people' who were being deported (or who had committed suicide for fear of what lay ahead), but also distinguishes between 'soldiers' and 'hangmen' and worries about the 'Germans' whose loyalty to the regime was being misappropriated: 'My heart bleeds if I have to believe that German people are capable of such misdeeds.'¹⁵³ Here, Daniel L. appeared to some extent to have internalized regime distinctions between 'Jewish people' and 'Germans', and yet utterly rejected the murderous consequences of this distinction, in a sense mourning for both sides in the unfolding tragedy.

By January 1943, rumours with quite considerable detail on particular incidents were clearly spreading widely, again as far as Bavaria. As Daniel L. now commented in his diary:

A pastor who was recently staying here on holiday asked me if I had also already heard that whole trainloads of poor Jews, who had been squashed in together, had been simply gassed. I had to reply that I had already heard repeatedly from trustworthy sources of similar and other appalling acts of murder against these poor people, but that I was baulking at believing news of such atrocities. Yesterday a lawyer told me that Jews who had been held in a train that was sealed up had been pleading without success for water. When the train carriage was opened the corpses of martyred and suffocated Jews fell out in front of the railway workers. Such reports are being passed around by word of mouth—and believed.¹⁵⁴

Even so, it should also be borne in mind that not all Germans were exposed to such rumours about killings. Nor by any means were all Germans as complicit in the functioning of the system, let alone the practices of systemic violence, brutality, and murder, as were those involved in the civilian administration and military campaigns of Hitler's state. Unwilling and often only partial belief in rumours is not at all the same thing as positive action sustaining the system or culpable acts of violence, and to ask of people who were often uncomfortably aware that something awful was going on why they did not do more to resist or oppose it is in part to ask the wrong question, or at least to ask the right question of largely the wrong groups of people.

At the very same time as many Germans were more or less aware of the murder in large numbers of Jewish civilians, the vast majority of those old enough to notice were also perfectly conscious of and indeed often actively involved in the employment of forced labourers.¹⁵⁵ Some 20 million Europeans were employed as forced

¹⁵³ DTA Emmendingen, 1315, *Das Tagebuch des Daniel L. 1934–1946*, p. 150, entry of 21 Mar. 1942.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173, entry of 20 Jan. 1943.

¹⁵⁵ See for an overview of the use of forced labour in the Third Reich, Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced foreign labour in Germany under the Third Reich*, trans. William Templer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; orig. German 1985); and in broader historical

or slave labourers, either in the occupied and annexed territories or brought into the Reich to replace the German manpower now away at (or already maimed or killed in) war. From 1943 onwards, perhaps half of the agricultural labourers in Germany were forced workers from abroad. This enormous system of employment of foreign labour often served to reinforce a sense of German 'racial superiority', largely unexamined and taken for granted. Forced labourers were engaged in the most menial and demeaning of work, while 'better' jobs were reserved for the 'racially superior' Germans: thus the hierarchies of work and of course local power over 'inferior' workers echoed the hierarchy of 'race', even if this did not quite serve to massage away class differences among members of the supposed 'master race'.

Strict regulations governed the (non-)relationships between Germans and the 'inferior' forced labourers, with severe penalties for infringements—particularly when romantic or at least sexual relations were involved. There is much evidence to suggest that at a fairly low level many Germans further abused their state-sanctioned position of dominance over foreign workers, and in some cases subjected them to extreme brutality. People working in agriculture often lived with their German employers at close quarters in family farms and in relatively small communities, and were thus particularly vulnerable and exposed—whether to maltreatment with no hope of redress, or by contrast to a degree of common decency and humanity. After the war, acts of physical brutality and maltreatment were, particularly in the GDR, often prosecuted as having been culpable in terms of criminal law—unlike, for decades, the system itself: the right to compensation was only conceded some half a century later, when for most former forced labourers it was far too late to receive anything by way of 'compensation' for the brutality and injustices suffered. On the other hand, some Germans recall that they—or members of their families, if they were still young at the time—treated 'their' foreign workers particularly nicely, inviting them to eat together at the family table or giving them more by way of food and other comforts than they were 'supposed to'. Thus the exploitation of forced labourers could simultaneously give Germans first-hand experience of deeply racist practices, reinforcing their own sense of superiority on 'racial' grounds, and yet also provide the basis for a post-war clean conscience and sense of having been rather virtuous in face of state-ordained callousness.

Vast numbers of 'racially pure' and conformist Germans also were able to witness the state of the slave labourers from concentration camps and their numerous external sub-camps within the territory of the Reich, and some interacted in one capacity or another with these and with inmates of prisoner-of-war camps. It was not as if the racist and deeply repressive character of the Nazi state was in any sense a secret for anyone living there at the time: indeed, callous and often also murderous racism was trumpeted from all sides. That its practical outcome in terms of mass murder should have come to Germans as such as a 'surprise' after the war is perhaps itself the greater surprise, although this allegation was clearly part of

widespread attempts to find ways of living with an uncomfortable past and an individual biography that no longer fitted what was required.

For those decreasing numbers of Jews still remaining in Germany, life was increasingly desperate. Separation, gradual debasement, stigmatization, and loss of social contacts and stimulation, increasing restrictions on where and when they could move, where and when they could buy what, how indeed they would be able to survive, were from October 1941 replaced by the threat or actuality of deportation. Some few sought on occasion to try to retain a sense of being a cultured human being, engaging in a fearful refusal to be completely separated off from the rest of their fellow Germans, sneaking out without wearing the yellow star and going out at night to the cinema, theatre, or other form of entertainment forbidden to Jews. One of the few who survived in Berlin by virtue of assistance from individuals who were prepared to hide her was Inge Deutschkron, who recalled vividly the sense of living in two worlds; she constantly had to be aware that she was acting a role, and having to act even to the tiniest details, such that she would not draw attention to herself as someone who did not belong to the *Volksgemeinschaft* of the living but was, if she gave herself away, effectively doomed to death.¹⁵⁶ Similar experiences were registered by Ruth Klüger, who was ripped from her Viennese childhood first to Theresienstadt then to Auschwitz, and survived the last stages of the war by escaping and hiding under cover of an 'Aryan' identity; she too was acutely sensitive to the differences between the worlds.¹⁵⁷ Both these and many others survivors who survived in hiding or adopted 'Aryan' identities highlight the ways in which they had to force themselves to play a role so as not to attract attention to themselves. They also recall, along with many others, the ways in which Germans simply appeared 'not to see', or 'looked away from', the victims of Nazi persecution—perhaps one of the most significant gestures fostered by the Nazi state.¹⁵⁸

Across Europe, anyone who did not conform to Nazi beliefs and demands, norms of behaviour or of 'racial purity' was at risk: not only Jews but also Sinti, Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses, and countless others had, if they were to have any hope of physical survival, to 'behave as if' through identities which were not ones of their choosing.¹⁵⁹ 'Acting the part' was in different ways, for example, crucial to the

¹⁵⁶ Inge Deutschkron, *Ich trug den gelben Stern* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985).

¹⁵⁷ Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994).

¹⁵⁸ See also M. Fulbrook, 'Embodying the self: Gestures and dictatorship in twentieth-century Germany' in M. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical perspectives, Past and Present Supplement 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 257–79.

¹⁵⁹ For a couple of decades, the appellation 'Sinti and Roma' has been preferred to the previously used and more generic 'gypsies', although technically the broader term 'Roma' can also be used to encompass the 'Sinti' subgroup. Like the choices between 'Holocaust' versus 'Shoah', or 'Kristallnacht' versus 'November pogrom', a heightened sensitivity (particularly among Germans) about potentially causing posthumous linguistic offence seems to be a form of over-compensation for, or at least explicit self-distancing from, far worse offences that can no longer be repaired. The German word 'Zigeuner' derived from a Greek root referring to 'untouchables'. Richard J. Evans has opted for the all-encompassing (and in English more neutral) term 'Gypsies', with a capital letter, in *The Third Reich at War*. The key issue here as elsewhere is to ensure avoidance of offensive terminology, even if the various linguistic arguments about particular terms tend to go in and out of fashion.

survival of homosexuals. While lesbians were not subjected to the same criminal penalties, for gay males 'masquerading' was often the only way to avoid arrest, imprisonment, torture, and in many cases death. Some 50,000 men were convicted under Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code for having committed what were seen as homosexual 'offences', and between 10,000 to 15,000 interned in concentration camps, of whom around two-thirds did not survive.¹⁶⁰ Among those who did survive, 'masquerading' had to continue through the early post-war decades, since homosexuality remained a criminal offence even if the penalties it attracted were no longer so severe. What different strategies for survival among all these groups might mean for a fractured sense of identity in either the short or the long term was highly complex.¹⁶¹

Even for those who were, on all counts, upright and committed members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, there could be inner conflicts. One extraordinary example of what was later so often repressed is given by a series of letters involving a so-called 'euthanasia' case. Hildegard and Wolfgang S. were the parents of a child, Gudrun, who was killed in the later phase of the 'euthanasia' programme, when death was caused by enforced malnutrition culminating in rapid starvation or falling prey to a fatal disease. Gudrun, referred to in letters by her nicknames of 'Dulala' or the affectionate diminutive 'Dulachen', had been born as a perfectly healthy baby in July 1938, but had later apparently received brain damage following a blow to her head. Although the family tried to hush this up even among themselves, their whispered view was that Gudrun's elder sister had delivered this blow in a fit of sibling jealousy; how the sister later felt, given the ultimately fatal consequences of her childish action, is beyond imagining. In any event, Gudrun's condition was soon held to be 'hopeless in the view of the doctors', and, as her father somewhat heartlessly put it in a letter to his brother-in-law, 'Father Christmas will hopefully bring a replacement [*Ersatz*] for Gudrun.'¹⁶² (Or perhaps he had adopted an enforced lightness of expression to cover up the pain and pretend there could be such a thing as an '*Ersatz*' for a unique child.) Shortly before her fourth birthday, her father voluntarily handed Gudrun ('Dulala') into the 'care' of one of the institutes specializing in 'euthanasia', and the child was killed by enforced starvation within a matter of weeks, as her mother recounted:

Two weeks ago today, on the 18th of July, at 12.30 in the morning our Dulala died in the regional institution of Görden near Brandenburg an der Havel. Wolfgang had

¹⁶⁰ Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life stories of lesbians during the Third Reich* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 10. For personal accounts see e.g. Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Gay Men's Press, 1980; orig. German, 1972); Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi war against homosexuals* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1987); Frank Rector, *The Nazi Extermination of Homosexuals* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981).

¹⁶¹ This is a topic that cannot be pursued here in the depth that would be required to begin to do it any kind of justice. But see e.g. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The ruins of memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁶² FMK, 3-2002-1248, letter of 27 Nov. 1941, p. 9.

brought her here without my knowledge on 26.6, when I was away for about three weeks in Upper Bavaria near Königssee and Chiemsee for rest and recuperation, in order, as he tells me, to have D. undergo another thorough investigation. As I have now heard from our Elspeth, he took her there in order never to bring her back again and there he gave them full authority over Dulachen. They then treated Dulachen accordingly. When we visited on 15.7 Dulachen had already got so thin that she was virtually unrecognizable, it hurt me to the depths of my soul, and I reproached myself dreadfully that I hadn't chosen, instead of going to Upper Bavaria, to stay home, and that I bore the guilt of her poor condition . . .¹⁶³

How this bereaved mother managed to retain her relationship with a husband who had knowingly delivered their daughter into the murderous 'care' of this institution, without involving her in the decision and clearly against every instinct in her emotional repertoire, is beyond imagining. But together they had several more children, boys, although the emotional legacies were not easily dealt with. A letter of 8 March 1943 from Wolfgang S. to his brother-in-law Helmut informed him that:

Hilde yesterday gave birth to a little boy—Gunter. Well, our joy is great, as you can well imagine. Hilde did in fact wish for a little girl for Gudrun, but perhaps it is better like this, that she is not reminded so much of our former misfortune; and three boys so close together is also quite nice.¹⁶⁴

Wolfgang and Hildegard seem, on the evidence of their letters, to have remained supporters of the Nazi regime and its war effort to the last, and to have found ways of coping with this personal tragedy, or suppressing any sense of loss or guilt. Wolfgang's work was sufficiently important to allow him to remain largely based in Berlin. But eventually he too was called up in the *Volkssturm* and was killed in the very last few days of the war, just two doors away from his own home.¹⁶⁵

Several decades later, when the by now adult son of the brother-in-law, Helmut, came to read through and seek to understand the import of these wartime letters to his father from his uncle and aunt, he tried to talk it through with one of his cousins, Hildegard and Wolfgang's fourth son. But the latter refused even to touch on the matter of the murdered sister whom he had never known, as Helmut's son recounted:

My attempt to provide the fourth son, Volker, of Hildegard and Wolfgang S. with the findings of these letters and the facts they contained met with the greatest resistance on his part (telephone call on 7.7.1994). He [said that] he did not know all these facts, and also didn't want to know anything about it. Ultimately there were only a few meaningful bits of information contained in the letters, the background must inevitably remain in the dark. His tone was disconcertingly deterrent and aggressive. I had the

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, letter of 1 August 1942, p. 12. Helmut was the husband of Hildegard's sister, and father of the person who donated the collection of wartime letters to the archive.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, letter of 8 March 1943, p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ FMK, 3-2002-1248, Wolfgang-D. Schröer, 'Tötung behinderter Kinder unter dem Deckmantel der Eugenik im "Dritten Reich". Vorbemerkungen', p. 5.

impression that he certainly knew more and precisely because of this did not want to be pestered with it any further. That has to be respected.¹⁶⁶

The matter was repressed as best the family could at the time, and it remained repressed into the next generation; the murder of the child Gudrun effectively disappeared from the family's collective memory, while the father was probably mourned as a late 'victim' of Nazism. It is hard to tell how many families in post-war Germany were affected in this way by enforced silence on such matters, such rewriting of family histories, but the numbers were immense.

Many Germans lived with a combination of constant fear and grief and yet at the same time a degree of freedom and the superficiality of seeking to maintain at least the outward appearance of a 'normal life'. Only relatively late in war, and only in the worst-targeted areas for bombing raids, did that change radically with mass civilian casualties. While many children were sent out to what was supposed to be the safety of life 'on the land', 'Mischling' children such as Ilse J. remained within the cities and sought to survive with adults as best they could. In Ilse J.'s case, the fear was made worse following the deportation of her Jewish grandmother and aunt, neither of whom she ever saw again. Her 'Aryan' father was sent to a forced labour camp, where he was put under immense pressure to divorce her mother, who would then have been deported too; a pressure to which he refused to succumb.¹⁶⁷ This family was highly fortunate that the war did not continue longer and that, unlike many of her mother's relatives, Ilse's parents both survived.

The worst worries for virtually all Germans who remained at home were losses of loved ones at the front—made even worse for those who could not share any world view which made those losses seem at all meaningful, let alone worthwhile in light of a wider cause. For women who were 'internally' opposed to the regime, but not excluded from the 'people's community' by virtue of 'race', finding ways of dealing with the war was difficult. The diaries of a journalist, Ursula von Kardorff, give insights into the mind of a young woman from a background of high social standing and associated socialization into 'Prussian' virtues. In a diary entry of 17 October 1942, Ursula von Kardorff deeply regretted the inactivity, indeed almost fatalism, of her conforming contemporaries:

Those who are cautious are usually right. But this lack of action on all sides is shocking. I don't know a single convinced Nazi, and yet everything is accepted as though it is unalterable.¹⁶⁸

Within Kardorff's social circle, there was a constant shifting of topics of conversation from how awful everything was and constant fear and crying to superficial or very false jollity, a Titanic-style life playing cards as though nothing were wrong in the world. Von Kardorff speaks of the way in which Prussian humour was intended to cover up emotions which were unbearable on saying farewell as yet another

¹⁶⁶ FMK, 3-2002-1248, Wolfgang-D. Schröer, 'Tötung behinderter Kinder unter dem Deckmantel der Eugenik im "Dritten Reich". Vorbemerkungen', p. 6.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Ilse J., 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen*, entry of 17 Oct. 1942, p. 43.

friend or relative left for the front: 'We went through the motions of a cosy family breakfast with the sort of tense jollity that always sets in at a time of farewells. Spoke of the most trivial things. Just no emotions.'¹⁶⁹ With respect to the battle of Stalingrad (to which 250,000 men had been despatched, of whom only 90,000 survived the winter and the campaign itself; and only 6,000 eventually returned after periods of imprisonment), von Kardorff commented: 'Unbelievable. It makes you go crazy, simply crazy . . . And yesterday, despite all, again this ludicrous gaiety, disconnected from the world.' Two days later, she noted: 'A grotesque life: in the depths of grief, and then again for hours on end as though living in peaceful times in which our comfort matters.'¹⁷⁰

Moving in circles where she felt many were like-minded, yet also that she could never fully trust anyone, von Kardorff constantly sought to maintain her Prussian 'bearing' (*Haltung*), yet with ever less success, particularly after one of her brothers, Jürgen, was killed and her other brother, Klaus, was called up and left to fight. When von Kardorff got Jürgen's belongings back, she found he had written a draft of a letter of condolence to one Frau Beheim, whose son died in January, professing religious grounds for maintaining a sense that the war was not without purpose. Von Kardorff quoted it in her diary, seeking desperately to find some comfort in it, but with little success:

'Despite all unhappiness I have not lost faith that this war too has a meaning, only that we don't yet recognize the meaning, for there is nothing which happens in the world without meaning, nothing which is not God's will.'¹⁷¹

Among others who were trying, almost literally, to drown their sorrows was Franziska, one of the former classmates of Helga Paasche and Alexandra von S. from the Augusta Schule. Unlike Alexandra von S., Franziska had not gone along with the politics of the Third Reich; and her father, Alexander Schwab, a former colleague of Hans Paasche's in the German youth movement, was actively involved in the anti-Nazi resistance group called the 'Red Fighters' (*Rote Kämpfer*). In November 1936 Schwab was caught and in 1937 sentenced to eight years' imprisonment; moved around through four different prisons and subjected to brutal maltreatment, he died while still in captivity on 12 November 1943.¹⁷² Franziska was forced, along with her brother Felix, to go to the prison and identify the body of their father. Even decades later, Franziska confessed a continuing sense of guilt that she had tried so hard to live on a superficial plane of existence that would somehow give a sense or at least an appearance of a 'normal life' during the Third Reich. Yet she had a continuing sense that she was really only 'half present', seeing neither the need to emigrate nor wanting to leave her father while there still remained some hope that he might survive and even be released from prison, but at the same time having a strong sense of being cut off from any kind of identification

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, entries of 27 Dec. 1942, 9 Nov. 1942, pp. 50, 41.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, entries of 23 Jan. 1943, 25 Jan. 1943, p. 61.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, entry of 15 Apr. 1943, p. 76.

¹⁷² See also the brief biographical details in Hans-Joachim Fieber, *Widerstand in Berlin gegen das NS-Regime, 1933- bis 1945. Ein biographisches Lexikon* (Berlin: trafo verlag, 2004), Vol. 7, p. 191 (which inaccurately lists him as only having a son).

with her own country and its people—a sense that continued right up into old age, decades after the end of the Nazi regime.¹⁷³

But in the meantime there was little hope for political change either. Von Kardorff was a journalistic colleague of Franziska's brother Felix Schwab, who had attended the same school as her brother Jürgen. Schwab's comments on the mood among the students he was acquainted with was depressing, as was the likelihood of any kind of revolutionary or mutinous developments among soldiers:

He said that the atmosphere of mistrust among students was so great that no one spoke openly. Friends barely trusted each other; impossible to raise such a topic, even only tangentially, in a larger circle . . . No opposition will arise from the Russian trenches. Anyone fighting for his own life has no leisure to brood over the question of whether he likes his government or not.¹⁷⁴

Von Kardorff briefly toyed with the idea of distributing leaflets from the White Rose resistance group, associated with Hans and Sophie Scholl, but her then boyfriend ripped the only copy of a flyer from her hands and burnt it. By the summer of 1943, von Kardorff was highly critical of all the acquired and learned mechanisms for coping with the situation, complaining to her diary of 'my mood in two minds' and the 'shit-word bearing' (*Scheißwort Haltung*):

As though I had not demonstrated that, if it is needed, I more than have this stupid 'bearing'. But these inner debates are about something more important than external composure, which I hope I will always have, they are about conscience. And that you can't always shrug off. One has to become more consistent, that's all that I wanted to achieve . . . That these people don't always latch on that it's not enough for me to have done enough for some people just by my sheer 'existence'. That is after all cowardly and self-sufficient. Self-satisfied. How hateful.¹⁷⁵

But von Kardorff found no resolution for her sense of dissonance and desire for effective action. Her Berlin social circle was by the later years of the war engaged in a mad round of socializing and partying, as people claimed they wanted to use their flats to the full before they were bombed out. The joke, reported also in many other sources, was going the rounds: "Children, enjoy the war, for the peace will be terrible".¹⁷⁶

Others too felt they were living within, effectively, two worlds within one person. The partially aristocratic, partially Jewish Mascha Razumowsky, now living in Vienna, was highly aware of the two worlds in which she was herself living: on the one hand, a world of indulgence in her chosen field of music, attending concerts and enjoying happiness with friends; but aware, on the other, of what she was trying to repress, in trying to ignore both war and the future:

That is the world in which I have been living since Aunt Olga's death, into which I have artificially spun myself, and which is too nice to be true. Everything else, the real, terrible world, is shut out . . . In this way one experiences everything far more

¹⁷³ Letter to a school friend, 6 Nov. 1980, private family archive.

¹⁷⁴ Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen*, entry of 15 May 1943, pp. 84–5.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, extract from *Tagebuch* of 22 Jun. 1943, p. 90, fn. 3.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95, p. 94.

intensively, and the memory of these days will hopefully give me strength and courage when the bad times come, since otherwise my whole current life would be nothing but wasted time. I have by now become quite a pessimist, looking at the dark side of everything. If you look at what is going on around us, how brutalized [*verrobt*] people are, if you hear what will happen if Germany wins the war; if on the other hand . . . you get told about Russia, then there is only one conclusion: for us there can be no future; people like us don't fit into today's times.¹⁷⁷

And further, Razumowsky recognized that she and her family, as the 'hybrid' offspring of a family including both Jews and aristocrats, had every reason to fear what the future might hold in this 'age of ideologies':

Least of all do I understand why we always and everywhere are supposed to be worse than all other people. Once our sort was held to be better, but those were probably not very good times . . . The old world is dead—how the outcome of the new will look one cannot say as yet. But it will depend on the victors whether in the 'new Europe' there will be a place for us or not.¹⁷⁸

Ousted by all ideologies, whether Nazi racism or Soviet class warfare, and fearful of whoever might eventually win this devastating war, all Razumowsky could do was try to shut out thoughts both of present 'reality' and of future possibilities and artificially try to throw herself, as best she could, into enjoyment of her social life and indulgence in music in what was likely to be a very short-lived present.

VII. THE MOBILIZATION OF THE YOUNG

If 80 per cent of all German troops fought on the eastern front in Russia, a very large majority of these did not return to tell the tale. The males of the war-youth generation and the 'first Hitler Youth generation' were decimated by war. Those who survived were not merely aware of the ways their ranks had been thinned, but were also in a large proportion of cases both physically and mentally deeply scarred by their experiences of war and also often imprisonment. The most highly ideologically charged generations were also the most widely maimed, and the most deeply tainted by their support for Nazism as adults. Their entry into the post-war world would be very different from that of those only a few years younger.

The generation of '1929ers' had a markedly different experience of war from that of older or younger cohorts (the latter, of course, not being called up at all).¹⁷⁹ Those younger males who as soldiers entered the war late were by 1944–5 drawn into what was a very different kind of war in the last year of defensive fighting

¹⁷⁷ Mascha, Dolly, and Olga Razumowsky, *Unsere versteckten Tagebücher 1938–1944. Drei Mädchen erleben die Nazizeit* (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), 28 Mar. 1944 (Mascha), pp. 185–6, underlining in original.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7.

¹⁷⁹ On children's experiences, see Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's lives under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

against the approaching enemy forces on German soil.¹⁸⁰ All, including those who never came to serve at the front, such as females and younger males, had distinctive prior experiences of collective socialization and ideological preparation for war.

These cohorts were uniquely subjected to what has been called ‘total education for total war’, exposed to the most far-reaching attempts at ideological influence, paramilitary training, and eventually mobilization for a whole variety of aspects of the war effort—including playing a crucial role in the war economy—going way beyond what might be conceived of as the ‘typical’ activities of a mass youth organization.¹⁸¹ In particular, these cohorts were the most removed from the influence of parents, the most absorbed into the ever growing landscape of ‘camps’ for a variety of purposes, the most subjected to Nazi indoctrination—and arguably the most affected by the experience of violence at a relatively young, impressionable age, a violence for which they themselves held extremely little or no responsibility. Yet the consequences were somewhat more ambiguous than one might expect.

Most had still been at school when war broke out. This meant, in many cases, also being among those school groups who were evacuated from cities where the dangers of air raids were high, and being sent away to pursue their studies in country areas supposedly well away from any risk of bombing. Letters home from such camps combine comments about everyday life—particularly the quality and quantity of food—and concerns about the well-being of members of their families at home. The combination of the extraordinary and ordinary for these youngsters was taken for granted in ways which can, for later readers, seem quite disconcerting. Wolfgang M. (born June 1929), for example, wrote home on 14 September 1943 from his camp in the Wartheland:

I haven’t had any post from you yet. How are you? Is our house still standing? I’m well, yesterday I ate up the last sandwiches; and I’ve only got one pear left now too.¹⁸²

The first few letters report on the details of life in the camp, sleeping on a ‘straw sack, on the floor due to lack of space’. There was no electricity, so ‘we can’t listen to the Führer’s speech here’. The daily round of organized activities started at 7:00, with school lessons for most of the morning, a ‘march’ or ‘darning’ or ‘mending’ in the afternoon, and going to sleep at the ‘onset of darkness’. Many letters are concerned with food, as this growing teenager, like his fellow students, appears to have been perpetually hungry. Within a matter of weeks homesickness was taking over; by 22 September, Wolfgang M. was counting down the days until he could go home, having been given a probable date of ‘February’, a rather general indication

¹⁸⁰ For the age ranges called up in different years of the war, see Bernhard Kroener, ‘The manpower resources of the Third Reich in the area of conflict between Wehrmacht, bureaucracy, and war economy, 1939–1942’ in *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. V, pt 3, p. 831.

¹⁸¹ Michael Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg: Hitlerjugend und nationalsozialistische Jugendpolitik*, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Texte und Materialien zur Zeitgeschichte (München: K.G. Saur, 2003), Vols. 13/1 and 13/2.

¹⁸² FMK, 3.2002.7614, Wolfgang M. letter of 14 Sep. 1943.

from which he developed a detailed calculation: 'so in approximately 145 days. Christmas is in 93 days.'¹⁸³

Students in another evacuated school camp in southern Bavaria were making similar comments about conditions and food supplies. One of the adults in charge of five camps in the Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Mittenwald area sent a circular letter to all parents seeking to reassure them that, despite difficulties caused by shortages of books and materials, everything was being done to look after their children and they should not believe everything in their children's letters. As he put it: 'Monitoring their letters has demonstrated that the younger pupils easily give a false impression of provisions.'¹⁸⁴ The censorship of children's letters would continue, and there should be no attempt to circumvent this rule:

We kindly ask parents never to cause your children to keep their letters secret from the camp leadership, which has unfortunately occurred on occasion. In this way mistrust and lack of honesty are sown and the consistent education of character by both school and home is endangered.¹⁸⁵

This generation was, then, being brought up to conform to the norms and practices of the state as transmitted through the school and camp leadership.

For many, the transition from such schooling into military service was seamless. In the file of Fritz W. (born 1927) was a little card entitled 'The waiting one' [*Der Wartende*] with the following rhyme on it, beautifully written out in careful handwriting:

For Fritz the time is dragging out long
Until to the army he can go
Because the year group to which he belongs
Still has to weather a year or so.¹⁸⁶

In the event, they did not have to wait so very long. By 24 May 1943, some four months after the schoolchildren had settled into their evacuation quarters, Fritz W. and his schoolmates had been called up as air force auxiliaries (*Luftwaffenhelfer*). In the words of the 8th Flak-Division commander in charge of Fritz:

With numerous comrades he is fulfilling his service with enthusiasm, cheerfully subordinating himself to military discipline and by his efforts replacing a soldier who is thus freed up to serve at the front.¹⁸⁷

And from the air force auxiliary service, like those just old enough to enter the final and most murderous phase of the war, Fritz soon joined the regular troops. He was last heard of on 18 March 1945, when his left leg was in plaster; there was then no further news. His parents sought desperately to trace him; as they put it in a letter to the Red Cross in January 1946, 'Fritz is our only child and this hoping against hope is very difficult.'¹⁸⁸ Despite a correspondence going through until the 1960s, Fritz

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, letter of 22 Sep. 1943.

¹⁸⁴ FMK, 3.2002.7256, Gerfried Ahrens, circular letter from *Lagerleiter* of February 1943.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* ¹⁸⁶ FMK, 3.2002.7256, Fritz W. (1927), no date.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, letter of 24 May 1943. ¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, letter of 24 Jan. 1946.

was never heard of again. Wolfgang M., two years younger than Fritz, was luckier: he was only called up on 1 May 1945, and survived the last week of the war intact.

Unlike members of the war-youth generation, who had reached adulthood well before the Third Reich entered its most violent phase, and who had, like Udo K., been in a position to make informed choices about compromises and career goals, however uncomfortable they may or may not have found subsequent developments, for many of these youngsters 'life projects' had been almost entirely informed by Nazi socialization. Individuals such as Fritz W. and his near contemporary Siegfried H., born in 1926, had available to them little by way of alternatives to officially given 'scripts' with respect to valued character traits and 'racial types', constructions of personal identity in terms of 'national' commitments, and future aspirations in which their own lives and that of the national community were intricately bound together.¹⁸⁹ This was particularly the case when there were no strong alternative moral communities (of the sort represented by Maria K.'s family, who had stood by and supported her in aiding Jews in November 1938), or when there appeared to be little by way of practical alternatives in terms of achieving a sense of self-worth and fulfilment, let alone broader social recognition.

Siegfried H., for example, left school before he turned fourteen and worked as a gardening assistant, a job which he had to give up for health reasons; he then managed to obtain work as an office assistant, but was desperate to be called up into the Reich Labour Service (RAD) with a view to going on into the *Waffen-SS* at the earliest possible age; in the surviving letters, the family at some stage after the war blacked out every mention of the particular SS unit he sought to join, before the letters were finally deposited in an archive. As Siegfried H. put it in his letter to the registration office of the RAD:

I hereby beg you politely to call me up finally for the RAD after all, so that by the end of my 17th year I can be called up in the [SS unit blacked-out]. I know that with my modest strength I cannot make a big contribution to the victory, but in the difficult times of today where every man is needed, I don't want to stand back and I would like to place myself at the service of the Fatherland . . .

Heil Hitler!¹⁹⁰

Having successfully obtained a place in the Reich Labour Service, Siegfried H. wrote to his mother on 1 August 1943 that he had heard that his 'comrades from the year group 1926 now must also join the RAD' whereas he would soon be out and able to join the *Waffen-SS*. His youthful enthusiasm for this sudden advancement, as he saw it, is almost painful to read:

Then at least I can say with pride that at the age of 16¾ I was already serving in enemy territory for my Führer, for my people [*Volk*], and for my wonderful Sudeten German Heimat.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ FMK, 3.2002.1377, Siegfried H. (28 Aug. 1926–24 Aug. 1944).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, letter from Siegfried H. to RAD-Meldeamt Trautenau Sudetenland, 4 May 1943.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, letter from Siegfried H. to his mother, 1 Aug. 1943.

Here, a young person's entire identity seems bound up with the national cause; and in the case of a person who was highly unlikely to have had many other options available to him, either structurally or culturally. He was, in short, fully mobilized, in mind as well as body.

Even after experiencing the privations of inadequate food and excessive exercise, as well as some apparently stomach-turning experiences while in training school for the SS near Berlin ('sometimes you see things that can ruin your appetite for weeks on end'), Siegfried H. remained enthusiastic:

Well I too certainly didn't dream of it being all fun and games with the [SS unit blacked-out], but nevertheless my eyes have also really been opened here. But the harder the exertion, the better for us in the upcoming mobilization at the front . . . Despite all the tribulations and exertion I'm unspeakably proud to be able to belong to precisely this, the best troop of our German people and quite particularly the core unit [SS unit blacked-out], of our [blacked-out]. When I look at the black lapels with the white runes [SS unit blacked-out] on my uniform, then the sacredness of the words 'My honour is to be faithful' comes to my mind and I want to and will always and under all circumstances put into practice this oath of fidelity that I carry on my belt buckle. Even if there are sometimes moments in which one thinks about things differently or because of the unfamiliar circumstances would like to mutiny, they nevertheless pass quickly and that happens even to the best of soldiers and is here in order to be overcome.¹⁹²

When Siegfried H. finally went to serve on the eastern front, the inevitable soon happened. He was wounded at Tarnopol on 10 March 1944, but on recovery rapidly volunteered himself back to the front, where he died. In the words of one of his superiors in *SS-Sturm 10/95*: 'After his recovery he volunteered himself back to the front and on 24.8.44 during the battles in Tuckum, Latvia, his hero's death for Greater Germany befell him.'¹⁹³ Siegfried himself had, earlier, tried to give a meaning to his death with almost Christian overtones, claiming to his mother that, in the event of his death, his girlfriend Ella should feel that (echoing Christ's words) 'he died that we may live': 'Should fate determine for me that I do not survive to experience the victorious peace, then Ella should and must say, he has died for me. He had to give his life in order that I can live!'¹⁹⁴

The death notices and related material make for miserable reading. As Siegfried's family put it:

The deepest sorrow was brought to us by the news that our beloved, good son, brother, nephew and cousin, the volunteer SS Infantryman of the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Regiment,

SIEGFRIED H.,

bearer of the insignia of the wounded, found a hero's death during an attack in the East on 24.8.1944, 4 days before his 18th birthday, joyfully giving his life in willing service for the Führer and the Heimat. He was denied the chance to see his beloved Heimat

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, letters from Siegfried H. to his mother, 6 Dec. 1943, 10 Dec. 1943.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 'Lebenslauf', *SS-Sturm 10/95*.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, letter from Siegfried to his mother of 10 Dec. 1943.

again. With cheerful courage he made the ultimate sacrifice of his own life, and we of our most beloved.

The family also produced a verse which from an aesthetic point of view can only be described as doggerel, but which is significant for the way in which it remains full of pain despite all the attempts at making Siegfried's death at such a young age seem to mean something more than the utterly useless loss of a much loved son:

When the great reunion eventually takes place
 With much rejoicing on the streets
 We will stand silently and with a sad face
 Alone and bereft.
 He will not return in glory to these parts
 Home to the quiet hearth,
 He whom we pressed to our hearts
 Rests in foreign soil.
 Sleeps the long, deep sleep
 Without hope of morning
 The bullet that hit him deep
 Has hit us too.

While still talking about a 'hero's death . . . for Führer and Fatherland', the family nevertheless registered their own private pain: 'All our hopes sank with him into a distant soldier's grave. Only those who have shared the same fate can appreciate our pain.'¹⁹⁵ The tragedy for so many Germans after the war was that, while the personal pain of bereavement remained acute, the supposedly comforting cultural wrappings of the allegedly higher 'meaning' of the premature death had either faded away and disintegrated entirely, or had become unspeakable, effectively censored in post-war, post-Nazi society: there could later be no solace, no 'good' reasons to have died so young, to have lost one's loved ones. Those on the side of the fight against Nazism could still have reason to believe that their loved ones had died in a 'good cause', however much they wished it had not had to be; but those who mourned for loved ones who had lost their lives on behalf of 'Führer and Fatherland', and whose leaders had, furthermore, been responsible for instigating the war, had no such framework for rendering suffering and bereavement less unbearable.

Siegfried H. may or may not have been unusual (like Wilhelm B. before him) in the way he identified so fully with the Nazi cause. But he was far from alone in his outlook. And his family were among the millions of bereaved, whose reactions can at best have clutched at the notion of death in service of something higher. Whether towards the end a concern for defence of family and homeland against what were seen as the invading hordes of rapacious Russians displaced faith in the *Führer* as the prime motive for fighting on with commitment, rather than allowing a widespread collapse of morale as in 1918, remains a somewhat moot point; there is only suggestive and partial evidence to this effect. Arguably for the vast majority of

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, materials relating to the memorial service.

adults a tremendous fear of 'Bolshevism' and what would come after this most horrendous 'racial war' was a major incentive in balancing the fear of peace against the hatred of a continuing and by now suicidal war.

Other youngsters appear to have been far more shocked and traumatized by what they went through. In 1943 the sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds were called up, and in 1944 also whole classes of fifteen-year-olds were removed from their school classrooms and mobilized as 'Luftwaffenhelfer', 'Flakhelfer' or anti-aircraft auxiliary forces.¹⁹⁶ Not only the youngest but also the oldest German males still capable of bearing arms were now being called up in the 'People's militia' (*Volkssturm*), to replace the vast numbers of men who had already been maimed or fatally wounded and killed in their prime; in February 1945, this decree was extended also to women. The young in particular were at a stage of life when their primary personal concerns had been narrowly focused on home, school, and relationships, with Nazi socialization resulting in a sense of the significance of fulfilling duties; unlike those who were somewhat older, they had no experience at all of life outside or before Nazi Germany, and nothing with which they could personally compare it. Many came from homes where parents had accommodated themselves to the regime in one way or another.¹⁹⁷ They were mentally entirely unprepared for what now faced them.

Diary entries of the time by Sepp Nuscheler suggest a certain bravado and sense of adventure at first, as his whole school class served together and had some near misses and lucky escapes while 'defending' the town of Saarbrücken. Having been brought up to believe in the cause, Nuscheler's tone at first is almost stridently triumphant, or at least has periodic echoes of the bombastic tone of officialese at the time; and *Flakhelfer* activities appeared initially more worthwhile than time spent in the classroom. But it was not long before the tone of the diary entries turned distinctly more sombre, as Nuscheler's friends, classmates and superior were killed before his eyes:

¹⁹⁶ See Rolf Schörken, *Luftwaffenhelfer und Drittes Reich. Die Entstehung eines politischen Bewusstseins* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1985), p. 17. On the anti-aircraft auxiliary forces, see also e.g. Horst-Adalbert Koch (with Heinz Schindler and Georg Tessin), *Flak. Die Geschichte der Deutschen Flakartillerie und der Einsatz der Luftwaffenhelfer*, 2nd edn (Bad Nauheim: Podzun Verlag, 1965; orig. 1954); Hans-Dietrich Nicolaisen, *Die Flakhelfer. Luftwaffenhelfer und Marinehelfer im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1981); Hans-Dietrich Nicolaisen, *Der Einsatz der Luftwaffen- und Marinehelfer im II. Weltkrieg. Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Büsum: Selbstverlag Dr. Hans-Dietrich Nicolaisen, 1981); Ludwig Schätz, *Schüler-Soldaten. Die Geschichte der Luftwaffenhelfer im zweiten Weltkrieg* (Darmstadt: Thesen Verlag, 1974); Rolf Schörken, 'Sozialisation inmitten des Zusammenbruchs. Der Kriegseinsatz von 15- und 16-jährigen Schülern bei der deutschen Luftabwehr (1943–1945) in Dittmar Dahmann (ed.), *Kinder und Jugendliche in Krieg und Revolution* (Paderborn etc.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), pp. 123–43.

¹⁹⁷ See e.g. the personal accounts in Hans Scherer, *Ich war Oberschüler und Luftwaffenhelfer. Teil I, II und II, 1927–1948* (Selbsverlag, Staffelnstein 1996); Hans-Martin Stimpel, *Schülersoldaten 1943–1945. Gymnasiasten als Luftwaffenhelfer in Berlin, bei Auschwitz, und als Fallschirmjäger in der 'Festung Harz'* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2004); and Wulf Schröder, *Luftwaffenhelfer 1943–44. Erlebnisse einer Gruppe Flensburger Schüler im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Kleine Reihe der Gesellschaft für Flensburger Stadtgeschichte, Heft 16 (Gesellschaft für Flensburger Stadtgeschichte, 1988).

19 July 1944

Already at 8.00 the sirens went off. Wave after wave came over . . . Then there was a humming noise quite close by, the ghastly humming noise. It gets quite dark from the bomb's impact, it must be really close by . . . I threw myself down immediately . . . What sort of a picture then lay before me . . . I will never so easily forget. Pelzel covered in stones up to his chest, back to back with Scheibe. His face streaming with blood. A picture of horror. The death rattles and the groaning of the wounded are still resounding in my ears. Friedemann . . . had severe injuries. Walter died instantly. Pelzel we dug out with our hands, he died a few minutes later. The same with our Chief. One I took away, I don't any more know who it was. The faces were disfigured. Doctors arrived, up until then our paramedics had already done makeshift bandaging.¹⁹⁸

From then on, until the end of his diary in December, the entries record the shock of deaths, and the meaninglessness of the military awards for bravery which were made even in posthumous 'compensation':

20th July 1944

. . . Cadet Barthen, Labour Service men Koch and Schmal died of their wounds today. General Buffa came to us, praised our attitude by awarding us the Iron Cross II and the War Merit Cross Class II. Cadet Barthen did not survive to receive his Iron Cross II.¹⁹⁹

The following day, this teenager noted in his diary:

21st July 1944

Everyone is rather nervous here, the latest attacks made themselves rather noticeable.²⁰⁰

There was, at this time, no comment about the attempt on Hitler's life the previous day. But the position of the *Flakhelfer* was rapidly becoming more precarious, and the accompanying shift in mood was registered in the diary:

11th August 1944

. . . An impact extremely nearby. Everyone lay on the ground. Again everything was dark and only gradually lightened to a grey haze . . . A direct hit on an artillery piece of the 5th Battery. Ten dead and five injured, mostly 16- and 17-year-old air force auxiliaries.²⁰¹

By the autumn, Sepp was clearly shifting in his perceptions of what he understood as 'good':

14th October 1944

. . . Now Saarbrücken has been completely destroyed . . . The war is getting ever more threatening. When will the world come to peace? When will goodness make a breakthrough?²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Sepp Nuscheler, 'Kriegstagebuch (12. Juni bis 21. Dezember 1944)', repr. in Ernst Itschert, Marel Reucher, Gerd Schuster, and Hans Stiff, *'Feuer frei—Kinder!' Eine mißbrauchte Generation—Flakhelfer im Einsatz* (Saarbrücken: Buchverlag Saarbrücker Zeitung, 1984), pp. 181–94, quotation here from pp. 186–7.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Some six weeks later, he commented:

28th November 1944

We are now leaving Saarbrücken. We experienced good but also hard times this year. The town has in the meantime been completely destroyed, it's like a city of the dead.²⁰³

Finally, war became a deadly reality in Sepp's own family, which he records with a startling factuality and possible numbness in his diary:

7th December 1944.

I received today a telegram informing me of the death of my father. The Chief immediately gave me special leave.²⁰⁴

The same collection includes photographs of the occasion when, on 11 May 1944, families stood around a mass grave with mothers and younger brothers and sisters looking down on a row of coffins covered in flags (including swastikas), and the inscription 'Here on 11.5.1944 died air force auxiliaries at the young age of 15–17' followed by the names of sixteen young people who, in times of peace, would have still had a couple of years of schooling before them; victims of total mobilization, at an age when few had a choice either over what to do, or even what to believe.²⁰⁵

The utter pointlessness of their service to the cause, alongside shock at the loss of their classmates and comrades, made a long-lasting impact on these young people. Hans-Martin Stimpel, a former *Luftwaffenhelfer*, later recalled his time 'defending' the capital city, Berlin in quite graphic terms:

The skies were covered in exploding shrapnel, tracer bullets and bright illuminated parachutes falling to the ground. In between, every so often burning planes plummeted down, spiralling as they fell . . . On top of that the fiery glow of detonating mines and fire-spewing phosphorous canisters lit up the night. Searchlights searched the skies for planes . . . The smell of burning and black smoke damage still gave evidence the following day that tens of thousands of fire bombs had turned whole areas of the town into a blazing sea of flames. We knew: yet again hundreds if not thousands of people had died appalling deaths in the affected areas, under their collapsing houses or while attempting to escape through blazing streets in the firestorm. We could not prevent it. So this was our experience, in danger of our own lives, of how we had been mobilized to defend our population, as in each of these bombing nights we made futile attempts to fight against this and great sections of the capital city fell into ruins . . . Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds were torn to shreds, and anyone who survived would never be rid of these traumatic impressions.²⁰⁶

Many youngsters went into the fight apparently willingly, only to be shattered by the realization of what violence actually meant once they witnessed it at first hand. A massive sense of shock at the realities of violence, at having been sent out on a hopeless and dangerous mission in vain, and at seeing one's friends and classmates being blown into pieces, was soon followed, after the war, by a sense of 'having been

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁰⁵ Itschert, 'Feuer frei—Kinder!', pp. 92–3.

²⁰⁶ Stimpel, *Schülersoldaten*, pp. 6–7.

betrayed'—a feeling which appears to have been very widespread among both males and females of the 1929er generation.²⁰⁷

Hans-Martin Stimpel only published his recollections of his time as a *Luftwaffenhelfer* some sixty years after he was called up into service of the Third Reich as a teenager. His traumatic memories of air raids, nightly bombing, and firestorms echo those of many others of his generation, whose experiences as victims of air raids have recently been the subject of increased attention.²⁰⁸ There can be little doubt that, unlike those a few years older, this generation could bear no responsibility for the violence which was now returning to Germany with a vengeance, towards the end of a war of unprecedented brutality. Like many of his age group in later life, Stimpel appears to have been most affected by the consequences for himself and his classmates of the horrendous circumstances into which they were quite innocently thrown. In these memoirs, however, written with the benefit of later knowledge, he remained what can best be described as somewhat coy about his own and his classmates' knowledge of Nazi atrocities and violence against others. Stimpel recounts that many from his school and his *Flakhelfer* group were stationed at Grojec, six kilometres south of Auschwitz, for some six months until the Russian advance in January 1945; thus they were there during the latter half of 1944, a period which included the gassing of the massive transports of Hungarian Jews in the summer of 1944, and the attempt by a resistance group among the prisoners to blow up the crematoria at Birkenau in October 1944. The young *Flakhelfer* working in nearby Grojec saw the slave labourers—who must, if they were at all typical, have been in a shocking state of starvation and near collapse—but, according to Stimpel's account, despite their close proximity (where both sights and smells should have alerted them, even if they were 'not told' what was happening in the camp) neither knew nor believed what was going on in Auschwitz-Birkenau. As Stimpel puts it:

Most people had only vague knowledge, limited to concepts such as 'prison camp', 're-education camp' or 'work camp for the enemies of National Socialism'. They had heard nothing as yet of 'gassing'. Any form of contact with or talking to the prisoners was strictly forbidden, and apart from that the women, who were being misused for construction work, mostly spoke only Hungarian. When rumours nevertheless occasionally arose that made one suspect worse in the camp, the head of the Flak unit maintained that such 'idle talk' was based solely on 'enemy lies'. The prisoners were 'enemies of the people, who have been locked up here and have to carry out penal labour'.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ See further below, Ch. 7. Cf. also Gabriele Rosenthal, 'Einleitung' in Gabriele Rosenthal (ed.), *Die Hitlerjugend-Generation. Biographische Thematisierung als Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Essen: Verlag Die blaue Eule, 1986), p. 17.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002).

²⁰⁹ Stimpel, *Schülersoldaten*, p. 9. See also his more comprehensive account in Hans-Martin Stimpel, *Getäuscht und mißbraucht. Schülersoldaten in Zentren des Vernichtungskrieges* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2001), pp. 41–83, particularly pp. 74–6.

It is quite possible that the teenagers believed what those in charge of them claimed, and accepted the picture portrayed. Yet at the same time this account echoes what became, in the post-war decades, a familiar trope: that true evil only really began at the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau, indeed only really at the doors of the gas chambers. On this version, one could effectively remain innocent if one had 'only' participated in upholding a system characterized by practices of utmost brutality, generally causing death within months by enforced starvation or killing on the spot for collapsing on the job, and had not actually 'realized' that the 'rumours' of 'gassings' were actually true. By so massively restricting what was held to be the key issue, people could claim with conviction that they really had 'never known anything about it', even at these extremely close quarters. It is interesting that even in this late account, too, there is an odd and inappropriate gesture towards what can perhaps be best described as chivalry: to say that women were 'misused' for construction work implies that lighter work might have been acceptable or that for men such work would not have constituted an abuse; an extraordinary implication in the circumstances.

Stimpel was perhaps somewhat unusual in the proximity of his unit to Auschwitz. But evidence of abuse of slave labourers, not to mention the condition of those on the death marches, was far more widespread in the last few months of the war, as survivors of concentration camps were brought ever closer to the heart of the Reich in face of the Soviet advance. There were very few Germans, then, who did not witness horrific scenes of one sort or another in late 1944 and the early months of 1945. And some youngsters, on the evidence of contemporary material, do seem to have retained a sense of moral qualms or conscience in a way that those somewhat older, already 'made raw' by their earlier experiences, apparently no longer registered. The comments of one young person who was still only an air force auxiliary helper (*Luftwaffenhelfer*), and who was utterly shocked by what he saw as the 'burdens on his soul' of being involved in guarding concentration camp prisoners, are interesting in this regard:

There are however other burdens on the soul, of a weighty character. For example the Jewish problem, held before our eyes here in all its naked reality. Here . . . in large KZ.-camps there are thousands of Jews living in conditions of mud and slime . . . During the day, they receive as their provisions two pieces of army bread and also a watery soup . . . On this basis they have to . . . carry out the heaviest of physical labour: excavating deep shafts in the ground, laying sewerage, cutting down trees and much else. In order to drive them on to higher productivity, naturally guards of the Jews have to run along behind them with rifles, punishing them with blows if they work too slowly and shooting them dead if they are separated by more than 3 metres from the group. And this is the task that we have to fulfil. To find the right path here between sympathy, charity, and duty, is very very hard. At first I avoided this job. But now I sign up for it all the more often, in order thereby to achieve some amelioration for the 'insulted and humiliated' [a reference to the title of a book by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, based on a biblical phrase]. That is of course forbidden, and I have already often got into trouble for this, but I nevertheless still think this is more the right thing to do than how the SS is going about it . . . Every day 30 die naturally

and 20 commit suicide . . . you have to be really down in the dirt to find God, it doesn't work in a confirmation suit.²¹⁰

This youngster, presumably not so long out of his own confirmation lessons, was clearly having something of a difficult time squaring the morality he had learnt in church with that propagated by his country's leadership.

VIII. BOOMERANG VIOLENCE

In the ten months between July 1944 and capitulation on 8 May 1945, nearly as many Germans died as a result of Hitler's war as in the whole previous five years since the outbreak of war in 1939. Of the total of 5,300,000 who died in the war, around 2,600,000 million—virtually one half—died in the last ten months alone.²¹¹ Yet Germans appear generally to have been far more willing to 'fight to the bitter end' in 1944–5 than they were in 1918, when it was mutiny on the part of soldiers and sailors that precipitated the collapse of the imperial government and the ending of the war.

There are a number of reasons for continuing to fight against all the odds in 1944–5, including not only the military mobilization of ever broader sections of the population whatever their views, but also a widespread, shared, and increasingly desperate sense of the need to defend 'Fatherland' and family, massively spurred by rising fear about revenge if Germany were to lose the war. There was particular anxiety as far as likely 'Bolshevik' treatment of the Germans was concerned, based not only on the years of propaganda about the 'defensive war' against the 'inferior peoples' of the east, but also the response which Hitler's aggressive war of utmost brutality had indeed unleashed on the part of those who had been invaded and attacked. As one soldier put it, reporting on a Russian propaganda leaflet:

Yesterday I got a copy of a Russian flyer that was targeted at Russian soldiers. Probably no proclamation or newspaper article could be more arousing than the order of the Jew Ehrenburg: 'Soldiers of the Red Army, now collect your booty, German women and girls! Enjoy the scent of their flesh and your sexual lust. Then revel in murdering the fascists. Take for yourselves the blond Germanic women, and break the German arrogance!' I must say, on reading this, an ice-cold shiver ran down my spine. One shouldn't think about these words further: they are terrifying. Hatred without limits and offering ourselves to the last is the only answer that we can give to them. *We must* nail the colours of victory to our flag!²¹²

Even though faith in the invincibility or infallibility of the *Führer's* judgement might have been wavering after Stalingrad, a determination to save the 'beloved

²¹⁰ Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, 20.11.1944, L.w.Helfer, Dormettingen, p. 80.

²¹¹ Wette, *Wehrmacht*, p. 182.

²¹² Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, 17.9.1944, Hptm.H.G.E., Stab/Pz.Aufkl. Abt.12, 12. Pz.Div., p. 78.

Fatherland' and avoid the potential horrors of revenge following defeat seem to have provided a powerful motivating force, particularly among the more committed soldiers who had been most influenced by Nazi ideology. As one put it, in August 1944:

We can no longer think of resting, now it's all or nothing, make or break, we have to gain victory, Germany must live. It must never go under, our beautiful Germany, however much by way of sacrifices this may claim . . . [F]or it cannot and shall not be the case that we lose the war, for then we Germans are lost without hope. The Jews will then overwhelm us and annihilate everything that is German, there would be a frightful and ghastly massacre . . .²¹³

There is in comments such as this no sense whatsoever of the irony of the German perspective. As soldiers began to worry about what might follow, they played down, even trivialized, what it was that they had already done, and began to create a differentiation of identity between 'Germans' and 'Nazis'. As another soldier put it on 4 September 1944:

What if we lose the war after all? That would be frightful, and one would have to have doubts about destiny, we Germans have after all not been such criminals, even if the Nazis occasionally went a bit too far with the Jews [*es mal ein bisschen toll mit den Juden getrieben*]. So I would rather die in action before I get sent to Russia for forced labour, then at least this shit would have an end . . .²¹⁴

Soldiers' views clearly varied according to prior convictions, but the sheer numbers who still—despite or perhaps even because of the mass crimes they had witnessed and participated in—were strongly imbued with Nazi ideology while yet distancing themselves from any responsibility is quite remarkable. To reduce the murder of millions of people to a phrase more frequently found in the context of a playground scuffle is extraordinary.

Even those no longer in the thick of fighting were locked into mentalities and ways of viewing the world which allowed them to dismiss or evade any real confrontation with the enormity of what the Nazi regime had been doing. An intriguing insight into views among German prisoners of war in North Africa is given in the manuscript notes of Fritz Beyling, commenting on reactions among fellow POWs to reports on discoveries of concentration camps and mass murders committed by the Germans in France and Poland:

The reaction amongst circles of Nazi prisoners of war to the reports about fascist atrocities in France and Poland . . . is quite various. A small number reject these things as 'bogus enemy propaganda'. That's particularly the case concerning reports of gas chambers and corpse factories [*Kadaverfabriken*]. A far larger proportion support the view that the Führer and Himmler are 'still being far too humane' (Sergeant E., . . . among those who in their circles support the principle of 'root and branch'

²¹³ Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, 16.8.1944, Uffz. O. D., 4. Kp./Trsp. Sich.Rgt.882, p. 74.

²¹⁴ Manoschek (ed.), *Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum*, 4.9.1944, Wm. L. D., 7. Btrr./Pz.Art.Rgt. 103, 4.Pz.Div., FPN 03 711 B, p. 77.

extermination.) Corporal W. averred with respect to the SS crimes in Oradour that it was the view of the whole 4th Company . . . that this had happened ‘with good reason’. The only mistake had been that such measures had been used too sparingly in France . . . Anyone who had themselves been involved in terror actions like those at the moment in the East has been forced under threat into remaining silent about them even in the prisoner of war camp (evidence of Party member L . . .)

For many it is the case that a certain anxiety about possible post-war penalties has precipitated a particularly ‘courageous’ Nazi stance.²¹⁵

At this stage, clearly, most of those who had been implicated in fighting for Nazism were unsure of what response to adopt—but the last thing on their minds, it would appear, was any real concern with the central issues of morality and mass murder. Moreover, they were increasingly concerned with the safety and well-being of their own, as the violence unleashed by Nazism across the world boomeranged back into the heartlands of Germany itself.

If some Germans had managed to live relatively comfortably in many areas for much of the war, from 1943 at the latest most families began to realize and fear for the worst. With the growing threat of air raids, children were removed from the big cities and sent to what were held to be safe areas in the countryside; people who had been bombed-out sought new lodgings; and gradually those in the east began to fear for the likely advance of a revengeful Red Army. There was no longer any possibility of evading the effects of war. As Fritz Sch.’s sister wrote to his wife Luise in late August 1943:

Recent weeks have been full of commotion, the long stream of refugees would never come to an end, we had all the misery at first hand . . . I helped a lot [in the assembly camp for refugees], I saw misery without end . . . Berlin is also being cleared of school-children . . . How many families are now separated. Hopefully this will all soon come to a good end.²¹⁶

At times, it may have seemed to soldiers in some parts of the front as if the exposure to the violence of air raids at home was even worse than what they were experiencing. Fritz Sch. wrote home from Italy in the final stages of the war barely ruffled by his own circumstances:

Healthwise I’m fine now . . . Now and then I’ve swapped some of my tobacco for a piece of sausage, I could well use it. I can’t complain about our provisions, if I compare it to the war years of 1917–1918.²¹⁷

But he was at the same time well aware of what was going on at home, and was shattered by the implications:

I came into possession of the newspaper ‘The Reich’ of 4th March, from a comrade. The article about the attack on Dresden gave me an insight into the horrendous

²¹⁵ SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/1, Fritz Beyling, undated manuscript notes, late 1944/early 1945.

²¹⁶ Kempowski-BIO, 7076, Correspondence of Fritz Sch. (1899–1991), letters from Emilie Kraft (Fritz’s sister) to Luise (his wife), 28 Aug. 1943, Bad Segeberg, pp. 1–2.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, letter from Fritz to Luise and his mother, 3 May 1945.

catastrophe that has hit Dresden. It's just impossible to grasp. A city with all its cultural treasures was destroyed in one night.²¹⁸

The front had, in short, reached home.

Violence was now experienced by German civilian populations too on an unprecedented scale. In the winter of 1944–5, the vast majority of those Germans who lived in territories at risk of being overrun by advancing Soviet troops fled for fear of what would happen if they stayed. Even those who were not affected by the 'treks' themselves often knew very well about the experiences of the refugees, whether through news about acquaintances, friends or relatives, or whether being at the receiving end when refugees arrived in search of housing, food, and clothing. On 23 January 1945 Ursula von Kardorff received a letter from a friend in Prague, 'Gretl', from which she quoted in her diary:

The downfall of the Bohemian aristocracy . . . Anyone still there is either living hopelessly in the past or has found some arrangement with the future entailing the devaluation of the label 'aristocrat'. So everything on which we had pinned our hopes, in which we still believe, is slowly perishing. To have to watch this consciously is hard.²¹⁹

Two days later, on 25 January, von Kardorff reported on stories she heard from a couple who had escaped from Breslau:

They told of refugees who virtually trampled each other to death, of corpses that had been thrown out from unheated goods trains along the way, of treks that had got stuck on the road, of mothers who had gone crazy and would not believe that the babies they carried in their arms were already dead. But one is already so stupefied that one can barely imagine such ghastly scenes any more.²²⁰

On 30 January 1945 von Kardorff records the fate of those who did not leave in time:

Willy Beer's wife did not come back from Silesia. Daily his desk is covered with ghastly news about misdeeds carried out against people who remained there: children bludgeoned to death, women raped, farms set on fire, farmers shot dead.²²¹

Such tales were widely repeated: few did not know personally someone who had been thus affected; and this significantly coloured the views of Germans who had not themselves been part of the westwards flight in the closing months of the war.

While hundreds of thousands were fleeing ahead of the Red Army's advance on the ground, the heartland of the Reich was far from safe, as Allied air raids over German cities took on a new intensity. On 3 February 1945 Ursula von Kardorff was in Berlin with Franziska's brother, Felix Schwab, when the heaviest air raid of the war to hit Berlin thus far took place. Around 23,000 people were killed within

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, letter from Fritz to Luise and his mother, 10 Feb 1945.

²¹⁹ Von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen*, p. 283.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284. ²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

barely one hour. When von Kardorff and Schwab came out of the air raid shelter, they found the editorial building in flames. As von Kardorff recorded in her diary:

While we were talking together—a nice little secretary, blackened with soot, was trying to cheer us up with jokes—I thought now and then that I would suffocate, there were such clouds of smoke. Not a single bit of the sky to be seen, only yellow, poisonous wads of smoke.

... On Potsdamer Platz the Columbus House was burning like a torch. We wandered in midst of a stream of grey, bent over figures, carrying their possessions with them. Bombed-out, cumberingly laden creatures, who seemed to be coming out of nowhere and going nowhere. The evening sinking over the glowing town was barely noticeable, it had been so dark already throughout the day...

But von Kardorff—unlike the majority of her contemporaries—then posed the question that, for all the appeals to ‘defence of Fatherland and family’, or Germans’ fear of ‘Bolshevism’, still remains essentially unanswerable:

Why does no one go out onto the street and shout ‘enough, enough’, why does no one go mad? Why is there no revolution?

Just keep on going [*durchhalten*], the stupidest of all phrases. So they will keep on going until they are all dead, there is no other redemption.²²²

And for some, when Germany was finally defeated, the only way out did indeed appear to be that of taking their own lives. But for all affected by Hitler’s war, the end, even for those for whom it really should signify liberation, was to inaugurate a very hard transition.

²²² Von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen.*, p. 287.

6

Who was who in the GDR—and why? The shifting formation of generations after 1945

The past is not dead; it has not even passed.
We separate ourselves from it and pretend to be strangers.

(Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*)¹

The reader (like so many contemporaries) may feel that 1945 was a ‘zero hour’: that it is a moment of such rupture, that what came before was so horrendous, and that there is such an effort required even to begin to try to understand Hitler’s Germany, that a break should be made; that what came after the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 should really be the subject of quite another story. This is of course simple enough if what is at issue is a ‘purely political’ history, looking at new structures of power, new institutions and organization, the actions of policy-makers, the historical events of the Cold War and beyond. One can readily write a history ‘of Germany’, or ‘of the German Democratic Republic’ (GDR) in this way, with clean political breaks between regimes. And indeed, it is notable when comparing the literatures on the Third Reich and the GDR just how different they are in tone and approach. This is not simply because there is broad political consensus about the Third Reich—where, given almost universal moral incomprehension and revulsion at the Nazi genocide, the task is to explain the almost inexplicable—whereas the historiography of the GDR is still in part coloured by the legacies of Cold War partisanship. There is something quite different about the tone of historical debates over the two regimes. It is almost as if these were different countries—and this too, echoes and reflects what contemporaries often felt when they looked back at their pre-1945 selves in the light of a far later present.

But it is not so simple when one is trying to understand the ways in which those who lived through these massive ruptures experienced and later reinterpreted their own lives. People had to make the effort to pick up the pieces, however exhausted they were by the war and its aftermath, and in whatever ways they had lived through this period. And a generational approach provides some surprising insights into how these processes of seeking to make a ‘new beginning’ took place; and how

¹ Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1979; orig.1976), p. 9.

it was that the communist part of post-war Germany, the GDR, despite being ultimately reliant on the backing of Soviet force and the existence of a Wall enclosing its citizens against their will, nevertheless found a degree of support in some quarters, was able to enjoy forty years of relative stability in a way never possible for the Third Reich, and posthumously even commanded a surprising degree of nostalgic remembrance after its eventual demise.

Given the ways in which the 'two German dictatorships' are often so readily lumped together, it is also significant to explore the ways in which the later communist regime not only grew out of and in reaction against the earlier Nazi dictatorship, but also the ways in which it was radically different from its predecessor. The history of the larger western Federal Republic of Germany, which appeared to have 'overcome the dictatorial past' so much sooner than its poorer and smaller eastern twin, is often written as the seemingly natural line of succession from the Third Reich to the present; but the twisting pattern of the past through the GDR also forms part of the prehistory of the united Germany of today.

Before exploring in more detail the ways in which people lived through this 'second German dictatorship', it is necessary to step back for a moment and gain an overview of the overall profile and some of the strikingly distinct patterns of involvement of different generations.² Generations are not simply givens, collective entities marching through history forever unchanged; rather, they are shifting constellations, the contours of which drift and reshape as new challenges are faced, and different issues about past, present, and future rise to the top of the agenda: new opportunities and constraints, and new values, norms, and sanctions affect both people's behaviour and their accounts of their lives to themselves and others. This becomes more than clear when exploring patterns of generational experience after Nazism. And there are some major puzzles with respect to the ways in which people of different ages experienced and participated in life in the area which, from 1949 to 1990, became the GDR.

Following the foundation of the two new German states, diverging conditions had a major influence on the ways in which adults interpreted their own past, and the paths and patterns of their subsequent lives. Communism and capitalism glared at each other across the Iron Curtain, and the implications of the Nazi past on either side were rather different, however similar prior experiences might have been. Among those who were already adults during the Third Reich, the old generational divides rooted in experiences of the Great War and the Weimar Republic waned in

² The overview presented in this chapter is in part based on a statistical analysis of the entries in Müller-Enbergs, Wielgohs, and Hoffman (eds.), *Wer war wer in der DDR?*, and in part on my own wider survey of 271 East Germans in the summer of 2005, discussed in "Normalisation" in retrospect'. The graphs in this chapter have already been published, along with discussion along these lines, in Fulbrook, 'Generationen und Kohorten in der DDR. Protagonisten und Widersacher des DDR-Systems aus der Perspektive biographischer Daten'; I have also broached some of the issues in my article 'Demography, opportunity, or ideological conversion? Reflections on the role of the Hitler Youth generation in the GDR' in Paul Corner (ed.), *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). While drawing substantially on these earlier publications, it is essential to reproduce the key questions and graphs briefly here in order to establish and clarify the empirical bases for distinctions explored at some length in the following chapters.

significance, overshadowed as they now were by the greater challenges of the more recent period. Distinctions between those who had fought in the Great War and the younger war-youth generation ceased to be of much significance in comparison with the horrors of the Second World War. Questions of political responsibility, guilt, or personal standpoint in relation to Nazism, and questions of personal survival in radically new circumstances, now took massive precedence over previous concerns with the legacies of 1918. The war-youth generation waned as a discernible cohort with distinctive agendas and features—or rather, perhaps, the groups who had claimed this status or enacted what they took as the ‘lessons of 1918’ before and during the Third Reich, had been effectively ‘dissolved’ by defeat—and death—in the Second World War. After 1945, they merged into the far wider grouping of mature adults who, by virtue of their age at the time, were inevitably faced with questions regarding their roles in sustaining or opposing the Third Reich. In short, responsibility for Nazism displaced concern with defeat in 1918 as the key focus for generational differentiation after 1945.

The broad group of those who had been adults during the Third Reich might therefore, after the Second World War, be regrouped and renamed the ‘KZ generation’—referring to *Konzentrationslager* or concentration camps, the hallmark of Nazi brutality—in order to distinguish between those old enough to have held responsibility for acts of commission and omission under Nazism, and those too young to have been substantially implicated.

This very wide KZ generation was radically divided between those who, at one extreme of the spectrum, had been engaged in more or less active opposition to Nazism, thus running a high risk of incarceration or death; and those who, at the other extreme, were in different ways responsible for sustaining a system in which concentration camps played such a central role. In between were those millions who had, to varying degrees, actively gone along with the regime, or sought to live through it with greater or lesser degrees of compromise, or lived some form of double life in order simply to survive. But whatever their own individual—and often highly complex—standpoints and experiences, no one who had already reached adulthood before or during the Third Reich could entirely evade post-war questions of guilt and responsibility. Sometimes such questions were forced on them from without, against their will, through for example denazification proceedings; this was particularly the case for those who were brought to account for their deeds in punitive ways. Sometimes questions could be more easily evaded, and people often preferred to forget certain aspects and highlight others as they sought to start new lives. But for many of those who had already been adults, the questions posed by the Nazi era could never entirely be escaped, and resurfaced at intervals, more or less insistently, throughout the rest of their lives, taking different forms and with different degrees of discomfort and difficulty.

In the GDR, it was only a tiny minority among the KZ generation, the group of those who could demonstrate left-wing ‘anti-fascist’ credentials, who with Soviet backing were able to impose their conception of a ‘better Germany’ on the majority of their contemporaries who had, actively or passively, willingly or unwillingly, gone along with the Hitler regime. The KZ generation was thus to some degree

internally split along the ideological divides formed in the earlier twentieth century: a distinctive heritage of ‘anti-Bolshevism’ mutated almost seamlessly into acute dislike and distrust of the new communist regime among many older East Germans, despite some cultural commonalities with respect to anti-Americanism or fear of post-war popular youth culture and changes in sexual mores. In the western Federal Republic of Germany, by contrast, with the relatively successful incorporation of former Nazis into high places in Adenauer’s conservative regime, internal divides within this generation were far less sharp.

Among those who were younger than the KZ generation, we find some extremely interesting new patterns of generation formation. These are evident both among those who became the new elites of the post-war communist dictatorships, and the wider population who lived through the GDR in less high-profile ways.

The ‘Who was Who’ of the GDR, *Wer war wer*, clearly presents only a very small and, by definition, highly unrepresentative sample of the GDR population.³ It seeks to include biographical details of all those who played a significant role in the GDR—whether as leading politicians and functionaries, as oppositionists or those who played a role in the revolutionary developments of autumn 1989, or as scientists, artists, writers, intellectuals, even prominent circus performers. Thus it can tell us about the 2,741 most significant people in the history of a state that had, at any given time, a total population of around 17 million (and of course, cumulative totals of those who lived—and left or died—at any time over the forty years of the GDR’s existence would be much higher). We are talking here, then, about the tiny percentage of the most active and significant ‘GDR citizens’ (*DDR-Bürger*). An analysis of five-year cohorts and their characteristics nevertheless yields some extraordinarily interesting results.

Figure 6.1 below displays the statistical spread of the birth cohorts (by five-year periods) of those who gained an entry. This shows a highly significant pattern. The general impression, widespread in the literature, that people born in the later 1920s and early 1930s played a very prominent role in the GDR, is clearly borne out in statistical terms. There is indeed a strikingly visible over-representation of those born between 1925 and 1929, and to a lesser extent 1930–4, compared to those born in the preceding or succeeding decades. But there are also other interesting, if lesser peaks. Those born in the early years of the century—roughly, 1900–14—show some considerable significance for GDR history, as do, to a very much lesser extent, those born in the early 1950s. The relatively low participation of those born during the Third Reich is quite remarkable in comparison to those born in the Weimar Republic.

The pre-Great War peak is predominantly made up of ‘founding fathers’: people prominent in high places in politics, and to a lesser extent in professional life. The trough of those born during the Great War can very largely be accounted for by two demographic factors decimating their potential ranks: first, the relatively low birth rate during the Great War, rendering this cohort small even at the outset; and

³ Müller-Enbergs, Wielgoths, and Hoffman (eds.), *Wer war wer in der DDR?*

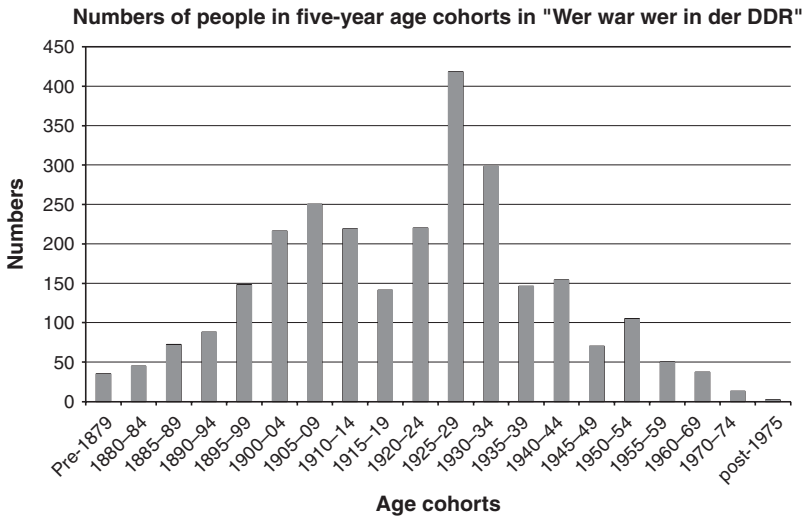


Figure 6.1 Numbers of people in five-year age cohorts in *Wer war wer in der DDR*

secondly, the disproportionate numbers of deaths, particularly among males in this age group, in the Second World War. Those who were actually born during the Great War and the early post-war years provided the prime military fodder for Hitler's army, and were disproportionately likely to be killed compared to their younger brethren of the 1925-9 cohort who were exposed to military service, if at all, only in the last year or so of the war. Thus the proportions of those who gained entries in *Wer war wer* who were born between 1910 and 1925 almost exactly mirror the results of differential birth and survival rates which gave rise to the peculiar blip in the GDR's demographic tree of 1955 (see Figure 6.2 below).

Demography, then, provides a prime factor in explaining the differential participation of older age groups. But after 1930, some surprising and far less easily explicable differences become apparent. The number of men born in 1916—the middle of the Great War—and who survived through the Second World War was less than a quarter of those born in the later peacetime years of the Third Reich, a cohort swollen initially by the recovery of the birth rate in the later 1930s and too young to have been felled by active combat in the Second World War. This is readily demonstrated by a comparison, for example, of the numbers of 18-year olds and 38 year-olds in 1955. Yet those large cohorts who were born in the later 1930s are strikingly under-represented in *Wer war wer*, in contrast to those just a few years older.

The biggest surprise in terms of new generation formation in the GDR is that of the 1929ers. Often termed the 'generation who built anew' or 'built up from the ruins' (*Aufbaugeneration*), the 1929ers are the 'sore-thumb generation' *par excellence*: they stick out differentially as, in general, loyal carriers, critical supporters, and practical sustainers of the GDR regime. They make up a totally disproportionate

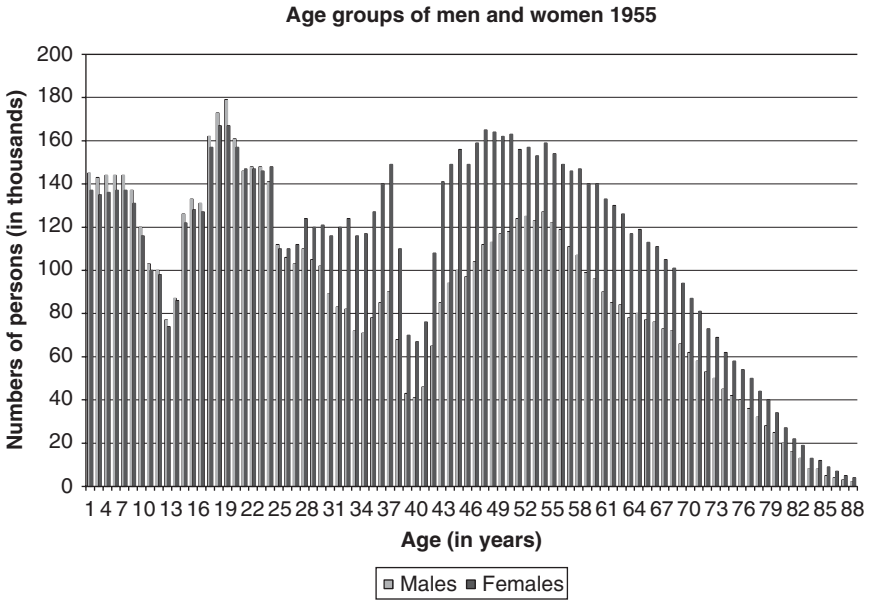


Figure 6.2 Age groups of men and women 1955

percentage of the functionaries who made the system work: in contrast to those born during the Third Reich, people born between 1926 and 1932 played a major, disproportionate role in the management of the economy and the leadership of the parties and mass organizations, the media, educational, scientific, and technical institutions of the GDR.

One might think that, perhaps, a select few hundred people had been in some way chosen and fostered in order to take on and then remain in such leading positions. But even more striking is the way in which the 1929ers who achieved positions sufficient to warrant an entry in *Wer war wer* appear to have been rather typical of the broader cohort, unlike virtually any other candidate for the status of 'generation' in the entire century. The later profile of the 'elite' 1929ers is very evident in biographical publications produced after the end of the GDR; but it was not only among prominent writers such as Christa Wolf (born in 1929) among whom this sort of profile was to be found.⁴ A survey of 271 'ordinary' East Germans in 2005 revealed that people born in these years were far more likely to have been members of the SED and bloc parties, and far less likely to have remained members of Christian churches, than were their slightly younger compatriots.⁵ They were far more likely than their compatriots to have had positive attitudes towards the GDR, and after unification to have had rosy memories, even if they

⁴ I was initially provoked into embarking on this research by a joke which I heard repeatedly, to the effect that 'Christa Wolf was born in 1929, like everyone else in the GDR.' While clearly impossible if taken literally, there is more than a grain of truth with respect to visible personalities here.

⁵ For details, see Fulbrook, "Normalisation" in retrospect.

were explicitly critical of certain aspects. They remained, even many years after unification, committed to ideals and a world view rooted in the mental and ideological frameworks of their communist past.⁶ ‘Ordinary’ members of this age group, in other words, tended to echo the values and outlooks of those select few who made it in to *Wer war wer in der DDR*.⁷ Although there were always individual exceptions and variations, in a variety of respects the 1929ers were a remarkably homogeneous age group: this was a cohort where those who stand out as a ‘sore thumb’ in the historical record are not unusual splinters rising to prominence among a broad and highly diverse landscape of contemporaries, but are, rather, fairly representative of the broader cohort from which they are drawn.

The highly visible difference in presence among the most prominent members of GDR political, economic, and social institutions for those born after 1925 and after 1935 respectively is clear even in Figure 6.1. It becomes even more striking when one looks more closely at the reasons for entry, or the distribution among different kinds of general categories, ranging from ‘functionaries’—those who held key positions in the SED, the state, the bloc parties and mass organizations—and full-time Stasi officers, through members of the cultural and technical intelligentsias, to political activists who played a role in bringing about the demise of the GDR in 1989 (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4).

The numbers of functionaries in the parties, mass organizations, and industrial enterprises of the GDR dropped massively among those born during the Third Reich, often known as ‘war children’. While, as indicated, the prevalence of the 1929ers compared to those born before them can be explained at least in part in demographic terms, the same is not true when one compares them to those born in the following decades. There clearly was something about these age groups—the ‘baby boomers’ of the 1930s, products of the higher birth rates as the economy recovered, as well as those who were born into the horrors and difficulties of the war years—which predisposed them against any commitment to the structures and institutions of the East German communist state. Yet as many opportunities in the economy and state were still open to them as to those just a few years older. The rapid social mobility of the early years of social revolution continued through much of the 1960s; stagnation did not set in until the 1970s, when it was the slightly younger cohorts born in the later 1940s and 1950s who were coming to maturity.⁸

There are also some subtle distinctions between the later groups, although the numbers involved are so small they are barely significant. For example, those born in the early 1940s, while sharing the overall profile of people born in the peacetime

⁶ Established in more detail with corresponding statistical analyses in *ibid*.

⁷ See also the striking regime loyalty of members of this generation evident in the interviews in Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung*. It has however to be borne in mind that these interviews were carried out in 1987, at a time when the individuals selected for interview were likely to have been those who could be relied upon to uphold the regime, and were, furthermore, likely to have felt under some constraint—given the presence of a ‘minder’ for the project—not to make comments about the GDR which were too critical.

⁸ See e.g. Ralph Jessen ‘Mobility and blockage during the 1970s’ in Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a socio-cultural history of the GDR* (New York; Berghahn, 1999), Ch. 18.

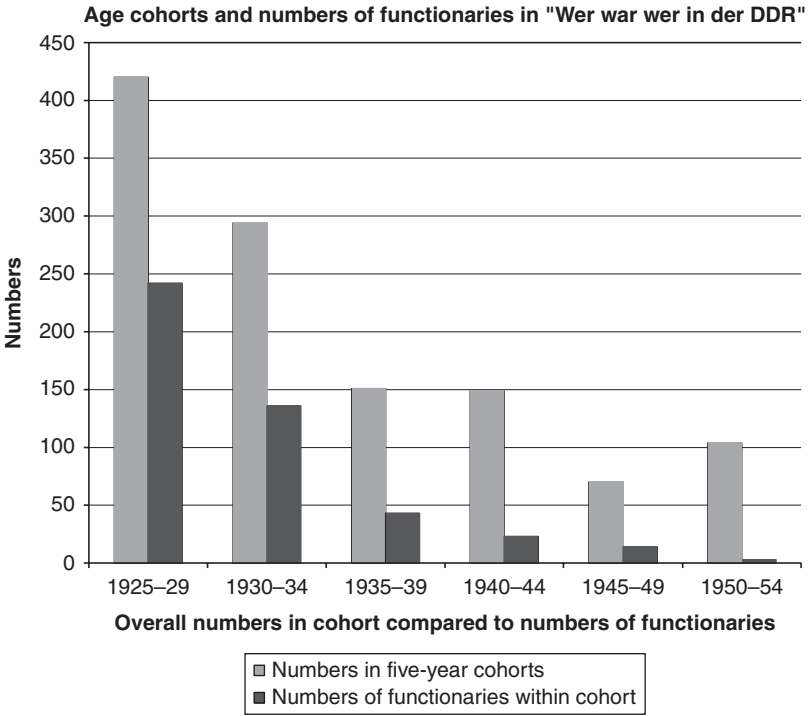


Figure 6.3 Age cohorts and numbers of functionaries in *Wer war wer in der DDR*

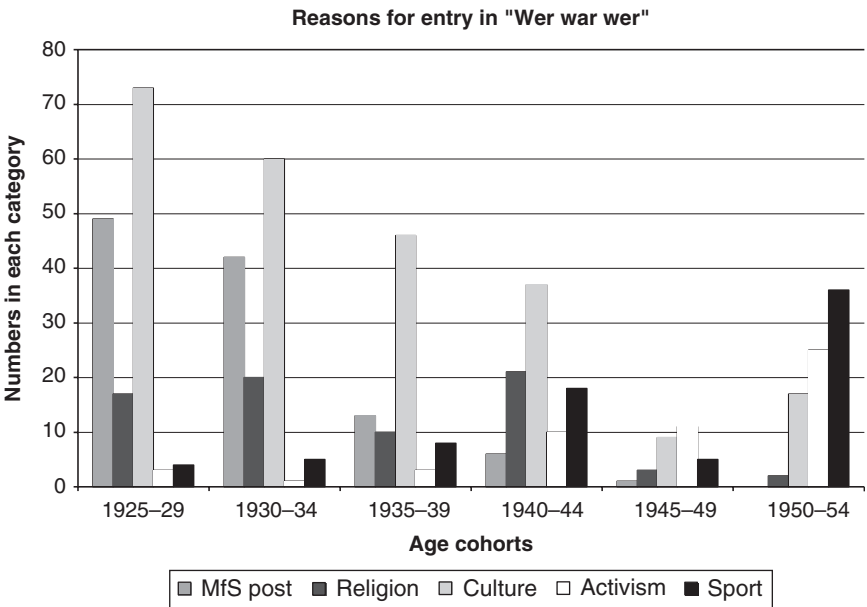


Figure 6.4 Reasons for entry in *Wer war wer in der DDR*

years of the Third Reich, had a slightly distinctive twist: disproportionate numbers of rock singers and pastors were drawn from these cohorts, who came to maturity in the early and mid-1960s at precisely the time military conscription and the possibility of alternative military service were introduced, and during a period of unexpected liberalization followed by a clamp-down on aspects of popular youth culture. These developments undoubtedly alienated many young East Germans in what was elsewhere termed the ‘swinging sixties’, and also pushed significant numbers into the study of theology—the only route through higher education then open, for example, to those who, just short of full conscientious objection, opted to be ‘construction soldiers’ (*Bausoldaten*) rather than do their military service bearing arms.

Those born in the immediate post-Second World War years (1945–9), by contrast, are distinguished by their relative silence and almost complete absence from the historical record: fewer than half as many in this cohort made it into *Wer war wer* than in the five-year cohort of wartime babies, 1940–4, despite a considerably higher birth rate after the war and no comparable difference in survival rates. This is a strikingly ‘silent’ generation, on this evidence.⁹ And yet these were the year groups from which, in the western Federal Republic of Germany, the ‘1968ers’ were largely drawn. Their silence in the GDR is hence perhaps even more noteworthy. Clearly a different generational dynamic was at work on the eastern side of the inner-German border: while there may have been, in principle, similar issues to be addressed with respect to the involvement of the parental generation in the Third Reich, in practice major differences arose from the contrasting post-war circumstances in which people born in the early post-war years grew up and came to maturity.

Those born in the early 1950s might be labelled the ‘first FDJ generation’ after the Free German Youth organization (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, FDJ). Of course these year groups were not actually the first cohort to become involved in the FDJ. Many of those born in the 1930s, who had already been organized in the Hitler Youth movement, almost seamlessly switched over into membership of the communist Free German Youth, which had similar organizational roles and mobilization goals under radically different political colours—and even a different colour of shirt, a sunny blue replacing the muddy paramilitary brown so characteristic of Nazism.¹⁰ But those born in the 1950s were socialized entirely within the GDR, and entered the whole world of ‘East German youth’ in a wider sense, well beyond the narrow organizational meaning of the FDJ itself. They are, then, distinctively ‘East German youth’—and far from free, in that, unlike older cohorts, they were too young to take an independent decision about whether or not to go west or to stay in the

⁹ See Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins* (Berlin: Links Verlag, 2002), for an insightful and detailed attempt to trace the paths through life of members of this ‘not-quite-generation’ (as she ultimately concludes), born in and around 1949.

¹⁰ See e.g. Alan McDougall, ‘A duty to forget? The “Hitler Youth generation” and the transition from Nazism to communism in postwar East Germany, c. 1945–49’, *German History*, 26(1) (2008), 24–46.

GDR before the option was closed off decisively in 1961, yet often had a very live (and remarkably varied) sense of what this closure meant in personal terms.

Members of this cohort gained entry into *Wer war wer* for two almost entirely opposing reasons: either as top sports people (*Leistungssportler*) or as people engaged in the circles of discussion and dissenting activity which sprang up particularly in church circles in the ever less stable 'actually existing socialism' of the 1980s. The figures are tiny, but it is worth noting that this five-year cohort, remarkably, provided nearly half (twenty-five out of a total of fifty-three) of those born in the whole of the three decades since 1925 who might be classified as 'political activists' by virtue of playing a major role in bringing down the SED regime in 1989. But before we begin to ask the wrong questions (such as 'why was this generation so opposed to the state into which it was born?'), or leap to too many generalizations, it is worth emphasizing that this 'first FDJ generation' was as deeply divided between pro- and anti-regime groups as was the much older 'KZ generation' of left-wing founding fathers and ex-Nazis. The five-year cohort born in the early 1950s not only provided around half of those who helped to bring down the GDR, but also just under half of all those whose sporting successes to the greater glory of the GDR's international reputation earned them an entry (thirty-six out of seventy-six top sports people).

It is perhaps worth adding that the majority of those included in *Wer war wer* who were born after 1955, not illustrated in these bar graphs, also gained their entry by virtue of sporting success: so there was a small and distinctive group of even younger East Germans who also owed a degree of fame and fortune to the new system which fostered their physical talents, even at massive personal cost to their bodies in later life. It is also vital to emphasize that the vast majority of their contemporaries, born at any time through the 1950s and 1960s, achieved neither sporting successes nor fame as political dissidents, but rather muddled through and often also wanted out. They, too, were in different ways marked by the peculiarities of the regime through which they lived their lives.

This analysis of those selected for entry in *Wer war wer* suggests that there are clearly differences between the more active members of different age cohorts: those whose activities within the GDR earned them an entry. It provides, in particular, very strong statistical evidence for the widely held impressionistic assumption the 1929ers were disproportionately prominent in the public life of the GDR, and disproportionately supportive of its structures.

To summarize exceedingly crudely: while those born in the later 1920s and early 1930s and socialized entirely under Nazism built the communist state up, those born in the early 1950s and socialized entirely under communism helped to tear it down. Those born in between did little in either respect; they remained largely silent, or raised critical voices in the areas of religion and culture.

In many ways, then, the 1929ers stood out in the historical record, both among the elites and among the wider population, as a quite distinctive cohort—and this was evident even to contemporaries at the time, as well as later. Here, perhaps, we have for once a generation in the fullest sense of the term: both distinctive in its profile, characteristics, and outlook, and self-consciously aware of itself in

distinction from older and younger cohorts; a generation (to adapt Marx's expression with respect to class) 'in and for itself'.

This distinctiveness was not lost on commentators and astute observers, either. Already in the 1950s Helmut Schelsky commented on the vaguely defined, broad, and rather undifferentiated West German 'youth' of his day, whom he termed the 'sceptical generation'.¹¹ There may have been a ring of truth to his notion that those who had, metaphorically, 'had their fingers burnt' by commitment to Nazism were more likely to be sceptical of all ideologies, and pragmatic rather than committed—in the West German context of the economic miracle years, at least. It may even play a role in the way in which a select few highly articulate individuals from this cohort in the Federal Republic, now dubbed by some historians as '1945ers', later played a highly distinctive role in the West German media and as public intellectuals (though to generalize to the wider cohort from the prominence of these individuals is not entirely warranted).¹² But this does not get us very far in explaining the contrasting East German developments, with the marked switch from Nazism to a replacement commitment to some version of communism.

Others have suggested that socialization within Nazism might perhaps predispose young people to 'obedience to authority'—any authority. But given the opposite supposed effect in the West—where 'anti-authoritarianism' ironically became a new trend to which some people felt they had to conform—this seems a little like adapting one's explanation to fit the facts, even if it means arguing the opposite for the contrasting case. It places a heavy emphasis on the impact of socialization under Nazism that, if so enduring, should have had the same effects on this cohort on either side of the Iron Curtain—which it clearly did not. And even an appeal to Mannheim's notion of 'key formative experiences' will not get us very far, given that the cohort born from 1926 to 1932 covered both those who were and those who were not called up into military service (whether '*Flakhelfer*' or fully-fledged soldiers), and covered females as well as males. A variation on this is the view that these cohorts were particularly affected by the whole range of things that the Hitler Youth tried to do with them, including particularly mobilization for war. On this view it was not specific attitudes, but a general outlook on life that was fostered by this particularly rigorous, uniform state influence.¹³

Common to all such approaches is the underlying premise that it was what happened to people before 1945 that explained their attitudes and behaviours in the states founded in 1949. There is undoubtedly some truth in this. However, it is far from the whole story.

First, it is worth reiterating the fallacy of one widely held presupposition. A lot of effort has gone into trying to explain something which does not need explaining—

¹¹ Helmut Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation* (Düsseldorf and Cologne: Diederichs Verlag, 1957).

¹² Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*; von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise*; and for contributions by (predominantly male, West German, intellectual) members of these cohorts, Alfred Neven DuMont (ed.), *Jahrgang 1926/27. Erinnerungen an die Jahre unter dem Hakenkreuz* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2007), and Martin Greiffenhagen, *Jahrgang 1928: Aus einem unruhigen Leben* (Munich: Piper, 1988).

¹³ See e.g. Buddrus (ed.), *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg*, Vol. 13, Part 1, 'Einleitung'.

or at least does not need explaining in quite the ways that have been attempted. This is the view that the prominence of those born in the later 1920s, compared to those born in the previous decade, is to be explained in terms of some feature of their collective character—perhaps their socialization experiences in the Hitler Youth organizations, or the habits of conformity allegedly acquired by growing up in the Third Reich. In fact, as demonstrated in the Figures above, there are some quite simple statistical explanations to do with the differential birth and death rates of those born during and in the first few years after the Great War, who saw active service in the Second World War, compared to those born in the later 1920s, who did not. Even so, there remain significant political and cultural differences in terms of both the experiences and the legacies of Nazism, as interpreted in the new post-1945 era.

The demographic arguments do not apply to the comparison between those born in the later 1920s and those born in the following decades. Here, a more complex picture emerges. Some of the key factors have to do with the ways in which certain developments were perceived, and differing degrees of readiness to take up new opportunities; some have to do with new opportunities and constraints, and the ways in which people negotiated these, rather than with the presumed long-term effects of prior socialisation or supposedly formative experiences. Political ‘sieving mechanisms’ and differential opportunities after the war in the East Germany brought certain ‘types’ to the surface and fostered particular kinds of outlook and attitude, while sanctioning or repressing others. Some of the key differences have to do with the way in which the 1929ers became young adults in the later 1940s and 1950s, and hence experienced the moment of ‘mobilization’ in the newly founded GDR rather differently both from those who were older and those who were younger at the time. And much of the uniformity in behaviour had to do with the later character of the state and society in which people made their lives. The relative homogeneity of the 1929ers in the GDR thus (also) had a great deal to do with the situations in which they found themselves after 1949, and not (or not only) with the ways in which they grew up; hence the differences in the later developments with respect to this cohort in East and West Germany.

It was, then, primarily members of the 1929er generation, who crossed all the regime transitions at key transitional moments of their own lives—socialized entirely within the Third Reich, leading their adult lives entirely within the GDR, entering retirement in a united Germany after 1990—who played the most significant role in upholding the communist state with which their working lives were so closely bound, and in continuing to defend it even after its demise. To explain this remarkable loyalty and to understand the different experiences of other generations, no amount of statistical analysis will be sufficient: we need also to look at people’s subjective experiences, the ways they responded to ever changing circumstances, and the interpretive frameworks through which they understood and portrayed their lives. There was a complex interplay between past and present, between structural opportunities and cultural availability for mobilization, in the light of varying social backgrounds, political inclinations, and the distinctive emotional landscapes of a post-war, Cold War world.

Transitions from Nazism to communism

On 15 June 1946 Gustav A., living in Germany after the war, wrote to his friend Heinz G., still a prisoner of war in Algeria, to prepare him for a shock on his return to Germany: ‘So much has been happening during this time. For us, the sun has gone down.’¹ For many adults who had not been persecuted during the Third Reich, experiences of defeat and the transition to new post-war circumstances under enemy occupation were very hard to come to terms with. The months and years after the end of the war were even harder: characterized by experiences of widespread rape, robbery, and repression by the Red Army, severe physical and emotional dislocation, illness and bereavement, survival in overcrowded conditions or among ruins, and extreme hunger verging on famine. For the vast majority of older East Germans looking back on their lives some sixty years later, the end of the war and the later 1940s were still remembered as the ‘worst times’ in their lives.² Not merely was this transition, for those who had gone along with Hitler, not experienced as a ‘liberation’ but rather a resounding defeat; it was also followed by horrendous experiences which, in the short term, hardened many people’s attitudes against the new communist system which was forcibly imposed in the Soviet zone of occupation.

Experiences of the ‘end’, which was not as yet a clearly defined new beginning, varied considerably: not only according to political, social, moral and ‘racial’ identities, but also according to age. Traumatic experiences of violence towards the end of the war and the shock of the new were rather different for younger Germans than for those who had been adults through the war. Those who were still teenagers at the end of the war had borne no responsibility during the Nazi era—and many of them had, indeed, been barely exposed directly to violence until the closing stages of the war. For these young people, the collapse of the Third Reich was often experienced in terms of deep, bitter feelings of betrayal; and they were filled with a sense that the ideals in which they had been brought up needed urgently to be replaced. The 1929ers reached adulthood at precisely the time of the foundation of the two new German states in 1949. In terms of both cultural and structural availability for mobilization, the 1929ers were thus poised on the brink of commitment to new regimes, new ideologies, in a way that older Germans were not. Among those even younger, the ‘war children’, who were not even yet

¹ SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/1, Fritz Beyling, letter from Gustav A., 15 Jun. 1946.

² Survey 2005; for further details, see M. Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979: The ‘normalisation of rule?’*, Ch. 13.

teenagers at the end of the war, the shock was dealt with rather differently again; nor were they yet at an age for taking on new positions of responsibility for 'building up' the new. It is in this moment of full realization of the horrors of the war and its consequences that the 1929ers were first seriously distinguished not only from those older but also from those who were younger than they were. The experience of defeat and the ways in which the challenges of the following years were faced, at different stages of life, thus proved crucial in distinguishing them from both older and younger Germans who had survived the war and who were to play very different roles in the coming decades.

The rupture itself was also of a different character than previous historical ruptures. The key general difference between the transitions of 1918 and 1945 was that, unlike in 1918, the defeat following Hitler's 'total war' in 1945 was also perceived as total: non-negotiable, imposed from without, and enforced by military occupation and the abolition of any central German government. Yet Germans had not themselves been prepared for this: they had fought unto the last. In the later months of the Great War, the morale of troops was crumbling and mutinies inaugurated the final collapse in 1918. By contrast, in the last months of the Second World War Germans, young and old, had been mobilized as never before—and had died as never before. Whether through summoning the last vestiges of ideological commitment or through fear of the horrendous sanctions if they failed to fight (and note that authorities were still prepared to put sanctions against 'traitors' and 'deserters' into effect), in 1945 Germans kept fighting to the very bitter end. And from May 1945 there was no going back; no arguing that, as in 1918, it had not been a real defeat but rather a 'stab in the back'. Germans in the summer of 1945 were under military occupation, the German government disbanded, and the Allies in complete control. There could be no doubts about the reality or scale of defeat, no carping about supposed 'enemies within', no revisionist attempts to challenge the character of the post-war settlement. Those who were young in 1945 could now only be mobilized by those who had opposed the old regime—not, as in 1918, by those who energetically continued to contest the legitimacy of its end.

The transition after 1945 thus had to be a transition to something radically new; the mission for the rising post-war generation could no longer, as in the 1920s, be that of carrying a revisionist torch, but rather a revolutionary torch entailing radical rejection of the past and seeking to build something entirely new. The notion of a 'Zero Hour' may have little to recommend it as far as real continuities of both structures and personnel are concerned (more so in the Western zones than the Soviet zone of occupation); but it certainly summarizes a widely prevalent sense that an entirely fresh start had to be made. Where people from the war-youth generation of the Great War were mobilized to continue the mission of the uncompleted old, after the Second World War the 1929ers—effectively another, new 'war-youth generation'—were available for conversion to an entirely new, even 'brave new', world. The early post-war years then proved a crucial period in the renegotiation of war-torn and traumatized lives, in different ways for different groups in the emergent Cold War era.

In both the areas under the occupation of the Western Allies and the area under Soviet occupation there were major changes, as the respective occupying powers sought to ensure that Nazism and militarism were eradicated from German soil. The NSDAP and its affiliated organizations were outlawed; the German Army was disbanded; and attempts were made to bring major Nazis to justice through the Nuremberg Trials and subsequent war crimes trials, and to exclude other Nazi 'offenders' from public life and positions of economic control. But the period after 1945 was not only marked by attempts to deal with Nazism; it was also a period when existing tensions between the western Allies and the Soviet Union—tensions which had been effectively put on hold while fighting the common enemy of Nazi Germany took priority—erupted into the Cold War. Germans everywhere had to contend with radically new conditions. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, there was, officially, a total repudiation of the Nazi regime and ideology. On both sides, although to differing degrees, there was a turnover of personnel in key areas of administration and industry. But in certain areas—which proved to be particularly relevant for generation formation—the challenges were greater, and the breaks were sharper, in the East than the West. In the East, adults had to contend with the hated enemy, 'Bolshevism'; and in the East, restructuring and turnover of personnel was greater. For both of these reasons, there were more structurally given opportunities for those young people who were willing to be mobilized in service of the new cause. Youth in the Western zones may have been just as 'culturally available' for new ideals after Nazism; but these opportunities were blocked to a far higher degree, given the continuities in both structures and personnel in Adenauer's Germany. Those in the West who later became known as the '45ers' (roughly drawn from the same cohorts as those whom I term the 1929ers) took up prominent positions among the intellectuals of the Federal Republic and in the public media, but did not so readily, so rapidly, attain positions in the lower heights of administrative, political, and economic structures as did their age group in the East.³ Emergent Cold War tensions and the energetic interventions of the Soviet Union in the domestic affairs of its zone of occupation, which subsequently became the GDR, thus helped to shape the ways in which members of different generations came to recast their lives after the historical rupture of 1945.

I. THE UNCERTAINTIES OF THE PRESENT: SURVIVAL AND NORMLESSNESS

For adults, both prior conceptions and current priorities differed significantly from those of the younger age groups; and the variation in responses, attitudes, and views was massive, depending greatly on prior positions in the socio-political landscape of Hitler's Reich. But one broad characteristic of this period was a sense of anomie, or normlessness, as whatever had been constructed by way of a mythical

³ See Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*; and von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise*.

'*Volksgemeinschaft*' shattered into a myriad of individual, bereaved and disorientated pieces. People barely knew which way to turn, and for most, self-interest predominated in a situation where it was impossible to be certain what actually would be in one's own best interest.

Physical conditions following military defeat were, depending on the area, verging on catastrophic: bombed-out cities were in ruins; transport, water, and energy supplies were disrupted; food was extremely scarce.⁴ The principal issues for the authorities at this time revolved around very basic physical questions: ensuring adequate nutrition, maintaining public health (or staving off the worst consequences of epidemic diseases, unsanitary conditions and malnutrition), seeking to secure minimum basic housing conditions, and dealing with what seemed like never-ending streams of refugees and expellees from eastern territories. In the Soviet zone of occupation there was at the same time—despite a degree of pragmatic openness of long-term political plans at this stage—also an attempt to gain and retain control of the political situation from a communist perspective. And, particularly in the early weeks, there were widespread expressions of rage and revenge, in an orgy of rape and robbery on the part of invading Soviet soldiers.

German society, too, was in a highly volatile state. Millions of people were on the move: soldiers returning from the front, from prisoner of war camps, from hospitals and sanatoria; refugees and expellees from former German or occupied territories in Eastern Europe, fleeing from the Red Army or ousted by the post-war redrawing of boundaries and imposition of new regimes; former forced labourers and those released from Nazi prisons and concentration camps seeking to find any surviving family members, trying to return 'home' or build new lives in radically altered circumstances. And yet moving was, given the breakdown in lines of communication, exceedingly difficult. A journey which would today be a matter of hours could take many days by foot or, if lucky enough to possess one and not have it stolen along the way, by bicycle. Barriers between zones constituted major problems for people seeking to cross without the appropriate papers. Incentives for creative invention and deception, trickery, circumvention of rules, were everywhere; were, indeed essential for survival.

People simply did not know, at first, how to deal with the new circumstances in which they now found themselves, and for which many were totally unprepared. Gertrud Bobek (born 1898) was a committed socialist whose husband Felix had in 1935 been arrested and in 1938 executed in Plötzensee prison for his resistance work.⁵ Bobek was struck by the atmosphere when she returned from exile in the Soviet Union to try to help to rebuild her native Germany, describing the situation when she arrived in Bautzen on 2 June 1945:

The first sigh of relief after the end of hostilities was already past, and people were beginning to make demands of life again. They were hoping to be able to pick up their

⁴ See now for an overview in more detail Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From war to peace* (London; HarperCollins, 2009).

⁵ See e.g. the partisan account by Siegfried Grundmann, *Felix Bobek. Chemiker im Geheimapparat der KPD. (1932 bis 1935)* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2004).

lives where they left off in 1933—perhaps somewhat more modestly. Of course there were no longer many who still clung to Hitler, but under his leadership they had totally lost the capacity to think, and anything new was anathema to them. At first, the greatest obstacle to our work was the total indifference of most people, the way they seemed to have died internally . . . Citizens seemed to be totally detached; and the biggest task that we faced was to overcome this situation.⁶

She continued:

The vast majority of the population had . . . in the previous 12 years not thought about their own interests. They had gone along with the Nazis because it was the easiest thing to do and the thought of belonging to a chosen people flattered their own self-love. The total defeat of the Nazis and occupation by Soviet troops unleashed a sense of shock that at first paralysed them . . .⁷

But practical priorities outweighed any wider political considerations for most people, who deferred political thinking in the immediate scramble for survival.

A breakdown of norms of behaviour, any sense of 'law and order', was manifest all around, and in all zones of defeated Germany. In a letter from Hanover to relatives on 15 May 1945, one woman wrote:

Unfortunately there is no end to the plundering going on here, so that we are constantly living in a state of upset and anxiety. One can't yet even dare to go out on the streets with a watch, briefcase, and bicycle . . . B.'s car has of course also been stolen . . . Daily now soldiers are returning home on foot. The trains aren't running yet.⁸

In the areas occupied by the Red Army in particular, in addition to robberies there were waves of rape carried out by the Soviet occupation forces, on an unprecedented scale.⁹

One elderly lady in Mecklenburg, Elly von H. (born 1867), observed repeated rapes of the few women in the tiny hamlet in which she was living in the first two weeks of May 1945 alone.¹⁰ When she tried to prevent one of these rapes by reminding the Soviet soldier of his family, and asking how he would feel if this was happening to his own wife, he curtly replied that the invading Germans had shot his wife dead in their own home.¹¹ Given her own advanced age, Elly von H. herself was spared the experience of rape; but all her clothes and other belongings were stolen by two Russian women, leading her to conclude that the men are 'more decent than these cheeky women'.¹² For innumerable younger women, the

⁶ SAPMO-BArch SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, *Erinnerungen* 'Die allmähliche Entwicklung des Verständnisses für die Politik der Sowjetunion' (fols. 128–51), fol. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 130.

⁸ Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Kempowski-Biographienarchiv (henceforth Kempowski-BIO), 3119, B.: Feldpostbrief Sammlung, letter of 15 May 1945.

⁹ See particularly Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); see also e.g. Kempowski-BIO, 764, Tagebuch 20.4.1945–10.08.1946, entry of 23 Apr. 1945, fol. 4; and 29 Apr. 1945, fol. 12.

¹⁰ Kempowski-BIO, Nr. 3943, Elly von H., *Tagebücher*, Heft 1, Sunday 6 May 1945, fol. 19; Friday 12 May, fol. 29; fols. 32–; see also further discussion below, pp. 272–3.

¹¹ Kempowski-BIO, Nr. 3943, Elly von H., *Tagebücher*, Heft 1, Monday 14 May, fols. 34–5.

¹² *Ibid.*, Tuesday 15 May, fol. 38.

comparison was reversed. The combination of lawlessness on the part of Germans and the dubious behaviour of the Red Army forces further complicated the situation. As Gertrud Bobek put it:

On top of this was the fact that the Soviet soldiers, who in the recent past had experienced unprecedented brutality and privation, wanted to make their lives a little better, and had little regard for the legal owners of things they desired, such as fruit, cucumbers, watches. Women were naturally also much in demand, and it cannot be denied that some soldiers assumed that as '*pobediteli*' [victors] they had unlimited rights. But at the same time it must be said that not a few Germans managed to blame their own thefts of property on the Soviet soldiers.¹³

While Bobek, as a communist returning from exile, had a degree of understanding for the Soviet side, most Germans saw injustice only on the part of the occupying forces. Previous atrocities committed by Germans on Soviet soil were rarely entered into any moral balance sheet at this time; and, as earlier with their encounters with the ragged and starving 'Eastern Jews', for most Germans the experience at first hand of Soviet rape and robberies only served to confirm pre-existing prejudices against 'Bolsheviks', rather than being set in a wider framework of understanding which would have had to include their own role in unleashing or creating such appearances and actions.

However taboo such topics may have been—for both political and personal reasons—these were experiences that were not entirely hushed up, but were recalled with intensity for many decades to come. As Gertrud Bobek pointed out, the Russians were on occasion their own worst enemy in respect of their own behaviour. Perhaps a little idealistically, but with a real point underlying her remarks, she commented:

On all occasions we had to explain to people in a convincing manner who was responsible for their misery. Since they had been under the influence of fascist agitation, and given their inadequate capacity for political judgement, many at first saw the Soviet occupation power as the cause of their unhappiness. Some also thought their liberators could somehow magically create a carefree life for them straight away. How often was I told: most people were so sick of Nazism that they would have fallen into the arms of the Soviet communists, if these had only been able to offer them a more or less normal life.¹⁴

For many Germans, then, however relieved they were that the war had finally ended, the experience of Russian occupation was devastating, and compounded their earlier difficulties with the end of Hitler's rule, again leading some to contemplate or commit suicide. For others it was somehow brushed off, eventually, outweighed or submerged by later experiences.

¹³ SAPMO-BArch SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, 'Bautzen Anfang Juni 1945 bis Februar 1950: Meine Tätigkeit in der Stadtverwaltung Bautzen, Juni 1945 bis Mitte März 1947', fol. 8.

¹⁴ SAPMO-BArch SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, *Erinnerungen*, 'Bautzen: Anfang Juni 1945 bis Februar 1950; Meine Tätigkeit in der Stadtverwaltung Bautzen Juni 1945 bis Mitte März 1947', fol. 8.

The long-term implications of what the Russians did to the defeated Germans in 1945 could nevertheless be transmitted across generations. When interviewed in 2005, for example, Wibke W. (born 1956) recounted how, when her father had returned home from the war, he had found that his former wife and his three daughters from that marriage had all drowned in the Ueckersee because they had fled to the 'safety' of the lake to hide from the Soviet soldiers.¹⁵ (In some areas, if not necessarily in this case, it was reported that people had committed suicide by drowning following the shame of rape.) Wibke's father sought to get over this personal tragedy by remarrying and starting a new family with a younger woman, who in due course gave birth to Wibke and a much younger son. But he never fully recovered from the shock; he died when Wibke herself was thirteen, and her youngest brother just three years old, leaving Wibke's mother a young widow, single parent, and full-time worker. And yet, fatherless and ever more reliant on state sponsorship for her subsequent sporting career, leading her to become eventually an Olympic medal winner, Wibke herself became a GDR success story in terms of a sense both of personal achievement and of gratitude to the Soviet-created GDR for the opportunities it had given her.

Hatred of 'Bolshevism' persisted, but it was not counter-balanced by any continuing sense of the German 'people's community' or *Volksgemeinschaft*. There was little or no sense of community at this time (to the extent that there ever had been) among the wider population, individually engaged as most were in the struggle to survive; and robbery was, as Bobek and many others pointed out, not solely a prerogative of the Soviet troops. A life-long committed German communist, Maz Opitz, described the situation in Dresden when he took over as Police President in 1945 and had to build up a variety of specialized 'commandos' to deal with the problems:

The city lay in ruins, burnt out, and an unbelievable number of racketeers were there, robbing and plundering in the town . . . There was therefore the salvage commando, the corpse recovery commando, then the commando at the central railway station, where most crimes were committed, with people arriving in Dresden being caught, robbed and stripped naked. So, to make it short and sweet: a total shambles. I called this period the time without an emperor. It really was a time when everyone could do whatever he wanted. But by deploying the police and building up the police forces we slowly gained a degree of order against the profiteers, against the racketeers, against the black market . . . And then we were also armed . . .¹⁶

In these circumstances, there was a widespread sense of normlessness and prioritization of personal survival against all the odds. And again, any attempts on the part of German communists backed by the Soviet occupation forces to restore 'law and order' was seen by most Germans as an illegitimate use of force, further fostering a sense of hostility.

¹⁵ Interview with 'Wibke W.', August 2005.

¹⁶ SAPMO-BArch, NY 4274/3, Max Opitz, 'Ich war glücklich', fol. 454-5.

A consequence for many individuals was a delight, in their personal narratives, in emphasizing the ways in which they had been able to surmount difficulties, circumvent constraints, and even engage in a degree of lawlessness themselves in the struggle to survive in lawless times. The 'social self' was adapted to the uncertainties of the new age. This not merely a matter of those engaged in wilful plundering or black marketeering, but a far more widespread phenomenon at a lower, everyday level. Many accounts of the self at this time are couched in terms of personal 'heroism' involving the successful hoodwinking of authorities in order to achieve personal ends despite official restrictions; in many cases, there is little or no sense of any commitment to being 'law-abiding Germans'. Diana J., for example (born c.1920), was a young mother seeking first to leave occupied Berlin, and eventually to escape with her husband and two small children over the zone border to get out of the Russian zone entirely. Her diary entries of 1945 convey the impression of a highly self-centred, self-pitying, but also self-heroizing person; she also rejoices when her husband managed to escape from the Russians by not letting them know he was a German officer.¹⁷

If rapes and plundering were bad at the time, hunger left perhaps the longest-lasting memories. Unlike those they had conquered during the war, those whose lands they had occupied and ravaged, the Germans themselves had not had to restrict their food intake radically before the late stages and end of the war.¹⁸ The situation changed dramatically in the occupation period, with different ration cards according to status and occupation, but none sufficient to sustain a healthy life or normal weight. City-dwellers often felt it was hardly worth working for wages, since money was relatively meaningless and time could be spent more usefully going out into the countryside to 'hamster' or forage and bargain for food from those who had direct access to foodstuffs. But everyone suffered. Even a smallholder in Kaulsdorf (near Berlin), whose diary entries contain much discussion of hens, eggs, tending the stables and garden, and the sowing of sugar beet, comments, in midst of far more momentous news and rumours, that 'it's almost impossible to sleep for hunger and worry. They say that Goebbels is hanging on the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin'.¹⁹ The situation was compounded by uncertainties about the future; and quite simple questions, such as whether to settle in one zone of occupation or be reunited with surviving close family members in another, were beset by having to weigh up a variety of imponderables. Fritz S., for example, had first been separated from his wife in September 1939, missing a joint celebration of his fortieth birthday. He had survived the war intact, and was after the war's end located in the British zone. He considered the various aspects of the situation in a letter to his wife Luise, still living in the family home which was now in the Soviet zone:

I am still dubious as to whether I should really register myself to return home. The newspaper has carried the announcement that one can now go back to the region

¹⁷ Kempowski-BIO, 1676.

¹⁸ See also Götz Aly, *Volksstaat*.

¹⁹ Kempowski-BIO, 764, entry of 4 May 1945, fol. 21.

where one previously lived. What shall I do, that's the question that I keep putting to myself. I'm not worried about engaging in a little chicanery. The main thing is that I can work in the business. It's of course easy to say that one wants to build up a new existence when everything is overcrowded and one has no room, no tools, no materials. Anyone who has lost everything because of the war and can't return home, they have to build up a new Heimat. I am confident that I can work there again. I'm concerned however about the food situation in the region. If I were there now you would have one more person in the house to feed. Even if the rations of fats and meat in this [British] zone are not wonderful either, at least we can be sure that these levels will be kept up. In the smaller towns they have potatoes already, in Kiel, Hamburg and Lübeck people are being given turnips instead of potatoes . . . I've retained my weight of 145 pounds despite the fatless diet, that is something to be pleased about, isn't it!²⁰

Fritz S. thus weighed up the advantages of returning to a family business and having secure work against the disadvantages of what were already perceived as a worse food situation in the Soviet zone; clearly the attractions of being reunited with his wife seems to have played less of a role here than the satisfaction of their respective stomachs. Most, however, simply sought to find family members and return 'home' as fast as they could, despite the fact that many homes in cities which had been subjected to bombing had been reduced to rubble and finding missing family members was often far from easy.

Millions had however been forced to leave their homes with little prospect of 'return'. In the later 1940s, perhaps a quarter of those living in the Soviet zone of occupation were refugees and expellees from lost German territories to the east, soon officially termed 'resettlers' (*Umsiedler*).²¹ Many of the millions fleeing from the Red Army or forcibly expelled from the Eastern European states in their new post-war boundaries continued on towards the Western zones of occupation, which in 1949 became the Federal Republic; but the percentage of refugees and expellees who stayed in the Soviet zone and subsequently GDR nevertheless remained higher than the percentage of these groups in the West German population. In Mecklenburg, nearly one in two of the population in 1947 were 'resettlers' (45.7 per cent); with the exception of Saxony, where the proportion was as low as 13.9 per cent, the percentage generally ranged between one-fifth and one-quarter of the population at this time.²²

Common to all refugees and expellees was the sense of total disruption of former lives, utter uprootedness, and loss of former homes and homelands, compounded by massive practical problems including finding adequate accommodation, suffering

²⁰ Kempowski Bio 7076, correspondence of Fritz S. (1899–1991), letter of 11 Nov. 1945.

²¹ See particularly the exhaustive work on this topic by Michael Schwartz, *Vertriebene und 'Umsiedlerpolitik'. Integrationskonflikte in den deutschen Nachkriegs-Gesellschaften und die Assimilationsstrategien in der SBZ/DDR 1945–1961* (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2004); Philip Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene. Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ/DDR und in Polen 1945–1956* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998); see also e.g. Pertti Aho et al., *People on the Move: Forced population movements in Europe in the Second World War and its aftermath* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008).

²² BArch DY 30/IV 2/2.027/34, Schreiben an Herrn Merker betr. Vorbereitung seines Referates für die Konferenz vom 9.–10. Apr. 1947, SED internal Mitteilungsblatt, 3 Apr 1947.

horrendous overcrowding, and often also the hostility of local populations who were unwilling to share scarce food and space with newcomers from different cultural, linguistic, and religious milieus. Added to these problems was, in East Germany, the determination of the dominant military power, the Soviet Union, that the new borders of Eastern Europe and in particular the Oder-Neisse border with Poland, should be final. Nor were the new communist authorities inclined to have much sympathy with their plight, given recent history. As one official memorandum of May 1947 put it, seeking to remind Germans that it was Hitler's policies that were at the root of the distress they were now experiencing:

Millions upon millions of people from other countries were supposed to be exterminated or expelled from their homelands, so that Germans previously spread across the world could be newly settled in the areas which had been illegally taken and stripped of their population.

But in Germany many people have already forgotten that millions were victims of this predatory enterprise. Particularly those individuals who themselves, through their conduct, contributed to putting such criminal policies into practice do not like thinking about it. We are finding those who were responsible everywhere, among those living here for a long time as well as among resettlers.²³

While in the Western zones such views were rarely voiced explicitly, and the desires of refugees and expellees to return to the former territories remained a key strand particularly of conservative nationalist politics through to the 1980s, in the Soviet zone such considerations were given short shrift. Here, there was very soon a policy of integration rather than—as in West Germany—supporting 'revanchist' demands or upholding a sense of *Heimat* with local customs and traditions. That quarter of the East German population who were refugees and expellees had officially, under these circumstances, to become 're-settlers' and 'GDR citizens'. Their life stories were, then, marked by a kind of double rupture: not merely across the historical and political divide from Nazism to communism; but also the rupture of displacement and resettlement with no chance ever of returning to lost homelands which soon, with the imposition of communism across Eastern Europe, became virtually unrecognizable to them.

Even so, experiences of this rupture varied quite radically with age. Klaus F., for example, was twelve years of age when his family fled from their home in Grünberg, Silesia, and his family's story provides some insight into age-related experiences of transition across 1945.²⁴ His parents had appeared to be committed followers of the *Führer* up to the very last, providing a somewhat conflicted perspective on their experiences of the end of the war, as letters from Klaus's mother to her sister on 3 February 1945, after their arrival in Colditz, confirmed:

²³ BArch DY 30/IV 2/2.027/34, 'Referentenmaterial zur Umsiedlerfrage vom Mai 1947', fol. 41.

²⁴ Kempowski-BIO, Nr. 3135, Klaus F., *Unstete Fahrt: Meine Tagebuchnotizen und die Briefe meines Großvaters, meines Vaters und meiner Mutter aus den Jahren 1945 und 1946* (self-produced and published in 25 copies, 1990).

How is everyone? Will we ever all see each other again? And what will become of our German Fatherland? Will we ever find our house in Grünberg again? And when? But let all that be lost, if only we survive this unholy war and still have our Führer!²⁵

In a letter to her sister of 13 March 1945, Klaus's mother commented that:

Now the Reich capital is the perpetual target of the terror bombers. When will this ghastly war ever come to an end?!

And what will the end be like? We mustn't lose our good courage and must bear with everything cheerfully. We have such strong faith in our Führer, he won't abandon us either, but perhaps we still have much to bear and battle through before the end.²⁶

These letters between sisters were hardly influenced by the kind of censorship covering the military field post, and such remarks were certainly not necessary from any careerist perspective; they suggest, then, the rather genuine sentiments of the day, expressed in an entirely private and personal correspondence. For all the ghastliness of this 'unholy war', the blame was laid entirely on the enemies of Germany, those sending the 'terror bombers', and certainly not on Hitler, in whom they still seem to have had absolute faith. Klaus's grandfather, too, spoke in the terminology of the times, as in his letter to his daughter Margarete on 8 February 1945, from Colditz:

Our consolation is the knowledge that we are making our sacrifice alongside umpteen thousands of others, a sacrifice from which we cannot turn away. The peak of suffering has not yet been reached, not by a long way, we have to reckon on that, but at all events we want to be able to bear with anything and everything, in order for things to move forwards and for the final victory to be ours.²⁷

The letter from Klaus's father, Gustav, to his sister-in-law Elisabeth S. in Berlin of 13 February 1945 was perhaps a little more realistic, less embellished with pro-*Führer* ideology: 'Now let come what may. The main thing is that we have escaped from the Bolsheviks'—a comment which in the event proved not to be the case.²⁸ It is notable here that politics as well as personal distress would play a strong role in this family's initial perception of the transition and the Soviet occupation. And the speed with which pro-Hitler comments disappeared after May 1945 is remarkable, while the hatred of the 'Bolsheviks' remained and if anything becoming stronger than ever, as far as the adults in the family were concerned.

Klaus's own diary account of the time suggests that he experienced the temporary settlement in Colditz, where he spent a gloriously unrestrained summer running around and going swimming with newly made friends, free from previous social constraints, as a form of enjoyable adventure. The report of the second flight from Grünberg (to which they had hopefully returned in the early summer, before being driven out again—hence technically becoming not only 'refugees' but also 'expellees'), also in the child's eye contains a certain spirit of adventure. While registering something of an unpleasant atmosphere among the adults, including a neighbouring family, the H.s, with whom they were travelling, Klaus's account is

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

written in a distanced, unconcerned tone: “The motto was: “Every man for himself!” and “God helps those who help themselves!” That at least is the way the H.s always thought and acted.”²⁹ By this time, practical considerations and the desire to save as much as one could outweighed any political concerns or sense of moral community; but Klaus himself seemed barely bothered by the adults’ bickering.

The reports of Klaus F.’s parents’ conversations, and the letters between his parents and other relatives (including an aunt and grandparents), suggest that adults experienced far greater difficulties when seeking to ensure the family’s physical survival: hence, not surprisingly, they perceived the same period in quite a different light. Klaus’s father Gustav, for example, reported on his earlier return to Grünberg; in his diaries, Klaus recorded it much as he had heard it. Although clearly the wording cannot be quite exact, the gist of Gustav’s account of a society in disintegration, marked by mutual distrust and increasing hostility—the collapse of any notion of *Volksgemeinschaft*—is unmistakable. Their house had been completely plundered and cleaned out, not only by Poles and foreign workers but also by former friends and neighbours, as Klaus reported his father saying:

‘Who on earth had cleared things out there! First the foreign workers. Then our dear neighbours took care of anything that was still left! Yes, people to whom we had only been good, or at least of whom we had never wished ill. So, my dear wife, what has now become of fidelity and belief? If I was still young, I would not move a single finger for my so-called fellow human beings.’³⁰

His father, according to Klaus, continued with his tale on the following lines:

‘I was also supposed to work in Grünberg. All Nazis were particularly tense . . . My colleague F. was working as an informer. He had already been twice to my cell and had made inquiries about how I had behaved, just as though he would not be able to recognize me! The baker S. had hung himself, Dr. I. and his wife had taken their lives by means of lethal injections. The gravediggers had to have reinforcements, temporarily corpses were even buried in their own properties.’³¹

Somehow these horrific reports about his former home community seemed barely to affect the twelve-year-old son, who went on to talk enthusiastically about something that clearly occupied a more important place in his life at the time, the fresh fruit his father was able to bring home that summer through his new temporary placement as a gardener in Colditz.

By the winter of 1945–6, the family had been moved further north, never quite making it as far as Mecklenburg, where the refugees had been supposed to settle, but remaining instead in Peisen, Kreis Merseburg. Here, the everyday worries of Klaus’s mother took over, as she recorded in her diary on 27 January 1946, complaining of the lack of food and the need to subsist almost purely on potatoes:

Because of a diet low in fats and protein, Father has water retention in his body. His legs have become fat, and also his face and hands are quite swollen . . . What can I give

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Father to improve his blood? I have nothing, and it sometimes secretly breaks my heart that I can always only put potatoes with salt or saltwater on the table, or the thin and non-nutritious broth that we can get from the butcher in Kitzen on some days.

She moved on to worries about her son's health:

Klaus is ill. His old bronchitis is particularly bad this time. He has been coughing for ages . . . Yes, if only I could give Klaus something that would make him stronger . . . He looks very pale and has become as emaciated as all of us.³²

Klaus's mother also wrote in more philosophical vein to her sister Margarete (Gretel), on 3 December 1945, commenting on her husband's views and feelings about the loss of his earlier job and pension, and how he had hoped that at the age of sixty-five he would have been able to retire and have an easy time, but had lost all this and now had to work. Moreover, the present and future seemed hopeless:

On top of all this a future with no prospects! When will our existence finally become different, better? When Gustav is at home, we can't talk about Grünberg and think about what we have lost. If we do, he always gets furious. Oh Gretel, even if we have to tell ourselves ten times over that there is no point in 'mourning' and 'remembering' our earlier circumstances, nevertheless you can't just rip this out of your heart. I will certainly never be able to settle down here in Saxony . . . I keep shaking my head and am amazed at how people can be so egoistic and tight-fisted. And particularly in relation to us refugees . . . I am not bitter about this. Sometimes I even say that earlier times were worth this sacrifice. For how lovely and great and worthy of life everything was! . . .

Other times will certainly come again sometime. So for the time being we just have to keep going [*durchhalten*] where we are, dear Gretel.³³

Nor, during this difficult first post-war winter, did religious faith seem to help:

You write that faith in God has always helped you over the darkest moments. I must say that very often I can find no comfort or peace in God. The times are too hard and difficult, relentlessly ghastly! If I only consider the evening of our parents' lives! In what meagre and primitive conditions they are having to pass their days now, and how insufficient are the starvation rations!³⁴

For almost the first time, then, Germans themselves were experiencing the kind of hunger and privation that they had inflicted upon millions of others during the preceding years—and the vast majority were also failing to make any connections, indulging instead in great bouts of self-pity.

It took a long time for adults to work through both the practical problems and the implications for their world views of this massive historical rupture. For purposes of practical survival, the immediate reaction was of course to disavow any previous commitment to Nazism and claim that any memberships of Nazi organizations or the party itself had only been under duress. But shuffling off the

³² *Ibid.*, Klaus F.'s mother's diary entry of 27 Jan. 1946, pp. 60–1.

³³ *Ibid.*, letter from Klaus F.'s mother to her sister, pp. 145–6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, letter of 24 Oct. 1945, p. 137.

underlying prejudices and beliefs which had both fuelled support for and been enhanced by Nazism seemed to take a little longer, if it took place at all. In some cases, the experiences of the Soviet occupation seemed even to harden, rather than destroy, previous Nazi sentiments.

One such case can be observed through the diary of Elly von H., an elderly lady in Mecklenburg who traced, in a series of simple notebooks, an almost daily record from the impending military defeat of Germany in April 1945 through to the spring of 1948, when her diaries end.³⁵ Born in 1867, widowed in 1904, having given birth to six children of whom one died already in 1898, Elly von H. lived in the landed estate (*Gut*) of Stavenslust, some seven kilometres south-east of the Mecklenburg community of Güstrow. In her late seventies at the end of the war, and hampered by a pronounced limp, Elly von H. did not flee with the rest of the residents of her hamlet when the Russian soldiers advanced, but stayed in a nearly deserted village to witness every moment of the end of the war. News appeared to travel fast in this tiny rural community, since she was well aware already on the evening of 30 April of the momentous events of the day:

In Güstrow the white flag has supposedly already been raised; the Führer is apparently dead; and Brauchitsch is in discussions with the enemy. Berlin in the hands of the Soviets! Until yesterday the avenue was occupied by military vehicles driving up and down and trucks full of refugees, today it is teeming with refugees on foot with prams and overloaded carts, trying to save themselves in the woods.³⁶

A few days later, on Wednesday 2 May 1945 she recorded:

An unforgettable day. Avenue, courtyard, the whole area deathly quiet . . . At around 12 a wild shooting started. I now limped after all with my bag . . . to the Teterow Avenue behind 'our' woods . . . It turned out to be 6 long hours then I could no longer bear the frightful din in front, the whining of bullets above and the impact following that behind me and limped to the Avenue, where I could see a brightly painted tank through the trees . . . In the clearing on the path through the woods before reaching the Avenue a young person (a Russian worker from the area) came towards me laughing and said as he passed 'Russians are here!'³⁷

By Sunday 6 May, the experience of Soviet occupation was in full swing:

A breathtaking fear overcame Frau Z. and the other women, when these 2 fellows (2 Russian soldiers) came into the kitchen, demanded their watches and went through all the rooms. Without further ado the young Frau S. was pulled out before our eyes and raped in the next room. (That had already happened a few days ago when they were all sleeping together in a barn in the woods near Hoppenrade!) It was supposedly frightful! One really is vulnerable to anything!³⁸

Such scenes were witnessed repeatedly in the following days.³⁹

³⁵ Kempowski-BIO, Nr. 3943, Elly von H., Tagebücher, 16 Apr. 1945–Spring 1948.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Heft 1, 30 Apr. 1945, fol. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 2 May 1945, fols. 6–7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Sunday 6 May 1945, fol. 19.

³⁹ See above, pp. 263–5.

Clearly a well-educated and upper-class woman with a degree of self-confidence, Frau von H. initially made an attempt to befriend the 'better class' of more educated Soviet officers, thinking that they would disapprove of and discipline the conduct of the ordinary soldiers; she was able to converse with them in fluent Russian, and seems to have had some quite long, philosophical conversations on occasion. But by the autumn of 1945, despite the apparent end of the wave of rapes and robberies (which at least cease to be noted in diary entries by this time), her attitudes were changing in the light of what she now perceived to be Soviet intentions:

I am horrified by the depths of the hatred of our enemies, who mix lies and truth together and use the lowest instincts of uneducated primitive people to strip us, the German people, bare and naked, to smear us, to deride us, to exterminate us! . . . Now they are triumphant, now they seem to have reached their goal! What shall we do? Fall into despair? No, not that! God has always been stronger than the devil and when the time comes, when we have proved ourselves through the fire, then . . . and we will gain strength again and become young 'like the eagle' etc.⁴⁰

Towards the end of her diary—arguably nearing the end of her own life—Elly von H. became more and more bitter and angry, raging into her notebook along lines that smack more of Nazi propaganda than any post-war rethinking:

What have the tormented Germans gained through the defeat of 'Nazism'? The most gruesome amalgamation of the most insolent and hate-filled Jewry with the most despicable proletariat of the whole of 'Christendom!'; [against] the former Germany that was once the stronghold and barricade for everything high and noble between heaven and earth!⁴¹

Like many others at this time, Elly von H. felt this to be a brief moment of transition, and 'other times' would come again. Behaviour was geared more towards personal survival than to any genuine rethinking of the recent past.

Germans who were still prisoners of war appeared to be living in another kind of 'time capsule', apparently well informed but, in a deeper sense, verging on unaware of what was happening in their homeland. The differences between those who lived through this period within Germany, and those remaining in captivity, are striking, and letters to and from family and friends provide interesting glimpses of what struck Germans themselves most at the time during and after the defeat of the 'Thousand Year Reich'.

An insight into mentalities among prisoners of war who were far from the changes within Germany is given by Fritz Beyling (1909–63). Beyling was a communist activist who had been periodically imprisoned for his political and journalistic activities during the 1930s, and who continued to work as an 'anti-fascist' agitator while in French captivity in Northern Africa from 1943 to 1945. He describes the general mood of fellow prisoners of war as they heard the news of

⁴⁰ Kempowski-BIO, Nr. 3943, Elly von H., Tagebücher, Heft 5, Friday 28 Sep. 1945, fol. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16 Apr. 1945–Spring 1948, Heft 10, 11 Oct. 1948 (no page).

the war turning against Germany. While many welcomed the possibility of an impending end of hostilities, not all were convinced by any means. In Beyling's view, expressed in a letter signed on behalf of the 'anti-fascist VII. Company of the Prisoner of War Camp 'D' in North Africa', the previous years of Nazi propaganda and militaristic practice had had their effect on the German soldiers' capacity for independent thinking:

Those who believe that they can do away with facts and truths if they simply ignore them are living proof that during the last 6 years of their lives, they have not learnt much apart from snappy marching up and down.⁴²

Beyling and like-minded colleagues sought to use this as an opportunity for political re-education, through the production and distribution of a camp newsletter, the '*Blatt der Heimatfernen*' [Newspaper for those far from home]. But Beyling was in a tiny minority in his views. Not everyone was prepared as yet to see the defeat of Germany in terms of 'liberation', let alone a 'free Germany'. And experience alone would not be sufficient to change people's ways of thinking, given the stubborn persistence of vestiges of faith in Hitler.

Gustav A.—who came from a very different political perspective than Beyling—explained in a letter to his friend Heinz, still in captivity, how things in Germany were generally far worse than returning prisoners of war might be expecting:

For people in Germany have unfortunately also changed, and I get palpitations when I think about what you poor PGs [party members] will say about the Germany you will find when you get home. Even still today hundreds of thousands of people, yes, even millions, are wandering around, having become homeless after the glory-filled capitulation, after which more people probably died than during the whole war. Perhaps 25 million have lost their Heimat... We have been completely finished off. Discord, treachery, sabotage, all were geared towards this end... Basically we are all POWs, since we are subject to administration even right into our own homes. In every zone of Germany people are starving... In the Russian zone it's even a lot worse than that... Madness has become method and out of all this world peace will supposedly be born... It's hard to instil solace and inspire confidence among you poor PGs, because it's no longer possible to judge who is in a worse position.⁴³

Gustav A. had himself fled from the Russians in Berlin before disaster befell his family; and he now dared not go back: 'Anyone who could get away has managed to escape these human beasts, if my wife and my 13-year-old Gisela had fallen into their hands there would have been a catastrophe.'⁴⁴ The views of Gustav A. were probably more typical than those of Beyling. Harald S., for example, complains in a letter of 31 May 1946 to his brother Heinrich, still a prisoner of war, about the lack

⁴² SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/1, Fritz Beyling, letter on behalf of 'rund 100 deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Lagers "D" in Nordafrika' to the 'Redaktion des "Wochenkuriers" z. Hdn. des Herrn Lagerkommandanten' (no date, late 1944 or spring 1945), no page.

⁴³ SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/1, letter from Gustav A., 15 Jun. 1946.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

of food—limited to 1,000 calories a day—in the Soviet zone of occupation, and adds critical comments in a somewhat sarcastic tone:

Haven't we got a wonderful future in Germany? But if you think we are losing courage, then you're wrong. There are moments when one has one's depressed moods, and life seems pointless. But one always manages to get through this and tell oneself that one has to keep on going [*durchhalten*] and that's how it really is. If you look at the current political situation, then you can justifiably hope that it will be different again sometime.⁴⁵

Some former soldiers tried to keep up post-war morale by appealing to themes such as comradeship (*Kameradschaft*) between former soldiers, in contrast to what they perceived as the collapse of society on the home front. Gustav A., for example, commented that:

I was really pleased about the comradely togetherness that can be sensed from the reports of the theatre group and the orchestra and that I as a soldier of course recognize. You will miss this comradeship again when you are back home, the German people is not held together any more by any kind of cement, it's breaking apart like a dried-out powder cake, baked without fat . . . If my family, which has just grown by the addition of a little girl on 5.4.45, did not need me, then I would prefer not to have to see this world any more.⁴⁶

Many others did actually despair and took their own lives, for whatever combinations of reasons—fear about the possible consequences of their former doings, a sense of hopelessness about the future, and an overwhelming sense of suffering in the present. Suicides were not limited to those at the top of the Nazi political pyramid who knew full well they would be brought to stand trial for their deeds.

Many of those who had been adults during the Third Reich either continued to uphold certain 'virtues' and values, or even found them renewed and strengthened by their experiences after defeat. Often, what might be called 'generic values' were separated from the previous adulation of Hitler, and now continued in a more disembodied way, associated with a more general notion of 'Germanness' rather than specifically Nazism. Thus the chords on which Hitler had been able to play continued to resonate even after his demise and the collapse of the Hitler myth.

The theme of comradeship, for example, had predated Hitler and now continued to enjoy something of an afterlife.⁴⁷ Comradeship was seen as closely connected with authentic 'Germanness', and intrinsically linked to peculiarly soldierly virtues. As Gustav A. put it:

Greetings to your comrades, to whom you are bound by genuine German comradeship, and hold on to this as something of value, since it gives you security and support. I often think back wistfully nowadays about my comradeship as a soldier, because I do not understand the remaining Germans . . . Write back soon to your old comrade . . .⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, letter of 31 May 1946 from Harald S. to his brother.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, letter from Gustav A., 15 Jun. 1946.

⁴⁷ See also Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft*.

⁴⁸ SAPMO BAArch, NY 4500/1, letter from Gustav A., 15 Jun. 1946.

And if 'humanity' was anywhere to be found, it was only among Germans:

Only ill people return from Russian captivity, who arrive here half dead, a large proportion don't survive the journey home. But higher officers have even returned home from British captivity half dead. Humanity is a word which has been virtually done to death here.⁴⁹

There are many similar comments in letters of the later 1940s, as Germans, ignoring their own earlier actions and the wider reasons behind the situation in which they now found themselves, began to try to come to terms with defeat and occupation.

Most Germans writing to those still in captivity were simply concerned to prepare them for what they would find on their return to a post-war Germany. A letter from 'your mother and sister' to a prisoner of war in North Africa in February 1946, for example, expresses the fear that he will be totally out of touch with events at home, and will be quite shocked when he returns. The two letter-writers in this case describe a flooded and ruined landscape where nature has taken over to finish what the enemy had begun. The mother has just returned home from two weeks spent in hospital after falling on ice; the sister is recovering from four months in a sanatorium (*Krankenlager*) with typhus. The cellar of their house is simply a bathtub, flooded with water. They complain of having very little to eat, particularly no fats. They suggest that the food situation is better in towns than in country areas, but that the townspeople complain more. But they are well aware that conditions in the Soviet zone are by far the worst; and there is a great deal more to comment on:

In the American and English zones there are supposedly adequate provisions. Do you know too that our Fatherland is occupied by the 3 [*sic*] powers? The borders are closed. There's trouble brewing . . . Yes, you'll be astonished at what they are doing to us. And Germany is a land of gangsters. Everything is being stolen by and by.—With insolence. Unbelievable.—Plundering trains is nothing new. Then politics. Germany the land of political parties. . . . I remember dimly the [Nazi] takeover of power. That is, the time beforehand and afterwards. Partly from books and what people said. Elections, propaganda, and the eternal waste of energy.—Anyway, it is now desired that every working person should join a trade union. So—in we go!—

Oh, there is so much. A pity that you soldiers are so far away from this everyday unfolding of world history.—For there are now so many fools here in our Heimat. . . . Soldiers and now KPD-man [communist party member] . . . Where is the bridge? . . . Have you heard already about the trials in Nuremberg?—Crazy.⁵⁰

Such comments are found, too, in many other letters.

Those who intensely and increasingly disliked the new circumstances of rule under communist auspices often simply fled to the West. This was particularly prevalent among those owners of landed estates who had, through the Soviet-imposed

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Fritz Beyling, letter from 'Deine Mutter und Schwester', 13 Feb. 1946.

land reform of September 1945, been forcibly ousted from their homes, their social standing, and livelihoods. Often too, they enjoyed the characteristically wide networks of relatives and friends of this class with the means to assist them, and could frequently manage to relocate with a high measure of both material and cultural capital intact, despite loss of immovable properties—to summarize crudely, to retain a combination of the family silver and the family name, despite loss of the family estate. Some few aristocrats remained in the Soviet zone, for reasons ranging from a sense of social duty to ‘their’ people, a sense of belonging to a particular area that had perhaps been a family home for centuries, or for quite personal reasons relating to care of relatives or networks of friends.⁵¹ By and large they viewed the new situation with a combination of acute hostility, a feeling that they might merely be weathering a brief storm, and a determination to ‘stick it out’ accompanied by notions of honour, duty, and ‘Prussian bearing’. While the wider family of the former Augusta-Schule pupil Alexandra von S., for example, were among those who made it to the West, the fate of those who chose to remain was less than pleasant. She commented in a letter to a former school friend that:

All of my eastern relatives are here in the West, apart from the few who tried to remain at home. They were kidnapped or murdered.⁵²

Alexandra herself, and her husband Udo K., the former *Landrat* of Będzin, were fortunate enough to find hospitality in the moated castle of an aristocratic family friend in what became the French zone of occupation. Unsurprisingly, Alexandra had an extremely low opinion of what was happening in the former German territories in the east:

It’s still impossible to grasp what is and has been going on in the eastern territories of Germany. All the towns laid to waste, the villages deserted, only newly settled to a minimal extent, the land for the most part uncultivated, and everything German extinguished. Apart from the endless abundance of need and misery, homelessness and ghastly individual fates, this dying out of the German east is so endlessly bitter.⁵³

Clearly what the Germans had done in the previous few years to the lands they had conquered and annexed was not uppermost in Alexandra’s mind at this point. And, unlike the situation after 1918, mourning over lost eastern territories could not now be followed by any practical action to try to regain them through the use of violence. The lost eastern territories, and, as it was to transpire, the Soviet zone of occupation which became the GDR, could not for the foreseeable future be a serious cause to unleash another war.

Meanwhile, Udo K. kept his head down until the immediate post-war flurry of denazification investigations had somewhat subsided and procedures passed over to German hands. As Alexandra eventually recounted the tale to her former school friend, quite belatedly, in a letter of 1948:

⁵¹ Interviews, summer 2007.

⁵² Alexandra’s letters from the French zone, 19 Jun. 1948, private family archive.

⁵³ Alexandra’s letters from the French zone, 2 Oct. 1947, private family archive.

I didn't previously mention Udo's earlier career, since Landrats belonged to the people liable to 'automatic arrest', that means they were imprisoned immediately wherever they appeared, remaining for years in concentration camps [*sic*] under impossible living conditions, with no sort of [legal] procedures. We were happy that Udo succeeded in avoiding this, in that he was able to sit quietly here in C. hidden as though in a mouse-hole. But for this reason he was also not able to get a job, because for every appointment you had to fill up a questionnaire, which would have brought his earlier occupation to the light of day, and then he would immediately have been locked up. Healthwise he would never have survived this time in a camp, since he is very delicate, and the healthiest people came back from the camps ill and half-starved. We were lucky in that the determination of automatic arrest was lifted even before the currency reform, so that he could initiate his 'denazification process', which then went astonishingly quickly—that too was only possible through 'connections', others had to wait for months and years for the resolution of their cases. Now therefore he has been 'de-brownd', and placed in the Group 5, that is those who are 'exonerated', who despite their [Nazi] Party membership could show that they had actively opposed Nazism.⁵⁴

This was in some respects rather typical for the ways in which former Nazis treated their past, although it was rare for someone of such previous significance in the Nazi administration to achieve the completely 'clean' category of 'exonerated'. This was an achievement which was later to come in useful: Udo K.'s subsequent highly successful career in the West German civil service was not significantly hampered by the long-running investigations into criminal acts carried out in the area so close to Auschwitz for which he had held formal responsibility. A far more typical outcome at this time, at least in the Western zones, was that of gaining categorization as a former 'fellow traveller' or *Mitläufer*, frequently attained through the production of what were colloquially termed 'Persil certificates' (washing former brownshirts 'whiter than white').⁵⁵ And it was of course a far cry from the way in which many survivors of Nazi persecution felt that Nazism should be dealt with—if indeed they were capable at this time of thinking about such things at all. Most survivors had enough to contend with by way of sheer physical and psychological survival on a personal level to be much concerned at this stage with dealing with the immediate past in any more general sense.

In the meantime, in the Soviet zone, political commitment counted for more than prior experience or relevant expertise in key areas. Recalling the early days in Berlin, for example, the later GDR functionary Hans Rentmeister highlighted the ways in which they 'removed the last former Nazis still hiding out in their offices in the Town Hall'. Instead, they installed, on his (politically coloured) account:

Members of the KPD, the SPD and anti-fascists who did not belong to any party. Most of them had never sat at a desk before or done administrative work.

Was that important now? What was there to administer?

⁵⁴ Alexandra's letters from C. in the French zone, 29 Nov. 1948, private family archive.

⁵⁵ See e.g. the now classic study by Lutz Niethammer, *Die Mitläuferfabrik. Die Entnazifizierung am Beispiel Bayerns* (Berlin: Dietz, 1982; orig. 1972).

The population was suffering and in need, people needed something to eat; there was no regular water or electricity supply, thousands of homes were bombed out, people needed a roof over their heads. The most important thing was—the factories had got to be set back in motion.

In order to carry out these massive tasks, one did not have to be an administrative expert, but rather one had to have a clear head and a warm heart, beating for a new life.⁵⁶

Thus with the backing of the Soviet forces, the communist-dominated left-wing parties—from April 1946 the SED (Socialist Unity Party, formed out of the union of KPD and SPD)—sought to deal with the ruins of Hitler's Reich and to remake German society in a new image. In the process, they introduced polices which radically overturned the previous social structure of their zone, and challenged the very existence of the bourgeoisie and upper classes. They also sought to deal with the issue of Nazism. This rupture was no repeat of 1918.

II. DISCARDING NAZISM

While a significant if small minority of those who had suffered at the hands of the Nazi system and who had stayed in or returned to Germany after the war were determined to try to build a 'better Germany', very few of those who had been truly responsible for Hitler's state were willing to face up to the enormity of what had happened and the outcomes of the ideology they had so recently sustained. A deeply divided society, in which only a tiny number had both actively opposed Nazism and survived to fight another day, remained precisely that: deeply divided. The difference was now that power lay with the victorious Allies, and no longer with the Nazi regime; and very different norms, values, and practices were now dominant in the new political and economic systems that emerged on the ruins of the Reich.

Survivors of Nazi persecution had to come to terms not only with liberation—often in such a physically and emotionally weakened state that even the realization that they had evaded death at the hands of the Nazis could be difficult to cope with, and 'recovery' take a long time—but also the discovery or conscious registration of devastating losses of family and friends.⁵⁷ Former Nazis and more or less enthusiastic fellow-travellers had to come to terms with the collapse of their previous ideals, belief system, aspirations—and the state and government which had demanded

⁵⁶ Landesarchiv Berlin (henceforth LAB), C Rep 902-02-04 Nr. 64, Hans R. (born 1911), fols 9–10.

⁵⁷ There is a huge literature on this question, which cannot be adequately covered here; but it is notable that, even when physically recovered as far as possible, many survivors of Nazi persecution felt it hard, on occasion impossible, to live with the emotional scars and memories. Furthermore, very many relocated and sought to start new lives away from their former homelands in Europe. Mental illnesses requiring one or another form of treatment, and suicides a few or even many years later were not uncommon. For some of the immediate issues in occupied Germany, see e.g. Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans and Allies: Close encounters in occupied Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

utter and ultimate sacrifices from them, and in which they had in turn invested so much by way of their conceptions for the future. Even those who had only gone along with the regime in grumbling and relatively passive ways now found they were faced with difficult questions about actions and compromises made in the past. Some faced for the first time the realities of the regime which they had somewhat blindly obeyed; others continued to ignore the consequences of Nazism, and focused instead on what they saw as the continuing evils of Bolshevism. This was, then, a time not only of acute physical demands and stresses, but also of emotional and psychic rupture in life narratives. It was not only because of the varied and variously traumatic experiences of flight, or loss of homes and possessions, or fear about the whereabouts of loved ones, and constant hunger, that the 'worst times' in the lives of many Germans, as they later recounted their life stories, were the later 1940s. This was rupture on a scale far greater than that experienced after the Great War.

Corresponding to the outer signs of a disrupted, deeply disturbed society in transition was a less visible remaking of social relations. Modes of negotiating this transition varied radically, dominated by the search for survival strategies, both physical and psychological, in highly uncertain times. Many found ways of discarding previous roles and developing new identities; others were forced, unwillingly, to do penance for past misdeeds or to suffer as a result of uncomfortable new demands. Some searched for new meanings; others were simply lost, disillusioned, living from day to day.

In terms of self-representations, the joke that, apart from Hitler, there had been no Nazis in Germany, began to acquire some plausibility. Hitler pictures were rapidly removed from the walls, party paraphernalia and copies of *Mein Kampf* rapidly jettisoned, and uniforms burnt or dyed to be reused as civilian clothing. For those who had been involved in Nazism as adults, and implicated—to whatever degree—in the functioning of this murderous regime, there were several options for navigating a highly uncertain period of transition. Key for the most compromised was of course to evade being brought to justice, whether carried out with a degree of victors' legality (varying from zone to zone) or more summarily, through the instant actions of the incensed. For the vast majority of those adults who had, in one way or another, assisted the Nazi regime through outwardly conformist or supportive behaviour, the likely penalties were far less radical. Nevertheless, in virtually all cases, however paramount the material demands of sheer physical survival in everyday life (and even closely related to these demands), some renegotiation of the 'presented self' was essential.

In the ways in which people represented themselves at the time and much later, three major types of strategy can be observed. These were not necessarily mutually exclusive, since they could be combined to varying degrees, or drawn on selectively and sequentially, depending on circumstances and audiences. A widespread strategy was that of the 'claimed conversion'. This entailed conceding the previous error of one's ways, having been innocently 'taken in' by the charismatic *Führer*, for example, and having allegedly 'not known' about the criminal acts of the regime. However, once properly informed during the later stages of the war, or while a prisoner of war, or shortly after the war when all began to be revealed, some form of 'conversion' took place, when the 'truth' about Nazism had finally become clear.

This form of narrative can be found quite broadly in East German life stories, without any attendant sense of guilt. A second and equally widespread strategy was that of 'claimed consistency'. This variant entailed claiming that internally, one had always 'been against' Nazism—*immer dagegen*—and only the outward force of circumstance had coerced one into *appearing* to conform, against all internal instincts and 'genuine' beliefs. This appears very widely in the early post-war period, particularly in connection with denazification cases. It arguably remained the predominant mode of framing life stories in a more shame-ridden Western culture of 'overcoming the past' than it did in East Germany, where, for those who had not been major Nazis and war criminals, subsequent conversions and commitment to the new cause provided a degree of absolution for (minor) sins. The third variant, in the strong sense less apparently widespread than the other two, but in the weaker sense highly prevalent, was that of clinging to some or all previous beliefs and assumptions. In the stronger sense—stubbornly adhering quite explicitly to obvious Nazi tenets—this was, clearly, an extraordinarily risky strategy for anyone seeking to negotiate any kind of successful future under the radically altered circumstances of post-Nazi Germany, although to somewhat different degrees in East and West. Only a very few would really wish to be associated with a regime now so clearly marked as criminal. But in the weaker sense, vestiges of Nazism were often difficult to eradicate entirely, and narratives can be found which combine all three strategies: thus it was possible simultaneously to claim that one had 'always been against it', that one 'only really knew about the worst aspects' after the war, and yet also to continue to adduce essentially Nazi justifications for previous actions.

Denazification proceedings tended to provoke a life narrative emphasizing lack of agency during the Third Reich, and a portrayal of the self as having been forced to conform.⁵⁸ So for example in the Berlin municipal finance and accounting office there were major disagreements about who should be dismissed and on what basis. This was particularly problematic since this large institution, employing some 1,000 people and scheduled to rise to 3,000, had formerly been the *Reichsbank*. Appeals were rife, and were neatly summarized in a letter of 19 January 1946 from multiple signatories to one Herr G. in the new, communist organized trade union organization (FDGB), arguing against the dismissal decisions made by a Herr P. On this collective account, all apparent memberships of Nazi organizations were effectively forced upon entirely innocent employees, who inescapably had been pressured to go along with the Nazi regime for the best of reasons:

It is however a fact that the members of the former Reichsbank, from the personnel of which the largest part of our employees are drawn, were forced into the NSV service [*Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*, National Socialist People's Welfare]. They could not simply withhold themselves from this activity without losing wages and bread, and also it was explained that it wasn't a political but rather a charitable matter.

Herr P. also considers the former supporting members of the National Socialist Flying Corps and of the SS to be politically unreliable. We would have shared this view

⁵⁸ On denazification policies more generally, see e.g. Clemens Vollnhals (ed.), *Entnazifizierung. Politische Säuberung und Rehabilitierung in den vier Besatzungszonen 1945–1949* (Munich: dtv, 1991).

if the people affected had become members through their own free choice and had been actively involved. But this is in no way the case; this is entirely a matter of enforced memberships that had to be entered into in order, where possible, to avoid joining the [Nazi] Party.⁵⁹

It was also held that commitment to ‘building up’ the new cause would more than compensate for past compromises. The letter-writers felt themselves obliged

to speak on behalf of our members, especially when this concerns people who in the most difficult times voluntarily offer themselves for ‘reconstruction’ [*Wiederaufbau*] and who in poor working conditions did even more than their duty.

It really goes without saying that we are in favour of an anti-fascist work force, since only with such a workforce are we in a position to accomplish the tasks which face us and which we will encounter in the best interests of our shattered Heimat.⁶⁰

These general remarks were followed by details of individual cases in the personnel department, whom Herr P. wanted removed, but who had allegedly only joined things ‘under pressure’. These were accompanied by many testimonies to prove that they had never been convinced Nazis and had only done what were in principle quite acceptable things under pressure and duress. They had, for example, only ‘distributed ration cards’ or added up the sums or some other such inoffensive thing, under much pressure; or had only been the ‘cell administrator’ for a few weeks.

Willy T., aged fifty-four, for example, produced a statement on 1 December 1945. He had joined the new East German SPD already on 1 August 1945, clearly already having a sharp eye for his future. He claimed that he had only been a ‘*Blockwalter*’ (low-level functionary) in the NSV under pressure; he was a member of the NSFK solely because of his interests in hang gliding and air sports; he belonged to the Reich War Veterans’ Association (*Reichskriegerverband*) because he had been lonely in Berlin in the early 1920s, and this league was subsequently absorbed into the Nazi War Veterans’ League, the *Kyffhäuserbund*, in 1936. As he explained, in the classic language of the front generation (note the repeated use of the term comrades, ‘*Kameraden*’):

In 1920 I joined the association of former comrades of my previous troop section. I was at that time a stranger in Berlin, had no relatives here and was happy to have found a few acquaintances. I kept up the contacts with the few comrades later too. In 1936 all War Veterans’ Associations were disbanded that didn’t belong to the *Kyffhäuserbund*. In order to avoid being dissolved, we formed a group of comrades which hardly had enough members to fill all the executive posts. I was designated the secretary, while the work that had to be done was carried out then as later by the previous Chair of the Association alone.⁶¹

Pressures ‘from above’ were also often adduced to account for memberships. In another case, for example:

⁵⁹ SAPMO-BArchiv, DY 34 40/68/4850, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Willy T., aged 54, statement of 1 Dec. 1945.

V. emphasizes that he did not become a Block helper in the NSDAP of his own free will but was pressured to by his superiors in the bank, who repeatedly demanded that he should take on a position and even threatened him with demotion. It was probably barely possible for V. to withstand these constant demands, if he did not want to be put out of wages and bread . . . V. gives as witnesses to his antifascist attitudes [. . . list of names follows].⁶²

'Personal' rather than 'political' motives seem to play a role in all of these accounts, thus supposedly making the behaviours or memberships more 'acceptable' as having been 'under pressure' rather than 'out of conviction'. One Otto D., for example, claimed that he voluntarily undertook training in a Nazi school for civil servants in 1938, and achieved the SA sports badge (*Sportabzeichen*); he had allegedly requested party membership of the NSDAP on 15 February 1940 and declared himself 'prepared for active service' only because he thought this would help finance his two sons to study. One son became a member of the NSDAP in 1943. But various testimonials were now adduced to prove that, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, D. had in fact been an anti-fascist: 'D. explains that he has always been anti-fascist in his outlook and has always judged the programme and the actions of the NSDAP' in an adverse light.⁶³ Individuals were brought in to confirm that, for example, 'his political attitude in relation to me was always anti-fascist; in this way it was possible for us even at that time to talk freely between ourselves about the madness that Hitler had brought on Germany'.⁶⁴ Another declared that 'D. never expressed himself in a pro-Nazi manner. In the Hitler years both [J. and D.] often talked about the war situation, in the course of which D. always expressed his opinion that he predicted a bad ending to the war.'⁶⁵ It is almost astonishing to think that such realistic comments about the probable end of the war, which at the time of course would have been officially decried as 'defeatism', could now be adduced as evidence of having been 'anti-Nazi'. There was apparently still a lingering sense that making such remarks must have been in some way 'oppositional'. As far as an individual's sense of self was concerned, there clearly was a degree of dissonance between inner views and regime constraints at the time, providing a degree of plausibility, even a sense of authenticity, to this later defence. In terms of denazification, however, this sort of testimony was clutching at straws.

Many accounts produced during this period portray behaviour in the recent past in a similar manner. Nothing undertaken during the Nazi period that on the face of it would have suggested evidence of supporting the regime had, it now seemed, been undertaken voluntarily or carried out with any real let alone active commitment. Many had children who had been in the Hitler Youth (HJ), but this was represented as only 'enforced membership' (*Zwangsmitgliedschaft*). All conformity

⁶² SAPMO-BArchiv, DY 34 40/68/4850, Egon V., in testimonial by Sch. and others of 4 Dec. 1945.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, testimonial of 4 Dec. 1945.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, testimonial by Emil S., 9 Dec. 1945.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, testimonial by S., 5 Dec. 1945.

seemed to have been not out of political conviction but for personal motives; individuals claimed they had been intrinsically against Nazism or the 'Hitler cause' (*Hitlersache*), and had only done as much as was necessary to protect themselves and serve their own personal and family interests. This seems to have widely been seen as good enough by way of an excuse, as acceptable to put forward as a reason why should one not lose one's position or be demoted. Outer behaviour and inner convictions could thus be held to be quite different. It is, in this light, perhaps understandable why then so many adults subsequently accommodated themselves relatively easily to the next set of political constraints and pressures.

For the new authorities, some areas of professional activity were more politically sensitive than others, and levels of scrutiny varied accordingly. Schoolteachers in the Soviet zone were, for example, subjected to rigorous sieving, with major turnover in some areas, although also surprising continuities.⁶⁶ It was possible, in due course, for former 'Nazi teachers' to gain reinstatement if they could demonstrate that they were now 'free of Nazi ideology' and had proven adequate commitment to the new system.⁶⁷ In the process, people sought to represent past allegiances and activities in a new light, although, as in other areas, often in face of contradiction by neighbours and colleagues. In the case of schoolteachers there was an extended audience for current views: schoolchildren and their parents. These could inadvertently confirm the extent to which conversions remained more apparent than real, and sometimes did so intentionally, as on the occasion of one teacher's application to join the SED. The daughter of a 'party comrade' reported on the behaviour of this teacher in her class along the following lines:

In response to the question whether it would have been better for us to have won or to have lost the war, most children replied with 'won'. But when one child expressed the view that 'it is better that we lost the war', the colleague M. said, 'Well, that is what we are supposed to say today.'⁶⁸

In face of this explicit confession of conformist enactment without inner conviction, it was difficult for the relevant authorities to come to a definitive conclusion, commenting that:

It is possible that M. really wants to commit himself on behalf of a progressive world, for real democracy and socialism, but that as a former army officer with virtually all possible military medals he has not as yet found his way completely into today's reality and out of the ideal world of his youth which has now collapsed. But there is also the possibility that he only wants to join the SED in order to make a career more quickly.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ For a detailed local study, see Charles Lansing, *From Nazism to Communism: German schoolteachers under two dictatorships* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁶⁷ See e.g. Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB) C Rep 120 Nr. 107, letter of 22 Sep. 1945 from the 'Magistrat der Stadt Berlin Abteilung für Volksbildung - Schulamt - An die Schulämter der Bezirke', fols. 4-5; Magistrat von Gross-Berlin, Abteilung Volksbildung, UA Unterricht und Erziehung, letter of 1 Nov. 1950, 'Einstellung von ehemaligen Nazilehrern', fol. 244.

⁶⁸ LAB, C Rep 120 Nr. 107, Bericht der Betriebsgruppe der 8. und 9. Schule über den Kollegen M. (n.d.), fol. 205.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 205.

Parents could also get proactively involved in disciplinary investigations of particular teachers, as in the case of those who protested against inadequate supervision of an assistant teacher who had divided the class into three ability groups, termed respectively the 'Departments' of 'Roses', 'Tulips', and 'Weeds'. As the report noted, the parents 'energetically refuse to have their children designated as Weeds'.⁷⁰ The school director, who had not only failed to intervene appropriately but was also accused of all sorts of other derelictions of duty and inadequacies of outlook and neglect of discipline, was demoted and sent to a school in another district.

Tensions between individuals who knew each other's pasts to a greater or lesser extent continued to play a significant role, cross-fertilizing with denazification proceedings in a variety of ways. The records are full of cases where people were being 'urgently sought' either because they were former Nazis against whom there were investigations running, or missing victims being sought by family members. Sometimes there were simply 'neighbourly disputes' that became entangled with the post-Nazi problematic (just as previously, under different political colours, personal animosities had played a role in denunciations to the Gestapo). Hans C., of Berlin-Pankow, for example, who had formerly lived in Berlin-Moabit, had been a member of the NSDAP and the SS, and was allegedly the 'chauffeur of Adolf Hitler's personal car and driver for higher officers of the RLM [*Reichsluftfahrtministerium*, Reich Air Ministry]'. Hans C. however denied being a member of either the NSDAP or the SS. The witness Gertrud M. owned a garden plot in Eichwalde, near Berlin, which she leased to Hans C. in 1947. The report on this testimony provides some insight into the social processes at play in the early post-war period:

From the fact that the witness Gertrud M. was known during the war as an anti-fascist and in addition had for lengthy periods of time given Jewish refugees food and a place to stay in her lodgings and occasionally mentioned this fact to G., C. had said the following to the witness M.:

1. Jewish pig (M. is not a Jew).
 2. We are reaping what Hitler has sown.
 3. You are on the blacklist.
 4. It's a good thing that I've leased the plot, when things change again I'll protect you.
 5. Traitor to your country (because she had harboured Jews).
- ... Frau M. felt threatened by these remarks and filed a charge of verbal abuse.⁷¹

On one visit to her garden plot, Frau M. 'had, because of C.'s violent behaviour, to take two constables from the Eichwald Police Station as protection when she visited her allotment' and she 'felt... her safety was under threat'.⁷² There are many similar and often rather nasty stories to be found in these accounts.

⁷⁰ LAB, C Rep 120 Nr. 107, letter from Bezirksamt Köpenick of 3 Aug. 1948, p. 2.

⁷¹ SAPMO-BArch, DY55/V278 13/206, Doc. of 26 Sep. 1948, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

As after 1933, ‘enactment’ of new roles was again required, and even as people professed that they had only been acting the required behaviours in the recent past they appeared to have imbibed more of that past than they were now prepared to admit. Nor were all apparent ‘conversions’ in the immediate post-war period very consistent. Gertrud Bobek recalls, for example, one case of a person who readily changed sides as it suited him:

In Bautzen the Mayor Böhmer was already replaced in 1945 by Heinz Ullrich, a young former Hitler officer, who had joined the National Committee ‘Free Germany’ [opposed to Nazism]. He was very energetic and knew how to get his way. We have his energy to thank for the fact that we succeeded in getting the bridge over the Spree rebuilt in a relatively short space of time. I didn’t like his excessive ambition and his strong inclination for self-representation. The first task which he set himself was the renovation of the mayor’s office. It turned out later that he was not really committed to our cause. Even before I left Bautzen he was called to join the National Council in Berlin. From there he defected to the West.⁷³

Even given the fact that the left-wing Gertrud Bobek would have little sympathy for those who jumped westwards, rejecting the communist experiment for what might on other views have been perfectly good reasons, this career trajectory indicates just what kinds of leaps were possible and even required. ‘Consistency’ of both attitudes and behaviour was a rare option at this time. Fritz Beyling similarly, in the context of his work with the Union of those Persecuted by Nazism (VVN), had to deal with one Richard A. in Thuringia, whom he felt had not adequately toed the party line in the course of ‘anti-fascist’ work. As he put it in what might be described as a letter of friendly warning: ‘Instead of settling into the relevant circle of the anti-fascist group in good time, at a certain point you preferred an almost sentimental “comradeship” with Nazi elements’; Beyling contrasted this development with that of others, ‘who came from circles that were definitely infested with Nazism’ yet who had ‘undertaken a development during the relevant period’ and were now party functionaries.⁷⁴

Some were brought very sharply to account for their actions under the previous regime. Although the Soviet occupation authorities and the GDR later made great play of having engaged more effectively in denazification processes than was the case in the West—both sides using claims and counter-claims on this front as a Cold War weapon—even a cursory examination of some of the sentences pronounced in the early post-war period suggest the seriousness with which crimes committed under the Nazi regime were taken in the Soviet zone and subsequent GDR. Offences which, given the scale of murder and inhumanity in the Third Reich, seem relatively minor in comparison with what took place in the East, could attract significant penalties—in some cases far higher than the sentences later meted out by West German courts in the more famous concentration camp trials of the 1960s. In

⁷³ SAPMO-BArch, SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, *Erinnerungen* Oct 1972, ‘Meine Tätigkeit in der Stadtverwaltung Bautzen, Juni 1845 bis Mitte März 1947’, fol. 11.

⁷⁴ SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/4, Fritz Beyling, letter of 22 Dec. 1947.

Magdeburg, for example, Paul S. was given a death sentence on 27 February 1948 because he had 'while he was a Kapo murdered a Jewish prisoner in the KZ Flossenbürg'.⁷⁵ This was a severe punishment indeed, given that 'Kapos' (prisoners who held roles as low-level functionaries) were also being held against their will, and Nazis who had committed hundreds if not thousands of murders later generally managed to come away with extremely lenient if any sentences in Western trials.

Others in the Soviet zone were given sentences of between five and fifteen years for having been involved in the 'euthanasia' programme in Grafeneck, Hadamar, and Bernburg. One Hedwig M. was given a sentence of two and a half years on 29 June 1948 simply because of her administrative assistance in the 'euthanasia' programme: she 'had from the beginning in 1940 until July 1941 registered and undressed around 500 mentally ill people in the extermination camps of Grafeneck and Hadamar, who were gassed there, and she had dealt with the administration of the remaining possessions of those who had been murdered'. Again, this is an extraordinarily harsh sentence in comparison to what was going on at the time and what was to come later in the West. Others in the Soviet zone received harsh sentences for acts of brutality towards forced labourers or prisoners of war. Arno B., for example, was sentenced to eight months by a court in Gotha on 23 December 1947 because he 'had hit two Italian prisoners of war who were employed in his business'. Hans L. was sentenced on 19 August 1948 to three years by the Gotha court since he 'had as an employee of the labour office pulled the hair of a female Soviet citizen who was forcibly taken [for labour], in order to get her on to the deportation'; hair-pulling to get someone onto a transport was clearly far from the worst offence committed by Germans during the preceding years, and many of those convicted in the later Auschwitz trials received comparable sentences for infinitely greater crimes. Hermann K. was sentenced to three and a half years in Weimar on 4 February 1948 because he had 'mistreated prisoners of war and forced labourers'.

There were many cases against individuals who had denounced fellow citizens to the Nazi authorities, with adverse consequences for those denounced. Lothar M., for example, was sentenced on 1 April 1948 to three years' imprisonment because he 'had as the Principal Cell Representative [*Hauptzellenobmann*] in the Gotha coach factory denounced two citizens', one of whom had then been 'sentenced to 1 year and 2 months by the Weimar Special Court'. Margarete N. and Elfriede S. were sentenced on 8 July 1948 in the Nordhausen court to seven years and six months' imprisonment because 'both of them denounced a female citizen who was consequently sentenced to death by the SS Court in Kassel'. Arno Z. was sentenced to three and a half years by a Weimar court on 3 August 1949 because he 'had denounced forced labourers'. On 18 November 1949 Curt V. and Helen H. were sentenced in Erfurt to seven years and two years respectively since they had 'denounced a citizen who was consequently sent to the KZ Buchenwald'. The 'minor' cases that were later closed include large numbers of people sentenced for having denounced someone for making anti-fascist remarks or 'race offences', such

⁷⁵ This and the following cases are taken from Bundesarchiv, DP/3/1804.

as Paul K., who 'denounced the citizen Margarete B. to the Gestapo because she had had relations with a French prisoner of war. Frau B. was sentenced by a Special Court to 1 year and 3 months in prison'.⁷⁶ Similarly, one Kurt S., born in 1904, a hairdresser who had joined the NSDAP as late as 1941, 'was accused of having in 1944 denounced a customer, the citizen Emil. S., to the Gestapo, because of his comments against the fascist Reich. S... was sentenced to death by the People's Court and was executed.' In this case, as in many others, the accused had indirectly but quite predictably caused the imprisonment or death of the individuals they had denounced. Those now brought to account for their former acts also included those guilty of maltreating Jews during the pogrom of 9 November 1938 or on other occasions; some had committed offences by virtue of the offices they had held, not only as, for example, guards in concentration camps, but also in civilian administrative capacities; others had committed one-off offences including acts of physical violence and maltreatment of foreign workers in their factories or farms; some were listed who had simply belonged to the NSDAP and sometimes also the SA or SS.

This summary of actions taken against former Nazis cumulatively paints an absolutely shocking picture of local society during Third Reich, suggesting just how many individual acts of violence were committed by ordinary Germans against foreign workers and Jews, how many denunciations there were of fellow citizens who were opposed to Nazism, and just how much willing participation in and active commitment to the Nazi cause there had been in some quarters. But quite apart from the appalling light these cases shed on the ways in which so many ordinary Germans had apparently willingly participated in a racist system of utmost brutality in their everyday lives under Nazism, this small selection from innumerable cases also serves to indicate the seriousness with which the authorities in the Soviet zone took the question of dealing with the Nazi past, handing out relatively severe sentences for offences ranging from physical violence to denunciations of fellow citizens. It was then not only, as so often suggested in the Cold War literature on East Germany, a matter of the communist authorities using 'denazification' as a guise for ousting the old economic and social as well as political elites and installing their own people in positions of authority instead, or playing a competitive game with the West. Even so, the reliance on courts of law for cases such as these did not disguise the fact that many other people were simply arrested and imprisoned without any due process; internment under appalling conditions, or removal to forced labour in the Soviet Union, also led to high rates of disease and premature death without any sentence ever having been pronounced. Such (mal)treatment of individuals, including even youngsters who had held no position of responsibility during the Third Reich, arguably gained far wider public attention both at the time and later than did the procedurally more correct, or at least genuinely legalistic, attempts at dealing with Nazism in East Germany.

⁷⁶ Bundesarchiv, DP / 3 / 1804, 'Eingestellte Verfahren gemäss Befehl 43 des Obersten Chefs der SMAD Bezirk Schwerin', no date (but after 1952), Nr. 174. A subsequent summary letter with figures is dated 16 Jan. 1965.

Whether in the Soviet zone or the Western zones, not everyone after Hitler's defeat seemed even to recognize the need to adapt to the new circumstances or make any pretence at 'conversion'. The von Osten family, for example, resident at Am Stakensweg on the Baltic island of Fehmarn, had been forced like many other property owners with spare rooms at a time of acute housing shortage, to put up a teacher who was a refugee; and, as the refugee complained, the family had treated her in a quite abominable manner. The von Osten daughter was one Frau Lina Heydrich, the widow of Reinhard Heydrich; and the teacher's complaints about the treatment she received in this household shed an interesting wider light on conditions in former Nazi circles so soon after the war:

The von Osten parents are hard-hearted people and drenched with filthy greed. Since the Nazi daughter, Frau Heydrich, returned here, my life has become hell . . . I can simply do nothing against the malice of these prominent Nazis, and I am totally at my wit's end. The von Osten family has huge support among their Nazi relatives here on the island. Here on the island of Fehmarn people haven't yet experienced any kind of privation of war; they are bigoted and hard-hearted in relation to the needs of others, even though the misery of refugees here is verging on grotesque . . . I have by now unsuccessfully approached all possible offices, but have not as yet found any kind of help. They comfort me and delay everything, because here on Fehmarn virtually everyone is a Nazi in disguise. The mayors change frequently, and apart from that the natives stick together here like fire and brimstone. The worst of them is certainly Frau Heydrich, who obviously was well taught by her husband . . .⁷⁷

It is unwise to generalize too much about responses at this time, and this little island infested by Nazis was clearly a highly unusual cluster; but it is clear that in some circumstances, people barely saw any need to change their expressed opinions and apparently viewed current conditions as merely temporary.

Meanwhile, those Germans who had been forced to become outsiders through Hitler's persecution, or who felt estranged from fellow citizens who had conformed, often still felt they were outsiders, even if the balance of power relations had changed radically. As Käthe Tacke, the young Quaker who had helped Jews and others during the Third Reich, put it in relation both to her own motives for staying in what eventually became East Berlin, and in relation to the motives of a rather more senior figure in Christian circles, Emil Fuchs:

Emil said, when he still lived in the West, that there, because he was a religious socialist, he was seen as a Marxist, stigmatized as a Marxist, and here in the GDR he had difficulties in part because he was always trying to make clear to Marxists what the difference was between Marxists and Christians, and that he was in the first instance a Christian, but was more than ready to work together, and like all of us he was under the illusion that, after the war, the world would get better now if we set about things in practice and everyone committed themselves to building the future.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB) C Rep 120 Nr. 230; Letter of 23 Dec. 1945 to Herrn Winzer of the Abteilung für Volksbildung.

⁷⁸ Käthe Tacke interview with Roswitha Jarman, (East) Berlin, 7 Aug. 1985, transcript in possession of the author courtesy of Roswitha Jarman, p. 15.

Nor was reintegration and the reconstruction of a shattered personal life always easy, even for those who were now finally on the 'right' side of history; relationships were often under immense strain, and personal harmony was not always a consequence of reversal of political fortunes. Hermann Beyling, for example, wrote to his son Fritz, still in captivity in December 1945, to update him on the political and personal news, including his mother's release from prison, her involvement in active politics, and the grandfather's appointment as mayor, as well as the less welcome news of the death of another communist comrade through an air raid while still imprisoned.⁷⁹ Much of his news gave the impression of a degree of harmony in a strongly politically committed family, striving with a common purpose to a common cause. But a letter to Fritz of 6 May 1946 from his own wife sought to make Fritz aware of the fact that even his father was giving in to weaknesses under the stresses of the situation, and that she had decided to move out, and indeed would have done so long before if it had not been for their son Peter:

Your father hates me with a vengeance and the feelings are mutual. I stand up in everything for the [Communist] Party and the party line. Your father has, I must let you know, come adrift. He is drinking away his last remaining capacity for understanding. Night after night this happens, and he does things that I as a [communist] comrade must completely reject, even if it were you doing them. He gives former Nazis like L. P. M. etc. certificates of innocence, even though right now there is a campaign against all former Nazis in factories and shops. The so-called cleansing. He simply has his own interests in mind when he does this.⁸⁰

Private lives and service of the political cause were often in some conflict with each other, in a time characterized by acute physical and emotional distress.

In this connection, it is significant that many individuals who committed themselves wholeheartedly to the communist cause had suffered mightily under the previous regime. They recognized only too well the need to maintain party discipline, and to work as a tiny cog in the service of a cause which they saw as being greater than themselves—they were now, in short, already or again prepared to be mobilized, along with others with whom they felt bound in terms of the left-wing version of 'comradeship'. They did not, therefore, see their lives in terms of the Western, liberal, individualist version of a personal or individual 'career', but rather in terms of being a tool for a larger purpose, in a quasi-religious sense—a point that became even stronger when such individuals looked back on their lives from the perspective of the later GDR. And even despite being now on the side of the newly dominant power, this did not necessarily make for easy lives on a personal level.

Is it possible, given this diversity of responses among adults—the 'KZ generation'—to make any generalizations at all about the relations between prevalent views and behaviours of Germans at this time? An extremely interesting account is given by Gertrud Bobek of conversations she overheard while on a train journey of three nights

⁷⁹ SAPMO BArch, NY 4500/3, Fritz Beyling, fol. 82.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 92.

and three days, including nights spent at stations, in December 1945.⁸¹ She was of the view that ‘the conversations that I heard and in which I often also engaged showed me that fascist propaganda is extraordinarily lively’.⁸² She reported that most rumours were to the effect that the Russians were likely to leave very soon, and it was therefore best to go along with their demands for the time being simply in order to avoid punishment. Occupation by the British forces would have been preferable: ‘Of the English it is said that they behave very well and are good to the Germans, that’s often why people would prefer to have them as the occupation force.’⁸³ Very few—and then, according to Bobek’s account, predominantly working-class individuals—reminded themselves that Germans had not exactly behaved very well to the Russians in the recent past:

All the same one sometimes hears the odd voice break in, when people are talking about the excesses of the Russians, and say: we didn’t act any better either. But in general these are always the voices of workers, but never of the petty bourgeoisie. When someone yet again said, well how did our lot behave, a woman implored him not to say such things when soldiers were present, since they were always so offended when anyone made this kind of accusation.

No-one complained about the Nazis . . .

In all conversations the following assertions were made again and again so that one had the impression they were being systematically spread around:

1. We suffered defeat because we had too many enemies. ‘Too many hounds are the death of the hare!’ One kept hearing this phrase again and again.
2. It would not have gone this far with us if the generals had not engaged in such treachery . . .⁸⁴

The corresponding attitude was that the Nuremberg trials need not be taken too seriously either:

4. People generally speak very dismissively about the Nuremberg trial, no one gives a penny for that, it’s only because we lost the war; if the others had lost, then we would have brought the leaders of our enemies to court. No one talks about the atrocities committed by the Germans. If they get mentioned, the Germans react with extreme scepticism.⁸⁵

When Bobek herself intervened in conversations, her views appear to have fallen on less than receptive ears:

The atom bomb also plays a big role in these conversations. When I said how then were they thinking of driving out the Russians, they said to me: ‘With the atom bomb!’ When I pointed out that this would then also fall on us, they became quite sheepish.⁸⁶

⁸¹ SAPMO-BArch SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, ‘Bericht betr. Fahrt von Bautzen nach Unkeroda bei Eisenach Weihnachten 1945’, fols. 183–7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, fol. 183.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, fol. 184.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 185.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 187.

Finally, Bobek summarized her sense of the conversations she had heard, and evaluated the extent to which they might be considered representative of broader views among the population: 'On the other hand it is always the case that people on a train dare to speak more openly than when they are at home. In this respect conversations on the train are naturally a good measure of what people are really thinking.'⁸⁷ The trope of the 'conversation overheard on the train' was one which was to reappear rather frequently in later post-war memoirs, particularly with respect to 'confessions' of earlier hushed, partial 'knowledge' of what had gone on in the extermination camps.⁸⁸ But it may have had some basis in fact, even if it was far from the whole truth.

Emplotment of the self among adults at this time thus varied widely according to conditions, although apparently mostly with an eye to personal advantage. Generally, there was a combination of rapid shedding of previous identities which might now prove embarrassing at best, and possibly far more disadvantageous, and adoption of new roles, frequently highlighting survival strategies rooted in individual quick-wittedness and capacity to outwit the new authorities. Life 'choices' for the majority of adults were largely determined by the overriding demands of survival, and the adoption of behaviours that seemed most apposite in circumstances which were not always entirely clear—given, too, that no one could at this time predict even the near future, let alone the longer term in which Germany would be divided for over forty years. It was, then, not any 'experience of war as such' that determined later profiles, but rather the ways in which these experiences were interpreted, dealt with, and lessons drawn from them among different groups. The years immediately after the end of the war proved to be a crucible shaping people's lives and perceptions, their decisions about which way to turn, and how to try to develop new lives out of the ruins.

III. THE SHOCK OF VIOLENCE AND THE BREAK WITH THE PAST AMONG THE YOUNG

The cohort of 1929ers already at this point stands out as distinctive. Socialized under the Third Reich, teenagers at war's end, and on the brink of adulthood as the communists came to power, their age-related experiences of violence around the end of the war rendered them uniquely open to new opportunities, energetically searching for new causes or ways of building a better future.

In accounts of their war experiences, 1929ers paint vivid, shocked experiences of violence and record a widespread sense of 'betrayal'. They register the contrasts between the ideals and views in which they had been brought up, and their sudden

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ The most well-known example of this is probably Christabel Bielenberg's account in her memoir of living through Nazi Germany, *The Past Is Myself* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968). Whatever the truth of Bielenberg's own story, the danger is that readers may generalize from this individual incident to a wider view of 'what the Germans didn't know'.

realization, when confronted with the realities of war and its consequences, that much of what they had fervently believed had been designed to train them as machines for willing sacrifice, and had been ideology in which they could no longer have any faith. As a result, many were, at least for a while, entirely lost, searching for new patterns, meaning, and foundations to their lives. As older teenagers and young adults at the end of the war, they were precisely at a life stage when experiences could make a major impact on world views, and when they were searching independently and actively for ways to construct a meaningful future after witnessing so much by way of destruction and death.

This sense of the shock of the experience of the end of the war and the need for a new start, accompanied by a total loss of orientation with respect to authority figures, was later registered by the 'classic 1929er', Christa Wolf:

When we were fifteen, sixteen, devastated by revelation of the whole truth about German fascism, we had to reject those who in these twelve years had, in our view, become guilty by their being there, going along with it, keeping quiet. We had to discover those who had been victims, those who had resisted. We had to learn to understand them. Naturally we couldn't identify with them either, we had no right to. That meant that, when we were sixteen, we could not identify with anyone. That is an essential proposition for my generation.

Yet there was hope for redemption:

Then an attractive offer was made to us: You can, they said, get rid of or work off your not yet fully realized participation in this national guilt by actively taking part in the building up of the new society, which is the precise opposite, the only radical alternative to the criminal system of National Socialism . . . In addition to this, particularly for me but not only for me, came the close relationships with communists, anti-fascists, who I met through my work in the Writer's Guild after 1953 . . .⁸⁹

On Wolf's view, her generation felt they could never really challenge the authority of the tiny anti-fascist political elite; so members of this generation never really dared to mount a challenge to the regime they had helped to sustain, even when, by the 1980s, it was becoming increasingly evident that the ideals of the early years had never been realized in practice, and that crises were mounting. In 1989, it was not the 1929ers but rather the FDJ generation born in the early 1950s who were at forefront of the revolutionary activity challenging the dominance of the SED.

There is little evidence of a sense of shame in oral history material with a wider cross-section of Wolf's age group, although one or two educated women—who had clearly read Wolf—seem to have found resonance in what she had written. A highly articulate observer and chronicler of her times, Wolf was of course exceptional: a creative writer, whose views cannot necessarily be held to be in any way representative of her cohort. Yet in some respects she was certainly on the right lines:

⁸⁹ Christa Wolf, 'Unerledigte Widersprüche. Gespräch mit Therese Hörnigk (Juni 1987–Oktober 1988)' in C. Wolf, *Im Dialog. Aktuelle Texte* (München, 1994), pp. 29 ff.; repr. in Matthias Judt (ed.), *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1998), pp. 59–60.

Dorothea Th.-H., for example, spontaneously began her interview, carried out in the summer of 2005, with precisely this point, and with her traumatic memories of the last days of the war:

Christa Wolf said, in so many words, she is four years younger than me, she was born in '29, well, how a person entered life here too in the GDR, how they entered the altered reality anywhere in Germany really, depends on the experiences they had, how they experienced the end of the war. And that was such a deep rupture in people's lives, although there are also many people who didn't suffer very much then, who let it wash over them more peacefully, some picked things up again where they had earlier left off, but many people noticed, we can't go on living like this any longer, not live at all any longer, and not only in terms of physical existence but also mental, spiritual. Isn't that true? So, this experience of war is that sort of rupture.⁹⁰

Perhaps more impressive, certainly more widespread, than any evidence of shame—at least along the lines described by Christa Wolf—is an overwhelming response to the experience of violence for members of this particular 'second war-youth generation'. The violence of the Second World War had been on a greater scale, the devastation far greater, than what had been experienced by the first war-youth generation at the end of the Great War. Moreover, there were, under conditions of total defeat and total occupation after 1945, no revisionist forces along the lines of the right-wing groups of the 1920s who refused to accept the Treaty of Versailles and constantly campaigned for its revision, in the meantime seeing violence as a legitimate political tool. After 1945, violence as a means had been absolutely appropriated by the occupying powers and their delegated domestic forces. There was now no sense at all of a 'mission' to continue the fight, no sense of an incomplete defeat or 'stab in the back', no chance of propagating any such messages. The only message for despairing youngsters seeking to remake the world after the Holocaust was to turn totally against what had preceded defeat and what had brought about such total destruction of the worlds in which they had grown up. Violence, of whatever sort, seems to have imprinted their experiences of war's end, and provided the background—whether they were explicitly aware of it or not—to their experiences of 'building up' new lives after the war.

Perhaps there is something distinctively awful about experiencing, as a teenager, direct physical brutality and the consequences of war for individual human lives, than there is at a somewhat younger or older age. Those just a few years older had been at least partially inured to the exercise of violence, and many had been actively involved in violent incidents or longer episodes, in the course of the 1930s and 1940s. The 1929ers, however, had been children during the 1930s, not actively mobilized in service of the Nazi cause on the streets during the peacetime years, and were only drawn into active personal experience of the war in the last and most violent year or so. They had not had the long, slow exposure to life at the front of those called up in 1939 (with the relatively easy victories of the *Blitzkrieg*) nor the

⁹⁰ Interview with Dorothea Th.-H., summer 2005.

lengthy ideological socialization, rooted in prior personal experience of the Weimar crises, of those slightly older cohorts.

For both the males who were pulled out of school and thrown into uniform, and the girls and slightly younger males who experienced the 'boomerang violence' of the war coming home to Germany, rapid exposure to violence on a massive scale appears to have come as a shock. Certainly later accounts, however coloured they clearly are by the prevailing messages of the intervening years, suggest a major impact on people who were teenagers on the brink of premature entry to adulthood at the end of the war. Moreover, as the war came to an end, the home front was equally beset by violence and personal tragedy; such experiences of shock and reactions to violence were thus not limited to the males in this cohort, who have received most attention as the 'air force auxiliary (*Flakhelfer*) generation'. For many, the violence they felt most keenly was related to the experiences of Germans in the 'treks' when fleeing in advance of the Red Army, or later expulsions from their former homelands in East Prussia, Silesia, and elsewhere. One woman describes, for example, the flight from East Prussia by boat: 'I will never forget this boat trip. Hunger, low-flying bomber planes and the danger of mines were our constant companions.' Nevertheless, despite such evidence of impending defeat, the end of the war came as a shock. As this woman continues: 'The 2nd [*sic*] of May was for me—certainly for all Germans—a blow of fate. The promised "final victory" was history.'⁹¹ This shock, for people who were young at the time, might lead to many future possibilities. In the short term, it inaugurated what many remember as the 'worst years' of their lives. For some, violence was brought home as bombing affected their own personal lives. Typically for people of this age group, the need to care for surviving relatives was about the only thing that had kept them going.

Some 1929ers seemed only to experience the shock of violence with the entry of the Red Army: violence was therefore seen primarily as caused by the Soviets invaders, and not by the Germans. Karin Dohmen's 'diary'—penned and published much later, but recounting vivid memories of particular incidents—records with horror the series of mass suicides which plagued her village in Brandenburg, with whole families choosing death by shooting or poison over defeat and maltreatment, including rape and robbery, by Soviet soldiers.⁹² She recalls the ways in which streams of refugees from Silesia arrived, with horrendous tales of deaths along the way: one eighteen-year old girl—only a little older than the diary writer herself—had set off with both her parents, her older, pregnant sister, and her sister's four-year son. But the sister had bled to death after giving birth to a baby along the way; the new-born baby had either frozen or starved to death within a matter of a day or so; the father and mother had both died of exhaustion and fever. By the autumn of 1945, the deaths, shocks, and horrors of the early occupation had begun to subside, but violence remained ever present. Following the reopening of

⁹¹ 159, F, 1925.

⁹² Karin Dohmen, *Märkisches Tagebuch* (Frankfurt am Main: edition fischer im Rita G. Fischer Verlag, 1981).

the village school, four of Karin's schoolmates were arrested for having allegedly circulated a rhyme criticizing the Soviet occupation, which ran roughly as follows (to be sung to the tune of the national anthem):

Germany, Germany, lacking all,
Without butter, without bacon
And if we had any margarine at all
Occupation forces have it from us taken . . .⁹³

Only two returned, after a period of incarceration and 'hearings'; the other two were taken away, and not heard of again. Another schoolmate, aged twenty and seeking to catch up on the *Abitur* he had missed through being in the army, was pursued by the Soviet authorities for his former activities in the HJ. His parents had advised him to settle in the West, which they seem to have felt was safer in this respect, but he was suffering from depression caused by the loss of his identical twin in the war and wanted to stay in his parental home in this Brandenburg village. But the predictable arrest took place; and in the course of an attempted escape, seeing that his parents were about to be held hostage, he committed suicide by leaping off from a rooftop and breaking his skull. All of these and many other violent incidents accompanied the diary writer's constant sense of hunger through the early months of the post-war period; none were brought into any meaningful relationship with what had been unleashed by the Germans before the Soviet occupation. Although distinctions are drawn between 'fanatical' Nazis and the majority of Germans, who are portrayed as having maintained a slightly scared silence masking distance from Nazi ideals, there is no mention in this diary anywhere of the violence that the Third Reich had unleashed.

Perhaps 'shame' is too limited, even inappropriate, a description of what these cohorts felt. It was for those who made the appropriate connections rather a deep-seated sense of shock at what had been done in their name, coupled with a sense of having been betrayed; for others, it was shock at the consequences, even if the causes remained obscure or at least relatively unreflected. For the vast majority of this cohort, such shock was accompanied by a determination to find a way out, including willingness to commit all their energies to a new cause, a cause which would ensure that never again would there be such horror, violence, and war. But it was not always easy to determine precisely what such a cause would be. As one later put it:

The greatest horror for me was that we were pulled away from the school bench at such a young age, and called up in the army (Jan. 1944) . . . I am still plagued today by nightmares from the last days of the war (seeing deserters who had been hung, walking over corpses).⁹⁴

Harald J. (born 1932) recalled vividly the end of the war, which he experienced as a thirteen-year-old in Poland, and the collapse of the ideological world that up until then had been his fixed mental universe:

⁹³ Dohmen, *Märkisches Tagebuch*, pp. 48–9.

⁹⁴ Questionnaire, 151, M, 1928.

Already [at this age] I lay in trenches in Poland with grenades and a machine gun and then we were saved from out of there by German soldiers and after that we joined the flight with a horse-drawn wagon. And I would have died for Hitler. When he was dead, I lay in the woods and howled like a dog, because that was my life, that was my ideology, that was my faith. There was nothing else. And after the war when we saw more plausibly what had been going on here, then for me every ideology was dead. Then there was simply nothing at all any more.⁹⁵

Dorothea Th.-H. (born 1925), spoke of her near suicidal depression after her sister was killed in an air raid:

And for me it was like this, my life was just turned upside down, I lost my only sister as late as 6 April 1945 in the bombing of Leipzig, she was totally torn to shreds, I spent three days helping to search for her, you don't forget that sort of thing. . . . [M]y father at the age of nearly 60 was called up as a soldier, he also went missing, so that's how the times were at first, hunger weeks, barely anything to eat in Leipzig . . . and . . . how do you go on living?⁹⁶

But she managed to pull herself together:

I was waiting for the reopening of the university, and in a total void . . . Hunger, despair, oh God, sick of life, I would have been happy if I had died too, so, well, the way we were sitting under bombs, and then what happened to my sister, and then, it was really only my mother that I could orientate myself to, I had duties, I had just turned twenty then, yes, and so, well, then I studied languages.⁹⁷

Such views were not merely long-distant lingering reflections benefiting from engagement with the later reflections of others. Autobiographical essays written by students taking their school-leaving exams in the period 1946–9 provide some insights into what must have been far more widespread reactions, however much the individual details in different cases might vary.⁹⁸ Although these young people were all at the time in school in Schleswig-Holstein, their experiences of the end of the war had taken place all over Europe, from lost homelands in the eastern provinces through to prisoner-of-war camps in Western Europe, as well as in the heartlands of the 'Old Reich'; but common to all was a sense of shock at the collapse of the world—in every sense—in which they had grown up. There are significant gender differences in the ways in which the end of the war was experienced; for young males, the shock of direct exposure to violence in combat for which they felt inadequately prepared predominated, while for females the focus of the account was often on family difficulties, and particularly on the experiences of flight and expulsion. But common to all was a double shock: first of all, the shock of direct exposure to the brutal realities of war, often experienced directly and vividly for the first time at a very late stage in the war; and secondly, a sense of total

⁹⁵ Harald J. (1932), interview 2006.

⁹⁶ Dorothea Th.-H., interview 2005.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ See the remarkable collection in Kurt Haß (ed.), *Jugend unterm Schicksal. Lebensberichte junger Deutscher, 1946–1949* (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1950).

disorientation, a loss of the value system which had sustained and pervaded their lives up to that point, and a sense that there had, desperately, to be a search for new meaning if they were not to go under in some way.

For some, such as Christiane H., who was aged eleven at the outbreak of war, 'the times of unburdened childhood happiness ended' when her father and brothers were called up; but the realities of what war meant by way of violence often did not sink home until far later.⁹⁹ The shock of initial exposure to violence, whether at the front or on the (changing) home front, was enormous, even though—as many of these young people pointed out—they could barely remember a time in their lives when reports of war had not pervaded the official news broadcasts and bulletins. As Günther H. put it:

In the meantime the war had become harder and more gruesome, but I, who could hardly remember a time when there were no military news bulletins, did not see the real face of the war. Then the heavy air raids over Hamburg started. We were sent in to do war service duties, and the shell-shocked faces of the people and the smouldering ruins opened up my eyes. Too weak to look all this misery in its face, there remained only one path for me: to harden myself. . .¹⁰⁰

Ilse B., living as a teenager quite close to the German–Polish border, was a relatively privileged 'Aryan' child, and barely aware of the war until their flight from the advancing Red Army in the closing months, when it struck home with inescapable brutality.¹⁰¹ Gerhard H. recorded: 'At that time barely 17 years old, I was suddenly ripped out of my everyday life and was made acquainted with the atrocities of the most terrible events in life, the war, mutual murder.'¹⁰² Ernst P., aged eighteen at the time of writing after the war, was called up in March 1945 with next to no training and sent to the ever closer 'eastern front':

What then followed seems to me today like a short bad dream. The ghastliness of these final days of the war has however affected me forever. I had to watch comrades next to me dying, see others lying there in their own blood, and these frightful images will always be before my eyes when anyone speaks of the terrors of war.¹⁰³

This moment was decisive in these young people's lives. As Karl-Heinz R. put it, recalling the day when Hamburg capitulated to British forces:

This day was the blackest so far in my life. My mental breakdown was total, since I saw my credulity and my trust so brutally deceived. I realized that Adolf Hitler had robbed me of the best years of my youth.

With total indifference and lethargy, after the unconditional capitulation of the German army I embarked on the bitter path to captivity.¹⁰⁴

Often the period after the end of hostilities served further to worsen young people's outlooks. As Werner D. recalled:

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Utterly depressed and given up to my fate, I moved along in the grey army of the disarmed masses. Morally at an end, I stumbled along with fellow sufferers, with our hands up and under armed guard, through the streets of a central German town. My face was red with shame as in this miserable state . . . I had to embark on this path of woe under the eyes of the German civilian population.¹⁰⁵

Jürgen St. too experienced a massive sense of shame on imprisonment, but rooted in his case in embarrassment about the ways in which former soldiers behaved—betraying, in the process, a still lively sense that Germans should in some way be morally superior in their behaviour perhaps particularly in relation to ‘Negroes’ (*Neger*):

The time which then followed was the most humiliating of my life. I was often ashamed to be German, when I had to see married men swapping their wedding rings for two cigarettes from negroes, or former German soldiers throwing their war decorations to one of the many guards in return for drink and tobacco . . .¹⁰⁶

Through his experiences as a prisoner of war, Werner D. became even more cynical. After he was liberated, he could no longer trust humanity, even—perhaps especially—when people sought to be cheerful and friendly: ‘The beasts of humanity put their camouflage on . . . I had experienced too much that was terrible to be able simply to get over it.’¹⁰⁷ Werner D. was perhaps unusual in this group in failing to find at least something that he could claim gave him new meaning, retreating instead into a form of depression and cynicism about what he now saw as the ‘essential’ character of human nature; others sought to appeal to religion, the German classics, or the needs of their family to provide some purpose in life.

For the female teenagers, the end of the war was often marked by flight and expulsion, in which they, too, often witnessed the death or sudden arrest and deportation of family members and friends. Ilse B., for example, recalled horrendous details of the arrival of the Russians, with burning down of houses. Most of the people she met in one gathering—when 500 of them were brought together in a church by Russian officers to be taken to work camps, including her former classmates—were then taken (*verschleppt*) to the Urals; as far as she was aware, none returned, and most were probably dead. She and her mother managed to escape again and eventually reach what she still termed, in 1946, the ‘Reich capital’ of Berlin.¹⁰⁸ For Ursula G., too, the arrival of the Russians in the winter of 1944–5 and their flight from their home marked for her the beginning of real experiences of what war actually meant: ‘this farewell to everything that was dear to one; then this endless journey in the cold, hungry, and with gruesome experiences, that for the first time showed me the true face of the war and taught me to rethink my ideas of humanity, character and decency’; eventually arriving in a place of at least physical safety further west, she experienced the ultimate shattering of her world: ‘here I experienced the collapse of Germany and with this the collapse of all that I had by

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

way of faith, enthusiasm, commitment to ideals'.¹⁰⁹ Christiane H. commented, after describing physical ordeals and losses:

On top of this came the collapse of the whole German world. In the process I became despondent and disheartened, until I found salvation in work.

If today . . . I think of what was once ours, the Heimat seems to me like a transfigured paradise full of unadulterated happiness.¹¹⁰

For all of these young people, there was a sense that not only the physical but also the emotional and mental worlds in which they had grown up had been utterly destroyed.

Such reactions could, to an extent, be observed across age groups—certainly the sense of loss was not unique to this age group. But some features do appear to have been age-specific: these included a sense of having been betrayed, and having been robbed of one's youth. Moreover, whether or not they were able to find a new way of interpreting the world, common to those young people who wrote these accounts in the early post-war years—unlike many of those who were already older at the time—was a sense not only that a new start was urgently required, but also that one needed to find a new ideology in which to have faith. In the words of Jürgen S.:

I am describing my experiences of war in such detail, because this affected and influenced me so incredibly much and set my life onto entirely new tracks. How we young people, just off the school benches, were such strangers to this experience, and how we were suddenly sobered by the barbarism, brutality and violence of modern war! With what sorts of *false concepts* of honour and heroism, to name but two of the so-called soldierly virtues, had we been brought up! For us youngsters, who without a valid school-leaving exam had been taken from the school benches to become soldiers, a world full of false ideals collapsed with the sad end of the war, a world to which we had committed ourselves faithfully and sincerely. Now we should not mourn what had been lost and thus fall into a state of doing nothing and waiting, but rather, with determination, we should turn to a new goal . . .¹¹¹

The shock of recognition of the realities of violence and war was combined with a sense of bitterness about the way in which this generation had been (mal)treated. As Günther H. put it:

Even if I now and already for a long time beforehand had sensed what sort of end must come, I nevertheless had not found the courage to give up my fantastic hopes. I clung to them until they, and with them so much that moved me, collapsed with the capitulation. With one blow swept out of all my familiar views, I took a long time to find new bases. Then I realized just how much we had been betrayed.¹¹²

Or, in the words of Kurt M.:

Then came, with the end of the war, gradual disenchantment and the realization that the views in which one had been brought up, and for which one had unconditionally

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

fought, were fraud and deception on a huge scale that had to lead us to downfall . . . I could no longer understand how I could have assented to such a crazy view and that I did not previously realize the impossibility of this idea.¹¹³

Having been perhaps particularly vulnerable to belief in and enthusiastic commitment to Nazism, in ways that much older generations were not, after its collapse these youngsters felt accordingly all the more strongly that their youthful trust had been betrayed. Yet their faith and commitment had not been quite on the scale of those who were slightly older, and who had held positions of sufficient responsibility that they now had to belie rather than admit to their past enthusiasm. This was, then, a rather distinctive age juncture as far as the psychology of conversion or denial was concerned.

This particular school group was not entirely homogeneous as far political and moral standpoints were concerned. Even so, the marks of the transition bore some common vestiges of the past. The father of one girl had been arrested by the Gestapo and was put to death, for reasons not specified, on 10 November 1943. Yet she managed, at least in the context of this essay written for her school-leaving examinations, to combine a reaction against Nazism with a professed deep love of what she still saw as her 'Fatherland':

From childhood onwards brought up to a genuine love of the Fatherland, I found the end of the war in May 1945 and all the depressing and shameful consequences deeply painful . . . It is my fervent wish that this my Fatherland, for which so much honourable blood has been spilt, should awake to a new spiritual life, to fulfilment of its *mission in Western Christianity* . . .¹¹⁴

Another, Elizabeth K., was the daughter of Christians, who had recorded a sense of conflict between her enjoyment of activities in the Nazi Girls' League (*Jungmädelsbund*) and the atmosphere and moral tenets of her home. She was the sole member of this cohort even to mention, let alone to have been apparently concerned by, the atrocities committed by Nazis against others. During her flight from her home in the eastern provinces she experienced 'overflowed trains, surging masses of people on the platforms, lost children, crying mothers, the ghostly sight of the ruins of Berlin, a night among the wounded in a field hospital train, and then—the whole weight of events overcame me.'¹¹⁵ She finally arrived in a small village in the Franconian Jura, where she remained worried about the lack of any news of her family since she had left home, compounded too by other concerns:

Apart from having all around me the collapsing Reich, [there was also] the first encounter with a concentration camp in the vicinity, and having to register the monstrous gruesomeness! I was so far gone that I saw in [my own] death, no matter by what means, nothing terrible but rather release. Only the thought of relatives who were perhaps still alive and people who needed me right now held me back from it.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Perhaps these young people were particularly strongly and vividly affected by the crashing down all around them of the world in which they had been brought up. Unique to this age group was, perhaps, the way they were caught in a sudden need to pick up adult responsibilities, in the absence of fathers who did not return, and in light of those around who were less fit and able to deal with the situation. In a sense, such new responsibilities were also a way of simply keeping going, in a situation that seemed to many at the time utterly unbearable. The answers ranged from the very parochial and practical in the immediate present to the highly ideological and political in the larger sense of the term. Their accounts certainly contrast with the more studied, perhaps on occasion less deeply felt renegotiations of identity evident among many adults at this time; and with the difficulties which younger children may have experienced, not so much in seeking to make any sense at all of their experiences, but in sensing that they had any control in actively defining their paths into a new and different future.

These at the time quite devastating experiences of the collapse of the ideological, social, and physical world in which they had grown up, accompanied by a shocked sense of betrayal when they first realized or witnessed at first hand some of the consequences of Nazi violence, were arguably common to young people across all the zones of occupation. But these youngsters were most actively targeted and mobilized for new ideological purposes in the Soviet zone of occupation. This was for a variety of reasons: determination to win youth over to the communist cause was accompanied by pragmatic considerations in an area where there was relatively high turnover of personnel in key areas of administration and politics. The young could, in theory, be more easily persuaded, and would arguably be less unreliable, than those who had already as adults committed themselves to the Nazi cause. Distinctive too about the 1929ers in the Soviet zone and subsequently GDR, then, was that they constituted a prime target group for active mobilization by the new communist authorities.

While the new Free German Youth organization (FDJ) was at its inception in 1946 presented as a non-political organization, it was from 1947 onwards under communist control. It never achieved the successes or blanket coverage the SED would have liked, but its genuine attractions at this transitional time should not be underestimated, and it appears to have had some success in attracting followers among a very small but notable and committed minority of this age group.¹¹⁷ As one disillusioned member of the Liberal Party, who later fled to the West, observed in his diary entry of 7 May 1949:

Yesterday the whole day in Senftenberg for the 3rd National Delegates Conference of the FDJ. It was depressing and repulsive at the same time. In the Social House a fanatical group of young people had gathered, who pledged themselves quite unequivocally to Bolshevism and to mercenary service for the Red Army. The war and propaganda speeches of the functionaries were punctuated from time to time by communist battle

¹¹⁷ See e.g. McDougall, 'A duty to forget? The "Hitler Youth Generation" and the transition from Nazism to communism in postwar East Germany, c.1945–49'; and McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany. The Free German Youth Movement 1946–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

songs. I was almost ill from agitation about the way young people are being stirred up by the communists. Although the conference still goes on until Sunday I already left S. this morning. I couldn't bear this racket any more.¹¹⁸

While some young people appear to have been carried away at the time on the wave of enthusiasm for the new, many others remained untouched. Arguably more significant perhaps than overtly propagandistic and organizational schemes for the mobilization of 1929ers in the longer term was the simple fact that the Soviet occupation offered young people jobs and opportunities for the future.

One of the key programmes in the Soviet zone, for example, was that of training up 'new teachers' (*Neulehrer*) to stand in front of classrooms of young children, untainted by any associations with the discredited Nazi education system of the past.¹¹⁹ It is astounding just how many biographies of those who later became functionaries and supporters of the GDR include a stint as a 'new teacher'.¹²⁰ Of course not all were convinced by the role, and many left for the West, particularly as older teachers were able to return to their former roles after a period of denazification or release from detention. Gertrud Bobek, at that time in charge of rebuilding education in the council district of Bautzen, later recalled that there were on occasion difficulties with 'new teachers' and some had to be dismissed, while others left of their own accord. But the vast majority were in her view a great success: 'However old most schools and their furnishings were, the "new teachers" filled them with a healthy, fresh and future-oriented atmosphere. . . . Virtually all the higher functionaries of our school and older pedagogues are former "new teachers".'¹²¹ It is also clear that these young teachers could have a considerable impact on the young people under their charge, as the letters of the East German writer Brigitte Reimann reveal.¹²² But not everyone was as complimentary; as another former pupil of the time, whose family soon fled to the West, later recalled:

Quite a few of our old teachers only gave a short guest performance, as former [Nazi] Party members they were soon forbidden to teach. In short courses new teachers were manufactured, because now many teacher positions were vacant. These new teachers were then let loose on pupils with very little training. They enjoyed little respect and were mocked and derided.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Wolfgang Schollwer, *Potsdamer Tagebuch 1948–1950. Liberale Politik unter sowjetischer Besatzung*, ed. Monika Faßbender (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), Saturday 7 May 1949, p. 122. On the FDJ, see more generally Ulrich Mählert and Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan, *Blaue Hemden, rote Fahnen. Die Geschichte der Freien Deutschen Jugend* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1996).

¹¹⁹ There was a much higher turnover of teachers in the Soviet zone than in the Western zones. But there were also some surprising and significant continuities in personnel in the schools; see e.g. Lansing, *From Nazism to Communism*.

¹²⁰ See for many examples *Wer war wer in der DDR*.

¹²¹ SAPMO-BArch SgY30 / 1622 / 1, Gertrud Bobek, *Erinnerungen*, 'Über die Aufgaben und Probleme als Kreisrat für Volksbildung, 1947–1950' (fols. 54–75), fol. 63.

¹²² See Brigitte Reimann's comments in a letter to a friend in West Germany: Brigitte Reimann, *Aber wir schaffen es, verlaß dich drauf! Briefe an eine Freundin im Westen* (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1995), letter of 7 Jul. 1950, pp. 38–9.

¹²³ Karin Dohmen, *Märkisches Tagebuch* (Frankfurt am Main: edition fischer im Rita G. Fischer Verlag, 1981), p. 47.

Whichever way such teachers were received by their pupils, which clearly varied with factors on both sides including aptitude, personality, politics, and social class, there was a widespread sense of a complete change after the disruptions of the war years, which had for so many school children been marked by loss of teachers who were sent to the front, elderly substitutes, or being 'sent to the land' for alternative schooling in camps well away from the cities which were the target of Allied bombing.

The New Teacher programme became entrenched however, and gained in significance well beyond the actual numbers involved, as part of the later model GDR life story script. In later years, the SED was still well aware of the value of this programme in sending out a wider message. To this end, tales were told of the difficult beginnings and the ways in which the new education system that was to produce the desired 'socialist personalities' of the GDR had been built up in the early post-war years; such tales provided tropes for autobiographical writings for many years to come. As one former *Neulehrer* put it, reviewing his life on the occasion of his retirement:

The deep hatred towards war criminals and murderers, a strong desire to build up anew, an irrepressible optimism linked with humour, and not least the constant moral and material support of the RED ARMY gave the many thousands of Activists of the First Hour, despite hunger and cold, the strength to clear away the material debris of the past and lay the foundation stone for our proud German Democratic Republic of today.¹²⁴

Another emphasized, in very similar language, the struggle to overcome shortages, and the significance of the task of *Neulehrer*, on which she herself had first embarked 'not even three months after the gruesome dictatorship of the fascist system of violence had met its inglorious end, beaten by the Allied armed forces and in particular the Red Army'.¹²⁵

A typical such tale, full of the appropriate heroes and melancholic touches was later given, for example, by one Fritz Tanck. Coming from a very modest background, Tanck reports that he was now to be trained as a member of the intelligentsia (*Intelligenz*) and sat in a grammar school (*Gymnasium*) for the first time after very simple schooling; he was, naturally, very impressed by it all. In this lightly disguised but self-confessedly autobiographical story, written some thirty years later, Tanck claimed he had 'fled' from the West where he was treated as a slave by a farmer: 'In the West he had been . . . exploited. For weeks he worked there as a menial farm labourer of farmers without payment, just for food and drink and a roof over his head . . .'¹²⁶ The tale includes the standard heroic figure who can show the correct way forwards; in this case, a teacher of current affairs

¹²⁴ SAPMO-BArch, DY 51/1589, 'Ein Neulehrer erzählt: Eine autobiographische Dokumentation', fol. 15.

¹²⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DY 51/1589, 'Neubeginn auch in der Schule. Erinnerungen einer Lehrerin', p. 5.

¹²⁶ SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/1876, Tanck—Erinnerungen; 'Über die Tätigkeit als Neulehrer in Mecklenburg', 17 Jul. 1978, fol. 14.

(*Gegenwartskunde*) who had been in a concentration camp, with impressive scars from the maltreatment he had suffered, and who had also been a committed member of the Communist Party (KPD).¹²⁷ Of the thirty-two children in the class for which Tanck was initially responsible, around 30 per cent were either orphans or what he describes as 'semi-orphans' (*Halbwaisenkinder*), looked after by a grandmother, an aunt, or other non-parents.¹²⁸ The atmosphere was pervaded by a constant sense of the presence of death, illness, the consequences of war, and material shortages, particularly lack of food. The story includes a useful figure of an unpleasant person who eventually fled west, serving to underline the heavy-handed message about the division of good and evil across the inner-German border. Even so, this poorly written story hardly added up to a very happy account of the experience and contribution of the 'new teachers' phenomenon. But the fact that Tanck himself made the effort to write it, however limited his skills as a budding author, is a measure of the importance of the *Neulehrer* programme for him personally.

What was the difference between the effects of the shock at the violence of the war and war's end experienced by the 1929ers and those a few years younger? The degrees of fear and sense of devastation and loss were certainly comparable, although there could of course be major variations in both the timing and the character of responses depending on individual circumstances and conditions.¹²⁹ But age did make a significant difference in how people coped, how they reacted, and arguably, perhaps, what the longer-term consequences of this traumatic end to the Thousand Year Reich might be.¹³⁰ The 1929ers were of an age where sudden adult responsibilities were either thrust upon them, or where, indeed, the recognition of such responsibilities actually assisted their capacity for survival and determination to adapt. Care for a remaining relative, for example, is frequently mentioned as a reason not to fall prey to near suicidal depression. And they often had to become a bread-winner in order for family members to survive the hunger years after the war. But for younger children, such responsibility was not as yet part of their lives; they were faced by devastation, trauma, and loss, but still needed protection and care. They had also not as yet developed well-worked-out world views; unlike the 1929ers, the war children had little or no sense of 'betrayal' about a cause: they had not as yet been fully mobilized, and did not feel therefore that they had been manipulated, made use of and 'betrayed' in the way that those who were teenagers at the time did.

It is difficult of course to gain access to children's experiences and reactions, but there are some sources available which register the sense of shock. Essays written in

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, fols. 16–17.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, fols. 23–4.

¹²⁹ For significant variations in experience, see particularly Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's lives under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

¹³⁰ For recent approaches to this topic, in which there is growing interest, see e.g. Lu Seegers, and Jürgen Reulecke (eds.), *Die 'Generation der Kriegskinder'. Historische Hintergründe und Deutungen* (Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag, 2009). See also, for a study of schools in the Soviet zone of occupation, Benita Blessing, *The Antifascist Classroom: Denazification in Soviet-occupied Germany, 1945–1949* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

schools in the Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin in 1945–6, for example, give vivid insights into children's experiences of the closing months of the war, as interpreted very soon afterwards. Many simply reported the shock, and were stunned by what had happened to shatter their former lives. Brigitte L., born in May 1932, described in her essay entitled 'Three mines on our house' how the family had gone down to the cellar when the alarm was sounded. Some neighbours left before her family because they thought the alarm was over:

Most of the tenants went upstairs. Then there was a big noise and we had the ceiling on our heads. The little children cried and were as white as chalk, the old people trembled.

When Brigitte went upstairs afterwards, she encountered a terrible sight:

There were the people who had gone upstairs earlier lying dead on the floor. That was a frightful, terrible night on 26.2.45. That I will never forget.¹³¹

The children who had experienced 'treks' before arriving in Berlin had equally traumatic experiences, which they too had trouble digesting and interpreting in the early months after the end of the war. Gisela L., for example, reported on a terrifying train journey that she and her mother had undertaken on 9 February 1945. Bombing raids had left many dead. She and her mother survived the air raids but lost their belongings. For reasons which remain obscure in this account, they tried to go back to find their baggage, which had by then been stolen, and they finally arrived in Berlin with nothing at all by way of possessions, but at least both still alive. Gisela L. ended her account with the wistful sentiment that now 'we are yearning for rest'.¹³² Wolfgang S. had fled from the Sudetenland; his grandfather died in the course of the journey; he too found it difficult to deal with recounting this.¹³³

The resilience shown by many of these children in adjusting to new lives was often tempered by a relatively unreflected admixture of old vocabulary and new frameworks of perception.¹³⁴ Elfriede Z., for example, commented in her essay written a few months after the end of the war that:

Now we have got used to life in the city and we like it very much in Berlin; despite this we are yearning for our old Heimat. There would be no greater pleasure for us than if the order were to come that we were allowed to return to the Heimat.¹³⁵

Here, there is a fascinating mixture of assumptions embedded in the language: despite her efforts to get used to life in the big city and to post-war conditions, this fifth-grade schoolgirl still thought in terms of 'orders' (*der Befehl*) and 'permission' to return to the lost '*Heimat*'—with an almost oxymoronic juxtaposition of 'order' and 'permission'. But for others, there was some at least implicit awareness that new approaches were required. For Vera M., the experiences of 23 April 1945 were

¹³¹ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), C Rep 134-13 Nr. 242, 'Die zerstörte Heimat' (essays written 1945–6), essay by Brigitte L.

¹³² LAB, C Rep 134-13, 'Auf der Flucht', Gisela L., Kl. 7, 2. Volksschule.

¹³³ LAB, C Rep 134-13, 'Auf der Flucht', Wolfgang S., 41. Volksschule.

¹³⁴ See also e.g. the case of Klaus F., discussed above, pp. 268–71.

¹³⁵ LAB, C Rep 134-13, 'Auf der Flucht', Elfriede Z., Klasse 5, 26. Volksschule.

appalling. Her father had been called up into the ‘people’s troops’ (*Volkssturm*). She and her mother were caught by an air raid when they had just gone to get potatoes from a place across the road from their home, and grenades suddenly exploded nearby. She ran back across the street to try to get to the air raid cellar, separately from her mother. As she explains, with a clear sense of underlying guilt about the tragic consequences of what seemed at the time like the clever quick thinking of a war child:

I then said to my Mum, she should wait a moment, so that we would not all run across together, that could attract attention. Outside it was deathly quiet, only the dust of the exploding grenades lay in the air, I ran as fast as I could; but too late. Hardly had I reached the pavement than I was hit by an exploding part of a grenade. I wanted to stand up quickly, but couldn’t any more. Then I was brought into our air raid cellar where I first asked about my Mum. I was told all sorts of things. But not the truth. Only after I had spent four weeks in hospital without news from home did I hear that my parents had both become victims [*Opfer*] of the Nazi regime.¹³⁶

It is interesting how, already at this early post-war stage, in an essay written in January 1946, Vera M. framed both her mother’s and her father’s deaths as effectively caused by the Nazis, seeing her parents as ‘victims of the Nazi regime’ and not by the Allies whose bombs had actually killed them. It is also here, too, that we see the subtle shift in the use of the German word ‘*Opfer*’, which was used ever less to refer to the ‘sacrifice’ of the ‘hero’s death’ and ever more to frame the new story of ‘Germans as victims’ of the bombing war, whether the blame was laid at the door of the Allies or ‘the Nazis’.

But, despite evidently being affected by the circumstances of their socialization in terms of discourse and interpretive framework, these were to be members of a generation that played little or no role in the public life of the GDR. Their shock at the violence of the end of the war was not accompanied—as it was for the 1929ers—by a sense of betrayal and a massive urge to rethink and to search for new ideological causes to which they could commit themselves; nor, perhaps more crucially, were they yet at an age to be actively mobilized in service of any such new cause. If they were momentarily affected by the new influences of socialization in the early post-war period, and prepared to commit themselves to the anti-fascist project in principle, over the ensuing years this was often also tempered by criticism of the way the new East German state sought to put the project into practice.

On Saturday 15 October 1949, Wolfgang Schollwer laconically observed in his diary: ‘The difficult birth of the so-called German Democratic Republic is over. The delivery was short but painful. Without elections, the occupation power installed an Eastern government, in which the SED [Socialist Unity Party] holds the leading role. The population reacted accordingly.’¹³⁷ At the time of its foundation, and given both the ideological background of Nazism and the disagreeable

¹³⁶ LAB, C Rep 134-13 Nr. 242, ‘Die zerstörte Heimat’ (essays written 1945–6), essay by Vera M. Schollwer, *Potsdamer Tagebuch*, entry of Saturday 15 Oct. 1949, p. 144.

experiences of the occupation years, the GDR was arguably the most unpopular regime in German history; and if the vast majority of adults were beyond any hope of conversion to Marxism-Leninism, then the only chance for the future of communism was the forcible persuasion of the upcoming generation. As Schollwer observed at the end of May 1950, only five months before his own escape to the West:

The majority of the population is meanwhile in no way in agreement with this development. Never before was there in Germany a greater gulf between the population and its government as today here where we are. The SED of course knows very well that it cannot turn people into convinced Stalinists, despite terror and a quite primitive propagandistic firework by Eisler—despite rallies, waves of meetings and mass demonstrations, with which they are trying to suffocate the critical consciousness of people. With these means they will at best gain the young, still easily influenced people, whom they are also incessantly injecting with their Marxist mindset in schools and employment, in leisure and sporting activities.¹³⁸

For those who remained in the GDR through the following decades, distinctive patterns of opportunity and constraint shaped not only the outward paths of their lives, but also the ways in which they perceived their social worlds, and the sense they later sought to make of their own biographies.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of Wednesday 31 May 1950, pp. 186–7.

Mobilization for the future (again)

After the foundation of the GDR in 1949, a major, often overriding question remained: that of how one had dealt with Nazism. Life stories could not remain framed as essentially individual biographies, but were inevitably, intrinsically, political; any account of one's life had to mean also 'accounting for' how one had lived through Nazism. Whether inside a concentration camp (KZ) or in exile, whether actively supporting the system or seeking to survive without attracting too much attention or sustaining too much by way of physical or psychological damage, anyone who had lived through Nazism could not remain untouched. Among those who had been adults at the time, this served to obliterate the older distinctions between the front generation and the war-youth generation that had seemed so significant in the Weimar period; besides which, the issues which had so fired the war-youth generation after 1918 had been more than played out through the following decades; and there were new, more urgent questions after the experiences of Nazi terror and genocide. Moreover, the way in which one told one's story made a difference to the kind of life one could live after 1945; the later context shaped and constrained the kinds of life narratives that could be told. Representations of former actions and attitudes to and through the Third Reich continued to matter, right through to the end of the Cold War in 1989–90.

But the GDR was about more than 'overcoming the past': it was also about shaping the future. After the foundation of the GDR in 1949, class and politics were infinitely more important than 'generation' for all those who had been adults through the Third Reich. For the small minority among the KZ generation who came to form the new ruling elite, the key issue was to change the world, and influence future generations, in such a way that 'fascism' could never arise again on German soil. Moreover, representations of the past were always also (and sometimes even predominantly) about shaping the present and future.

The GDR was not merely an unwanted state imposed from without, as though there were an entirely blank slate on which to impose the domination of the Soviet Union.¹ Rather, the internal political dynamics revealed continuities, in new forms

¹ Once again, the point here is not to write the history 'of the GDR' but to explore generationally distinct experiences. For overviews, selected sources and further references on particular aspects, see e.g. Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic 1945–1990* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000); Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany 1918–2008: The divided nation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946–1973* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Matthias Judt (ed.), *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten. Beschlüsse, Berichte, interne Materialien und Alltagszeugnisse*; Christoph Klessmann and Georg Wagner (eds.), *Das gespaltene Land: Leben in Deutschland 1945 bis 1990. Texte und Dokumente* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993).

and in a new domestic and international context, of an older and still unresolved 'civil war' between left and right that had persisted, in one twist or another, since the early twentieth century. The key difference after 1945 was that communist segments of the German left, backed by the USSR, held the state monopoly of violence, while moderate social democrats and those of liberal, conservative, or centrist persuasions were co-opted, dominated, or silenced, and the far right utterly discredited. The Cold War context thus served to sustain the domination of a particular group of German communists who, domestically, could not have clung onto power without Soviet backing, as events across Eastern Europe from 1953, through 1956, 1968, and 1980–81 to the rather different situation in the Gorbachev era, culminating in 1989, all too obviously demonstrated.

Violence was now imposed on a largely unwilling population, increasingly also refracted through domestic forces of repression and control, including armed police forces, the 'National People's Army' (NVA), and an ever growing state security service, the now notorious Stasi (*Staatssicherheitsdienst*). Soviet tanks were actively called out to suppress domestic unrest during the uprising of 17 June 1953; thereafter, they provided a constant reminder of the ultimate sanction of superior military might, and were readily to be seen lurking along the tracks in the forests alongside the transit autobahns, or engaging in military manoeuvres and exercises near the inner-German border, or moving around the many 'closed areas' (*Sperrgebiete*) with military installations. Even as Soviet soldiers were supposed to keep an appropriate social distance from the population, while the latter was encouraged to engage in 'German–Soviet friendship' activities, the threat of force directed by Moscow was an ever present factor in the history of the 'second German dictatorship'. The Cold War context thus remains a crucial constitutive element of the life stories of those who lived through the GDR, even if not always explicitly articulated.²

Even so, the story is more complex. For the vast majority of those who were adults during Nazism, the GDR was greeted with suspicion and dislike—even among those who had also been victims of the Nazi regime. For some (and not only Viktor Klemperer, whose diaries of the time make this abundantly clear) it was increasingly a case of trying to choose between the 'lesser of two evils'; and many personal considerations with respect to family and a sense of homeland or belonging came into play, often overriding political or 'ideological' considerations with respect to regimes.³ Moreover, whether or not they supported the GDR politically, those who did not flee westwards before 1961 had to devise ways of adapting and making their lives in a state that at first appeared only provisional, but increasingly appeared as if it would remain a fixture on the Cold War landscape. Life stories, aspirations, and activities were revised accordingly, although a sense of dissonance

² For the relations with the Soviet Union during key moments affecting the development of the GDR in the pre-Wall period, see Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³ Victor Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, Vol. 2: *Tagebücher 1950–1959* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1999).

remained very strong in some quarters. Living through the GDR left clear traces on attitudes and ways of thinking, evident even in life stories related more than a decade after unification, revealing distinctive patterns of interpretation going way beyond the individual variations of personality. Even in the early years, a new type of 'social self' began to emerge in the context of the new communist system.

I. WHO REMAINS? THE DIVIDED 'KZ GENERATION'

Crucial to understanding the dynamics of GDR history is an understanding of the background of the founding generations, the issues with which they were fundamentally concerned, and the idealism that they at first brought to the cause. It is extremely easy, in hindsight, to see how the emancipatory goals of the 'founding fathers' of the GDR were subverted by the repressive means which, over the years, proved not to be the temporary transitional measure envisaged—the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' which should, in the Marxist scheme of things, eventually have given way to a pure communism in which the state would 'wither away'—but rather permanent features of the East German landscape, embodied and epitomized in the Wall. The idealism of the early years may have waned as 'actually existing socialism' became increasingly bureaucratized and routinized, and as it reduced its initially idealistic horizons to a matter of materialistic competition with the West—in which it was doomed to be the loser by a great margin—for the satisfaction of physical needs and consumerist desires. But this should not blind us to the genuine idealism with which so many people committed themselves to what they saw, in the early years, as the best way out of the murderous morass of Nazism and the brutal class exploitation of capitalism.

Throughout its existence, the GDR was led by a small group of people drawn from what had been the front generation and the war-youth generation. The ruling SED's first leader, Walter Ulbricht, was born in 1893; his successor, Erich Honecker, in 1912. The top members of the political elite, or 'Wandlitz group'—those who lived in the secluded and guarded residential enclave of Wandlitz, north of Berlin—roughly fell into two demographic groups. The majority, twenty-one in total, were born between 1893 and 1917; and, following a significant gap, just over a third (fifteen) came from the following generation, the 1929ers, born from 1925 to 1931 (including Erich Honecker's wife Margot, born in 1927). The 'original founding fathers', the older leading lights of the SED including a far wider group reaching well beyond the Wandlitz elite, were deeply marked by the conflicts and mentalities of the 1920s and 1930s; and, given their background of clandestine struggle in face of appalling persecution before 1945, most had an intrinsic belief in force as a legitimate means of achieving desired ends in the struggle for a better future. They had a major influence over the slightly younger members of this group, who never really broke loose from their influence—as indeed was the case also for other 1929ers, for whom the 'anti-fascist founding fathers' retained an aura of authority which was hard to challenge. The ideological clashes of the first half of the twentieth century thus continued to affect the dominant political culture of the

GDR right through until the gerontocracy around the ageing SED leadership under Erich Honecker was finally forced into long overdue retirement by the 'gentle revolution' of 1989.

This was of course a unique minority. The broader picture suggests that those who were already adults at the end of the war—part of the internally divided 'KZ generation'—and who subsequently held positions of sufficient weight or responsibility in the GDR to warrant an entry in *Wer war wer in der DDR* had already been involved in left-wing activities prior to 1945. Older ones had generally been active on the left in Imperial Germany or the Weimar Republic; younger ones often first became involved in left-wing political activities in the economic and political crises of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The top political elite was thus not alone in being formed by the struggles of earlier decades, or at least in claiming this heritage in seeking to legitimize their positions of power in the later 'anti-fascist state'. The majority of older Germans who held positions of responsibility—even down to quite modest local functionaries and *apparatchiks*—were able to demonstrate that they had already been politicized and active in appropriate causes prior to 1945. But it was also possible, among a significant minority, to claim that they had experienced sufficient by way of a conversion experience during or after the war, and had proved their commitment to the new society in practice, in order to earn a place in the functionary system of rule.

But these functionaries and elites were strikingly different from the majority of their compatriots who had gone along with, or had even enthusiastically supported, the Hitler regime, as well as those on whom some of the intense dislike of communism had rubbed off. Mutual mistrust and suspicion not surprisingly survived through the war and into the Cold War period. Adults in the GDR in the early years of the Cold War were thus deeply divided between those who could claim a political hinterland for their new roles in the 'anti-fascist state', and the far broader population, many of whom had actively supported Hitler's regime, some of whom had survived it with varying degrees of internal opposition, and a few of whom had been persecuted but who were no more favourably predisposed towards communism than they had been towards Nazism. There was a legacy of decades of struggle, suffering, and hatred, punctuated not only by differences of ideology, and by bitter experiences of betrayal and bereavement, but also by differences over the search for potential solutions in the future.

The Cold War was, then, not the sole root of the conflicts in the GDR which are often inadequately theorized in terms of 'state' versus 'society', or 'regime' versus 'people', but which were in fact far more complex and long-standing.⁴ And conflicts after 1949 were not only about contemporary politics—although these were the issues which had to be fought over—but were also rooted in and coloured by earlier political differences, with lingering traces in emotions and attitudes. Even

⁴ See for differing views of this Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945–1955* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Mary Fullbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Fullbrook, *The People's State*.

though many former 'minor Nazis' were eventually amnestied, at first large numbers of Germans resident in the Soviet occupation zone and then GDR were sharply brought to account for their actions during the Third Reich, further complicating the ways in which people sought to come to terms with the new regime. Mass arrests and unjust incarceration in hastily reorganized former concentration camps, or removal to forced labour camps in the USSR, which had been such a feature of the occupation period, were by the early 1950s no longer such prominent and unpredictable elements of life; but the era of Stalinist show trials in Eastern Europe and the uncertainties of domestic politics continued to highlight, very visibly, the superior force and power of repression on the part of the new communist rulers. The future was sharply contested, and fear of the 'class enemy' marked the development of both the visible police and military forces, as well as the less visible system of surveillance and intervention under the Stasi, officially founded in February 1950.⁵

Long-standing divisions with respect to communism (so recently and widely denounced as 'Bolshevism', and fought with immense bitterness and brutality in Hitler's war) historically ran deep among the KZ generation. But now the majority of East Germans found themselves in the role of victims, rather than active carriers, of violence. This was a key shift across the transition from the Nazi to the communist dictatorship. Under Nazism, state power had been directed against specific targets among the people, selectively directed against political opponents and 'unwanted' groups who were at the extreme to be 'annihilated'; other members of the population were mobilized, co-opted or constrained into participating in the massive project of violence against other European countries and, eventually, most of the world. In the GDR, state power now backed the deployment of force by an unpopular minority, and was turned against the majority of the people, who were seen as inherently unreliable.

The uprising of June 1953 was arguably a major turning point in the character of violence in the GDR.⁶ During much of the previous year, following the strengthening of the inner-German border in May 1952, the determination of the SED

⁵ For the development of the various different organisations which together made up the formidable apparatus of the armed forces of the GDR, see Torsten Diedrich, Hans Gotthard Ehlert, and Rüdiger Wenzke (eds.), *Im Dienste der Partei: Handbuch der bewaffneten Organe der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998); for an accessible overview of the history of the Stasi, see Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990* (Stuttgart and Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2001).

⁶ The uprising of 17 June 1953 has remained the subject of considerable controversy and varying interpretations. For discussions and sources, see e.g. Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk and Ehrhart Neubert (eds.), *Die verdrängte Revolution. Der Platz des 17. Juni in der deutschen Geschichte* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2004); Roger Engelmann and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (eds.), *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat. Eine Bestandaufnahme zum 17. Juni 1953* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2005); Ulrich Mählert (ed.), *Der 17. Juni 1953: ein Aufstand für Einheit, Recht und Freiheit* (Bonn: Dietz, 2003). For personal accounts and memories, see reproduction of key Cold War sources in translation, see Christian Ostermann (ed.), *Uprising in East Germany 1953: the Cold War, the German question, and the first major upheaval behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2001), produced in collaboration with The Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, sources also available at <www.CWIHP.org>.

under Walter Ulbricht to push through the 'building of socialism' in social and economic policies had been met with increasing popular unrest. Hauled to Moscow in early June 1953, the SED leadership were instructed to engage on a 'new course' and relax some of the more problematic policies. But their announcement of a change of course was both partial and self-contradictory: workers were informed that, far from any improvement in their conditions, they would be subjected to a 10 per cent increase in 'work norms', meaning that productivity would need to be raised by this amount with no increase in pay. On 16 June a group of construction workers on the prestige building project of East Berlin's Stalinallee downed tools and marched to the House of Ministries to protest; by 17 June the protest had snowballed—with the considerable help of the 'free publicity' provided by news reports from the Radio in the American Sector (RIAS) in West Berlin—such that across the GDR some half a million people came out on the streets to demonstrate their dislike not only of the economic policies but also the politics of the GDR. Uncertain of the loyalty of the fledgling domestic forces of repression, Ulbricht had to call on Soviet tanks to assist in dispersing the demonstrators. Official SED attempts to portray this uprising as an act of 'Western provocateurs' were seen by most Germans, East and West, as laughable propaganda; the West was, indeed, notable more by its absence, as West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the Western Allies dared not risk sparking international conflagration by any practical intervention. Thereafter, however, the date became a symbol in West Germany for commitment to freedom, democracy and unity, with a significant street running through the Tiergarten (the western continuation of East Berlin's central avenue of Unter den Linden beyond the Brandenburg Gate), renamed the 'Street of 17th June', and the day pronounced an annual national holiday.⁷ In East Germany any serious discussion was taboo; even those scores of individuals who were killed in the course of the uprising (the exact number remains uncertain) were largely written out of history until after unification, their causes of death often officially suppressed.⁸ This major outburst of violence, precipitated by protests against the state and forcibly repressed by open force, left lasting scars reverberating throughout the following decades. For many people, it indicated the futility of any attempt to oppose the new regime; for those in power, it indicated the fragility of their hold on popular support.

The uprising of 17 June was not only a matter of dissatisfaction with current economic policies, nor solely of expressing pro-democratic sentiments against a dictatorial regime, although it clearly was at times both these things, expressed to different degrees in diverse areas over the various phases of the upheaval. Part of the

⁷ See further Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanische Erinnerung, 1948–1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999); and Wolfrum, 'Ein ungebetener Erinnerungsort? Der 17. Juni im nationalen Gedächtnis der Bundesrepublik Deutschland' in Engelmann and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (eds.), *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat*, pp. 414–25.

⁸ For a belated attempt to commemorate and 'return identities' to some of the dead, see Edda Ahrberg, Hans-Hermann Hertle, Tobias Hollitzer, and the Stiftung Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur (eds.), *Die Toten des Volksaufstandes vom 17. Juni 1953* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

(surprisingly heated) debate over the uprising has revolved around what labels best encompass it, the extent to which different social groups were involved, as well as the goals and strategies in different locations, and the ultimate reasons for failure. It also, in some quarters, allowed expression of a long-standing and continuing hatred of communism with little commitment to democracy in principle. While paranoia among the ruling communist elite was massively exacerbated by the June uprising—leading even to the expression of fear on the part of Stasi chief Erich Mielke in the autumn of 1989 that this would be ‘another 17th June’—such an atmosphere of mutual suspicion also had roots in the Nazi prehistory of the GDR. And the outcome was the inauguration of that long period of effectively frozen violence, further sustained by the expansion of domestic forces of repression, consolidated by the erection of the Wall in 1961, and significantly affected by the massive expansion of the hidden violence of the Stasi in the later period of *détente*, *Ostpolitik* and international recognition. These aspects of the effective reversal of violence, such that the population became potential or actual ‘victims’, are integral to understanding the fractured and contradictory views and development of the always internally divided ‘KZ generation’ during the GDR.

A major point of radical disagreement was, of course, the future-oriented project of communism itself. The struggle over a ‘racial state’ in Nazi Germany was displaced by a focus on ‘class’—or rather, the determined attempt to produce a ‘classless’ society in the GDR. This entailed attacks on inherited privileges and the formation of new types of property-ownership and social relations. The GDR was not merely about politics as dictatorship: political repression was intended as merely the temporary, and even for many communists disagreeable, means to achieving a major social revolution: the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’—as exercised by the Marxist-Leninist ‘leading party’, the SED—was designed to sustain the conditions in which such a revolution could, over a transitional period, be effected. During the 1950s and through much of the 1960s, constant social upheaval was accompanied by attempts to institute and stabilize the domestic system of power, often with considerable difficulty at the grass roots.⁹

The officially designated ‘winners’ of the social revolution of the GDR were to be the workers and peasants, in what was supposed to become, ultimately, a ‘classless’ society. This posed major problems for those classes that were supposed historically to ‘wither away’, more or less forcibly helped along by state policies.

No adult could fail to be affected, one way or another, by the social revolution instituted by the post-war communist regime. Aristocrats who, despite potentially relative high mobility, along with excellent networking and command over resources, nevertheless unusually chose to stay in the GDR, were adversely affected with respect to property ownership (confiscation of estates over one hundred hectares in size), career chances (discrimination in education, employment prospects, opportunities for their children), as well as seeing a sudden, radical reversal

⁹ See e.g. Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945–1968* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*; Corey Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots: The transformation of East Germany* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

of the official status hierarchy. Members of the bourgeoisie were variably affected according to whether they were bourgeois by profession or possession, and in which areas. The propertied bourgeoisie (*Besitzbürgertum*) lost its position of command over the 'means of production', as factories were taken over into state ownership in the name of the people as the 'People's Own Factories' (*Volkseigene Betriebe*, VEBs), often after a period under Soviet control as Soviet joint stock companies (*Sowjetische Aktiengesellschaften*, SAGs). Groups forming the 'educated' or professional bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) were gradually transmogrified into new GDR variants as a 'socialist intelligentsia': doctors, engineers, scientists, journalists, writers, and technicians were still required in one way or another in an advanced industrial state under communist rule. But different groups experienced the transition in a variety of ways: the medical profession and the clergy suffered far less by way of turnover of personnel or denazification than did other professions.¹⁰ Members of the working class and peasantry also found their status dramatically changed, with the land reforms, collectivization of agriculture, and formation of 'People's Own Factories'. While some experienced little change, or even new chances, for many—and particularly peasants who lost their independence and were forced into collectivized farms (*Landesproduktionsgenossenschaften*, LPGs) in the two major waves of collectivization in 1952–3 and 1960–1—this period was one of highly unwelcome, forcibly imposed upheaval.¹¹

The continuing fluctuation of the population, with moves to (and sometimes back from) West Germany, as well as the attempted integration of what were now officially known as 'resettlers'—but who still considered themselves to be expellees and refugees—continued to create frictions and uncertainties. Overall, around one-quarter of 'East Germans' actually came from territories beyond the GDR. There were even frictions concerning those tiny numbers of people moving from West to East: one report commented that meetings registered 'again and again misunderstandings between GDR citizens and immigrants and returnees [from West Germany]'.¹² Further strains and tensions were experienced by those returning from lengthy periods of forced labour and captivity in the Soviet Union, with differing but generally difficult attempts at integration into post-war society. Renegotiations once 'home' ranged from political identities to gender roles, accompanied by often slow or only partial recovery from the physical and psychological strains of both combat and captivity. Dissonant life stories were further complicated by changing regime policies, including both castigation as 'criminals' and yet

¹⁰ On doctors and clergy, see particularly Christoph Kleßmann, 'Relikte des Bildungsbürgertums in der DDR' in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwar (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1993); for overviews and further references, see e.g. the contributions to Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (eds.), *The Workers' and Peasants' State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); and Fulbrook, *The People's State*.

¹¹ See particularly Arnd Bauerkämper, *Ländliche Gesellschaft in der kommunistischen Diktatur. Zwangsmodernisierung und Tradition in Brandenburg 1945–1963* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2002); and for a later period, George Last, *After the 'Socialist Spring': Collectivisation and economic transformation in the GDR* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2009).

¹² SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4898, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, *Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Erfurt*, Juli–Dez. 1956, p. 6.

offering the possibility of redemption through narratives of conversion.¹³ This was, in short, a highly unsettled, fluid society, all members of which were in one form or another affected by continuing transitions of status or location or sense of belonging. And the future remained highly uncertain.

There was a very widespread sense of provisionality, an expectation that the current situation was merely temporary; people were wary therefore of over-committing themselves. Many reports quote individuals as using the stock phrase 'when things are different again'. Yet in the meantime, new gestures of belonging were demanded, and to a greater or lesser extent exacted, in formal memberships of relevant organizations, and attendance at appropriate political, organizational and ceremonial occasions. For many adults, however, economic considerations outweighed questions of political conviction. As one report put it, 'economic problems get far more discussion than ideological questions. The majority of people who participate in discussions proceed from their own personal interests . . .'¹⁴ And in view of these priorities, where arguably economic interests could not be so readily separated from 'ideological' or political views, many took the opportunity to leave for the West—some 3 million in total before 1961—seeing better prospects for themselves and their children in the capitalist democracy of the Federal Republic.¹⁵

At this stage, it was far from clear that the GDR would last very long as a separate state. Survival in the present was not based on any certainties about the course the future would take. And the single most significant aspect of the Cold War for most Germans was, arguably, not so much ideology in the abstract, nor even the central economic issues concerning the social revolution by which so many were affected, as the division of their nation in an emotionally freighted military context. The division of Germany meant not only the loss of the national prestige of 'being German', but also often far more painfully and more particularly, separation from family and friends across the other side of the 'Iron Curtain': the inner-German border, and the border around the little island of West Berlin. As one of the group of former Chemnitz school friends, Gretel P., now stranded in the GDR and separated from family and friends in the West, put it in a circular letter to her former classmates on 28 May 1952, at a time when the borders between the GDR and the Western zones were being dramatically tightened up:

My yearning for the 'other zone', where I have friends and relatives, is growing doubly strong. A [border] pass is however sadly unobtainable. How much I would like to see my brother and family in Stuttgart!

The sense of provisionality was without any kind of realistic timescale:

¹³ See particularly for the period up to 1955 Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the legacies of defeat in postwar Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); for the post-1955 period, Christiane Wienand, *Performing Memory. Returned German prisoners of war in divided and reunited Germany* (London: UCL PhD thesis, 2009). Both compare the situation in West and East Germany.

¹⁴ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 1, Ausschluß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, Argumentation demokratischer Sektor, Berlin, 9 Apr. 1956, p. 1.

¹⁵ See further Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the frontiers of power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Pt I.

But perhaps the dream of a united Germany will still be fulfilled one day, so that we can travel again without restrictions throughout our beloved Fatherland. Who knows, perhaps one day one of the 'westerners' will after all get an unwanted visit!

She consoled herself that at least they had, on previous occasions when they had met up as a class in what she now saw as happier times, been spared foreknowledge of the divided fate that was so soon to befall them:

I often think of our last 'numerous' class meetings in the Reich Café. How few of our former wishes and hopes have in the event been fulfilled! Well, it's a good thing that we didn't know then all the hard times that were coming to us.

At a little gathering of 'the pitiful remnants' when those in what was now the GDR had met up, they had thought back with pleasure to the 'good old days' of the Third Reich:

We were very sorry that the circle could not have been larger. We greatly enjoyed revelling in memories of past times as girls, and not a few pranks were dug up from the depths.¹⁶

In considering examples such as this, it should be held in mind that women such as Gretel P. had not necessarily been committed Nazis in any strenuous ideological or party political sense; they just felt, seemingly without much if any reflection about the broader system under which they had lived and at whose cost they had previously been able to enjoy life, that life had simply been better for them before the current period of national division and humiliation, and what they saw as occupation by a former enemy.

There were very many who echoed and shared these kinds of reactions. The announcement of the tightening of the inner-German border in May 1952 unleashed a wave of angry reactions in Kreis Worbis, for example, in Thuringia. The SED held somewhere in the region of 95 meetings with an estimated total of 8,200 people in 81 of the 94 parishes of the Kreis, with an average attendance of 86 people per meeting. Several of these meetings ended in absolute uproar when people heard of what were euphemistically called the 'measures for the protection of the population at the demarcation line (police orders)'. In Wiesenfelde, the report noted: 'Strong resistance. After giving notice of the measures, a tumult.' In Hausen, the mayor himself seemed to be the ringleader in a heated debate full of hostile utterances (*Feindseligkeiten*). Leinfelde, by contrast, had a social structure and culture that predisposed to a respectful silence and suppression of disagreements in public: 'A place of well-to-do bourgeoisie influencing the numerically weaker working class strata. Dependency and a mentality of subservience still persist.' But when a young person said it was important to engage in discussion with West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and 'preached . . . pacifism: You shall respect your opponents and love your enemies' a full '50% of those present at the meeting applauded him'. In Kella, the report was also mixed: '200 participants, at first great unrest in the hall, heckling, by the end somewhat quietened down'. In summary,

¹⁶ Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Stuttgart (BfZ), 'Klassenbriefe', Vol. 1, 30 May 1943–6 Oct. 1953, fols. 168b, 169.

it was officially noted that: 'In political discussions a predominantly pacifist outlook was expressed, the argument being: We won't bear weapons again, we only want peace.'¹⁷ But such an approach was not to be given much of a chance in the GDR.

National division was not the only problematic aspect of the Cold War. It also represented a hostile balance of power: for the moment an apparently frozen but highly fragile balance of force and fear, accompanied by a constant sense of the risk of another major and even more deadly conflagration. This terrified Europeans on both sides of the Iron Curtain, to varying degrees at different periods; and for Germans, it had an added twist. The fear of war again engulfing the Germans was accompanied by awareness that Germans would be fighting each other in opposing causes. Remilitarization in both new German states took place a mere decade after the defeat of the Third Reich, accompanied, in the East, by the forcible imposition of a 'friend /foe mentality'; and many East Germans had the sense not only that they were being mobilized to fight against Western 'brothers and sisters', but also in service of a cause to which they were opposed. At the time when the National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*, NVA) was formally established, in 1956, conscription was not introduced. But, as one East German was quoted as pointing out, "As long as it remains voluntary, it's still okay, but if it becomes compulsory, then the GDR will be empty."¹⁸ Following the Berlin crises of the later 1950s, and the increased flow of refugees westwards with the second major wave of collectivization of agriculture in 1960, the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 radically removed the need for any such considerations. Conscription could be introduced in 1962 without any fear that the GDR would 'be empty'. Yet the inner reactions of those affected could not be as easily influenced as their physical presence.

Reactions among older Germans to the foundation of a new German military army a mere decade after all German military forces had been banned are interesting for the light they shed not only on attitudes towards the 'national question'—which were much as expected—but also on some continuing militaristic sentiments with a Nazi tinge, as well as generational tensions between old and young in the 1950s. Older East Germans, males in particular, had seen their authority radically weakened; they, in turn, saw the youth of the day as not being brought up in the ways they had thought better, in the 'good old days'. Thus there are in the records periodic comments in favour of the foundation of the NVA along the following lines, taken from a report from Bezirk Erfurt to Berlin:

In all areas of our district some of the older inhabitants and former ranks of the fascist army argue as follows with respect to the establishment of the National People's Army:

¹⁷ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4620, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Informationen aus dem Land Thüringen, Jan.– Mai 1952, Wochenbericht vom 25. bis 31.5.1952, Kreis Worbis, pp. 1–3.

¹⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4629, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, Information 2 / I 25 Jan. 1955, p. 7.

‘The creation of the National People’s Army is to be welcomed, since at least they’ll turn youth into something decent [*was anständiges*].’¹⁹

In Eisenach, Walter G., a master confectioner, apparently held a similarly old-fashioned opinion about the need to discipline youth: ‘He is of the view that something like Labour Service should be introduced, in order to sharpen young people up a bit.’²⁰ A report from Arnstadt suggested that such opinions were relatively widespread among older men: ‘False arguments are particularly prevalent among older colleagues (in the workplace), in that they welcome the formation of the National People’s Army because young people, in their two years of service, will finally become [adult] “fellows”.’²¹

Interesting as these views are for the light they shed on ex-soldiers’ desires to see the young men of the 1950s subjected to military discipline as they had themselves once been, far more widespread were the reactions which opposed remilitarization either with reference to the borders and character of ‘Germany’, or for more general anti-war reasons. Very typical comments included, for example: ‘The Red Army in the Second World War should have called a halt at the borders of the German Reich and should not have been allowed to occupy one-third of Germany.’²² A report on a meeting in the rural district of Erfurt (Erfurt-Land) listed several problematic voices, including one colleague who believed that ‘establishing a People’s Army is the beginning of a fratricidal war’ and another, introduced as a ‘former resettler’, quoted as saying ‘now we can defend the Heimat that we no longer have’.²³ While the general rumblings were everywhere along these lines, all reports sought to include ‘positive’ voices, including examples of the kinds of arguments that were being fostered officially. An example of one such, which manages to bring together a number of relevant themes, came from Frau Emma H., a member of the official women’s organization, the DFD, in Apolda, and who clearly knew what line to articulate:

As a former resettler I greet the decision made yesterday by the people’s Parliament [*Volkskammer*] to create a People’s Army. In this way we will be able to show the western pirates, for whom working people are worth nothing except being used as cannon fodder, that we are not willing to give up our achievements, but will defend peace, side by side with the Soviet Union . . . As a housewife and former resettler I do not want my homeland [*Heimat*] to experience again the terrors of a new imperialist war.²⁴

It was precisely this sort of (somewhat implausible) commitment that the SED was desperately trying to achieve, but with, at this time, relatively little success—and least of all among those former soldiers who had so recently been the Soviet Union’s most deadly enemies.

¹⁹ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Erfurt, Jan.–Juni 1956, Informationsbericht Erfurt, 16 Feb. 1956.

²⁰ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Telefondurchsage Eisenach, 20 Jan. 1956.

²¹ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Informationsbericht vom 15. Januar bis 13. Februar 1956, Arnstadt, 13 Feb. 1956.

²² SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Informationsbericht vom 15. Januar bis 13. Februar 1956, Arnstadt, 13 Feb. 1956.

²³ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Kreis Ausschuss Erfurt-Land, 21 Jan. 1956.

²⁴ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, DFD statement, 19 Jan. 1956.

Views on developments in the Eastern bloc in the 1950s were further overlain by considerations of what it might mean for Germans in the GDR, both politically and economically. In 1956 there was a degree of sympathy (as well as condescension) towards those who were engaged in challenges to communist rule in Hungary and Poland, comparable to that which had been put down so forcibly in the GDR in 1953, the alleged lessons of which did not seem to have been learned elsewhere. In the working-class north Berlin district of Pankow, for example, comments were reported along the lines of: 'In Poland and Hungary there must have been crazy conditions for it to come to this sort of breakdown' and 'Why on earth haven't they learnt the relevant lessons from the events of 1953 here?'²⁵ From the rather more bourgeois suburb of Weißensee came the opinions that: 'Now neither Hungary nor Poland will deliver provisions to us and it's possible that we will not have a goose for Christmas dinner'; and 'If the ration cards are lifted, butter will get more expensive and then things will develop here just like in Poland.'²⁶ A building worker in the prestige project of rebuilding Stalinallee, the main East Berlin street where the downing of tools had precipitated the 1953 uprising, is reported as summarizing the views of his workmates with respect to developments in Hungary thus: 'What should they say? They go on working, and soberly follow the events in Hungary. And apart from that, most of them haven't even really noticed what is going on.'²⁷ It should not be forgotten that at this stage there was not the kind of news saturation and mass media coverage typical of the later television age (and which played a key role in 1989). Personal economic considerations alongside a feisty willingness to engage in any revolutionary uprising against current repression seemed to take precedence for a woman employed as a cleaner, who compared her current situation unfavourably with that of the Third Reich:

A cleaning lady at the HO [state-owned] grocery store in Prenzlauer Berg explained: 'If things spark up again here, I'll be right there. I have never lived under such repression as I do now. Only ever margarine sandwiches and working as a cleaning lady, that's no life.' On being asked about the character of her employment under fascism, she replied: 'Also a cleaner, but with butter sandwiches!'²⁸

Similar comments and criticism can readily be garnered from other sources, with variations according to religion (Christians were particularly critical) and social class. Reports from the district of Köpenick, just south of Berlin, for example, suggested that:

in discussion of the events in Hungary, particularly among white collar employees and sections of the intelligentsia, questions keep arising about the cult of personality and personal changes in the leadership of party and state in the socialist countries and in the GDR.²⁹

²⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 2, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, den 29.10.56, Information 4 / X, p. 2.

²⁶ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 2, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, den 29.10.56, Information 4 / X, p. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

As always in politically unpredictable situations, where people remained ‘unclear’ about political developments—that is, they did not accept the official line of interpretation—there was unrest evidenced by excessive shopping and hoarding of supplies:

Most people remain unclear about the events in Hungary . . . This lack of clarity has partly led to conceptions among the population that in Germany too—just like in Hungary—it could come to unrest. Hamster buying, above all of flour, eggs, preserves and ham are one demonstration of this. It is to be noted that during the last few days there has been a rise in purchases of 8% in Friedrichshain.³⁰

Nor did this unrest over political developments in central Europe under Soviet hegemony die down very readily. But people were, in view of the recent past, somewhat fearful of committing themselves, as regime representatives soon registered:

We have not yet succeeded in creating clarity among the population with respect to the events in Hungary . . . [There is] great reticence regarding discussions of political questions. Some are afraid that things may be different again here too. They therefore do not want to express themselves out loud.³¹

Thus, a combination of memories of recent repression in the GDR, disapproval of Soviet intervention in the affairs of other states under its influence, and fear of future shifts in political colours given the recent shift from Nazism to Communism, together fostered a widespread sense of provisionality and distrust.

There was a more general atmosphere of suspicion and on occasion well-grounded fear within East Germany too, in a context where the ‘class enemy’ was held to be everywhere. Carsten K. (born 1924), for example, recounts a curious story of a colleague who was accused, as he thought, of spying for three Western countries.³² In fact, it ultimately turned out that he had ‘only’ been engaged in illicitly dealing with Western currency and also buying a friend tobacco in West Berlin; but in the course of retelling what was a quite complex, lengthy story, Carsten K. clearly recalled some of the fear that he and his workmates had experienced in the 1950s. And in a decade when state and the Church were at loggerheads over questions such as the SED’s attack on the organization of young Christians, the *Junge Gemeinde*, and the introduction of the alternative secular ‘confirmation’ ceremony, the *Jugendweihe*, committed Christians were widely not well disposed to SED initiatives. In the localities, pastors frequently influenced popular opinion, such as in the border area of Frankfurt an der Oder where, as one report noted, despite the best efforts of SED propaganda in collecting signatures for a particular petition, ‘there remains considerable lack of clarity, in which a major role is played by some Protestant pastors who are in part directly hostile

³⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 2, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, Berlin, den 6.11.56, Information 1 / XI, p. 2.

³¹ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 2, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, den 7.12.1956, Information 1 / XII, p. 2.

³² Interview with Carsten K., summer 2005.

in their attitude'.³³ 'Lack of clarity' was, of course, the standard euphemism for disagreement with the party line.

II. MEMORIES AND NEW MESSAGES

The recent past also continued to be a very live issue for those who had consciously experienced the war and its ending. In the decade and a half after the war, personal memories of violence and loss were very 'live'; and the shape of the future, with respect to the permanence of division and the remilitarization of the two German states within opposing Cold War blocs, was still wide open as far as contemporary perceptions were concerned. Thus no commemorative event could take place without relevance both to the immediate past and the uncertainties and agendas of the present. In the official view, the message to be transmitted was extremely clear, as outlined, for example, in characteristic Cold War style in the run-up to celebrating the 1952 anniversary of 'liberation' on 8 May:

The life-blood of Red Army soldiers that was shed for the defeat of fascism and with this our liberation from the chains of brutal fascist domination must not have been given in vain; it must commit us to crush the new fascist plans for war being forged in West Germany by a certain fascist clique with the support of Western imperialists.³⁴

This kind of enforced linking of a particular rendering of the past in service of distinctive political interests in the present was to remain a central feature throughout the forty-year history of the GDR.³⁵ But the ways in which it was received depended very much on the specific area addressed, with notable differences between events where Germans felt empathy with the topic and those where old points of disagreement and tensions over unresolved issues were reawakened. In no area, however, were the officially imposed interpretations entirely in line with the representations preferred by the majority of adult Germans.

The least dissonance was occasioned where it was German victims of bombings who were being commemorated. While Dresden clearly remained a special case throughout the history of the GDR, there were many other sites of memory and personal mourning, some larger and some of smaller scales, but always with a deeply personal angle for those closely involved.³⁶ In February 1955, for example, it was reported that a total of 17,829 people had been involved in meetings in housing areas, street meetings, or specially organized evening discussions; and seventeen wreath-laying ceremonies, attended by 1,667 people, had taken place

³³ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4777, Report from Frankfurt-Oder, 10.5.1955, Betr. Stand der Unterschriftensammlung im Bezirk Frankfurt (Oder), fol. 66.

³⁴ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4620, National Front des demokratischen Deutschland - Landessekretariat - Land Thüringen - Erfurt, Erfurt, den 13. Mai 1952, Informations-Bericht 27 / 52, Zur Durchführung des Tages der Befreiung, p. 1.

³⁵ On the broader context, see e.g. Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

³⁶ On commemorations in Dresden (although concentrating primarily on the period since 1985), see Tony Joel, University of Melbourne PhD thesis, 'Dresden as Opferstadt?'

at sites in Berlin which had been particularly severely affected by air-raid attacks and bombing ten years previously. While the official figures are startlingly exact (yet probably also somewhat inaccurate), it is clear that ‘in virtually all areas of the town where there were large numbers of dead to be mourned, wreaths were laid or memorial ceremonies held’.³⁷

Even so, not even individual mourning could be left untouched by the politics of the day. If people’s lives and deaths had been intensely affected by the politics of Hitler’s Reich, their mourning was coloured by the changing Cold War context. Despite the highly personal aspect of remembering friends and family members who had died, which was clearly what brought people out on the streets, the occasion was characteristically used by the SED to put across anti-Western propaganda. In 1955, this was construed in the context of the fight against the proposed ratification of the Paris Treaties, which awarded (with some qualifications concerning the rights of the Allies) full sovereignty to the Western Federal Republic:

On 3 February loud-speaker vans drove through specific areas of town, such as Friedrichshain and Pankow, pointing out the particular significance of 3 February and the people’s fight against the Paris War [*sic*] Treaties, and bringing to attention the planned rallies. Short commentaries were issued for individual memorials about the extent of destruction wrought by the English and American bombers.³⁸

Interestingly, at this point when the memory of suffering was so very strong, the blame for the destruction of Berlin through bombing was laid squarely in the hands of the ‘English’ (British) and Americans, with no mention whatsoever of the role of the Soviets in the ‘liberation’ of Germany—a feature that was to shift dramatically in emphasis in later commemorations, which took on more of a character of celebration than mourning.

At this point a mere decade after the war’s end, private grief was very evident: ‘Everywhere it was observed that people stood still, read the inscriptions on wreaths and say “for God’s sake, no more war!”’³⁹ Yet despite the reality of private grief, East Germans did not buy into the lessons the SED hoped they would draw: ‘Unfortunately large sections of the population still do not recognize the danger threatening them through the ratification of the Paris Treaties.’⁴⁰ And typically, criticisms of current economic shortages took precedence over SED foreign policy:

Many people occupy themselves solely with the currently pressing economic questions. They complain about too much margarine on [ration] stamps and its poor quality and about the non-delivery of the old coal [ration] cards.⁴¹

The actual ceremonies of May 1955 appear however to have gone well where the character and message of the commemorations were politically widely acceptable.

³⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4629, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Informationen aus Berlin, Jan.–Dez. 1955, Information 1 / II, 8 Feb. 1955, p 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

'Lost places' were just as important as places of memory, and here the dissonances between the official line and wider views and memories were often far greater than where the 'sites of memory' were literally accessible physical locations. In the case of the lost eastern territories and particularly the territories beyond the new Oder-Neisse border with Poland, for example, official attempts at 'celebration' of 'German-Polish friendship' proved highly controversial, and audiences did not show up in the numbers required. The issue of the lost territories in Poland remained a constant source of disagreement and irritation in the GDR, given that there was no outlet for the kind of 'revanchism' in which former refugees and expellees who had settled in West Germany could indulge. In March 1955, 'negative' comments were being reported such as:

'If the states which are befriended with us would show us a generous gesture with respect to giving back the areas behind the Oder-Neiße border, the West German population would support us.'

'We will have no success with a referendum in West Berlin and West Germany, because people, particularly resettlers, can not be won over to our politics.' . . .

A member of the NDPD [*National Democratic Party of Germany*] is of the opinion that the Soviet Union has not always pursued policies of peace, but rather in the Second World War used the battle against fascism to conquer at the same time a part of Poland.⁴²

Events during the 'week of German-Polish friendship' at the beginning of May 1955 were particularly notable for their failure, in SED terms. The 'venues' (*Lokale*) set up for the purpose of events were poorly equipped, and often remained closed. At one, only an old man was to be found who, on questioning, explained that he was merely there to 'heat the oven' and had no knowledge about the planned event on German-Polish friendship. In the surprisingly laconic words of a summary report reviewing developments over the week: 'We did not succeed in eliciting much resonance among the population through our well-prepared events on the occasion of the German-Polish friendship week.'⁴³ Clearly lively recent memories far outweighed any weak impulses towards political conformity at this point.

On the other hand, attempts to evoke sympathy with the victims of and 'fighters against' fascism met with somewhat more success, even though here too good organization and a degree of pressure were the key to high turnouts. In 1955 around 10,000 people turned out for the ceremonies in the former Nazi concentration camp of Sachsenhausen in Oranienburg, just north of Berlin. Although many people came from residential areas and factories, there was also a very high proportion of young people brought by their teachers from the primary and secondary schools of Berlin, establishing a pattern that was to be endlessly repeated in the 'anti-fascist state'. A 'good political demonstration' was also achieved in the large Jewish cemetery of Weißensee in Berlin.⁴⁴ Yet at a meeting in a small

⁴² SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4629, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, Information 3 / III, 23 Mar. 1955, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Information 2 / V, 18 May 1955, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Information 1 / V, 9 May 1955, p. 2.

village near Weimar following a huge demonstration in Buchenwald, which was now developing into the commemorative centre and symbol of the ‘anti-fascist state’, one of the French delegates who had been invited to the ceremonies as a former prisoner raised a highly pertinent question. The village in question was marked by a high rate of religious observation (‘this parish is very oriented towards the church’), and a good 10 per cent of villagers appear to have attended the meeting: some fifty to sixty of the total population of around 500. The report comments:

The French comrade then put the following question:

He said: In Hitler’s time people went on demonstrations etc. because they more or less had to. Is it really the case that people are demonstrating [now] because they are progressively inclined, or are they just going along with it again?

The peasants took 1½ hours to answer this question and said the following:

They had really changed and had learned from the past and the French could have confidence in the Germans . . . The evening closed with handshakes and embraces.⁴⁵

It is hardly likely that the local peasants, thus put on the spot, could have come up with any answer that would have been much different. But it was notable, too, that young people in particular were highly involved earlier ‘in the rally at the crematorium of the former KZ Dora’ which had ‘approximately 1,000 participants’, and were deeply engaged in subsequent discussions under the aegis of the FDJ:

In the evening there was a Friendship Gathering with the FDJ in the Club House. The comrades there declared that they had never previously brought young people together in such large numbers. After the Danish comrade (P.) and the Czech comrade (M.) had spoken, the delegates stayed with the young people until about 24:00. (There were about 300 young people present.)⁴⁶

These are examples which could be replicated innumerable times across the records of the GDR in the 1950s. Young people, it would seem, had a visible desire to be involved in exploring the past—or were at least available, yet again, for mobilization by new political forces—in a rather different manner from that of older generations.

The question of ‘Jewish’ identities and relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans remained rather muted, if on occasion awkward. Walter S., a communist who had lost both his parents in Auschwitz, and who in the GDR held a variety of functionary roles, later recalled, with reference to his work as a mayor of a district in Berlin, the difficulties he had on occasion with ministers of religion:

The most interesting aspect of working as a city district mayor was meeting with people from diverse social groups. I remember my first discussion with pastors. We had big problems with the Protestant Church, which in part was quite openly opposed [to our politics]. There were only a few exceptions. Pastor H. in Bohnsdorf was particularly hostile. I used these discussions with pastors to introduce myself widely. Luckily I had the sort of background—on top of it all also of Jewish descent—(that I generally cut out) in order to show them at the same time the role of the Church in fascism. That

⁴⁵ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4897, Bericht über die Kundgebungen in den Kreisen anlässlich des Internationalen Befreiungstages im April 1956. Sonderhausen und Nordhausen.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

forced many pastors to reflect. I don't want to claim that the problems ceased because of these discussions, but it was a beginning. I also felt this in that often afterwards a pastor would ring me up and request a personal discussion with me.⁴⁷

It is interesting that here, as elsewhere in his testimony, Walter S. is slightly reticent about his own Jewish background, a topic surrounded by continuing tension in the GDR—on the part not only of members of the population who had previously been complicit in state-sponsored murderous antisemitism but also on the part of the communist regime. The latter did not indulge in the officially ordained 'philosemitism' along the lines prevalent in post-war West Germany, given periodic bouts of official anti-Zionism, and the issue remained highly live at the level of interpersonal relations on the ground.⁴⁸

The vast majority of those who were adults during the Third Reich and subsequently resident in the GDR had been, in one way or another, mobilized in service of the Greater German Reich, and complicit in the practices of Nazism, whether or not they had been inwardly in agreement with any aspect of Nazi ideology. The experiences of the early post-war period and particularly the political vicissitudes of the 1950s, with the upheavals of politics around 1953 and the draconian imposition of party discipline, affected many people's uneasy attempts to transform both themselves and the world at this time. The sense of ambivalence about both past and present rarely surfaces in archival records, and is only glimpsed on occasion in reflections many years later. For those who had formerly come to terms with life in Nazi society by complicity in racist practices, life was far from easy after 1945. Yet even so, it was possible to rewrite the script of the past, not only by showing—as was done so widely during the early denazification period—that despite evidence of memberships in the NSDAP and other Nazi organizations, they had inwardly really 'always been against it', but also now by demonstrating commitment to the new state. And the new regime made strenuous attempts to win over key groups in this spirit.

Efforts were made, for example, to persuade and incorporate former officers of the National Socialist Army (*Wehrmacht*). At a meeting in November 1951, speeches were given by former *Wehrmacht* officers that were designed to win over 'comrades', in the old military-patriotic rather than left-wing political sense, through the use of words such as 'love of the Fatherland', and with reference not to 'liberation' in May 1945, but rather 'collapse', 'national catastrophe', and even potentially if they did not heed current warnings and avoid future war—with an appalling use of a term tainted by other meanings under Nazism—'the extermination [or annihilation, destruction: *Vernichtung*] of our nation'.⁴⁹ The speeches at this meeting, and similar presentations in other outlets, were designed to demonstrate a particular

⁴⁷ LAB E Rep 061-23 Nr. 36, Walter S. (1915), *Ergänzungen zum Material Walter S. Zur Tätigkeit als Stadtbezirksbürgermeister Berlin-Treptow*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Frank Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge: Antisemitism and philosemitism in postwar Germany* (London: Heinemann, 1991).

⁴⁹ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4606, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Informationen aus dem Land Brandenburg, Sept.–Dez. 1951, Auswertung der Tagung der ehemaligen Offiziere vom 17.11.1951, various speakers (some terms used several times).

version of the past that led inevitably to support for the GDR, and to prove the possibility of personal exoneration and redemption through conversion and commitment to the new 'peace-loving' state. Similarly, former NSDAP members ('Pg.'s), including those who had been denazified and those who had been interned, were invited to an evening with representatives of the VVN (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes*), the organization for victims of Nazi persecution, an invitation which occasioned surprise among those former Nazis who attended. The absence of others who had already fled to the West was noted somewhat sourly, but those present soon entered into the required spirit:

At the start of the discussion the former party members [*Pg.* 's] wanted to highlight their personal disadvantages, but we managed to move the discussion onto a high political level. We had comrades from the People's Police present, who explained right at the outset to those present that they did not need to be shy about speaking when they saw a police uniform.

In the course of the discussion many former Pg.'s proclaimed that they wanted to help in the National Front, and made negative judgements of the Western powers' preparations for war. They were particularly glad that we as the VVN do not harbour feelings of hatred; nevertheless some of them had been rather startled when they received the invitation, a matter which they themselves brought up.

Those present set themselves the task of organizing further such evenings and declared themselves prepared to bring along one or two former Pg.'s each.⁵⁰

The evening was generally adjudged a success to be repeated in other small circles; low numbers were held to facilitate uninhibited discussion (notwithstanding the presence of uniformed police).

The relatively easy incorporation of former Nazis may have been highly convenient for those concerned, who may even have been somewhat convinced by the new order of things (if only temporarily); but this policy was far from popular among some victims of the former Nazi regime. As Klemperer noted bitterly in his diary, reporting on a session of the National Front: 'Yet again stirring declarations of forgiveness and love were handed out to all well-meaning Pg.'s.'⁵¹ He also clearly felt there were unspoken constraints on what he was able to say in this context and atmosphere of reconciliation, as for example when asked to write a newspaper article about the bombing of Dresden, where avoidance of specifically 'Jewish memory' would mean resorting to tired and over-used generalizations.⁵²

Even those who did not join any party could gain some recognition for evidence of absorption into and positive contribution to the new society, as illustrated for example, by the cases of Paul L. and Ernst G. who had been sentenced in 1953 to a life sentence and ten years respectively, but subsequently released 'on the basis of

⁵⁰ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4610, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Informationen aus dem Land Sachsen, Sept. 1949–Mai 1951, Kreisverband der VVN Zittau, to the Landesverband der VVN Dresden, 'Bericht über den 1. Ausspracheabend mit den ehemaligen Pg.'s, Entnazifizierten und Internierten, den wir am 1. März 1950 im Volkshaus, Zitta [sic], durchführten.'

⁵¹ Victor Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, Vol 2: *Tagebücher 1950–1959* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1999), entry of 7 Jan. 1 1950, p. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the former decision by the Council of Ministers in 1955'. The mayor of Knippelsdorf, Kreis Herzberg, and the VPKA in Herzberg reported that their subsequent behaviour had been entirely to the satisfaction of the authorities, even during the difficult period of the collectivization of agriculture:

After they were released from prison, both immediately took up work again on their children's farms. Since their release that have conducted themselves with loyalty towards our state, even during the socialist reorganization of agriculture [i.e. collectivization]. The children became members of the LPG [cooperative farm] and are working very conscientiously in this. G. died in perhaps 1960/61. L. is still alive today and is still working as a pensioner during the summers in the LPG, according to his capacities, without being a member of it.

They do not stand out in any way, neither positively nor negatively. At the beginning there were discussions on the part of L. that he had been sentenced although innocent. But that died down years ago.⁵³

It is not possible to assess how typical such individual cases were. It is also clear that many others were not so lucky in their efforts at rehabilitation and integration into the new socialist society. As late as 15 September 1962 Horst P. was given a death sentence and Erna P. was sentenced to life-long imprisonment by the District Court of Erfurt because they 'had been responsible for managing an SS farm near Lvov in the period 1941 to 1944, and had shot dead forced labourers there'.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the sheer numbers of those listed as having at one time or another received sentences indicate that in every single village and town across the GDR there were significant numbers of individuals and families affected by the reverberations of a Nazi past which was by no means entirely forgotten, even a decade and a half after the end of the war.

Towards the end of his life Viktor Klemperer became increasingly depressed about the state of affairs in both West and East Germany, seeing any decision about which side to live on as basically a choice of the 'lesser evil'. As he confided to his diary in April 1958: 'Personally, I hate the people in Bonn [the capital of the Federal Republic]; but the bigoted anti-intellectualism, the lack of education and the tyranny of the Party here daily gets even more on my nerves.'⁵⁵ There was little that escaped Klemperer's scathing critique: 'The heavy-handed battle about culture, the heavy-handed school policies, the heavy-handed arse-licking of the LDP, CDU and NPD . . . it's only that I hate Bonn *even more* than "Pankow" [the seat of the Soviet-backed administration of the GDR].'⁵⁶ He was particularly critical of widespread flight from the GDR to the West:

Everywhere 'flight from the Republic', particularly on the part of doctors, university professors, the intelligentsia. The battle over culture, the passport law, the tyranny, the pressure on conscience, the inner turmoil of children—Nazism through and through. I

⁵³ Bundesarchiv, DP / 3 / 1804, Potsdam, Frankfurt/O., Cottbus, letter of 20 Jan. 1965 from the Staatsanwalt des Bezirkes Cottbus to the Generalstaatsanwalt der DDR, Genosse Foth.

⁵⁴ Bundesarchiv, DP / 3 / 1804, report from Bezirk Erfurt.

⁵⁵ Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, Vol. 2, entry of Apr. 1958, p. 680.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

no longer know which I find more ghastly. In Bonn the open Hitler regime—but the individual lives on the whole in rather more freedom . . . can express opposition in the newspaper, whereas here the press etc. is closed off—but over there Hitlerism can also openly agitate, etc. etc. Repulsive and always the same and every day more repulsive.⁵⁷

Whichever way one looks at it, for those who were already adults during the Third Reich the transition to the new post-war situation was accompanied by a requirement to account for oneself; to explain (or explain away) one's past actions in order to be able to begin a new life, and to search for ways of accommodating oneself to the demands of the new system. A further common response, at this stage, was simply to refuse to commit oneself at all: as one report from what was still called Stalinstadt (later renamed Eisenhüttenstadt) put it in June 1955: 'It is characteristic of the house meetings, as in the youth meetings, that those present generally only repeat what they have heard or read, without expressing their own opinions.'⁵⁸

III. NEW LIFE CHANCES: THE 1929ERS AND THE NEW SOCIETY

Adults had to face both denazification and what were, particularly for those who had previously enjoyed relatively privileged social positions, the unpleasant consequences of political, social, and economic restructuring. But in many respects the situation was rather different for the 1929ers. They were untainted by responsibility for Nazism, and were officially exonerated by the occupying powers. They were, as a consequence, the object of massive attention in the Soviet zone and subsequent GDR as the potential carriers of a new Germany, with a mission to 'build up' from the ruins (*Aufbau*). They were also particularly concerned to make a radical break with the past.

Crucial also about this generation is that they were *new* to politics—unlike the older 'founding fathers', who were part of a deeply divided generation, already politicized in the 1920s and politically active in the 1930s. These younger people had been socialized as members of the Hitler Youth organizations in a dictatorship of wholly opposing ideological colours; but they had registered a far greater shock on exposure to what Nazism meant in terms of violence in practice; and they had sensed a feeling of betrayal at the end of the war. For some at least, an awareness of what had brought about the present situation meant that there was then no wallowing in a sense of 'victimhood' under the Soviet occupation and the new East German regime. Such attitudes did not necessarily mean that the 1929ers would 'convert' to communism; and indeed analysis of life history stories suggests that such political conversion as there was came about, often, for not very 'ideological' reasons. Commitment to the new state was often rooted in far wider, everyday reasons. In a broader sense, such reasons were in effect 'political': not in the narrow party

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 682.

⁵⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4777, Wochenbericht Stalinstadt, 4.6.1955, für die Zeit vom 30.5–5.6.1955, fol. 100.

political sense, but in respect of the ways in which the remaking of 'private lives', and the ways in which these were fostered, ran alongside, and meshed in with the social policies of the new state. For it was precisely as young adults, picking up the pieces of shattered lives and trying to make new families, new lives—literally—among the ruins of the defeated past, that these young adults in the 1950s felt some degree of harmony with the proclaimed aims of the new state.

For many 1929ers—as indeed also for older people—the 'worst times' in their lives were the closing months of the war and the later 1940s. But, for very many 1929ers, the 'best times' were the 1950s, when happiness in the private sphere corresponded with 'building up' the new state. The 1950s was for them the decade when, as young adults, they formed new ties of friendship and family, they witnessed the births of their own children, they picked up on educational opportunities, embarked on new careers, and often achieved rapid successes, experiencing what for people from modest social backgrounds was entirely unexpected upward social mobility. The new state and the opportunities it offered were, in short, intimately bound up with the way people who were now in their twenties were able to pick up the pieces after a period of unprecedented trauma, dislocation, and devastation, and start to build up new lives. And, after the miseries of the war and the early post-war years, they were able to begin to feel they could have fun again.

The mood of the times is well captured by Ernst L. He had been an enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth, and still remembered his childhood in the 1930s and even during the war as the 'best time' of his life, a period of 'good times' which for him only ended at the very end of April 1945. Like many East Germans, in recounting his life story he saw little need for anything other than a conversion narrative, fully accepting his previous commitment to the Nazi cause. His father had been a member of the *Waffen SS*, and the end of the war came as a total shock to Ernst. Indeed, in response to the question of when his 'worst times' had been, he answered:

Around 1945. You see, it was like this: my mother came in, in April, somewhere around the 30th, and said 'Adolf Hitler is dead'. And then we said, now—this is how we were brought up—'Well, how will things go on now? What will happen now? Now everything is over.' As long as Hitler was alive, we thought right to the very end, nothing can really happen to us. That was the man, the God! That's how we were brought up.⁵⁹

The period after 1945 was marked for Ernst L. not only by horrendous hunger but also by the fact that his father, having escaped from an American prisoner-of-war camp, was in hiding in fear of the Soviet authorities and only able to emerge after the foundation of the GDR when the search for ex-Nazis abated somewhat. Having recently been branded a 'Nazi pig' (*Nazischwein*), Ernst made a rapid transition into the new ideological colours of the future and joined the newly founded Free German Youth organization (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, FDJ). He recalls that he was not the only one to convert so rapidly from Nazism to communism:

⁵⁹ Interview with Ernst L. (1933), summer 2006.

But all of them who were there in the FDJ, they had all worn brown shirts. You see, that was the ‘Germany Meeting’ (*Deutschlandtreffen*), 1950, we all marched along in blue shirts [of the FDJ]. That was Whitsun, rain, sun, rain. We were softened up, we were enthusiastic. Berlin still lay in ruins. Our state President Wilhelm Pieck, I still like him today, Otto Grotewohl, because he was a great man. If it had been Wilhelm, there would not have been a Wall. He didn’t want that, I don’t think. And there were many war wounded, former soldiers, they marched along too in blue shirts. Then I said, if it’s for peace, then I’m always in favour of it, I’ll always be on board, because I have suffered too. One of our FDJ group had lost an arm, yes, and earlier they were also in the Hitler Youth. So you didn’t look at things like that.

. . . That was a new beginning. And that was also like a holiday then, on 1st May, our little town, a demonstration, the FDJ, the fanfares and marching of course, with the music right up at the front. And it was everywhere, people still really participated in it at that time, with decorations and greetings and here and there. That was five years after the war, that was only just over. The first prisoners of war were coming home . . .⁶⁰

Such memories of conversion and a new beginning are far from isolated.

Fritz E. was perhaps one of the most straight-down-the-line GDR supporters, but some of the emotions he registered and remembered resonate with those of others who did not become quite as politically committed as he did in the sense of formal memberships. Born in 1928, Fritz E. recalled that he was called up on 24 December 1944—Christmas Eve (*Heiligabend*), the most important day for Christmas celebrations in Germany—and that he experienced the last days of the war in the most terrifying manner, seeking to ‘defend’ Berlin with little by way of equipment and even less by way of training:

And then the front came ever closer, then we were equipped with two centimetre cannons, and then we were supposed to defend Berlin against low dive bombers, yes, and then on 2nd May the battle in the Reichstag building in Berlin with many many deaths, I was trapped in this marble hall, of the 200 men who were in there only eight came out alive, I was one of them. . . .

Fritz E.’s brief experiences in captivity after the war were not as bad as what he had just gone through in the last months of the war—he even managed to put on weight as a prisoner of war—but he really came into his own in the 1950s. He felt, along with others for whom he sought to speak, totally betrayed by the Nazi past, when he had been a relatively enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth: ‘And so we just had to work through the swindle of Hitler’s Germany, that we had been lied to and deceived in those Nazi times.’ He rapidly switched his commitments to the FDJ, for which he clearly still retained considerable enthusiasm, not least for its songs: ‘We did good youth work in the FDJ, and sang FDJ songs. Build up, build up, Free German Youth, build up!’ One of the most important aspects of the new state for Fritz E. was its professed commitment to peace, a message which, however propagandistic, he seems entirely to have internalized along with, he thought, others of his age group:

⁶⁰ Interview with Ernst L. (1933), summer 2006.

Those who were of the same age, they had lived through practically the same times, that was it, you see, we were agreed on this, on what lay behind us. Now it was about what lay before us. Maintaining peace, building up new measures, doing good youth work, not harbouring any hatred for other peoples.

And as for so many others of his age group, these were also personally 'good times':

Well, then—I was, as I said, I worked in agriculture then I became a truck driver, then I got to know my wife, we married in 1954, we've celebrated our golden wedding anniversary, and, as a young fellow one could obviously make a bit of a splash as a truck driver, I drove a wonderful car, . . . and was of course a proud car [*sic*], I worked Saturdays, then on Saturday evenings or Sundays I scrubbed and polished the car, and then with my bride we went for a spin in it, it was—and then, yes, Monday morning at six a.m. back to work.⁶¹

Fritz E. became one of the most committed supporters of the GDR, and must stand as typical for many who led lives that were neither notable nor surfacing in the archival legacies of the significant or the dissident.

Not everyone participated as joyfully in the new state-sponsored youth organizations; in fact, the records of the latter are full of complaints about how poorly attended their meetings were, and how low the membership figures remained; functionaries are constantly being goaded on to greater efforts. Young Christians in particular generally preferred to lead their social life within the circles of the 'Young Parish Community' (*Junge Gemeinde*) members of which were subjected to considerable harassment in the early 1950s, with negative consequences for plans to study or pursue careers in the GDR. But the wider point is the sense of building anew: the underlying message is that of a sense of renewal and a determination, in whichever way, to make a fresh start with vigour and commitment. It was from then on—as always—a battle as to which sorts of commitment were possible, and which suppressed; what opportunities were available, under what conditions, and which were closed off.

These general remarks about the need for renewal and the rejection of the past among the young were of course true in the Western zones that became the Federal Republic of Germany too. But there were significant differences with respect to the character of the opportunities offered and the ways in which distinctive groups were selectively fostered and brought on in each state. The new communist authorities in the Soviet zone of occupation and subsequent GDR were highly conscious of the significance of the young for building the 'new Germany'—and, arguably, they provided more specific opportunities than did the authorities in the Western zones for harnessing the energies and potential enthusiasm for a new cause among the young. If in both East and West the 1929ers were in principle 'culturally available for mobilization', then it was certainly the case that the structural opportunities for this age group were far higher in the East than the West. This was so for four principal reasons. First, the turnover of personnel in key areas of politics, administration, and education was far higher in the Soviet Zone/GDR than it was in West

⁶¹ Interview with Fritz E., summer 2005.

Germany, where old elites soon recovered positions after shorter or longer periods of absence from the labour market for reasons of denazification or internment. Secondly, the flight of around 3 million from the GDR to the West prior to the erection of the Wall in 1961 meant that there was constant, continuing turnover and severe labour shortages, providing massive structural opportunities for rapid upward mobility, predominantly of males from the appropriate social and political backgrounds, and unprecedented entry of women into the workforce, at a time when the alleged lures of domesticity were being preached in the West to allow men back into positions held in wartime by women. Thirdly, there were politically driven policies designed precisely to foster people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as the 'Workers' and Peasants' Faculties' (*Arbeiter- und Bauern-Fakultäten*) designed to provide a route into further and higher education for those who had missed out at the secondary-school level, or the programmes and policies designed to make motherhood and paid work compatible. Finally, there was a major drive to win over the hearts and minds of youth to build a 'better future' precisely in the sense intended by the communist regime. However similar the social-psychological starting points for the 1929ers in East and West might have been in terms of their experiences of socialization in the organizational and ideological landscape of the Third Reich, the shock of violence in war, and the search for new alternatives at the threshold of adulthood, it was these structurally rooted differences which explain the distinctive path taken by the 1929ers in the East in contrast to the rather different profile of the 'sceptical generation' of the West. Socialization and 'key experiences' might have rendered the latter equally susceptible to the lures of the new; but the re-colonization of positions of power and authority by the old blocked many avenues of opportunity for the young (apart from the few who rose to critical positions sniping from the not to be underestimated intellectual sidelines of the media and academia), while the social policies of Adenauer's Germany did more to foster the integration of refugees and expellees and ensure the profitability of industry (including startling continuities in profit-making among the successor concerns of the notorious I.G. Farben) than to foster people from disadvantaged backgrounds. So the combination of the peculiar patterns of denazification, political and social revolution in the GDR played a particular role in promoting the 1929ers at an early stage in their adult lives.

The job offer as a 'new teacher' was for example a crucial new beginning for Dorothea Th.-H., still recovering from the devastating loss of her sister in the bombed-out ruins of defeated Nazi Germany, and seeking to return to and effectively bury herself in her language studies. Her later account encapsulates precisely not only her own reactions but also the unofficial 'selection criteria' operating at the time:

I learned all the grammar, then I got worried that the University was not opening again, and at the end of October 1945, just this early period then—yes—I went to the council in the new Town Hall in Leipzig, did they maybe need a new teacher, the university is still closed, and he said, no, don't need one right now—But oh! I was not politically tainted, that is everyone had been in the Hitler Youth, but in my parents

house no one had been in the NSDAP, my parents had not been politically active, they were not in any sense in the resistance against Hitler but they were against many things and they had not been politically active in any way . . .⁶²

So Dorothea was taken on as a new teacher after all; and from then on, her career gained momentum. This early moment, picking up the pieces after the war, set Dorothea on a path towards becoming one of the many committed pillars of East German society.

There can be little doubt of the significance of the 'New Teachers' programme in fostering the new lives of many young people, and bringing a significant proportion of the 1929ers into early experiences of state service.⁶³ Nor was it the only new opportunity. For those who were able and willing, and from the right kinds of background (socially and politically), there were many other avenues for personal advancement through employment, or further education and training. A classic example of a 1929er's biography shaped according to the political requirements of the GDR is provided by Franz S.⁶⁴

Franz S., born in 1927, was the son of a poor farmer, and became in due course an agricultural apprentice himself. In 1944 he did Reich Labour Service (*Arbeitsdienst*), and in 1945–6 was an agricultural labourer in Kreis Kaden, Czechoslovakia. But with the population upheavals of the post-war period in Eastern Europe, his family had to leave and resettle in the Soviet Zone, subsequently GDR. Franz describes the move quite laconically, simply saying that his career in agriculture was 'interrupted'.⁶⁵ But it was his new work in a Soviet-run factory that, according to his own account, started to open his eyes politically. And, typically, it was a communist among the work force who started to explain the way to 'building up anew' (*Wiederaufbau*), supporting relevant political activities and assisting in the process of rethinking:

So you could say, this was the beginning of everything that we achieved for ourselves after 1945. In general I would say that already this shaped an understanding that we ourselves could rescue ourselves from this [bad] episode. This fact was not immediately clear to all workers. That understanding only developed more broadly later. In my department there was a coal worker who was a communist, who explained to us the path of reconstruction and supported all our activities. This naturally provoked reflections that also supported my political development.⁶⁶

By the later 1940s, Franz had already taken the step of deciding to 'defend' the Soviet zone against the dangers from the West, by joining the border troops (*Grenztruppe*), and remaining in the paramilitary defence forces for several years thereafter. In his own view, his age and life-stage at this time were crucial to the decision:

⁶² Interview with Dorothea Th.-H., summer 2005.

⁶³ See above, Ch. 7, pp. 303–5.

⁶⁴ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 26, Franz S. (1927).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

In the years 1947/48, in line with the temperament of our youth, we often went dancing and there I got to know friends who were already members of the People's Police. Our country at that time of course needed protection within as well as outside, since the end of the 1940s were of course marked by class conflicts between the zones of the Western Allies and the then 'Eastern Zone'.

In contrast to what we had already achieved, for example the land reform, the expropriation of Nazis and war criminals, in the Western Zones these people were of course still around, agitating wildly against us, and we could in no way assume that they would somehow become our friends.

These facts, as well as talking to my friends at the time, led me to become a member of the organizations bearing arms.

Apart from this there were also impulses given by the political events happening at that time. The FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] was founded and with this Germany was divided. In Berlin a currency reform was carried through and Berlin was also divided. All of this was not without an impact on me and further marked my political understanding, without claiming that everything was already entirely clear to me at that time.⁶⁷

Having given his commitment at an early age, even before 'everything was entirely clear' to him, Franz was rewarded by the support of the state in furthering his education, and a classically rapid rise through relevant state and party positions soon followed. He joined the SED in 1952. Alongside his work in the border guard troops and subsequently party employment, he was in 1957–8 able to study at the Academy for Political and Legal Studies (*Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaften*) in Babelsberg; in 1962–72, again alongside his work, he took courses by distance learning at the Humboldt University in Berlin; and finally he obtained his Juridical Diploma in 1972–3 at the Party High School (*Parteihochschule*) 'Karl Marx' of the Central Committee of the SED. Building on previous positions, Franz's career culminated in becoming the City District Mayor in Berlin-Treptow in the period 1974 to 1977 (following on from the now retired Walter S.), and was rewarded with numerous awards for outstanding service.

Franz's personal biography—and the way he recounts it—is typical for many of the 1929ers who served the party cause in the GDR. Nor was he, for all his commitment, lacking in recognition for the difficulties faced by the SED. Franz was in a position of some responsibility in the Berlin border district of Treptow when the Wall was erected in 1961, working as personal assistant for the 1st District Secretary for State and Legal Affairs. When prompted in the late 1970s in his officially solicited memoirs to report on his experiences of 1961, Franz gave what can only be described as an awkward answer, betraying the difficulties experienced by many committed GDR functionaries at that time. As he put it, the implications of the Wall were not only a matter to do with party and state:

but also many personal questions were thrown up by this. These started with the question of possibilities for visits . . . I would like to say, to understand the whole significance of this measure ideologically, it's not sufficient just to look at the 13th of

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

August. Later we had repeatedly to deal with the consequences of these measures with respect to ideology. But I would also like to say that, seen objectively, this measure was also understood and everyone could convince themselves of the positive consequences of this 13.08 for the economic and political development of the GDR.⁶⁸

The distinction between people's subjective experiences and emotions, on the one hand, and the 'objective' view of the historical necessity of an unpopular measure in view of the longer-term future, is very typical of the Marxist-Leninist outlook in which Franz had been steeped. 'Subjectivism' or the pursuit of individual happiness had always to be subordinated to what appeared to be in the 'objective' long-term interests, understood from a 'class perspective'. Having demonstrated his loyalty in a difficult situation (unlike many other functionaries at a time when party loyalty was placed under severe strain), Franz was 'rewarded' with a career move. Again very typically, he uses the passive tense when describing his own career moves in service of the wider cause:

In 1962 I received from the SED District Leadership in Berlin-Treptow the task of returning to work in the state apparatus. I was elected by a meeting of the City District into the City District Council and took over the function of Deputy of the City District Mayor for Internal Affairs.⁶⁹

By the time he was mayor of Treptow in the mid-1970s, Franz was able to celebrate many small successes and perceived improvements in conditions in his area. But again he was prepared to admit that things were not always easy, although the continued struggle both for real improvements and for persuasion of the as yet unconvinced was well worthwhile:

In this period it was necessary for even the mayor to let himself be seen on building sites. Problems with the organization of work and sometimes also private problems were discussed . . . If one could help in this connection, this was not only a big thing for the individual construction worker, but the [workers'] collective noticed that one had a heart for them. This also stimulated their pleasure in work.⁷⁰

Franz was among a minority of the politically active and involved citizens of the GDR; but his life narrative, produced for and constrained by political purposes, was in many respects rather typical for the ways in which those who conformed to and upheld the new regime wanted to interpret and represent the course and meaning of their lives.

Far more broadly, many 1929ers benefited, and were quite conscious that they had benefited, from what they saw as 'new life chances' after the horrors of the recent past. This was particularly the case for those whose education had been broken or interrupted by the war, and who were now able to take up positions to study, or make careers that would have been blocked to them under Nazism. The so-called 'workers' and peasants' faculties (*Arbeiter- und Bauern Fakultäten*, ABF) provided enhanced educational opportunities for those who in previous decades (indeed centuries) would never have dreamt of being able to go on to further and

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

higher education; by the early 1960s over 50 per cent of university students were from working-class or peasant backgrounds in the GDR, compared to a mere 4 per cent in West Germany. The abolition of school fees for secondary schools, and the additional financial support given to students, made a major difference in the lives of a large proportion of these cohorts. So, too, did the active fostering and support of women in this decade, when policies were introduced to enable women to combine mothering with education and employment outside the home. Some 1929ers even later professed a sense of gratitude to the state for the opportunities they had even when they had actually been prevented from taking educational paths they thought they would have liked to pursue. But such gratitude could also be tinged with a slight sense of missed opportunities; of not having realized that further options would soon be closed off.

To relate some of these aspects of the post-war years is not to suggest that all members of this generation actually liked the new state in which they found themselves: ambivalence and disapproval of certain aspects was perfectly compatible with acceptance or enjoyment of others. Ilse J. (born 1932), whose grandmother and aunt had been deported and murdered as Jews, but whose mother had survived by virtue of her 'protected' marriage with an 'Aryan' husband who had refused to divorce her despite being put under duress in a forced labour camp, was finally able to enter secondary school and pursue her studies.⁷¹ Here, she met Harald J. (also born 1932), who had grown up in a relatively conformist household where the only indication of silent dissent on his father's part was when he had, without commentary, taken his then young son to witness the destruction of Jewish property in November 1938. Ilse and Harald met at secondary school after the war, having both missed out for different reasons on two years schooling. Ilse refused to join the new GDR youth organization, the FDJ, or participate in the enforced parades and celebrations: 'My parents too, who were of course happy that the Nazis had gone, they weren't at all in favour of this. There were simply too many similarities.' Harald too refused to join the FDJ, despite considerable pressure, and had some success in keeping most of the class out with him:

Only when it came to doing the Abitur [school-leaving exams], then the rumour was spread around that anyone who was not in the FDJ, they cannot pass the Abitur. And since I was at that time the best in the class, they all then said to me, 'If you don't join the FDJ—they can't let you be failed in the exams! If you don't join, we won't join either.' So no one went into the FDJ, and we all did the Abitur.

The only one in his class who had already been a member of the FDJ subsequently left for the West—as did one of the apparently most committed teachers.

What was important for Ilse and Harald during this early period? A strong sense of neighbourhood community played a role in the initial decision of Ilse's family to stay in their house: neighbours had protected both Ilse and her fully Jewish mother throughout the Nazi period, and particularly in the last months of the war when the father had been taken to the forced labour camp. A strong sense of agency and

⁷¹ Interview with Ilse and Harald J., 2007.

determination to stick with their own—Christian—values also played a role; they even scored a small triumph in a school ‘strike’ in favour of reinstatement of a teacher who had got into difficulties for political reasons, a story which was featured in a West Berlin newspaper at the time. Harald was also highly active in musical circles, playing violin, cello, and bass in a number of dance bands throughout the 1950s. They both experienced some initial difficulties in pursuing studies and work. Ilse trained to become a Kindergarten teacher and worked at first in a Christian Kindergarten, where she was very poorly paid, before switching to the Red Cross. Harald was disadvantaged for political reasons, but eventually qualified as a graduate engineer (*Diplomingenieur*) in a new area of materials science, as Ilse explained:

So they were the first ones to study this at all, he studied this in Magdeburg. He had actually wanted to study aeronautics, he was already in Dresden. But because he refused to go into the Army, he was suddenly not accepted there. So he went to Magdeburg and there he studied this materials science and ultrasound and all that stuff.⁷²

Harald was lucky in the opportunities that this subject immediately offered him, as he explained:

I finished my studies in 1959, worked for a year in a power plant, then in 1960 I was offered this job in Magdeburg, that lay right in my area. This area had not previously existed in science. That was really a first, what we had been learning. But this then developed very fast in industry, and so we were a generation that was much in demand.⁷³

In recounting the development of a successful and rewarding career, Harald paused momentarily to register a moment of regret that he had not accepted a job offer in the West in July 1961: ‘Three weeks later, it was over. Yes, that’s how it was.’ Their children were born in 1955, 1961, and 1964. Even as they lost touch with the few survivors on Ilse’s side of the family—it would be a long time before there was even a trace of her mother’s brother who had escaped to England in the 1930s—and even as Ilse herself with some humour acknowledged the continuing scars of the recent past, still seeking safety in darkness and protecting the privacy of her home from prying eyes, they sought to give their children what they saw as a ‘normal life’. They found that family, friends and work, as well as musical and church activities, were fulfilling and rewarding.

Perhaps most importantly, then, for this age group the decade of the 1950s, the period of public reconstruction (*Aufbau*) in the state, was—despite the undoubted wider political constraints—a period also of personal post-war ‘normalization’ with the founding of new families, finding partners, giving birth to children. For many, the ‘return’ (which was of course not in fact a return) to a sense of ‘normal’ family life was accompanied by a renewed sense of personal agency, when they could also exert a degree of choice and control in their own lives, and begin to construct a future. Such subjective memories have—of course, like all self-representations—to

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.* On the wider context of emergent technological and scientific development and social change, see Raymond Stokes, *Constructing Socialism: Technology and change in East Germany 1945–1990* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

be seen in the context of the post-unification date and Western 'audience' for their reflections; but the generational patterning of this particular perception of the past is nevertheless marked.

Moreover, as with Ilse and Harald J., such perceptions of personal renewal and rebuilding did not have to be all 'positive'; and their ambivalences resonate with contemporary materials. A strong sense of the unique combination of building up new lives in a period of *Aufbau* comes across vividly, for example through the diary of Gerdi Nolde.⁷⁴ The subjective experiences recorded in the diary entries of the 1950s, published some three decades later, still in the GDR, interspersed with the reflections of the later self, are, for all the constraints of this source—like all such sources, subject to both what it was 'possible' and 'desirable' to say in the circumstances—highly illuminating about this period of transition from the perspective of the 1929ers. The diary entries are written from the perspective of a young woman who, following a brief and whirlwind romance with a man who later turned out to be totally unsuitable, rapidly becomes a young wife and mother. The diary entries of the time are far from coloured in any positive sense (*verschönert*) a critique often levelled against later reminiscences. Gerdi records, indeed pours out into her diary in detail, the appalling record of the difficulties the young couple faced in finding a place to live (first of all living in separate towns, then her moving to the town where her husband lived and worked but able to rent only one tiny room, where the landlady refused to allow either husband or baby to spend the night, and having to put the baby into a weekly crèche), and the frustrations of trying to combine motherhood and work and study commitments, in which her needs always took second place to those of all other members of her constantly growing family. In a period where she had no access to any means of contraception, her successive pregnancies were unplanned and unwanted, interfering in a major way with plans for study and work. Sexism was still widely prevalent among colleagues at the school where she was a teacher: the assumption was that she would give up, which she refused to do, and finally the tide started turning in general expectations. But what comes across extremely strongly in these entries is, despite the shortage of housing and the miserable state of conditions in post-war East Germany, the strong sense of a new start and the fact that some things in life could be greatly enjoyed, such as the walks the young couple took with their babies even in the snow, when Gerdi's husband had, as a Christmas present one year, made 'skis' for the pram wheels. Happiness was not all about the perfect lifestyle.

The 1929ers were, furthermore, old enough to take the decision, if they wanted, to move west in the decade before the building of the Wall. Large numbers of young people did so; this provided, perhaps, a further sieving mechanism such that those who remained had actively chosen to do so. Reading through autobiographical materials it is clear that 1929ers stayed in the GDR for much the same reasons as older people did: because of what was most important to them, which generally had little or nothing to do with SED propaganda and ideology. Possibly most important

⁷⁴ Repr. in Erika Rüdener (ed.), *Dünne Haut. Tagebücher von Frauen* (Halle, Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1987), pp. 59–156.

of all were questions relating to family and friends, linked very closely to a sense of 'being at home', either very specifically and physically, with reference to a house, garden, local area, or more generally in terms of the wider region or sense of Heimat. In the case of some 'resettlers' (*Umsiedler*) an added consideration was the hope that one might be able more readily to return to lost homes in what was now Eastern Europe—there was still the hope that the redrawing of boundaries was only provisional, temporary. Further reasons for staying included having congenial work, a sense of collegiality with workmates, a sense of professional responsibility, and a sense of responsibility to the community and belonging in an area for more principled reasons.

For a few, additional reasons had to do with a dislike of West Germany, either based on assumptions about how it might differ from the GDR, or following a real experience of going west, and coming back. One interviewee even later described West Germany as a 'golden cage': a rich West German family had befriended him, invited him over, fixed him up with employment and even supported and encouraged his relationship with their daughter to the point that he became engaged to her; but suddenly he felt trapped, as he put it, in a 'golden cage', and returned to the GDR where he felt more at home and at ease.⁷⁵ In many other interviews, there is a strong sense not so much of belief in SED ideology but rather of a strong experiential basis for wanting to stay. These were, then, people who had the opportunity to make their own choices as young adults in the 1950s, and were in principle quite mobile at this time, but made an active decision about living in the GDR.

For those from the appropriate social backgrounds (modest, worker or peasant preferred), then, and of acceptable political outlook (preferably committed to left-wing causes, or open to persuasion), there were suddenly enormous opportunities for what was seen, by many, as a 'new start' in life. Those who had been away at war were able to complete an education which had been broken off by war; others were able to gain training and enter professions they would never have dreamt of, coming from far more modest circumstances. Women, now vital to rebuilding the war-torn economy at a time of radical demographic imbalance, were not merely retained in the labour force but were also given opportunities for training and provisions of childcare on an unprecedented scale. But there is a further twist to this story: this was not necessarily, or only, a story of 'winning over' young people to the new cause; it was also a question of retaining them once in the system. Once caught up in positions of responsibility, many of those benefiting from the new opportunities—insofar as they were subjectively experienced as such—also became caught up in the practices and structures of a political system governed by highly strict notions of party discipline and control. Here, some degrees of dissonance were often indeed felt, with a degree of discomfort about the constraints and demands imposed by involvement. Availability for 'party schooling', for example, or a sense that one could not leave a particular occupation and simply change tracks at will, could take away an earlier sense of relative autonomy and agency.

⁷⁵ Interview with Bernd S., 2006.

Those choosing to flee westwards in the 1950s (known by the GDR authorities as *Republikflucht*) were disproportionately young and highly skilled, including many whose departure rendered the remaining 1929ers arguably even more politically and socially homogeneous. Those in their age groups who chose not to flee were disproportionately those who were either tied to the GDR by personal reasons (family members, sense of *Heimat*) or still sufficiently socially and politically committed, even if only in a relatively passive sense, not to feel the potential enhanced benefits following any successful resettlement in the West would be sufficiently attractive or worthwhile in light of the risks and disruption involved in the process. Thus remaining 1929ers in the GDR might in any event be more likely to be at least more tolerant towards the communist regime than their peers who had left. Those somewhat younger, by contrast, were generally not at an age yet to take their own decisions, and left only if their parents chose this route. For them, coming to maturity in the 1960s, it was too late to have a choice.

The 1929ers were also a generation for whom the GDR, however much they felt they had to come to terms with it, remained a provisional state, one whose borders had been imposed. They retained a picture of a Germany before division, and often also a sense of inner distance from the new state, however much they may themselves have conformed to its demands. They had a strong sense of their own identity as an age cohort who had to look up to the older generation of anti-fascist founders, and as, in some respects, a regional grouping of those who had either actively chosen to stay in the GDR, for whatever combination of reasons, or who had missed the opportunity to leave for the West while the borders were still open. They had an increasing sense of difference from those of their friends and relatives who had made new lives in the West, with the different compromises and adjustments that these lives entailed, and with decreasing understanding for those who remained in the GDR.⁷⁶ They were perhaps the first generation of 'Ossis', who began increasingly to internalize the norms and rules of the new society, although in a faltering, provisional, and somewhat distanced way. This sense of both accommodation and provisionality—of realizing that one had to make a life where one found oneself, and yet also that this was not the only way the world might be organized, the boundaries both geographically and politically defined—was not something that the following younger FDJ generations necessarily experienced.

The emotional landscape of the time was highly complex, and aspects of its complexity often only began to be clarified—or constructed—in reflections many decades later. The GDR actress Eva Schäfer, for example (who was technically on the cusp between the first Hitler Youth generation and the 1929ers, having been born in September 1924), was—despite a successful career making films with the DEFA film studio—by the later 1970s in a state of inner turmoil and personal despair. Her highly private reflections in a series of diary notes on her life include comments, indeed regrets, on the decision she took in the early post-war years to commit herself to the Soviet side of Germany. A 'guilty conscience' was certainly

⁷⁶ See e.g. Günter de Bruyn, *Vierzig Jahre. Ein Lebensbericht* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998).

part of her repeated armoury of self-critical concepts. But it was not so much a sense of ‘guilt’ about what her country had done in her name, as a sense of guilt about her own behaviour towards others, her fear of not being loved, and her constant habit of ‘saying yes’ in order to please others. A few days after her fifty-fourth birthday, in late September 1978, Schäfer commented to herself:

Here lies perhaps the most precise demonstration of the fact that I am a ‘yes-person’ [*Jasager*]. An unforgettable journey across the so-called green border [between the Soviet and Western zones] in 1947. I seem to notice that on the Western side the yellow corn was standing tall and calm, whereas in the same weather conditions on our side the corn appeared to be moved by the wind. (Fear *and* curiosity grabbed me.) Good communists offered me warmth and protection . . . So I was a Member of our Party . . . I wanted *never* to be in a situation where I was excluded by people among whom I felt there was interest, warmth, understanding, yes even curiosity. That was also the reason I gave to myself.⁷⁷

Schäfer put these feelings of need for acceptance and warmth not down to any experience either of Nazism or war, but rather to a quite personal experience as a child. She recalled a sense of having been effectively rejected as a child by her mother whom she had overheard, when asked if it came to a choice between her husband or her daughter, replying after only slight hesitation that she would choose her husband over her child. As Schäfer comments: ‘From then on I “changed” my character: I became “sweet” rather than my previous bristly contrariness.’⁷⁸ Like so many women of her generation—for whatever reasons—she subsequently sought always to put other people’s professed physical and emotional needs above her own, and to blame herself and her own character, rather than the surrounding circumstances and conditions of life, for anything that seemed to be out of joint in some way, until her near collapse in the late 1970s (a collapse which by this time had not only personal grounds, but was also, finally, recognized as very much a matter of political conditions and the associated personal frustrations). Yet in the meantime, while committed to the new state and its political culture in the 1950s and 1960s, she built up a highly successful career for herself. Others too threw themselves into new landscapes of social community and ideological meaning. For many of this age group, there were numerous opportunities to try to throw off the past and engage in new causes, provided they were willing and from an appropriate background.

The 1929ers were, thus, characterized by a high degree of both structural and cultural availability for mobilization. They came to adulthood at a unique historical moment, and were readily mobilized; but the GDR, unlike the Third Reich, was not in a state of constant radicalization and movement. Once routinization set in, the 1929ers were already in position; they were constrained to behave in the context of the dominant norms. Those born a few years later than the 1929ers had similar opportunities. With the loss of manpower to the West up until 1961, even those who only

⁷⁷ Deutsches Tagebuch Archiv Emmendingen (henceforth DTA) 93 / I / 4, Eva Schäfer Tagebuch 1972–1981, entry of 24 Sep 1978.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

reached adulthood a decade later than the 1929ers found innumerable avenues for 'upward mobility' available to them. Turnover of personnel only started to decrease in the course of the 1960s, and stagnation only set in during the 1970s; so there were no seriously 'blocked opportunities' for those born just a few years later. But emotionally, they seem to have been less culturally available for the communist project. In part, this had to do with the way they had failed to make sense of the end of the war as precipitating an urgent need for new faith, new ideologies; in part, it had to do with their age-related experiences of the 1950s and beyond.

IV. CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH IN A POST-WAR, COLD WAR CONTEXT

Although many 1929ers had lost their own fathers and other relatives, they were young adults at the end of the war, with new responsibilities and ready to found new families. For those who, for whatever reasons, stayed in the GDR, there was a sense of actively seeking to make a new beginning—of 'building up anew'. Arguably, the slogans of the regime made at least some sense to this age group, in ways somewhat more resonant than was the case for older or younger citizens of the new state. People who were born during the Third Reich, by contrast, had rather different age-related patterns of entry into the GDR; and their experiences of the 1950s were not quite so characterized by a sense of agency and choice.

These 'war children' were, famously, also the 'fatherless generation'. Many of them were effectively no longer brought up in what had been, in theory, the patriarchal family model of earlier in the century, whether or not their fathers were killed, or eventually returned from the war or post-war periods of imprisonment, often physically and psychologically broken down by their experiences. The position of women or mothers too had changed dramatically and did not in East Germany return rapidly to the 'ideal model' of married woman as domestic housewife as it did in the Western Federal Republic of Germany. Labour shortages in the GDR were not only rooted in the wartime slaughter of adult males, but were also exacerbated, in a decade of open borders, by the flight of predominantly young adult males to the West. Demography and economic needs further combined with the SED's ideological commitment to the 'emancipation' of women, such that women were not only encouraged to enter paid employment outside the home, but practical policies were put into effect to make this possible even for those with childcare responsibilities. In the GDR of the 1950s, then, mothers were often out at work, and frequently also held responsibility as head of the household, with implications for patterns of domestic authority while children were growing up. This did not necessarily mean instantly 'traumatic' experiences of childhood or 'wild' and unconstrained experiences of adolescence. Many young East Germans had quite stable family circumstances, even if the primary care giver were an aunt or a grandmother. Some were highly institutionalized—whether through extensive after-school provision, or weekly or longer-term boarding schools—and were

consequently more exposed to official doctrines than those in intact families, with arguable long-term consequences that remain to be explored in more detail.

The nature of East German family life in the 1950s should also be seen in the context both of the recent past—with not only the war-time disruption, but also the growing dissociation of socialization in the family and in the schools and Nazi youth organizations—and in the context of the new dynamics of attempted official (re)mobilization of youth under the auspices of the school system and the official youth organization, the FDJ. Nevertheless, at this stage other institutions and cultural milieus remained strong. The Churches in particular still presented a powerful countervailing force, highly evident in the battles between the regime and Christians over such matters as the youth secular ‘confirmation’ ceremony, the *Jugendweihe*, or the SED’s attack on the Christian young people’s organization, the *Junge Gemeinde*. In quite another direction as far as milieus and moral frameworks are concerned, in both East and West Germany aspects of international youth culture transcended Cold War boundaries, including what to older Germans was the frightening popularity of ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll’, Elvis Presley, and Beat generations, as well as more generally what was critiqued as ‘rowdiness’ in behaviour, and the broader disaffection of nevertheless redeemable youth depicted in films such as *Berlin Ecke Schönhauser* (1957, based on a script by Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase). Arguably, there was a critical independence and sense of disassociation from any regime and any authority of older people built into the world views of those who experienced these kinds of transitions and conflicting influences in their adolescent years.⁷⁹

The war children reached adulthood just as the GDR was stabilizing, but they retained a very live sense of ‘pre-’ and ‘post’: they were personally aware of the fragility and artificially constructed character of the ‘*Provisorium DDR*’ and of the key moments of transition. Given the war-torn circumstances of their childhoods, they may have learned how to make the best of a difficult situation. There were still many opportunities open to them for upward mobility in the functionary system; and the benefits of new educational opportunities were very significant for individuals coming from disadvantaged worker or peasant backgrounds in the 1950s and early 1960s. But if the opportunities which were structurally available to these cohorts were actually very similar to those available for the 1929ers, a cohort just a few years older, their cultural availability was very different. They were simply unwilling to commit themselves to the new cause in the way many 1929ers were.

These differences between ‘war children’ and 1929ers are not only captured in the contrasting profiles of commitment evident in *Wer war wer in der DDR*, but were

⁷⁹ For further details and references, see e.g. Mark Fenimore, *Sex, Thugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll: Teenage rebels in Cold-War East Germany* (Berghahn, 2007); Alan McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany: The Free German Youth Movement 1946–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); M. Fullbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*; Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War politics and American culture in divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Peter Skyba, *Vom Hoffnungsträger zum Sicherheitsrisiko. Jugend in der DDR und Jugendpolitik der SED 1949–1961* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000).

also later consciously theorized by East Germans themselves. In a striking essay published in 1982, the psychologist and creative writer Helga Schubert (born in 1940) registered a whole gamut of ways in which ‘her generation’ differed from those who were seventeen rather than five at the end of the war (so the 1929ers in contrast to the war children). She points out that her generation were:

The first pupils starting school in Germany who did not begin lessons with Heil Hitler . . .

Enthusiasm ended before us.

And we are still observing . . .

We are an experimental generation . . .

The first Young Pioneers.

Our teachers, New Teachers, had no pupils before us . . .

The numerous red placards with white writing.

The photographs of faces that we carried in front of us on stakes and that we gathered together neatly after the demonstration. Oh, it was all too big for us, too big and loud.

The loudspeakers. The fanfares. The faces.

The old faces of my schoolmates, six-year-olds.⁸⁰

Schubert describes the ways in which members of older generations were characterized on the occasions of funerals, or entering retirement, or receiving a merit or award: whether born at the turn of the century, or during the Great War, or brought up under Nazism, there was always some way in which the official speeches could show how the life of the individual in question had intersected with history, and had contributed to the great historical developments through resistance or exile, through disillusionment and conversion, and contribution to the building up of the new. Only her generation was the exception. And her generation differed too, in terms of their experience not only of the major world events but also, more crucially, of family life, childhood, and youth. As she commented, those who were born in 1940, as she was, had experiences which differed crucially from those of the 1929ers:

Since in their childhoods the filled bags of bread rolls hung outside on the door to the home. They undertook family outings with a physically existing father. In their school days the boys had to be hard as Krupp steel, as tough as leather and as fast as greyhounds. The girls had soon to be a mother. These songs—For the flag leads us to eternity, our flag is more than death—they had really sung, they still know all the verses.

We can never cross the wall of these memories. If we live with them, we live two lives, their recounted lives and our lived ones, and they do not coincide.⁸¹

Just as Christa Wolf, the archetypal 1929er, was highly aware of the differences between her generation and people who were older and had fought against fascism, so the younger Helga Schubert was highly conscious of the enduring distinctions between her generation and that of Christa Wolf:

⁸⁰ Helga Schubert, ‘Innenhöfe’ in *Das verbotene Zimmer* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, Neuwied, 1982), pp. 15–16.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

They are now our Directors, our Presidents, our Party Secretaries, our Professors, our Heads of Organizations, our Well-Known Writers. After the war they were our nineteen-year-old New Teachers . . . At seventeen they were still at war, okay, but they hadn't killed anybody. They now built up the Heimat again for a new future. Build up, build up, build up, Free German Youth, build up . . .

For us they were: the experienced ones, the more mature ones, the ones who were more aware of responsibilities. Clever big brothers and sisters, that we would have needed so desperately. But they were however already grown up, right from the start, they threw themselves into responsibility and new faith. We became pupils in their hands.

And today they are still the grown ups. And we stand around their pedestal.⁸²

And, as Schubert went on to point out, the 1929ers repeatedly suggested to the war children that the latter 'had it easy'. Putting words into the mouths now of the 1929ers, she suggested that they critiqued her generation for their passivity:

We would have liked to have had it this good too.

We had to work hard for everything we got, which you now take for granted.

Don't be so passive, don't let yourselves be served with everything . . .

I can't understand it, you are all so nervous. As though someone is driving you. Just take pleasure in the present. Look at how hard we had it, Nazi times, war, men fallen in war. And you? Can study. Earn a lot.

*What have you actually got to complain about all the time.*⁸³

Patterns thus set after the war persisted, in Helga Schubert's highly perceptive representation, through to feelings of generational difference even at the start of the 1980s. 'Her' generation were constantly searching for some kind of being left in peace, for a rest time of their own choosing and not 'a break that has been planned in'. They were further marked by widespread melancholic yearning and posthumous searching for knowledge about the fathers they had never known, combined with a fear of finding out 'too much' and discovering that their fathers had, in fact, been Nazis; and a diffuse feeling of inherited collective guilt about 'being Germans'.⁸⁴

For those who still had fathers, the authority of the parents seemed curiously—at least in some cases—to take precedence over the authority of the state, in ways not shared by those a decade or so older. Bernd S. (born 1941), for example, recalled that he had the opportunity to make a career in the GDR, but was thwarted by his parents' (typically post-war) reactions to what he had perceived as an offer he could not refuse:

Well! I come home beaming with joy, tell my father, my parents. My father: 'Hey you, watch out now. There was once a state, it lasted twelve years. This one is now eleven years old. You can choose: The GDR or us! Parents' house or GDR! Career or parents!' Hm. The next week I went to M. and said, 'I can't, it won't work, my parents are against it.' With that my state-political career in the GDR was at an end.⁸⁵

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 22–4.

⁸⁵ Interview with Bernd S., 2006.

This kind of caution about commitment to what might again prove to be only a temporary and highly ideological state was very widespread.

The experiences of being mobilized, even shaped, as the new 'socialist personalities' of the future were rather different for the later cohorts of those who were children in the early years of the GDR, those 'born into the GDR', and perhaps particularly what might be called the 'first FDJ generation'.⁸⁶ Something of the idealism of the early Cold War did in some way rub off on the members of this cohort, who were too young to experience the political upheavals of 1953 and 1956, and even to some extent 1961, as personally painful, and who generally grew up in somewhat more intact families—or at least had not personally known those who died in the war, hence not suffered emotional loss themselves, even if their parents were still deeply affected by recent forced migration, premature widowhood, and earlier bereavement. Like respondents from other periods, many members of the FDJ generations felt they had—despite the circumstances—predominantly 'apolitical' and in many cases relatively happy childhoods. By definition, as products of the post-war baby boom, their fathers had not 'fallen' in the war.

Although growing up in what remained a bomb-scarred landscape of ruins, these cohorts were perhaps more marked by the Cold War than the Second World War. Whether they were aware of it or not, the broader battle with the 'West' was ever present. In the 1950s, it was fought out in all manner of spheres—from high politics over division and remilitarization, through economic and social policies to attempts to retain workers and 'overtake' the West in economic productivity, to popular culture and campaigns against the alleged decadence of Western music as epitomized by Elvis Presley and 'Rock 'n' Roll'. While shaped in a distinctively communist style and with quite different goals and means, both GDR economic aspirations and cultural productions reflected alternative versions of the post-war 'modernities' of the West.⁸⁷

Integral to all these concerns was an overriding desire to influence members of the rising generation. These concerns were effectively summarized in Ulbricht's 'Ten Commandments' for the 'new socialist personality' issued in July 1958. These included commandments concerning the international solidarity of the working classes; the love of the 'Fatherland', with no definition of geographical boundaries but clarified by including willingness to defend the workers' and peasants' state; helping to put an end to exploitation; engagement in the collective building of socialism; protection of socialist property; striving to enhance achievements, while remaining frugal and disciplined; living cleanly and 'decently'; and practising solidarity with those nations struggling for their liberation. It also included the injunction to: 'Educate your children in the spirit of peace and socialism, to become

⁸⁶ A key work on those born in or around 1949 is Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins* (Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag, 2002).

⁸⁷ Cf. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (eds.), *Socialist Modern: East German everyday culture and politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

comprehensively cultured, psychologically stable and physically steeled human beings.⁸⁸

Broader aspects of ideology, behavioural and moral codes, and 'culture' in the widest sense mattered too, with more ambiguous legacies from earlier periods and aspects of socialization. Hitler's Germany, with antisemitic shades in both directions, was not only virulently anti-Communist ('Jewish Bolshevism'), but also, to a somewhat more ambivalent degree, anti-American ('Jewish international capital'); opposed both to communism and to many aspects of modern capitalism, democracy and 'Western' materialist and 'decadent' culture. These traditions had longer-term effects on the ways in which many post-war Germans interacted with the new occupying and dominant superpowers in East and West. In West Germany, a contested but ultimately largely successful process of 'Americanization' set in, while anti-communism remained a dominant theme throughout the Cold War period, providing continuity with earlier political attitudes. In East Germany, the very widespread anti-communism of the Nazi period, compounded by violent experiences at the hands of the invading Red Army as well as brutal experiences in the early post-war period, never entirely disappeared; rather, the emphases shifted with the passage of time. The anti-communism fostered under Nazism persisted among certain groups, often exacerbated by post-war experiences. But, curiously, aspects of anti-Americanism were often shared across political divides in the GDR. Generation as well as politics affected attitudes towards youth in the 1950s.

Older East Germans—across the political spectrum—shared a dislike of what they saw as '*Unkultur*', Western 'superficial' civilization (as opposed to 'deep' German 'culture'), 'rowdyism' among teenagers, new forms of popular culture, the sexual connotations of modern dance, or changing social conventions and the destruction of pre-war social norms. There were, thus, some lines of cultural continuity, or common underlying normative systems, which transcended political divides among adults in the early GDR, and which were in tension with and critical of the emergent trends of the popular and youth cultures of the post-war West—which were therefore seen in the light of past prejudices as well as current developments, with continuing elements of pre-war views informing Cold War attitudes. These generational commonalities may help to explain why the Cold War in East Germany was a complex, generational as well as a political experience. This was not only a matter of the classic anxieties and taboos surrounding the emergence and negotiation of sexual identity and authority relations during adolescence. As far as those who were youngsters in the 1950s were concerned, the battle for their souls reached down even to the level of popular reading matter in the form of children's comics, apparently the vehicle of the 'class enemy' to sneak in under disguise and afflict a rising generation with the wrong attitudes.

The interplay between their own recent wartime experiences and current Cold War anxieties among adults is seen particularly clearly in the (retrospectively, quite extraordinary) campaign grandiosely entitled the 'Struggle against the Poisoning of

⁸⁸ Reproduced in Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat* (Munich; Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), pp. 671–2, quotation from p. 672.

our Youth through Trashy and Smutty Literature [*Schund und Schmutz*].⁸⁹ Here, generational concerns with the morality of young people and critiques of ‘Western decadent culture’ (*Unkultur*) overlapped to a very high degree. As one campaign working group in Bernau put it:

The so-called Comemics [*sic*] produce the most devastating effects. Their contents are based primarily on torture, crime and murder. Through these writings, youth is to be brought up to brutality, contempt for humanity, murder and acts of violence.⁹⁰

This was explicitly linked, not only to ‘youth criminality’ but also to supposed preparations for another war. In the paranoid world view prevalent in certain circles in 1950s East Germany, a whole new generation was allegedly being brought up in the West specifically to engage in bloodthirsty conflict without questioning the goals of warfare:

Youth criminality in Western countries, particularly in West Germany and West Berlin, has developed to such a degree that all responsible parents and educators are terrified. There, [youngsters] engage in beating people up, stealing, raping, and murdering. . . . War is glorified, because they need soldiers for their intended war who will not think too long about just and unjust wars but rather will dumbly consider atrocities and murder to be everyday events and will act accordingly. So they are creating for themselves a willing army of gangsters and murderers, who, given the opportunity, they will unleash on humanity.⁹¹

The report continues to suggest that a further goal of this literature was to undermine the character of East German young people. The degree of virulence in the critiques of violence in these comments is quite striking; there are, presumably, echoes here of what these adults had themselves so recently experienced through the Nazi exercise of brutality; perhaps they even felt, if only inchoately, that they had themselves been abused or used by a previous era of socialization. There is a palpable degree of fear and anger which was in some way related to emotional tensions and only partially repressed anxieties about the ease with which violence can be unleashed and young people readily mobilized for murderous causes.

The official strategy was, of course, to try to organize the time of young East Germans in such a way that they would not merely have plenty of uplifting and entertaining alternatives (‘Boredom must never be allowed to arise’), but also no time for Western ‘un-culture’: ‘Perhaps youth will then no longer have the time to go to see the gangster films across the sector border, or to buy or exchange smutty literature there.’⁹² Efforts to displace Western comics and other decadent literature with more uplifting moral messages were not entirely successful, however. In March 1956 the senior management of the Pößneck Elementary School III wrote

⁸⁹ LAB, C Rep 120 Nr. 3066, Rat der Stadt Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abt. Volksbildung, Pädagogisches Kabinett, 8 Feb. 1956, fol. 152.

⁹⁰ LAB C Rep 120 Nr. 3066, Stand der Diskussion zur Kreislehrerkonferenz des Kreises Bernau am 12.3.1956 in Bernau, 12 Mar. 1956, fol. 190.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, fol 191.

⁹² *Ibid.*, fols. 193–4.

to the Education Department of the Berlin city government that the moral message of even films representing the heroic efforts of communists to fight against the Nazis were being lost on the children, while the raw details of violent scenes made a major, and gender-specific impact:

Children from the middle and higher levels have been going to see patriotic films with their teachers, for example, [former communist leader] Ernst Thälmann—Shots at the Border—The Devil's Circle.

We educators have ascertained that the children do not understand the contents and message of the films at all. Girls watch the brutality of the presentation purely in terms of emotions, the boys retain and observe the brutal, raw actions that pass before their eyes in the course of the story. But no child could recount the sense of the contents . . . Even days and weeks later the children would retell how one man had bashed another up against a wall. But if asked why he had done that, no child had any answer.⁹³

Elsewhere, there were criticisms of the attempted GDR replacements for comics. A letter from one Hannes H. in Leipzig, for example, criticized the youth magazine 'Be joyful and sing' (*Fröhlich sein und singen*), commenting that:

We all know 'Comics' to be typical representatives of decadent Western literature. There is no need to rehearse again here what these smutty booklets are aimed at. But it is all the more dispiriting to find that this criminal jargon—typical of this literary poison—is also to be found in the [GDR] magazine 'Be joyful and sing'.⁹⁴

Whether such comics or their GDR rivals did in fact have much of a long-term impact on those who read them in the 1950s is, of course, another matter entirely.

Young people in the 1950s were also apparently widely ill-disposed towards the forcible suppression by the Soviet Union of challenges to communist rule in Poland and Hungary. They listened to RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) broadcasts discussing developments in 1956, and, given the back-up or at least tacit assent of adults on this matter, were extremely hard to persuade with respect to the SED line. Reports came in to the effect that, for example:

There are still hostile arguments coming from schools. So for example some of the pupils at the 1st School in Köpenick expressed themselves thus:

'We are free people after all. So we can listen to the RIAS as well.'

Or:

'Just stop it with the DSF [German-Russian Friendship Society], since wherever the Russians come they destroy everything.'

The teachers who don't belong to any political party don't take a stand against this. The majority of teachers supposedly listen to the RIAS.⁹⁵

Similarly:

⁹³ LAB C Rep 120 Nr. 3066, Stellungnahme des Kindergartens II zu Filmveranstaltungen, fol. 314.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 359.

⁹⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4630 / 2, Ausschuß der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland der Hauptstadt Berlin, den 20.11.56, Information 3 / XI, p. 5.

A meeting of young people that was organized in the young people's home in Königsberger Str. (Friedrichshain) showed that anti-Soviet agitation among the population is still having an effect. Around 25 young people took part who expressed themselves in the discussion of current affairs in an extremely negative manner, in the voice of the RIAS. They placed the situation in Hungary in the foreground of the discussion, with the comment: 'The Russians are at fault'.⁹⁶

Even more worryingly from the perspective of the SED regime, criticisms of communist functionaries elsewhere in Eastern Europe were having repercussions for critiques of the GDR among young people at this time:

The discussions on Hungary led our young people particularly to taking positions arguing against our state functionaries. So in group meetings in Friedrichshain some young people said quite clearly that they rejected our politics and asked when things would be changed here too—after changes had been made with respect to the leadership of the governments of Poland and Hungary.⁹⁷

Another report commented on the case of a student at the Humboldt-University 'where the Hungary question is still the object of various discussions' who apparently said that he did not think it so bad that 'a series of Stalinists' were 'murdered'; ominously for his own future as a student in the GDR, 'the incident was passed on to the appropriate authorities'.⁹⁸

These young people, then, appear to have been intrinsically ill-disposed to the new regime to a quite significant degree, for a variety of economic, cultural, and political reasons. Further, for those who were already of an age to be called up, it was also not so much an alleged sneaking Western inculcation of supposedly warlike and aggressive attitudes (directed in the wrong ideological direction as far as the SED was concerned), but rather remilitarization under GDR colours that appeared a problem, with the foundation of the National People's Army (NVA) in 1956. Fear of and opposition to war did not translate directly into predictable reactions to the establishment of an East German army—particularly since East Germany was already a heavily militarized society, with the domestic 'People's Police in Barracks' (KVP) complementing the Soviet forces which had been present since 1945, and both of which had been all too evident during the Uprising of 1953.⁹⁹ But the foundation of the NVA, so soon after so many young men had lost their lives in service to the *Wehrmacht*, did cause widespread consternation, particularly in the generation of those who feared being called up. As one report put it: 'particularly among young people a certain tension is evident'.¹⁰⁰ Those born during the Third

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.11.1956, Information 4 / XI, p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.12.1956, Information 2 / XII, p. 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.12.1956, Information 1 / XII, p. 3.

⁹⁹ On the development of 'hidden remilitarization' in the period 1947–52, see Bruno Thoß (ed.), *Volksarmee schaffen—ohne Geschrei! Studien zu den Anfängen einer 'verdeckten Aufrüstung' in der SBZ / DDR 1947–1952* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994).

¹⁰⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DY6 / 4629, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Informationen aus Berlin, Jan.–Dez. 1955, Information 1 / III, 10 Mar. 1955, p. 3.

Reich were most directly affected, and apparently widely opposed to any political ideology, including communism. As one member of the Free German Youth, whose father was in fact a committed SED Party Secretary in the Ministry for Machine Production, was reported to have remarked:

We already have a stronger army than in West Germany. Our young people will not declare themselves in agreement with the defence measures and will uniformly go on strike at the decision: establishment of national armed forces. Preparations for this have already been made. We are all fighting for the same goal, that is for the extermination of communism. I myself will, if I can't escape the matter in any other way, go to a neutral country, Switzerland or Denmark, where there is neither politics nor war.¹⁰¹

This attitude, on the part of someone with an impeccable family background, may not have been typical, nor did the show of bravura necessarily result in the promised action. It did however occasion intervention on the part of the Party and the FDJ, including 'discussions' which had, at the time of the report, 'not yet' succeeded in resolving the situation. Those who were already old enough to be potentially affected at the time of the NVA's foundation still had the opportunity to flee West; those who were younger found that, by the time conscription was introduced in 1962, this path was no longer open to them.

The paranoia found in official reports and campaigns is however barely, if at all, reflected in oral history evidence or 'memories' of those who were younger children in East Germany at this time. Oral history accounts of childhoods in the 1950s reflect children's perceptions of the world often quite at odds with the flavour of SED fears. Family concerns, friendships, experiences of schooling, and leisure time are remembered in ways that bear little or no relation to the fears of the SED, even where the milieu was not at first sight very promising.

Stefan B. (born 1950), for example, came from a very conservative, Catholic, bourgeois background; his father was a medical doctor, and the family came originally from Silesia, now a 'lost homeland'. On every count, then, his experiences of childhood were set up to be difficult, as far as regime prejudices and preferences were concerned. Yet he, too, had happy memories:

So I was born in L . . . and my father was at that time active as a consultant in a municipal hospital in L., and—so that in every respect I—so I experienced all possible warmth in the family home, because my mother was a housewife . . . so that I grew up very well looked after and very very happily and I also think back on this time with pleasure.¹⁰²

In the account of the rather more working class Renate B. (born 1948), the 'normality' of her childhood (and indeed later on of virtually every stage in her life) is what is stressed, as evident in response to questions about where she grew up, and the character of her relationships with parents and others:

Yes, well, in a medium-sized town and a village, because I had a grandfather who had a farm, a big farm. That was my childhood. And just in a normal town . . . Well, my mother was a worker, she sewed, and my father was employed in, at the Sports League.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰² Stefan B. (1950), 2005.

... Neither of them had any time. [Pause.] I can't really say any more about this, my father lived in Berlin for years and only came home at weekends, and my mother just went to work and at weekends went with me to my grandfather's place. Little time. And that really says everything.

... I was a latch-key kid. I was really just a latch-key kid. Always had a key hanging on my neck. Either on my neck or I had lost it.

... Most of the time spent at my grandparents, where [my mother] then helped on the farm and I lay about somewhere at the edge of the field and could enjoy the sun and the air and the beauty of it all.

When asked about her experiences of school, Renate B. responded:

Well, to that extent it was nice, the first three years were normal, I think, I can hardly remember any more, and then we moved to Berlin, from the 5th or maybe half-way through the 4th grade, then it got a bit hard, because that was now a big city too and that was a reorientation, but I think, as a child you just want to go along with things and be there too. And then it went quite well and in that period, from the 4th to the 10th grade, I had to change school three times, you can say it was really all topsy-turvy then. If you have to keep changing schools, not because you've moved, but because the school is being closed down, because a new one is being built, then it's just like this, the classes are always being mixed up again, that's why I can't say much about my school-time. It was normal, like every other child, high points, I think, were always when there were new teachers again.

... Was actually quite normal, there were good teachers. Those that did artistic things, whether painting or singing, they were naturally particularly pleasant, whereas physics teachers are logically for every child a bit, well because there you can't, as a woman, or as a girl you don't have a particularly good relationship with physics or maths. There it's different. But because of that they were great teachers. And the sports teachers were great.¹⁰³

In these and similar accounts, the 'class enemy' attacking the lives of the young is nowhere to be seen. Yet it is also absolutely clear that the conditions of childhood and youth in the GDR of the 1950s had a deep impact on what was held to be 'normal'. This included, at this stage, in Renate's account transitional ideas about gender roles—mothers who were always at work and had little time for their children, yet also that girls were allegedly worse at some subjects than boys—and a sense that everything was in flux, that rebuilding, in every sense of the word, was afoot.

The social revolution of the period from the collapse of Nazism through to the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was, thus, experienced very differently depending on whether people were adversely affected by the disruptions caused to already established interests, resources, behaviour patterns, and experienced the social upheavals of these years as violations of an already well-established sense of selfhood and personal and social identity (the KZ generation); or whether they were

¹⁰³ Interview with Renate B. (1948).

at precisely the age of young adulthood to benefit from new opportunities, still able to adapt, develop new modes of thinking and behaving, and seize new opportunities (the 1929ers); or whether they were somewhat younger 'war children', with a considerable sense of dislocation and often unwilling freedom in the 1950s. Reactions of course varied not only with age and life stage, but also with social class background, as well as political, religious, and moral views, cross-cutting the age questions. This nevertheless does not render the generational issue unimportant or irrelevant: it too is a factor to be considered in any more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the early post-war period was experienced in East Germany.

The ‘iron cage’: Coming to terms with the present

We now know a great deal about the structures and institutions of power in the GDR; and there is little disagreement about the fact that the GDR was a repressive dictatorship, dependent not only on the ultimate sanction of Soviet force and the fortified border with the West, but also by domestic institutions of surveillance and power, including the Stasi. The real differences between those historians interpreting the GDR from the perspective of ‘totalitarian’ theory and those proposing a range of alternative approaches lies not so much in the recognition of the sheer existence and extent of the apparatus of power but rather in understanding how East Germans themselves were involved with, were affected by, and challenged or helped to sustain, these structures of power and forces of repression.

This is particularly the case for the long decades of apparent domestic peace, bought at the price of concentrated violence at the borders, from the early 1960s through to the renewed instability of the 1980s. Were East Germans constantly held in check by fear, only reaching uneasy accommodations with the regime because of perpetual anxiety (the so-called ‘repression thesis’)?¹ Or did they proactively adapt to SED domination and Stasi surveillance, seeking to carve out spaces for their own agency, exerting power in the micro-spheres and interstices where it was possible to improve the conditions of one’s life, even if the outer boundaries were fixed?² The GDR was also a state characterized by massive and

¹ Cogently expressed with rich early use of archival sources in Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten. Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1993); explicitly articulated in Klaus Schroeder, ‘Die DDR: eine (spat-)totalitäre Gesellschaft’ in Manfred Wilke (ed.), *Die Anatomie der Parteizentrale. Die KPD/SED auf dem Weg zur Macht* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); and Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998); frequently repeated in other works. An (already slightly dated) overview of debates on particular issues can be found in Rainer Eppelmann, Bernd Faulenbach, and Ulrich Mählert (eds.), *Bilanz und Perspektiven der DDR-Forschung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003).

² Early significant contributions to these approaches can be found in e.g. Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen (eds.), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996); Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 1999); Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (eds.), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994); Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Historische DDR-Forschung. Aufsätze und Studien* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993); Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow, *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen, Hypothesen, Perspektiven* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994); Thomas Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999); Thomas Lindenberger, *Volkspolizei. Herrschaftspraxis und öffentliche Ordnung im SED-Staat 1952–1968* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

obvious constraints in daily life rooted in aspects of central planning of the economy, economic productivity (or otherwise), and social policies advantaging some groups over others, but guaranteeing virtually no one a life entirely free of material cares and constraints. What were the consequences of these circumstances for interpersonal relations and life courses? And how far can greater awareness of cultural developments and particularly a conception of what some have dubbed the 'socialist modern' assist in exploring the new modes of behaviour and attitude developed behind the Wall?³ Although in a very different context and on a quite different scale, how do controversial attempts to recapture the everyday lives of GDR citizens relate to the issues raised in debates over approaches to everyday life in the Third Reich, where the term 'normalization' has been applied not to contemporaries' experiences but rather to later attempts by historians to treat the period without political or moral fervour?⁴ And how is it possible to build in the question of an ever changing population, in which people's outlooks and behaviours were affected by the conditions through which they lived, and the fact that new generations were constantly coming to maturity and older ones passing away?

If we try to capture some of the changing generational experiences of the GDR, it is worth remembering that there were major changes in the parameters of life over the decades of relative stabilization.⁵ International shifts played a major role. Following the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, there was some reduction in Cold War tensions in Central Europe, as superpower attention was diverted to flashpoints elsewhere in the world. Internally, with an assured labour supply following the construction of the Wall, there were short-lived periods characterized by a degree of experimentation in economic, social, and cultural policies, particularly under Ulbricht's leadership in the early 1960s. The New Economic Policy allowed a degree of decentralization in economic decision-making, alongside the introduction, to a degree, of profitability rather than sheer quantity of production as official targets for the planned economy. Despite the introduction of compulsory military service in 1962, youth policies from 1963 momentarily appeared to give young people greater leeway, until there was a renewed clampdown in 1965—as also, more broadly, in the sphere of creative culture.⁶ Policies with respect to

³ See e.g. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (eds.), *Socialist Modern: East German everyday culture and politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

⁴ See particularly the debate between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, repr. in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the historians' debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

⁵ Here, as throughout, I shall not rehearse the familiar details of the broader historical developments. For further discussion and references, see e.g. Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic 1945–1990*; Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany 1918–2008*; Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (eds.), *The Workers' and Peasants' State*; M. E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente and Ostpolitik, 1969–1973* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁶ On the changes in the later Ulbricht era, as Erich Honecker was increasingly making a bid for power, see particularly Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); on youth policies, see e.g. Alan McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany*; on the clampdown in film, see e.g. Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of daily life in the East German cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

women and the family, also introduced at this time, had a more long-lasting effect. By 1968, a new constitution officially enshrined the more than obvious 'leading role' of the SED. With time, the imposed dictatorship became increasingly routinized; domestic structures of power were streamlined and stabilized; and, in the early 1970s, following West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's 'Ostpolitik', the GDR gained international recognition and entry into the United Nations—followed by a further revision of the constitution in 1974 to register the attempted construction of a new GDR identity. With the increasing globalization of culture and spread of mass media, people were exposed to international currents in fashion, popular music, and commercialism; and the regime itself, somewhat paradoxically, supported a degree of individualization and materialism through the emphases on consumerism and social policy, particularly in the years after Erich Honecker came to power in 1971. All of these longer-term developments, as well as the moments of crisis such as during the Soviet repression of Czech reform movements in the so-called 'Prague Spring' of 1968, had an impact on East Germans, who increasingly thought that they were living in a state that was here to stay, and in which there was little point in actively engaging in attempts at radical change along the lines of the failed uprising of June 1953.

At the same time, strands that contributed to the apparent stabilization of the GDR in the middle years—roughly the mid-1960s to the later 1970s—also contributed to growing problems in the 1980s. Honecker's social policies were in the longer-run economically and environmentally unsustainable in a context of world economic recession following the oil crises of 1974 and 1979. The destabilization of the international system and renewal of Cold War tensions between the superpowers from the late 1970s (the stationing of Cruise and Pershing missiles, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan's 'Star Wars' programme) also contributed to increasing domestic political unrest. From 1985, the accession to power in the USSR of the reforming Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began radically to alter the external parameters of the GDR's continued existence in the later 1980s.

Older generations continued to be radically divided in their views; and even the 1929ers, now well established in their places of work, homes and families, by the later years of the GDR began to register the deficiencies in the system to which they had given the best part of their lives. All of those old enough to remember a 'time before' had in some sense to adapt and realign their lives and selves to the new circumstances. Those 'born into' and growing up in the GDR, by contrast, did not for the most part fundamentally query the structures and patterns that shaped their lives; rather, the majority became involved in and almost unthinkingly sustained the new structures of power. Yet, with growing evidence of mounting problems—which the increasingly elderly generation still at the helm seemed incapable even of registering, let alone tackling—it was from among members of the younger generations that both vociferous critiques as well as retreat into alternative lifestyles were predominantly to be found. And it was individuals born in the early 1950s who were eventually most active in the movements for change in the 1980s that heralded the 'gentle revolution' of 1989. Even so, it is important not to read the end into the early and middle years of the GDR, as people sought to come to terms with

the state in which they found themselves rather than preparing (as historians do, with hindsight) for its demise.

I. A SENSE OF BORDERS

For East Germans, the fact of the closed borders—the 'Iron Curtain'—between communist East and capitalist West was inescapable. But the impact of the Cold War division of the world, of Europe, and most particularly of Germany itself, was variable not only for people in different geographical and social locations in the GDR, but also according to age. National division was particularly painful for adults who had friends and relatives across Germany, or whose closest friends and family fled the GDR in the 1950s. This was experienced less acutely among members of younger generations for whom the 'aunt in the West' was more a source of occasional packets of Western consumables and perhaps Western currency than a relative with whom there were any deep emotional bonds. The sheer longevity of division, including the changing provisions with respect to contacts during the period of *détente*, rendered it somewhat less emotionally fraught, although it never ceased to be an issue. It continued to have an impact on those whose careers were adversely affected by having Western relatives, or who had to face decisions about whether to pay the price of dropping Western contacts in favour of rising in the GDR hierarchy. For many of those who were already adults at the time of the building of the Wall, it meant the sudden, abrupt severing of close family ties. Interestingly, however, the impact on younger cohorts was slightly different.

For some among those too young to remember an undivided 'greater Germany', the sense of boundaries was ever present; for others, it was a known but easily ignorable fact, a piece of knowledge which barely impinged on the emotional landscape of personal life. Much depended on family background; but common to younger East German cohorts was the fact that decisions about whether to stay or to leave had, of necessity, been taken at a time—before August 1961—when they were themselves too young to have played a key role in the decision-making. Even the 'war children' were still youngsters in the 1950s, though some were old enough to have made their own choices about staying or leaving before 1961.

One might think, for those too young to have taken a decision over whether to stay or to go, parental decisions would play a major role in their later views both of their parents and of the state in which they were forced to live. In oral-history interviews carried out a decade and a half after the end of the GDR, the representation of parental decision-making by war children and later generations varied—for some it was not worth even a mention—yet few suggested any real criticism of their parents' decisions, which they generally presented in an acceptable, even 'honourable' light (whether or not they agreed with their parents' views); and most seemed to have been able to come to terms with the consequences for their own lives. The reasons given were quite various, but crucial to all accounts were questions relating to the potential impact on the wider family if a member left for

the West; so too, of course, were degrees of political commitment for or against the new communist system.⁷

Whatever the personal reactions of different individuals, the impact of the Wall on the character of life in the GDR was major.⁸ With the restrictions on cross-border communications, Germans in East and West began to grow apart, as they sought to make their lives under very different circumstances. As the division of their country was literally sealed in concrete, the emergent differences in patterns of behaviour, expectations, and outlooks on life were registered in innumerable ways between Germans living in the East and the West.

A team of Western journalists exploring the GDR in the early 1960s for the West German weekly *Die Zeit*, for example, were struck by the relative youth of the regime representatives, functionaries and works directors whom they met—many of them 1929ers, now in their mid thirties—and by the strength and conviction with which these people, now in charge of key elements of the new state, put across the very different world views of Marxism-Leninism to their sceptical Western visitors.⁹ It was clear that, among those adults entrusted to represent the state, there were emergent differences of attitudes and outlooks that went well beyond any common upbringing.

Among younger East Germans, too, the differences were already beginning to be evident within a matter of a few years. Some glimpses of divergent patterns among those born during the Third Reich and shortly thereafter are given in a fascinating set of essays on 'My visit to East Berlin' written in 1964 by young West Berlin residents for an essay competition, initiated by the West Berlin Senate (city government) as a means of marking the slight loosening of border controls which had allowed West Berliners to visit family and friends in the East.¹⁰ These essays were of course written with certain standpoints in mind—and the possibility of a trip to America as first prize dangling before the young writers' eyes—but they are nevertheless highly revealing of early perceptions of difference within a cohort of young people just three years after the erection of the Wall.

The essay by Heidrun H. (born 1944), which won the first prize in the competition, recounts experiences on the first visit back of a brother and sister who had fled from East Berlin with their parents in 1958 and had not been able to return to see their friends since the Wall was built. Extremely pro-Western in the attitudes expressed, Heidrun H. is nevertheless quite insightful about the changes she observed in the character and outlooks of her former friends:

Among our former friends is one who today is in favour of this state . . . We can live out our ideals and goals. Over there [in the GDR] people have even their ideals prescribed for them: [communist leader Ernst] Thälmann, [productive worker Adolf] Hennecke,

⁷ Explored further in M. Fulbrook, *Living through the GDR* (in preparation).

⁸ See generally Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the frontiers of power*.

⁹ Marin Gräfin Dönhoff, Rudolf Walter Leonhardt, and Theo Sommer, *Reise in ein fernes Land. Bericht über Kultur, Wirtschaft und Politik in der DDR* (Hamburg: Nannen Verlag, Die Zeit Bücher, 1964).

¹⁰ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB) B Rep 015, Nr. 591, 'Mein Besuch in Ost-Berlin' essays.

the cosmonauts, the over-fulfilment of the plan and the target, voluntary extra hours of work rebuilding. It was shattering for me to see how timid and frightened people over there have become. How was it possible that a young man can, in the space of 2½ years, capitulate so hopelessly? Up until the building of the Wall he had worked in West Berlin and had made a good living. His wife did not have to work. Today it's not enough whichever way you chop it, although the wife has to work too. There's no way they can even think of a fridge, a television, a car. The children are being brought up in the factory Kindergarten in the spirit of the 'Workers' and Peasants' State', and he finds that perfectly in order, he stands up for this state. Is it blindness, the lure of cheap advantages, or is it an attempt to forget the past? I felt ashamed on his behalf. It's not the Wall that is brittle and crumbling. It's people who are crumbling to pieces . . . How can one change so much in 2½ years? . . . And suddenly I saw, in the middle of the room, the wall between me and this renegade, who was sitting about 5 metres away alone on the sofa.¹¹

Heidrun H. also has the insight to make some slightly self-critical remarks about the implicit sense of superiority and the insensitivity of Westerners, who would not stop talking to their East German relatives and friends about their last few holidays, showing slides and photographs of trips to Italy, Egypt, and other warm, enticing and out-of-the-question locations to GDR citizens:

. . . mustn't our carefree lives, our self-centredness, hurt the people over there? Aren't we thinking in the first instance primarily about ourselves? . . . Is there nothing else to talk about, in the short time we have of seeing each other again, than the last holiday trip? Don't we notice how much we are hurting our relatives with this? It isn't envy. I believe that there is no envy in the East any more. It has given way to other feelings.¹²

But Heidrun's overwhelming response is one of amazement at the way in which East Berliners seem to have come to terms with their fate, and to have resigned themselves to the circumstances under which they were living. At the time of her visit, a young man by the name of Peter Schulz had just been killed while trying to cross the border and escape to the West, an incident which was widely being discussed in shops. Heidrun H. was aghast at typical reactions which she overheard:

When a customer at the butcher's shop said that she was sorry for the young man, a woman answered: 'That just serves him right. He knows after all that it's forbidden. Why does he do it anyway?' . . . Is she really already so dulled that even a murder does not shake her awake? Does she secretly envy him, that he found the courage to flee. To put his life at stake for freedom? Have we already grown apart so badly?¹³

The implications of the Wall were, in one way or another, (literally) inescapable for all East Germans; but the fact of division was experienced differently not only by people in different positions—contrast the '*Reisekader*' who had permission to travel, for example, with families who were separated, and with people who had no relatives or friends or even interest in the West—but also in different ways by people at different life stages.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, First prize, Heidrun H., born 28 Aug. 8 1944, p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The 'national' issue was never the same for older citizens as it was for those born later, 'born into' the GDR behind closed borders. Among the vast majority of older East Germans, the sense of division remained alive, incomprehensible. Official reports remain full of criticisms of what the SED termed 'lack of clarity' (*Unklarheiten*), such as the reported comment: 'How is it with the unity of state and nation? There are two German states but after all only one nation; since over there live Germans and here live Germans.'¹⁴ Similarly, functionaries complained that: 'The dangers of West German imperialism are still not fully recognized by some citizens in various border areas; for example there are the false conceptions about the border regulations "that are inhumane" . . . The demand is put for "relaxation" [of border controls].'¹⁵ There were also what official reports euphemistically termed 'misunderstandings' of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt and his politics of *Ostpolitik*. Willy Brandt, on his visit to meet East German state representative Willy Stoph in Erfurt in March 1970, was greeted with overwhelming popular enthusiasm amid widespread hopes for the opening of the borders, unrealistic hopes which Brandt himself feared that he would unintentionally raise knowing that they would only be dashed. It is hardly necessary to rehearse the repeated variations on these themes, in terms of the frequency with which they crop up in official documents.

Yet here, too, as far as subjectivities among East Germans can be ascertained through both contemporary and later sources, there was what might be described as a 'routinization of evil'; or at least, the resigned recognition that one had to play by the rules to achieve what was possible, and try not to yearn too much for that which was not. Letters to the Association of Old Girls of the Augusta Schule, for example, from those alumnae who had landed up in the East rather than the West, and who were now pensioners, are full of comments regretting that they cannot attend school class reunions because they only had a certain number of allotted days per year for Western visits, which they preferred to commit to visiting family and close friends.¹⁶ Even when finding an aspect of life in the GDR particularly difficult, they developed coping mechanisms. As one 85-year-old living in a care home in East Berlin put it in a letter to the former Augusta Schule classmates in the West, expressing her sadness that her friends and relatives were scattered everywhere, and visits to her in her care home were very rare: 'So a visit is something which happens only rather rarely, above all because of the high "entry charges" from which you aren't even allowed to pay for a hotel room. Well, gradually one gets hardened to this. There is nothing else one can do.'¹⁷

Sometimes, in personal correspondence across the inner-German border, there are hints that East Germans were somewhat defensive about the conditions in

¹⁴ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4916, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Erfurt, Jan.–Nov. 1975, Aktuelle Berichterstattung lt. Informationsplan für das I. Quartal 1975; Erfurt, 3 Jan. 1975, p. 3.

¹⁵ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4910, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Erfurt, Febr.–Dez. 1969, Informationsbericht zum 28. Nov. 1969, NF Bezirksausschuß Erfurt to the Sekretariat des Nationalrats, Sektor Information, Berlin, p. 6.

¹⁶ Heimatarchiv Schöneberg, letters of former Augusta-Schülerinnen, N-R.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, A-E, letter from Hildegard B., 16 Jan. 1983.

which they were living; there is often an undertone of irritation about Western assumptions about the 'poor relations' in the East. One lengthy letter from an Augusta Schule alumna, Dr. Hella K., who was aged seventy at the time of writing in 1972, expressed this very well:

Apparently I am the only one living in the GDR. I have to reckon with misunderstandings and am quite happily prepared to clarify and report *sine ira et studio* [Latin, 'without anger or partiality']. We live here under completely different conditions and not at all bad. I only need to think of the fact that my father, from a sense of responsibility, had endless rows with the three regimes in which he lived, right up to the highest levels, all of which have today become completely irrelevant! Everything that one directly needs to live is cheap, that is rents, energy, transport, bread coal potatoes [*sic*], and above all medical treatment! There is no longer any need to pay for school education, and the vast majority of those attending college or university live on scholarships. But of course anything that doesn't grow here and has to be imported has its fixed price, which is however fixed and may not be exceeded!—Now, briefly to me: I am now 70 years old, have all sorts of physical ailments, because of earlier accidents and times of need, but nothing threatening. . . . [University qualifications in] German, history, history of art, philosophy and a doctorate in musicology, philosophy and German anthropology. The attempt at working in academic library services did not work out (see above), and was lost entirely through the bombing of all material and books!—I didn't marry, partly because of the great losses of people in both wars, partly because I could only imagine a mundane marriage, which wouldn't work out.

The reference she makes in this passage to the failure of her earlier attempts at a professional career was to previous comments:

The Nazis had simply closed many professions to women, I asked right up to the highest levels of government, everything hopeless, and then came the restrictions of war,—and after the war I was ill an awful lot,—nothing serious, but all very disruptive (inflammations, neuritis etc., etc.), so that I couldn't manage any work, I am also registered as disabled, may even be classed as seriously disabled.¹⁸

But clearly, despite long-term ill-health, she had managed to make something of a successful professional life for herself in the GDR and was correspondingly aware of the advantages of its social and health provisions compared both to the past and the West.

The circular class letters between the women from the school in Chemnitz, by this time renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt, also betray the characteristic combination of slight tension about the difficulties of aspects of life in the GDR and yet some determination to show that it was possible to lead a decent, even enjoyable life. Ruth, for example, was proud to tell her Western friends as well as those with whom she was in closer contact in the GDR that she had managed, with much difficulty, to acquire a desirable new apartment in the Berlin suburb of Mahlsdorf, as well as a car (a Trabant). It was hard for her to get the tone right between pride in her own achievements and recognition that for Westerners the sheer struggle would be simply one more reason to pity her:

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, K-M, Dr Hella K., letter of 12 Mar. 1972.

I would prefer to spare myself from the novel that I could write about the palaver it took for me to get a flat in Berlin. There was simply no way through various regulations for the move to Berlin. The Berlin border areas were under closure. But I managed it anyway and am so happy finally to have a flat that suits me. It's understandable that I'm envied by so many people for having this flat.¹⁹

Thus what was highly regarded on one side of the border would be simply derided and sniffed at on the other: Ruth could not expect her own joy in the flat to be even registered as a cause of celebration by her former class friends. Having given what, to a GDR citizen, was this big news, she went on rapidly to report on career successes, recognition of which was more likely to transcend cross-border differences. She was by now the director of a school, and was full of news about the work at the school. But even this, in her experience, was tinged with a high level of stress. She finally commented: 'Otherwise despite the huge workload and overload, the job gives me a great deal of enjoyment and pleasure. Despite all I wouldn't want to be in any other profession.'²⁰ She also spoke in both this and a previous letter about visits to Poland with her close friend Agnes, and how they had visited Agnes' former home, now in Poland, and received a highly friendly reception.²¹ There is no doubt that this trip was a great pleasure for the two friends; unintentionally, it may have stirred a degree of wistfulness (though hardly more) on the part of those in the West, who might have thought Eastern Europe less easily accessible at this time.

Even families who were divided found ways of coping, psychological strategies for dealing with what was initially a great shock. At first they may have hoped for changes, as expressed in letters and postcards between parents who were in East Germany and their daughter who was in West Berlin: 'We can only wait and hope that everything will turn out well... Hold your head up still, things will be different again one day.'²² But over the following weeks and years they found ways of maintaining a correspondence accompanied by parcels of delicacies, registering in each letter the ways in which they had accommodated themselves to life in the two states. In one letter the mother provided an extended discussion of the important little things in life: 'Our potatoes are still very good... Bananas have been available again for once'; she even reported on the progress of the major clothes washing (the 'große Wäsche'). She continued for a while in this vein, but stopped in her tracks when realizing how mundane this all sounded: 'This sort of thing you only really get done in the East, cleaning the windows is also necessary again. Sometimes the sun shines too brightly, then you see for the first time that they need it. All of these sorts of thing happen after the 13th August. Sometimes one is truly amazed about oneself, that despite all one is becoming so damned

¹⁹ Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart, 'Klassenbriefe', Vol. III. 11.1.65–30.12.77, Ruth, letter of 11. Jan. 1965, fols. 2a–b.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ It might be noted that Ruth never married; she made no secret of her close friendship with another woman, but nor did she explicitly discuss this as any kind of more intimate and possibly sexual relationship.

²² Kempowski BIO 3190, 1 + 2, postcard of 24 Aug. 1961.

indifferent.²³ Although her husband disassociated himself from his wife's sentiments by a dissenting scribble in the margin, it is clear that a sense of having to accept the inevitable and make the best of an imperfect situation was far more widely shared.

If '1953' had taught East Germans that there would be little support in the West for any challenge to the communist regime, then 1961 compounded this by confirming that there was no way out. The forcible repression in August 1968 of the experiment of introducing 'socialism with a human face' in the Prague Spring in neighbouring Czechoslovakia only served to confirm to East Germans that the only option was to accept the seemingly inevitable and reshape one's life to suit the constraints of the system. A sense of borders increasingly became internalized: the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and strategies for a 'successful' life were defined in the context of the dominant norms of the SED regime.

II. THE 'NORMALIZATION OF RULE'

Growing up in a society and becoming adept at following the prevailing social rules is a little like learning a language: native speakers tend to speak more or less grammatically, without necessarily being consciously aware of the rules; but those having to learn the rules of a second language at a later date never feel quite as at ease within it, however fluent they may eventually become as 'near-native speakers'. Border crossing from one country to another can moreover be temporal as well as spatial. Thus those who were socialized primarily or entirely within the GDR had different perceptions of it than those who were born earlier, for whom readjustment was frequently somewhat akin to learning a second language in which one never felt entirely at home.

Individuals who had childhood memories of East Prussia or Silesia, or close relatives in the Rhineland or Bavaria, would never feel quite as at ease with the shrunken state of the GDR as those whose horizons were experientially restricted from the outset. And a sense of 'abnormality' about the GDR was of course all the worse for those who had not only grown up with a wider sense of what was geographically encompassed by 'Germany' and the political and cultural meaning of the 'homeland', but who had also been influenced by Nazi 'anti-Bolshevism' and could only see the new 'Soviet friends' as erstwhile enemies. But for people who were born into the GDR, and particularly those born too late even to remember a time before the Wall, the boundaries of the known universe were far more restricted from the very start. Nor were they exposed to a radically different pattern of socialization, whatever the dissonance between the official line and the stories told in the home, particularly among earlier cohorts; and even this was an issue that faded with time. Dominant norms of behaviour were learned in a wide variety of settings from an early age, and the penalties for transgression were by and large

²³ *Ibid.*, letter of 4 Mar. 1962.

clear and predictable. The shortages and constraints were also only too evident at the time, as were ways of dealing with and circumventing bothersome aspects of life. But for all the criticisms which individuals might make, the world thus constituted appeared to be 'simply the way things were': this appeared, in short, from a particular perspective to be 'normal'.

As the GDR political system became more stable, and once the state was internationally accepted and appeared a long-term fixture on the geopolitical landscape, political processes as well as aspects of everyday life—even if they were the object of critique and dislike—became to a degree predictable and routinized. In these senses, one can talk of a process of 'normalization of rule' following the early decades of violent imposition of a new system.²⁴ 'Normalization' does not mean acceptance, and should not be confused with legitimacy; nor is it a stable condition, but rather a process; and with the ever more visible problems of the 1980s the GDR was increasingly the object of radical critique, particularly but not only among its younger citizens. It was only as those born into the GDR, too, began to have to 'learn a second language' in terms of the new social rules of unified Germany after 1990, that they became increasingly aware of other aspects of the world that they had, with incorporation into an enlarged Federal Republic, finally lost.

The analogy with language should not be taken too far. Awareness of social rules is generally far more explicit than knowledge of grammar; and people are highly adept at presenting a 'social front' as appropriate under a variety of circumstances and with different goals in mind, whether or not they are conscious of this. Particularly for those who were acutely critical of dominant norms or transgressed officially defined boundaries, penalties in the GDR could be very clear. Even for those who conformed, knowledge of the paths open to them to achieve certain goals was generally quite explicit, particularly where things rubbed (as for example in the need for young males to do military service in order to gain a university place).

Moreover, not everything in this secretive and repressive state was clear to the population at the time: some East Germans only became fully aware after the demise of the GDR of the extent to which their lives had been shaped, either by being 'positively' fostered by the regime, or 'deformed' by malign manipulation and repression. A subjective sense of 'normality' did not mean that East Germans' (variable) understandings of the way the system worked were also in some sense accurate as historical representations, and they should not therefore be taken at face value as valid 'descriptions' of the social world. But they were ways in which East Germans inhabited their world, and indeed continued, with significant shifts, to interpret it after its demise, and thus need to be explored—in much the same way, theoretically, as historians need to explore the utterly different Nazi understandings of German society in terms of 'race'.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly, given the misunderstandings that constantly arise over the application of this term, that in the social world there is no

²⁴ For the construction of 'normalization' as a theoretical concept, or ideal type in the Weberian sense, see my introduction to Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR*.

such thing as 'normal' in any 'objective' sense. People may claim that they lived 'perfectly normal lives', but this is a matter of their claim, and what they mean by 'normal' when they make this claim must itself be the subject of analysis. The word cannot be used in history in the same way as it is, for example, in medical discourses on homeostatic physiological processes ensuring that the body self-regulates to remain consistently within the 'normal' range for body temperature, blood sugar levels, blood pressure, and so on, and where the consequences of 'abnormality' may be cessation of 'healthy' functioning leading potentially to the physiological death of the organism. Such a non-subjective meaning of 'normality' cannot be applied to the social world, where meanings of 'normal' are culturally variable. Thus historians and anthropologists need to analyse what are the dominant norms, and what people in different positions themselves define and construct as 'normal' or see as 'deviant' in some way. The concept of 'normal' is thus frequently normative, intrinsically evaluative; the term 'normalization' was, for example, used to mean totally different things by West Germans in the 1950s registering the reconstruction of what they saw as 'normal private lives' after the war, and the Soviet leadership referring to political stabilization after the crushing of challenges to its rule in Czechoslovakia in 1968. In the broadest sense—in that we all live in the light of implicit or explicit presuppositions, values, and more or less articulate 'philosophies of life'—there is not and can never be such a thing as an 'ideology-free zone'.²⁵ And what one group wants to impose by way of norms may be quite at odds with another group's construction of 'normality'. But the extent to which people in different social positions and of different political and moral views register a degree of dissonance with the norms propagated by dominant groups can vary considerably: what some perceive as overt 'ideology' and 'propaganda' others may see variously as 'self-evident truths' or even 'common sense'.

As far as differences in conceptions of 'normality' across generations are concerned, one of the key differences between the GDR and the preceding Nazi regime was the sheer longevity of the GDR: forty years, in contrast to a mere dozen, was long enough for several cohorts to grow up to adulthood without having consciously known any other kind of regime. In these circumstances, what those who had consciously experienced the transition from Nazism to communism might never be able to come to terms with or perceive as 'normal' could be experienced almost as 'second nature' to younger generations. Across the subsequent transition to unified Germany, things that had prior to 1989 been simply taken for granted—and of which people were barely consciously aware at the time—could, as they disappeared, suddenly become visible. Perceptions of society during and after the GDR could again be somewhat at odds with one another. There are thus again multiple historical layerings, as the reverberations of

²⁵ Here as on other issues in his introduction, Eli Rubin fundamentally misrepresents the position of at least this particular 'Fulbrookian' and is effectively tilting at a straw man: see Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 6, 8, and more generally pp. 6–9; and my review of this in the *American Historical Review*, 115(5) (2010), 1549–50. Cf. also Scott Moranda, 'Towards a more holistic history? Historians and East German everyday life', *Social History*, 35(3) (2010), 330–8.

the Third Reich lingered through new representations in the developing GDR, and as the experiences of East German society were later reflected upon with hindsight from the perspective of post-unification Germany.

In the later self-representations of many East Germans, a strong sense of what was 'normal' comes across very clearly—enunciated in a relatively defensive manner after unification, arguably seeking to stress in the critical post-unification context that the GDR was not all about repression and terror, or complicity and conformity.²⁶ In an odd form of echo, and with respect to a far less violent dictatorship, the retrospective protests about having led 'a perfectly normal life' in the GDR may play something of a similar self-defensive role to the post-Third Reich protests that one 'never knew anything about it'. Both the claims of 'never having known' after the Holocaust, and having led a 'perfectly normal life' after the GDR, are in some senses attempts to escape being cast in the roles of perpetrator or victim, although with far less by way of self-distancing from the GDR than from the Third Reich. For the GDR, people mostly did not need to deflect accusations of sins of commission or omission; nor did they want to see their state portrayed as being on a par with the previous Nazi regime. Correspondingly, professions of 'normality' underline the claim that there was, precisely, nothing much to get excited about: that the GDR was not as sensationally interesting, violent, or vile as portrayed.

Renate B. (born in 1948, and growing up in the 1950s as a 'latch-key kid' or *Schlüsselkind*) is a case in point. In classic GDR style, she recounts her career in an essentially passive tense, having apparently required little by way of her own initiative to move on to the next step but rather being fostered all the way, even though with some personal amendments and variations to the suggested script. She also repeatedly emphasizes how her working life had been 'perfectly normal' (*ganz normal*), as extracts within minutes of each other in her interview demonstrate:

I learned to be a sales assistant in a perfectly normal way . . . So I trained for the retail trade in a perfectly normal way, then I passed the training with distinction and then they said to me didn't I want to take up studies and I didn't want to, I wanted to go to work and then I did distance learning, so I myself put a double burden on myself, went to work and alongside it studied for five years . . . So that, I started in the cooperative shop, it was a normal sales outlet, then came to the regional office, then to the head office, and so this developed, that is one had the possibility of promotion in a perfectly normal way, until finally then also to the Ministry of Trade and Provisions, and then I had also actually come into an area that is the final stage that you can reach, that is as a normal colleague, not as a department head or whatever, but as a simple [worker] and so that one then dealt with matters of provisioning in the whole of the GDR . . .²⁷

In this 'perfectly normal' pattern, Renate B. did all the expected and usual things by way of training and work, was repeatedly promoted by suggestions from above rather as a result of her own initiatives, and finally arrived not quite at the top through what

²⁶ See further Ch. 11, below.

²⁷ Interview with Renate B., summer 2005.

she portrays as very little of her own agency—with the exception, paradoxically, of ‘choosing’ the ‘double burden’. Nevertheless, here and elsewhere she clearly had a great sense of pride in working at ministerial level and having some responsibility for the ‘whole of the GDR’. While it can readily be argued that the emphasis on ‘normality’ was a post-unification defensive strategy, neither in Renate B.’s interview nor in many others on similar lines is there any attempt to downplay what they saw as the ‘bad sides’ of life. The use of ‘normal’ references rather expected patterns, aspirations and achievements in a relatively predictable social world.

At the same time, East Germans lived not only within a literally closed-off state, but also, metaphorically, within what Max Weber in quite another context called an ‘iron cage’ (the conventional translation of what he actually called a ‘steel-hard casing’: *stahlhartes Gehäuse*).²⁸ Weber initially used this term to refer to the way in which, while early modern Protestants may have actually wanted to work in a ‘calling’ or vocation, those living under modern capitalism were forced to do so; behaviours were hence constrained by the system, once sufficiently established, and no longer motivated by the inner convictions of individuals. The ‘spirit of modern capitalism’ may have had its roots in a ‘Protestant work ethic’, but once the system was embedded, people simply had to conform to its norms in order to survive, whether or not they had any inner commitment, let alone any driving religious passion or ideological conviction. The point has far wider significance in referring to the ways in which systems constrain people to behave in certain ways, and enact certain kinds of attitude, whether or not they inwardly agree. It can be applied to virtually any society with one qualification or another (some conditions allow more leeway for individual variations in behaviour and norms, more apparently ‘spontaneous’ challenges to ‘the system’, than others); and with even more poignant relevance to the walled-in GDR from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Living in what seemed to be a permanent and arguably also unalterable state—or at least one in which most citizens had little leeway for affecting policies or the future—had implications for the ways in which people adapted to the situation and became involved in the system in order to do what they could in the context of their own lives. There is a key issue here of norms, and a sense of what is entailed by notions of ‘as it should be’, or what is ‘in order’ (the repeatedly used German phrase ‘*in Ordnung*’). In retrospect, even those who were at the time angry about the disruptions to patterns of living and working and having to alter aspirations, expectations, and life plans later came to terms with the new patterns of life. There was a degree of ‘normalization’ in the sense of learning how to ‘play the rules’: knowing what the parameters of life were, and what would be the consequences for stepping over or challenging the boundaries, both physical and metaphorical, of life in the GDR.²⁹ This did not necessarily mean that

²⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (originally published as two articles in 1904–5), in W. G. Runciman (ed.), *Weber: Selections in translation*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.), p. 170.

²⁹ See further discussion in Fulbrook (ed.), *Power and Society in the GDR*. See also for related works addressing these issues but from rather different perspectives, George Last, *After the ‘Socialist Spring’*; and Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, compromise and participation in the GDR* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2009).

memories were suppressed, and that legacies of the past did not linger on; nor did it mean that was what predictable and routinized, and in that sense experienced as 'normal', was also experienced as pleasant, let alone desirable; but it did mean that ways had to be found of coping with and making the best of the present; and for many it also meant continuing to strive to build a better future.³⁰

Harald J. (born 1932) had in the early 1950s married the 'Mischling' Ilse J., whose grandmother and aunt had been killed in the Holocaust. They both still had vivid childhood memories of Nazi Germany; they were both committed Christians, and had maintained a distance from GDR social organizations. Harald summarized his view of the 'normality' of life in the GDR:

What does one call 'normal'? It is normal, as long as one is still of working age, to have work that perhaps one even likes. To earn enough money that one can live well on it. To have an apartment. To have a future. This we had . . . So, we had a future, honestly, even when there wasn't one any more. There was no anxiety about the future, one could live perfectly normally.³¹

His wife Ilse rapidly added in that a family and friends also belonged to a 'normal life', and these they had too. They agreed that they did not have everything they would have liked, and did not travel as much as they might have liked, but that, lacking resources, they still could not travel. In this sense, the couple agreed, '99 per cent of the population had a normal life'.³² In this, they explicitly sought to distance themselves from the dissidents who became well-known in the autumn of 1989.

It is clear from contemporary sources that for many East Germans the immediate present posed problems enough; dealing with everyday issues took over from wider ruminations, whether about the legacies of Nazism or the political system of the GDR. Reading through diaries written by women at the time, for example, one feature is particularly striking: the fear or actuality of successive unwanted pregnancies, which, from a twenty-first century perspective, appears to place women in quite another historical era. The children who were born unplanned, as it were, appear to have been the focus of unconditional love; it was the women, and their relationships with their husbands, who appeared to be the primary casualties of this situation. This seems to have been common to women from both the 1929er generation, and those born during the Third Reich; the real change only came with the advent of widespread contraception from the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as, in 1972, the possibility of abortion on demand within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, by which time (given a generally early age of marriage and child-bearing) it was too late for most East German women born much before 1945. Gerdi Nolde (born 1928), for example, records her great sense of exhaustion as she sought to do all that an East German woman was increasingly expected to do—and which she herself wanted to do—by way of studying, passing exams, and holding a

³⁰ On legacies of the past for the future, see further Ch. 10, below.

³¹ Harald J. (1932).

³² *Ibid.*

job, while looking after her children and also her husband (since notions of an equal share in parenting had not yet swept through this generation). That at one particularly over-burdened time she managed to get through weeks and weeks with barely four hours of sleep a night in order to pass her exams as an external mature student, while at the same time holding a demanding job as a schoolteacher and keeping everything going on the domestic front, was extraordinary. Yet the elation at getting through successfully was short-lived, as further burdens, alongside a souring marriage, rendered her effectively a single mother even while still married. She recorded bitterly, after twenty years or so of more or less successfully juggling this kind of life, that she still felt an overwhelming lack of self-confidence.³³

Similar experiences and ambivalent emotions, both on suspecting each new pregnancy and throughout the ensuing struggle to keep everything going, were recorded by Marie Ziegler, who, born in 1944, was some sixteen years younger than Gerdi Nolde. Apparently well nigh unaware of the facts of life when she met the man who was to become her husband, Hans, she was pregnant within a matter of months and, at a time when illegitimacy was still a matter of some disrepute, hastily married shortly before the baby was born; yet her then friend and confidante, Birgit, was also pregnant by the same man and this was a cause of constant misery to Marie.³⁴ Marie, like Gerdi a few years earlier, started married life and had her first child at a time (still) of acute housing shortage; like Gerdi, Marie had to hand her first baby over to a weekly care home until such time as she could find a larger room or small flat (it was the landlady rather than the size of the accommodation that prevented these women from starting out married life with both husband and child in the same premises). Both Gerdi and the younger Marie faced the critical remarks of colleagues and contemporaries in a variety of relationships about their repeated pregnancies. Marie—who in her diary frequently refers to herself in the third person, particularly when appealing to her own presumed characteristics and even more so when advocating virtues and desired standards of behaviour to herself—was explicitly concerned to challenge sexist prejudices on all fronts. Following some debate about whether she should study, she exclaimed into her diary:

Marie is going to study. A husband should not only be the progenitor of his children. He should know just as well as the mother what is involved in bringing up a little person to be a person.³⁵

A few months later, confirming this difficult decision to herself, she added: 'The times move on, Marie moves on too.'³⁶ But this was in fact not only of the unwillingness of her husband to share much of a domestic role but also the opposition of her mother-in-law. A little over a year later, on a day which she had nobly spent assisting her mother-in-law with the physically demanding job of the washing (another arduous

³³ Diary of Gerdi Nolde in Erika Rüdener (ed.), *Dünne Haut*, pp. 59–156.

³⁴ Diary of Marie Ziegler (1944) entitled 'Entfernung', *ibid.*, pp. 201–319.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, entry of 7 Apr. 1965, p. 263.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, entry of 23 Aug. 1965, p. 263.

task of which Western women of the twenty-first century have little experience), Marie recorded:

Today I have to hear from mother-in-law what a crazy, egoistic woman I am, impossible—because I am studying. How can a married woman with two children even think of studying, leaving the children on their own, expecting so much of her husband. Yes, whether I can even manage it, her son by contrast is actually intelligent! (But I am not a dumb sheep! You will see what the little dumb sheep can achieve!)³⁷

Fear of another pregnancy plagued the physical side of Marie's relationship with her increasingly estranged husband, Hans; their marriage ended after sixteen years, through many of which he had sought sexual satisfaction elsewhere. As he rose in the hierarchy and became director of a state-owned enterprise, Hans had to be away from home a lot in new functions; he clearly used the opportunities to be looked after by other women, while Marie struggled on as a single parent and working mother, denying all her own needs for relaxation or pleasure. She was frequently totally exhausted but made the effort always to do everything until she collapsed; he did not, claiming he had worked hard enough in his day job. As she commented to herself about Hans' sense of being over-burdened in his elevated role: 'And in general an awful lot has become too much for him. But Marie is never allowed to find anything too much for her.'³⁸

In outward terms, both Gerdi and Marie were to be counted as among the GDR's 'success stories'. Both were unusually committed and loyal citizens. The 'personal' and the wider historical context were inextricably intertwined, reaching a deep emotional level and affecting life choices accordingly. Marie was a member of the Free German Youth (FDJ), the para-military Society for Sport and Technology (GST) and the ruling communist Socialist Unity Party (SED), and critical of a friend whose father had been an officer in Hitler's army. Her own personal 'life project' was in part quite consciously designed to overcome the wounds of the recent, violent past: having herself grown up without a father, presumably because of the war (her diary does not make this explicit, although she frequently mentions the fact that she was fatherless and that she had never known him), Marie was determined to give her children a secure and complete family. As she put it, following the birth of her son, her relationship with the man whom she married seems to have been less important to her—the marriage required 'courage'—than the attempt at some kind of personal compensation or post-war 'making good again' at the level of the family:

I was unable to get to know my own father, but our son should not miss his father. Where did I get the courage from to love this man and to enter into a marriage with him? It was above all the desire to have a child grow up protected by both parents.³⁹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, entry of 28. Sep. 1966, p. 268.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of Apr. 1979, p. 308.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, entry of 23 Feb. 1964, p. 256.

This is an unusual sentiment to express so explicitly, very probably rooted in emotional tensions arising from Marie's own fatherless childhood. Gerdi, too, was a fully committed GDR citizen. When her journalist husband was disciplined for an alleged 'offence' for which he was unfairly 'sent to work in production', she did not critique the system or the utterly disproportionate party 'discipline' involved; her sense of injustice was purely over the fact that the offence was actually the fault of a colleague, not of her husband; and she soon afterwards, in commenting on the flight of the last-but-one dentist of the town to the West, represented the actions of the 'class enemy' as infinitely worse than the disciplinary proceedings of her own side. Clearly, these diaries would not and could not have been published in the GDR had they been critical of central aspects of GDR politics and society; nor would dissidents have thought to publish views for which they would only have reaped trouble. It is all the more remarkable, then, just how clearly these diaries of women who are entirely uncritical of the regime in principle document the dispiriting difficulties in practice of women of their generations in fulfilling the official aims of combining the roles of production and reproduction.

Some diaries could, for obvious reasons, only be published after the demise of the GDR. One such is that of Hartmut Zwahr (born 1936), now a well-known historian and in the late 1960s an acute chronicler of his times, registered from the perspective of those born during the Third Reich who remained far more disaffected than the 1929ers. Utterly dispirited by developments in the GDR in the context of discussions in neighbouring Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1968, Zwahr commented into his diary:

A whole people engages in lying because this is what is wanted. Whoever does not want to hear the truth must be contented with lies. Our people live with two sets of conceptions, they are masters at this, at work they dissemble [*heucheln*], and in the party too. Some are bigoted, others are cowardly or too clever and dissemble.⁴⁰

Again, it would seem that East Germans were enacting the scripts required of them in public, however different these now were from those of the Nazi period. The difference perhaps was that, even after two decades, older East Germans had apparently 'still' not internalized the new dominant rules of the game to quite the same degree that, in the 1930s, Germans had 'learned' the racist practices and beliefs in 'German superiority' that were so rapidly acquired in the Nazi period. Despite the SED's faith in the powers of persuasion (with the frequent use of the phrase 'not yet' in their reports on continuing deficiencies) it seemed increasingly unlikely that most East Germans would ever become quite as enthusiastic for communism as many had been for Hitler.

But despite the far lower degree of open terror in the GDR compared to the Third Reich, East Germans no longer had much taste for open opposition. Clearly

⁴⁰ Hartmut Zwahr, *Die erfrorenen Flügel der Schwalbe. DDR und 'Prager Frühling'. Tagebuch einer Krise 1968–1970* (Bonn: Dietz, 2007; Archiv für Sozialgeschichte Vol. 25), entry of 11 Mar. 1968, p. 15. The verb '*heucheln*' has connotations which are hard to convey appropriately in English. A '*Heuchler*' is a hypocrite.

memories of 1953 played a role, consolidated by the non-intervention of the Western powers in 1961; the growing presence of the Stasi and its increasingly effective manner of dealing with dissent also rapidly suppressed any signs there were of unrest among young people in 1968.⁴¹ Older Germans may in addition have been affected by other influences: Zwahr saw the distant workings of the past, and of the distinctive German war experience, as playing a role in the ways in which East Germans differed from their counterparts to the south. Seeking to draw the contrast between Czech intelligentsia and GDR, Zwahr commented that in Czechoslovakia there were:

Highly interesting discussions, objective, unvarnished contributions, uncomfortable lines of inquiry, impatient opinions betraying outrage and the urgent need to clear up the whole morass.

Where does this strength come from? And we? . . . People 'grumble', but wouldn't dream of taking the risk of doing anything . . . We have no national consciousness or too little of one.

The driving power of national tradition and national worth which the Czechs and Slovaks have at their disposal has no place with us. The war burned ideals into dust. We have material levers, but no sense of honour, no pride.⁴²

Zwahr also noted the self-distancing of younger East Germans from members of an older generation at this point, presaging the retreat, ever more evident in the 1970s and 1980s, into a form of individualism and pursuit of private happiness among those born too late to feel any burden of guilt or responsibility for trying to come to terms with the present (let alone build a better future):

The young lads dance along the street, hand in little hand with their girls. You can't tell the sexes apart by either hairstyle or gait. A large proportion of youths present themselves in an explicitly feminized way. One might bitingly say, the outer appearance just reflects the uniform state of their minds . . . Have we grown old? The external picture gives little hope for the future. Or is it a form of distancing themselves from the way we are? We can't be taken seriously any more, with our meetings, our fruitless discussions, our treading-on-water, from which we cannot liberate ourselves.

Sons are scared of their fathers, fathers of their sons.⁴³

Again, generational tensions played out even within families, although in contrast to the Third Reich it was in this case adults who conformed and went along—if unenthusiastically—with the behavioural expectations of the regime, while younger members of society opted for alternative attitudes and lifestyles. In the somewhat depressing context of writing a diary to document the inner and outer forms of adaptation of East Germans to an oppressive present, in which there appeared to be little by way of alternatives to conformity except on the purely individual level of self-presentation, Zwahr commented that 'It's always a matter of sustaining modes

⁴¹ On the suppression of unrest in 1968 in the GDR, see also Mitter and Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten*; and Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*.

⁴² Zwahr, *Die erfirenen Flügel der Schwalbe*, entry of 11 Mar. 1968, pp. 15–16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

of behaviour that demonstrate the deformation of people in our developing social system.⁴⁴

It is difficult to quantify how many people had similar reactions to those of Hartmut Zwahr at this time; possibly more from his generation of 'war children' than those who were slightly older or significantly younger. Many of the 1929ers were by the 1960s and 1970s in full swing in their professional and political lives. And, however ambivalent they might have felt about party bureaucracy, at least in their recollections of the period they appear to have felt fully engaged by the project of building a better society. As Dorothea Th.-H. put it:

In my professional life, I was always,—I worked, I wrote, I spoke, I was very active and of course I was politically engaged on behalf of this country... Well politically, because I was for, for, in favour of Socialism.⁴⁵

In her case, as by now a mature 1929er, the goal of building a better future took precedence over difficulties in the present, in a way that did not seem to resonate among those who, like Zwahr, were born somewhat later and oppressed by enforced conformity rather enthused about the wider political project.

There were also many other aspects of life in the GDR which were less difficult to deal with than the painful personal consequences of national division, the difficulties of combining domestic roles with full-time work, or the recognition of political oppression, petty-minded bureaucracy and the need for a degree of hypocrisy, dissembling or '*Heuchelei*', to survive. Most notable was of course the economic divide between the East and the ever more affluent West, visible nightly over much of the GDR on the television screens owned by increasing numbers of East Germans, particularly since the SED had in the late 1950s somewhat foolishly announced the explicit goal of 'overtaking' West Germany on this front. Juggling and seeking to influence the changing demands and aesthetic preferences of consumers with the bottlenecks and failures of a planned economy was a task that the SED never fully resolved.⁴⁶ While the GDR existed, then, people tended rather to grumble about shortages in supplies, particularly of durable consumer goods, than to recognize the value of secure employment, a major aspect of life of which they only became fully cognizant with rapidly rising unemployment after unification in 1990.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Interview with Dorothea Th.-H., summer 2005.

⁴⁶ There is a rapidly growing and theoretically sophisticated literature on the interrelated areas of work, consumer culture, the productivity (or otherwise) of a changing planned economy, and the attempted negotiation of compromises among different interests. See e.g. Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande* (Paris: Belin, 2001); Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: The politics of consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jeannette Madarász, *Working in East Germany: Normality in a socialist dictatorship, 1961 to 1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), and Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971 to 1989: A precarious stability* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1999); Andrew Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism*.

The much vaunted closeness or warmth of interpersonal relationships in East German society was strongly emphasized in retrospect, and certainly warrants some closer inspection. For all their critiques of evident shortcomings, a large majority of East Germans later claimed that, as far as interpersonal relations were concerned, there was a high level of ‘solidarity of citizens’ and ‘sense of togetherness’.⁴⁷ This is perhaps in part an aspect of ‘*Ostalgie*’ (nostalgia for the East), but there are some clear historical bases for the claim that social relations in the GDR were of a different order than those prevalent under post-1990 capitalism. This sense was arguably rooted in part in the lack of competition for jobs, and the social and leisure practices of works collectives, with frequent social events and outings, as well as the need for cooperation among members of work brigades to ensure the material premiums and honorary awards which were characteristic of GDR working life. Even if this entailed ostracizing those individuals who did not live up to standards—one should not paint too rosy a picture of such collectives—it necessarily also entailed investment in close interpersonal bonds among most members of the collectives that more individualistic ‘career-oriented’ work practices do not. We gain here the contrasting echo among those who were well integrated into the system of the more anguished cries of those who felt constrained as outsiders.

In addition, among most East Germans, including and perhaps particularly among those on the more disaffected end of the political spectrum, a ‘sense of togetherness’ was also rooted in widespread dependence on networks of friendship and ‘contacts’ for the informal economy based on ‘Vitamin B’ (for *Beziehungen*; in English, perhaps ‘Vitamin C’ for ‘connections’). This could make all the difference in obtaining spare parts for a washing machine, building materials, or additional labour for converting a garden shed into a habitable allotment cottage, and so on. Even where there were shortages of particularly desired goods, these could be ‘organized’, as Renate B. recounted:

Well, you just organized things, you either knew someone, who then in turn knew someone, and so you could just organize things, that was not actually a problem. One always, one knew a lot of people, one had friendships, one had time for each other, one did things together with other people, which now, no one has any time any more now. No one has time any more. If they do have time in the evenings, they’re all exhausted.⁴⁸

Renate B.’s interview is punctuated not only by notions of what was ‘perfectly normal’ and a sense of ‘togetherness’, but also of life in general, and specific conduct within particular circumstances, as being ‘in order’ (*in Ordnung*). For Renate B. and millions of ‘ordinary East Germans’, the GDR was a society where people had time for each other, and where the social world, for all the difficulties, constraints and shortages, was ‘*in Ordnung*’.

⁴⁷ See further Fulbrook, “Normalization” in retrospect: East German perspectives on their own lives’.

⁴⁸ Interview with Renate B., summer 2005.

There were, too, official bases for the sense of collective solidarity. Regime propaganda such as the following was, in its effects, far from purely cynical or as propagandistic as the injunction itself:

Even such simple things as a friendly word of greeting from the residential community on the occasion of a citizen's birthday can foster a relationship of trust between different generations, creating a feeling of security and fighting against feelings of resignation when living alone.⁴⁹

In essence, although wrapped in the political colours of the SED regime, this sort of advice differs relatively little from the tips involved in the 'feel-good' management manuals or the political campaign trails of democratic capitalist societies. Moreover, whether rooted in a sense of the community of the oppressed, or the functional requirements of the 'second economy' of bartering goods and services, or through the bonds engendered in work collectives, many of those who lived through East German society as adults felt there was a layer of warmth between human beings beyond the wrappings of the SED slogans and despite the constraints of the outer Wall. It also had something to do with the progressive erosion and alteration (if never complete erasure) of previous class differences. As the regime-supportive 1929er, Dorothea Th.-H., later put it:

Well, yes, you know, what, what I actually found very good, it was that, that people communicated much more with each other, they felt more solidarity with each other. Yes and, and if they had just moved, colleagues came and helped them clear books, and so on, had a care for them, or when this or that, there was really more human contact with one another. So this is indisputable. Indisputable. And because there was for the first time a unified school system, despite all gradations that I recognize, yes, that I can see, I think, it was naturally also the case that among young people such social differences were not so pronounced.⁵⁰

Whatever the validity of Dorothea's perceptions of an increasingly classless society, a strong sense that they were 'all in the same boat', as well as simply having the time for one another, seems to have played something of a role here. And in this case, the perception *was* what was most significant; feelings of togetherness are, after all, just that: feelings.

But equally clear to people both at the time and in retrospect was the significance of conformity, and the advantages—as well as constraints—conferred by membership particularly of the SED, and failing that of one of the bloc parties or at least one or more of the mass organizations. Many interviewees however retrospectively downplay the extent to which such memberships were significant in their own lives. As Renate B. put it, having for the first time experienced some difficulty when she herself chose to change tack in her working life after reaching a level which had become too stressful for her:

⁴⁹ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4881, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Halle, Jan.–Dez. 1974, letter of 18 Dec. 1974 from Bezirksausschuß Halle (Saale) to Sekretariat des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front der DDR, Abt. Information Berlin, Informationsbericht über Ergebnisse und Erfahrungen bei der Durchsetzung der Grundsätze und Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der Betreuung der Bürger im höheren Lebensalter, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Interview with Dorothea Th.-H., summer 2005.

Well, there I have to say, this was quite important, because I wasn't a comrade [SED member], one had a few problems as a non-comrade, because everyone else all around me was a comrade, so before I could start with the People's Solidarity [*Volkssolidarität*, a welfare organization] I also had—well, I didn't have a battle, I was actually appointed there, and then they said to me, let's see if you can manage to do this at all, or something like that. And then I thought, what do they want from me, and I realized that if I had worn the party badge they would not have asked what sort of training I had, they would have just taken me straight away. But in this way I had to—I had to engage in debate with them. But I don't think that was bad though.⁵¹

One in five adults did eventually join the SED, and the vast majority of East Germans were members of one or another of the mass organizations, thus metaphorically 'rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's' whatever their private opinions, as well as, in the case of some of the organizations, reaping whatever privileges there were to be obtained in this way—such as holidays organized through the trade union organization, the FDGB. The systemically endemic practice of dissembling, or '*heucheln*', was further fostered in this way.

III. THE ROUTINIZATION OF HIDDEN VIOLENCE

There was however a far more sinister aspect of endemic pretence. As the avalanche of revelations and extensive research after the fall of the Wall has made abundantly clear, the system which allowed some, such as Renate B., to feel they were leading 'perfectly normal lives', was underpinned by a state apparatus of terror, predicated on paranoia about the 'class enemy' both abroad and within. The activities of the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, MfS), played a far greater role in people's lives than many were aware of during the GDR's existence. This was 'hidden violence' of a rather different character than either the open physical brutality of Nazi Germany or the nazification of social relations and progressive exclusion of those designated as beyond the 'racial' community. Unlike the formation of 'two worlds' in Nazi Germany, this was not a form of violence enacted by citizens all around. Rather, it was institutionally driven, carried out through a highly developed organization of paid employees assisted by a massive network of 'unofficial collaborators'—whether willing, bribed, or coerced, for whatever reasons in each case—known as IMs (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*). Founded in 1950, the Stasi continually grew through the 1950s and 1960s, and expanded exponentially in the 1970s and 1980s; by 1989, it had somewhere in the region of 91,000 full-time employees and 173,000 informers, a higher saturation per head of population than any comparable secret service.⁵²

⁵¹ Interview with Renate B., summer 2005.

⁵² There is by now a huge literature on the Stasi, which, as the focus of major controversies not only over the involvement of individuals but also of institutions such as the Churches, was one of the first areas of GDR history to be explored extensively after the fall of the Wall. See for further discussion and references Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and reality* (London: Pearson, 2003); Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990* (Stuttgart and Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2001);

Once the archives were opened in the early 1990s, people were shocked by revelations about the identity of previous informers and the consequences for people's relationships, education, and careers. If people had previously 'known' about the Stasi in principle, it now turned out that they had often had little idea of the scale, character, and impact of its interference.

This point is highly significant and perhaps requires explicit emphasis, since it is so readily misunderstood.⁵³ To register that people only later discovered the extent to which the Stasi had penetrated society is important in understanding the widespread claims to having led 'perfectly normal lives': a sense of 'normality' may have been largely predicated on a degree of ignorance or misjudgement, as well as, in part, on a possibly misplaced sense of being able to cope with surveillance and interference. A comparison may be of some help here. For many decades smokers remained largely unaware of the long-term damage their habit was doing to their lungs and heart; asbestos workers were similarly unaware of the consequences of long-term exposure for developing mesothelioma after a latency period of decades. A later diagnosis of heart disease or lung cancer could certainly cast a massive shadow over any sense that they had previously, as they had thought, led perfectly healthy lives. Keeping clear the distinction between people's perceptions at the time and later diagnoses—whether by the medical or historical professions, depending on the issue—is crucial.

There can be no doubt about the overall character of this apparatus of surveillance and terror. But getting at people's experiences and perceptions of the Stasi when they did not actually fall obvious victim to its machinations is extremely difficult, and a 'societal history' of the impact of the Stasi is only just beginning.⁵⁴ The records produced by officers and unofficial collaborators (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, IMs) are, insofar as they survived the attempted destruction in the autumn and winter of 1989–90, available for analysis; and a 'top-down' account of policies and practices can readily be constructed by those with full access to these sources.⁵⁵

Gieseke, *Hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950–1989/90* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2000); Helmut Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit* (Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag, 2008); for examples of Stasi reports from just one year, Siegfried Suckut (ed.), *Die DDR im Blick der Stasi 1976* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009); and for Stasi terminology, Suckut (ed.), *Das Wörterbuch der Staatssicherheit. Definitionen zur 'politisch-operativen Arbeit'* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1996).

⁵³ Oddly, although I have made the repressive role of the Stasi very clear in both *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* and *The People's State*, in discussions of my work it is frequently claimed that I underplay its significance, while also misinterpreting my theoretical approach and particularly the concept of 'normalization'. See e.g. the misleading discussion of my approach in Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The inside story of the Stasi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 1 (where there is also no mention of *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*). It is worth reiterating: the issue of popular perceptions and societal significance is an empirical and not a political question.

⁵⁴ See e.g. the contributions to Jens Gieseke (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); see also Gary Bruce's discussion and case studies in *The Firm*.

⁵⁵ The question of access remains problematic. Although the availability in principle of the archival records is unrivalled, in practice the restrictions on access render it very difficult to undertake research beyond very specific, narrowly defined areas and topics, and researchers are dependent on the archive staff to seek out and make available those documents which are held to be relevant. There are also

Recently there have also been attempts to engage not only with the structures and written legacies but also with the remembered experiences of Stasi employees. The experiences of those who suffered, were subjected to surveillance, had their lives and relationships affected, were arrested and incarcerated, are also increasingly available: former victims of Stasi persecution are generally relatively willing to recount their experiences.⁵⁶ But it is far harder to tap into the views of those who were relatively conformist, sought not to draw attention to themselves (remaining un-notable, *'unauffällig'*), worked in unimportant areas, had no Western or other suspicious contacts, and hence had relatively little to do with the Stasi; or who felt that their stories and experiences were not worthy of telling in any sense that would put them into the public domain.⁵⁷ It is generally held to be harder still to elicit the genuine sentiments of those who informed for or otherwise supported the activities of the Stasi; even if willing to talk—and former Stasi officers have not been entirely reticent about putting their case to the public—these people were by definition extremely well trained in the arts of persuasion and dissembling.⁵⁸

Even when approached through the anonymous medium of questionnaires and survey research, or the slightly less anonymous form of in-depth oral history interviews, large numbers of East Germans well over a decade after unification revealed a marked unwillingness to talk very openly or extensively about this area of their former experiences, in part perhaps for fear of making admissions which could still have practical or psychological consequences in their lives. This part of GDR history remained far from dead long after the state itself had disappeared.

Nevertheless, in attempting to tap into the experiences of 'ordinary people' through later oral history interviews, a paradoxical situation rapidly becomes apparent. On the one hand, 'Stasi stories' are extremely widespread; although many people were not always as aware of it at the time as they later became, through post-unification media discussion as well as individual reading of their files, significant numbers of East Germans had contacts with the Stasi and were in one way or another affected by the existence of this all-pervasive state security apparatus. But the degree to which they were bothered by this, and indeed the extent to which some seem to have actually welcomed its presence, varied quite considerably: no uniform reactions can be 'read' from the sheer prevalence of the contacts and

major debates over the significance and desirability of working through this material. See e.g. Klaus-Dietmar Henke and Roger Engelmann (eds.), *Aktenlage. Die Bedeutung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Zeitgeschichtsforschung* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995).

⁵⁶ There was a veritable spate of such literature in the 1990s. See for examples of collections of selected individual stories, Jürgen Aretz and Wolfgang Stock (eds.), *Die vergessenen Opfer der DDR. 13 erschütternde Berichte mit Original-Stasi-Akten* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Bastei Verlag, 1997); Hans-Joachim Schädlich (ed.), *Aktenkundig* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1992).

⁵⁷ This is an area where a great deal more work still needs to be done. But see the interesting and suggestive discussion by Dorothee Wierling, 'Die Stasi in der Erinnerung' in Gieseke (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft*, pp. 187–208. See also from another perspective Barbara Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany. Stasi informers and their impact on society* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁸ See e.g. Bruce, *The Firm*; and the not always well corroborated nor adequately contextualized accounts in Anna Funder, *Stasiland* (London: Granta, 2003).

knowledge.⁵⁹ Moreover, it is clear that people's responses to questions about the Stasi changed quite considerably over the post-unification years, not only with changing knowledge and broader perceptions of the GDR but also as a result of different degrees of emotional involvement in dealing with their own past. It is also widely apparent that the Stasi could mean quite different things to people, with many different faces: the routine, day-to-day inquiries made of individuals in professional positions (directors of schools, factory managers, colleagues in workplaces) were frequently disassociated from the sinister, malign, and manipulative treatment of dissidents, those seeking to flee, or other perceived or potential 'threats' to 'state security'.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, the general patterns of response in retrospective comments can nevertheless be instructive. In their anonymous answers to a questionnaire in 2005, it was predominantly older respondents, and those in distinctive positions such as sport, who gave the most 'pro-Stasi' answers.⁶⁰ As one person born in 1922, who had contacts 'in a professional capacity' put it: 'It was significant for me as an organ of state security, since the GDR stood in the cross-fire of West German politics. There [in the West] they were not squeamish about inflicting damage.'⁶¹ Typically for their cohort, two people born in the early 1930s were themselves directly involved with the Stasi, phrasing their involvement thus: 'In the context of my professional activities (a data processing centre always has a high need for security)'; and rather more vaguely, 'in the context of professional and societal obligations'.⁶² Those in this age group who responded positively combined a supportive view of the regime with a positive evaluation of the role of the Stasi in assisting in its protection:

Colleagues from the Ministry for State Security made inquiries about colleagues in my workplace or co-residents who wanted to travel to the 'Western foreign countries'. I considered that to be normal, that not 'everyone' could travel, but [only] people who could represent our state in a worthy manner.⁶³

A somewhat younger person, born in 1949 and professionally involved in sports, responded vigorously:

⁵⁹ This topic obviously requires more space for adequate treatment than is available here; I have therefore merely made a small selection from a far larger body of material.

⁶⁰ Two versions of a lengthy questionnaire were administered in a number of locations in and around Berlin (including Müggelsee, Köpenick, and Königswusterhausen, as well as Lichtenberg, Marzahn, and other inner-city areas) and the town of Eisenhüttenstadt on the Polish border, to over 300 people in the summer of 2005. I am very grateful to Silvia Dallinger for assistance in this research. The earlier and longer version included more by way of questioning on the Stasi, which elicited such hostility in many quarters that too high a proportion of those approached refused to answer it. The questions on the Stasi were more limited in the subsequent version of the questionnaire. Responses to questions from the longer version are referenced in footnotes by a number prefixed with 'L'; responses to the shorter version are numbered without any prefix; occasionally there is a combined numbering system appended. For further details, see Fulbrook, "Normalisation" in retrospect'.

⁶¹ L43 (1922).

⁶² L58 (1934); L59 (1932).

⁶³ L40 (c.1931).

Anyone who worked in sports and travelled with sports delegations to the West (USA, Italy, Yugoslavia, Spain) had personal contacts (without having to be an Informer!!!) . . . In general in relation to the Stasi questions: My experiences of life and the course of my life in the GDR is in no way influenced by the Stasi. Why does this have to play any role in this questionnaire!?⁶⁴

There are some other quite extraordinarily positive comments in answer to the question of whether the Stasi was important in people's lives, such as 'I felt myself to be secure' and 'One of my sons belonged to the [Stasi] guard regiment.'⁶⁵ It is important of course to remember that these views are those reported, perhaps unduly defensively, by East Germans well after the end of the GDR, when their former state was exposed to widespread criticism and attack; nevertheless, the frankness with which such positive comments were made, given the generally negative atmosphere with respect to the Stasi is in itself surprising.

There were of course more critical respondents in this sample. What is interesting here, however, is the way in which many seemed in some way to have 'routinized' the Stasi as something to be expected in the course of everyday life. Some claim to have seen talking to Stasi officials as simply part of their professional duties, in much the same way as Westerners may dislike but more or less unthinkingly accept the need to discuss their financial affairs with tax inspectors. Many people held roles that automatically made them into what the Stasi called 'contact persons'. As a School Director put it: 'Since I was also the director of an Upper School, information was requested about students who wanted to train for a profession in the merchant navy.'⁶⁶ Another was both a teacher and a person in a position of responsibility in a residential complex:

As a teacher and the house security representative [*Hausvertrauensmann*] I was asked about trips for teachers or fellow residents to the Federal Republic of Germany by members of the State Security [Service], and now and again vouched for some teachers.⁶⁷

Others knew Stasi people socially: 'The husband of a colleague was a Stasi worker. That was never a problem in festive and private gatherings.'⁶⁸

Younger East German citizens often had a quite matter-of-fact approach to the Stasi issue, even when it was a cause of difficulty for them. One person born in 1957 laconically mentioned that the Stasi was significant because of 'contacts to persons from Western foreign countries' and 'in the factory (listening to telephone conversations)' but added that 'from today's perspective the problems of that time seem really small, since they never threatened my existence and I was not anxious about the future'—a reference to the practical problems and existential anxieties experienced in a post-unification period of high unemployment.⁶⁹ Another, born in 1960, commented: 'I didn't know anything more precise, only that certain persons were active'; 'you also picked this up during societal work', but that all this 'did not interest me'.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ L18 (1949).

⁶⁵ L45 (1935) [220].

⁶⁶ L47 (1939) [222].

⁶⁷ L48 (1936) [223].

⁶⁸ L55 (1941) [286].

⁶⁹ L24 (1957).

⁷⁰ L23 (1960).

Such reactions are found at greater length in oral history interviews too, where it is often possible to gain more of a context for the opinions and hear stories about particular incidents. A brief selection must suffice. Amalie H., born in 1922, seemed to see the Stasi as simply part of life, certainly nothing much to worry about in comparison to what she had been through in the Nazi period (she even, at one point in her interview, made the Freudian slip of saying 'Gestapo' when she was referring to the Stasi). Hers was a remarkably equable summary:

Well, I'm of the view, you can't change anything. What for? Well around here we had a lot of Stasi people. We knew that. For example two houses down from here is someone with whom I'm still on speaking terms today, yes. And at that time he was, whenever my husband changed his workplace, then he came to us and said, 'Herr H., you're changing your workplace again?'—'Yes.'—'Then I know why they were round my place again.' They always went to see him and asked about us. I am still on speaking terms with him today, why not, he never did anything to us. I hope not anyway, I've never looked into my things [Stasi files]. And here next door, that nice big new house, that was also one of the Stasi. After the *Wende* he was off, gone. He built himself a nice house near Stuttgart.

... Well, what does 'important' mean. We knew of many, no, we knew of all them, of these ones too.⁷¹

Fritz E., born in 1928 and a member of the NDPD who was strongly supportive of the GDR in virtually every respect, yet who seemed to have no particular privileges, nor any obvious personal reasons for dissembling, was quite angry when tackled on the subject of whether too much was being made of the Stasi in debates after unification. As he expressed it rather heatedly:

People are turning the Stasi into criminals. Today if someone had been in the NSDAP [i.e. was a Nazi] and, and that is—you say he's innocent, but if he was in the, in the, had something to do with the Stasi, that was a crime, yes. But that is really, is really wrong. Not everyone who worked together with the Stasi was a criminal... Now this, this security system is being made into criminals, into crime. Of course there were also black sheep, people who stuck a knife into you, or what do I know, please, of course you can punish those people. But you can't punish every little person who had something to do with the State Security, can't set them up as criminals. That's just crazy.⁷²

Brigitte D. (born 1924), was similarly exasperated when asked if she had personally had contacts with or been bothered by the Stasi:

Not at all! Not at all! When they keep on talking about it, it sounds as if someone from the Stasi was following every single one of us around all the time. Perhaps I had, when I was in the Further Education College, there was maybe one in the class, that could be so, that in this way they checked how the teaching was going from an ideological point of view, that could be so, but I didn't notice it. Yes. So I—I'm sorry.

... Yes, they make out as if someone was always following us around, that's how it sounds, yes.⁷³

⁷¹ Amalie H. (1922).

⁷² Fritz E. (1928).

⁷³ Brigitte D. (1924).

This is not to suggest that these people were necessarily correct in their professed unawareness of the presence of the Stasi. They were simply exasperated at the extent of coverage it seemed to be getting in unified Germany, as if this was supposed to summarize the entirety of their lives in the GDR.

Others were far more specific in their responses, giving details of uncomfortable brushes with the Stasi, as well as occasionally more humorous stories. Ilse J. and her husband Harald J., for example, managed in the late 1980s to gain a visa for both of them to travel to London to visit Ilse's uncle, a Jew who had survived Nazi persecution by emigration in the 1930s.⁷⁴ They brought back with them a highly prized possession of a video recorder, a gift from Ilse's uncle. At the border crossing back into the GDR, this was about to be confiscated, when the border guards suddenly noticed how unusual it was for a married couple to have been given permission to travel West together—permission which had actually been obtained with considerable difficulty and by 'playing the Jewish card'. Ilse and Harald reported with some pleasure the way in which the border guards had intimated that they might be privileged travellers as undercover members of the Stasi, a misperception they had done nothing to dissolve, thus being able to retain (via a roundabout procedure involving a relative in West Berlin) their new video recorder. Despite all their critical comments on the GDR in general, which they both frequently compared to Nazi Germany, and the fact that they were both active and committed Christians, they reportedly had little trouble with the Stasi, even at work, as Ilse explained:

But as I said, with the Red Cross, although [the boss] was a communist and probably also worked for the Stasi, I had no disadvantages and he knew perfectly well that we sang [in the church choir] and went to church.⁷⁵

Knowledge of the fact that a Stasi employee lived right opposite them from 1977 onwards had the consequence that they lowered the blinds on the windows when they watched Western news, and turned on East German television for the Stasi neighbour to watch with the blinds raised if they were going out for the evening. Again, they reported this with a degree of humour, and Ilse interpreted these habits as actually unnecessary but rooted in her childhood experiences in Nazi Germany when her parents tried to ensure that no neighbour could see or hear them listening to radio news broadcasts from London—reports of which could have had possibly fatal consequences. Harald J. had slightly more serious brushes with the Stasi, but nevertheless summarized his views in what might seem understated terms:

Well, I had various experiences with this. And experiences of the sort that I cannot understand all this talking about the Stasi, to the extent that it is now being driven.

From 1957 or 1958 until 1961 the MfS repeatedly tried to gain Harald J. as an unofficial informer, first to inform on fellow students and subsequently in his workplace. On each of three separate occasions he refused, with some difficulty when one of the meetings was set up in a 'conspirational apartment', and he was threatened with ten years imprisonment if he told anyone about it; he was also told

⁷⁴ Ilse J. (1932).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

in some detail how and with whom he had spent the previous few days, in order to underline the power of the Stasi to survey his life. But in the spring of 1961 Harald J. told his boss at work that he was being subjected to this pressure, and following an exchange of words in high places the attempt to recruit him as an informer was called off. As he discovered on accessing his file in the 1990s, the conclusion was officially reached that, in the awkward expression of the Stasi: 'The recruitment procedure is to be desisted from; the person approached is expressing anti-conspirational thoughts [*dekonspirative Gedanken*]'. Harald J. claims that there were absolutely no negative consequences for his career. He was rather more shocked that one of his colleagues at the time, who was also a member of the church and a member of the CDU, later turned out to have been an informer. As Harald put it: 'And what a crooked dog. But we didn't know at the time.' Harald had a further brush with the Stasi in the mid-1970s, when he became interested in matters to do with environmental pollution and correctly calculated sulphur dioxide emissions and pollution from brown coal ash. Again, however, he stood up to the Stasi officer who challenged him on where he had gained his figures from—accusing him of having illicitly obtained and betrayed state secrets—and Harald, perfectly honestly, explained that he was a trained chemist with good enough mathematical skills to perform the relevant calculations from publicly available data, and was pleased to have official confirmation that he had calculated so accurately. While he emphasized that he would not, in public, have called Honecker 'a pig', he had no compunctions about openly criticizing his boss at work. His robust attitude seems to have earned him respect rather than trouble. Perhaps he was particularly fortunate, but Harald's periodic bouts of exposure to the Stasi did not detract from his claims to have led a 'normal life'.

Wibke W. (born 1956), the Olympic silver medallist, discovered on reading her file after unification that she and her family had been thoroughly vetted before she was selected as a talented young sports person whose career was to be fostered.⁷⁶ She also had a scary encounter with two Stasi officers who tried to recruit her as an informer when she was training hard for Western competitions. She repeatedly refused, and told her mother about the experience; her mother was shocked. Her own 'solution' at this point was to get engaged and move out of the district, moving to another district with her fiancé. Although her file was forwarded, the new Stasi office made no attempt to recruit her. After that, she was not bothered at all by knowledge of the Stasi's existence and indeed omnipresence:

We did actually know about it, that is that some people had signed, that certain people had really [signed] so that they were then active as informers, that I didn't know, but we knew that some from the State Security were there. So, we always joked, for every athlete there is, well for every two and a half athletes there was always one Stasi functionary coming along too . . . But actually, well it didn't really interest me at all, as I said, I had no disadvantages, I didn't know, I didn't know that things were being written about me like that, yes, and they simply, they knew that without the stamp of

⁷⁶ Wibke W. (1956).

the State Security we wouldn't travel to the West, everyone knew that . . . and without, without permission from the State Security you didn't travel anywhere, at least not we athletes. Who were now travelling in capitalist foreign countries.⁷⁷

Despite her almost instinctive aversion to the approach of the Stasi men who tried to recruit her, Wibke W. seems to have seen Stasi official approval of and accompaniment on her travels with her team to competitions abroad as a standard, acceptable part of the way things were. She thought, too, that many informers may have simply been young people who had merely wanted to 'help the state' and been flattered by an approach, only to regret it later. She was adamant that, at the time, she had no idea of how extensive the surveillance had been, and that for her the Stasi had really played very little of a role.

There was nevertheless a sense in which the knowledge or perception of the ubiquitous Stasi played a 'normalizing' role in the GDR. Sensing that it was all-pervasive, even without necessarily knowing the full details, meant that people in their outward behaviour conformed to the norms they felt required of them in any given situation. Knowing that within any seminar, lecture hall, or work group at least one person would be informing, and that reports on what was said could have consequences for future lives and careers—positive as well as negative—was certainly a strong constraint for many people on the type of behaviour and expressions they allowed themselves 'in public'. Norms were in this way, if not internalized, at least sustained through a sense of what was possible within any given situation. This was arguably why it was all the more shocking for those who later discovered that people whom they had trusted completely, such as members of their own families, had in fact been betraying what they said when their guard was down in what they had thought to be a 'safe' environment.

The response of Renate B. (born 1948), who had in her interview repeatedly emphasized that she lived what she saw as a 'perfectly normal life' in the GDR, is particularly interesting for the way it demonstrates how not merely her upward career path, but also her personal relationships, could be brought into line with the norms and expectations of the state. Her account betrays both a hint of disapproval yet simultaneous adaptation. She appears to have developed responses to the Stasi as something of both a routine irritation and a not entirely welcome fact of life, rather than a deadly threat, although her account betrays lingering evidence of dissonance. Following a visit to Czechoslovakia, where she had stayed in an international youth camp, she had got to know some young West Germans. She met up with three of them again later in Berlin, where one of the boys suggested she should visit them in the West. Renate's response here is interesting, for she downplayed both the essentially extraneous reasons for her dropping this growing friendship, and suggested that the potential relationship on which she was missing out was in any event not really so important to her:

One of these West Berliners, one was from West Berlin, he said come and visit us sometime and somebody must have picked up on this. But I must honestly say, it didn't really bother me because I couldn't really care. So, no, because it, well, you got

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

to know someone, if you get to know someone on holiday and then still—that wasn't now important to me. That wasn't so. We just said, here, we're being observed, we have to watch out. And then this laid itself to rest, shall we say. Because it . . . it didn't bother me . . .⁷⁸

In the following part of the interview, when pressed on this rapidly terminated incipient relationship, Renate B. repeatedly emphasized that 'in principle it was over for me' and that it was 'not so important', the very repetition of the phrase, with hesitations and qualifications in between, suggesting that she might, perhaps, still be having to persuade herself that it really had been that unimportant to her. Renate B. also worked with colleagues among whom she knew there were Stasi informers, and lived in an area where many Ministry for State Security employees also lived, all of which could be accommodated within her view of GDR life as 'perfectly normal', or at least something that could readily be dealt with:

Then I lived where the Stasi—one knew where they were, one knew where they were. And someone, if someone said, hey, there's something going on, watch out there, then that—, well I'll say, today I don't know any more who is sitting next to me and what he does. Today I don't know this any more. At that time you knew it, you could see who . . .

Of course one of my colleagues was involved there—, we were at that time in the department store, I knew then, well, they also told us then, she said, watch out, they were at home just now to see my husband, they want to recruit him for the Stasi. Yes, one knew that. Then one looked and laughed, but I'm still friends with him, that was all—, one just sometimes heard something or other, but it didn't irritate me, it also didn't bother me, was just well, oh what's going on there, you see?⁷⁹

It is difficult to know how best to characterize this kind of response. One might want to call it the 'mosquito theory' of the evils of everyday life in the GDR: often more sensed than seen, known to be buzzing all around, the background hum louder in some places than others, potentially hugely irritating and best to avoid, but generally not life-threatening. It certainly did not shift Renate B. from pursuing what she still perceived to be her 'perfectly normal' life. Yet it 'normalized' her, in the sense of constraining her choices of friendship, a fact she sought not entirely successfully to rationalize as having been of her own free will.

Others, of course, had far worse experiences. In many of these accounts, 'normalization' entails aspects of both perception and reaction: it includes not knowing the full extent of Stasi activities; knowing of some aspects and seeing these as in some way standard and acceptable procedures in a modern state; being only marginally aware of the effects on one's own life or of the ways in which one's conduct was constrained; or having a sense of agency in the ways one adapted or dealt with the situation as perceived. None of these professions of both relative ignorance and simultaneous routinization of responses to the Stasi should detract from registering the ways in which the Stasi actually manipulated people's lives, intervened to restrict freedoms, and prevented East Germans from exercising the

⁷⁸ Renate B. (1948), 2005.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

human rights of freedom of speech, association, and movement. From the perspective of any individual victim of violence, it matters very little whether they are the sole person in the world to experience such violence, or rather one among hundreds, thousands or even millions who share similar fates. But what these sorts of responses do indicate, however, is what might be described as a 'routinization of evil'. The sheer fact that those who answered in these sorts of terms outweighed the numbers of respondents who had suffered, sometimes very deeply, at the hands of the Stasi is in itself surprising. And the fact that so many East Germans were surprised after 1990 at the extent of what they did not know is a significant aspect of the way the GDR operated, and how people led their lives, while it lasted.

IV. LIFE COURSES OF THE FDJ GENERATIONS

For those born after the end of the war and in the early years of the GDR, the 1960s were a crucial period for the channelling of future lives. How people responded to the challenges and opportunities depended in part on background—parental social standing, presence or absence of contacts in the West—and partly on personal aptitudes and attitudes. Those who did well at school in one way or another, and were prepared to cooperate with whatever was required of them by way of commitment and conformity, could find that the state eased their paths and opened up career opportunities that would—particularly for those from relatively modest backgrounds—have been totally unattainable under other circumstances. Those who had little contact with anyone of emotional significance in the West, and who were willing to engage in the appropriate political compromises and commitments, might well be able to develop careers and lives of which they could feel proud, or with which they were at least contented or satisfied. But those who rubbed up against the borders of the regime—both literal and metaphorical—and found the rules unduly restricting, could find their lives thrust onto more marginal and critical paths. And even some of those brought up in the most regime-supportive environments found that key events and ongoing experiences as teenagers and young adults in the later 1960s and early 1970s could set them on more dissident tracks.

One such was Vera Lengsfeld, born 1952, the daughter of a senior official in the Ministry for State Security. A classic 1929er, Vera Lengsfeld's father had been born in the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia from which Germans were summarily expelled straight after the war; already an orphan at the age of fifteen, Lengsfeld's father had to gather up all his belongings into a bag inside twenty minutes and leave the parental homeland for what was then the Soviet zone of occupation.⁸⁰ Like so many of this generation and background, he appears to have identified with the new East German state which in all sorts of ways—discipline, commitment, future orientation, and a sense of wider belonging—

⁸⁰ Vera Lengsfeld, *Von nun an ging's bergauf...Mein Weg zur Freiheit*, 2nd edn (Munich: LangenMüller, 2007), pp. 13 ff.

came to substitute for the entirely lost family and erased past. Vera Lengsfeld's mother was, too, in her way a classic 1929er: she was working as a new teacher (*Neulehrer*) in Thuringia, trained up on the fast-track programme to replace the old Nazi teachers, when she first met the newly arrived 'resettler' (*Umsiedler*) who was to become Vera's father. Vera was, thus, brought up in an extremely state-sustaining environment, the child of two classic 1929ers. Yet the parental generation could not transmit entirely the emotional basis for their own commitment to the system, despite increasing intellectual awareness of its shortcomings in practice.

Vera Lengsfeld recalled her own 'first doubts about the system' when, as a late teenager, she had her first run-in with police about a 'youth festival'. This was meant to be an innocent party of young people with music, which Vera Lengsfeld and a friend had wanted to organize under the auspices of the FDJ, but which in the view of the local authorities was more in the way of 'an illegal event for the disturbance of public security'.⁸¹ Fortunately for Vera at the time, little more came of this escapade and she was able to proceed to university studies. But by the time she was a university student in the 1970s, further clashes both with the authorities and with her own, regime-supporting father, became inevitable—although at first she remained of the view that open debate and critique in order to improve the GDR was possible. Among Vera Lengsfeld's informal discussion circles at university there was a 'relatively open atmosphere':

This led many of us, including me, to the false conclusion that socialist society could be changed. Up until now mistakes had been made, yes, crimes committed. Our generation seemed to be called to expose these mistakes and crimes, to ensure that they would not be repeated and that finally society would live up to its own standards.⁸²

This sense of a generational mission for reform soon however eventuated into generational clashes, as the parental generation more generally blocked moves towards liberalization, and individuals whose emotions took precedence over political commitments were, in turn, subjected to disciplinary measures in respect of difficult offspring. As Lengsfeld recalled in relation to the expulsion of Wolf Biermann, when even her father appeared to have registered doubts about the party line although he 'had to keep himself on the straight and narrow if he wanted to continue to practise his profession':

After the opening of the Stasi files I was forced to see for myself that my father had several times been made to sign that he would distance himself from his daughter who was hostile to the state, and to pledge that he would never meet her again... The frustrated comrades registered the fact that my father, against his written undertakings, not only saw me but also now and then supported me financially. That led finally to his being made to retire prematurely at the age of 55.⁸³

In the later 1970s and 1980s Vera increasingly gravitated towards the groups of political activists who were growing under the umbrella of the Protestant Churches, following the Church–State agreement of 6 March 1978 which had allowed more

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

space for relatively open debate.⁸⁴ And in the course of the 1980s, egged on by her then husband Knud Wollenberger, she became one of the most prominent figures in the dissident scene, only to be expelled from the GDR, against her will, after being arrested at the Luxemburg-Liebkecht demonstration of January 1988. It transpired, after the opening of the Stasi archives, that the prime Stasi informer or IM who had both encouraged and at the same time betrayed her dissident activities was her husband, Knud.⁸⁵

Vera Lengsfeld's case was—as all individual stories—in some respects unique but, like Hans Paasche decades earlier, her story is unique primarily in respect of the courageously risky ways in which she responded to challenges and perceptions which were far more widely shared. The increasing disillusionment with the disjuncture between the high ideals and the corrupt and repressive realities of the SED regime was one which many people of her generation and background registered. Anetta Kahane (born 1954), for example, was the daughter of Jewish and communist émigrés—in double ways the key protagonists for upholding the 'anti-fascist state', although during her youth this combination was something of a taboo. As she later put it:

We were lucky, since the word Jew or Jewish resonated too in the stories. There were other families in which it was unspoken . . . In ours it was explicitly mentioned and yet remained something of a taboo. Although the official state ideology basically only recognized anti-fascist victims of the Nazis, we knew that there were also others.⁸⁶

Anetta Kahane had, unlike many of her cohort, grown up with rather cosmopolitan horizons, given the fact that her politically loyal parents were variously stationed in India and Brazil; following stints as a child living across the globe, as a young person life in the GDR appeared to Kahane particularly confined as a political, cultural, and social space in ways that many of her cohort would not have experienced so directly. For a long time, too, Kahane felt constrained not only by the political achievements of her parents' generation, but by the overwhelming sense—typical of survivors' children—that any of her own suffering or fears paled into absolute insignificance in comparison with what they had gone through, however indirectly their suffering had been alluded to in the past. As she put it:

But what was left from this for us? What was the perfectly normal life in contrast to the elegant and so admirably unemotional heroism of my parents? Whether intentionally or not, practically everything had to stand comparison with them and their cause, their intensive life.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ See further Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, where further references may be found. These remarks are also in part based on meeting Vera Wollenberger (as she then was) personally on a couple of occasions in Cambridge and London during her stay in the UK in 1988–9.

⁸⁵ See Lengsfeld, *Weg zur Freiheit*; and her earlier account published under her then name, Vera Wollenberger, *Virus der Heuchler* (Berlin: Elefanten Verlag, 1992).

⁸⁶ Anetta Kahane, *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst. Meine deutschen Geschichten* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2004), p. 35.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Even a visit to the dentist caused acute anxiety in the young Kahane, who 'felt ashamed' that she could barely stand the 'torture' of dental treatment while her parents had had to face the Gestapo.⁸⁸ And, like others born into the GDR in contrast to their parents, the political situation was not imbued with the same intensity of emotional commitment overriding intellectual hesitations:

I asked instead what I should become, what I should do, what was really worthwhile, if everything was so fabulously in order in the GDR, if all battles had been fought and all conflicts resolved.⁸⁹

Answers were barely convincing; and, even if difficult to understand at the time, the half-repressed complexities of the current situation were not so easily ignored:

On top of this came the collected silences or the restrained words, like a code that was hard to decipher, made up of contrasts in a world in which every contradiction had simply been declared resolved. Despite the Wall, which was a constraint for everyone, despite the open hypocrisy, the GDR media which were so distanced from reality, despite the coldness of people, their hardness and indifference, despite the only partially reformed Nazis, despite the enforced pompous rituals and megalomaniac gestures of the political leadership, despite the unbearable self-righteousness of the officials and bureaucrats. It was just an impression—what had been left out, that is, the significance of which I had to figure out for myself.⁹⁰

Eventually, Kahane and others did figure out for themselves what they thought about the GDR—but not immediately.

Those who eventually were at the forefront of dissident movements in 1989, largely born in the early 1950s, were on the whole up to a decade younger than the majority of Western students who, in the 1960s, became involved in the student protest movements in the Federal Republic of Germany which have been conveniently summarized under the heading '1968'. Nor were the vast majority of these younger East Germans actively involved in any kind of protest against the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact repression of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in that year. As Hartmut Zwahr noted in his diary, few East Germans were willing to risk expressing their inner views in outward forms at this time; and such protests as there were in the GDR were very rapidly suppressed by the speedy and efficient intervention of the Stasi.⁹¹ But observing these events from afar did make an impression on many younger East Germans, even if they were still only in their mid-teens at the time. The later dissident Ulrike Poppe, for example, remembers vividly the impact this moment made on her.⁹²

For the time being, however, the early 1970s and the shift from Ulbricht to Honecker did appear to register a period when reform within the GDR appeared more possible. Honecker himself made great play of constructing an image as youthful reformer and excising Ulbricht as best he could, if not entirely from the

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42. ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43. ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–4.

⁹¹ On the suppression of protests in the GDR in 1968, see e.g. Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten*; and Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*.

⁹² See Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins* (Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag, 2002).

historical record then at least from the panoply of communist stars. Even so, people were able to live in a number of different registers at once; and among both the ‘first FDJ generation’ and younger cohorts it was not always easy to produce conformity. Reports from schools repeatedly provide evidence of the difficulties of developing the desired ‘class outlook’ among young people who were, with the growth of radio and television ownership, increasingly exposed also to the influence of the West. As one report on the Wilhelm-Pieck Upper School in East Berlin put it, with respect to the work of the FDJ in Class 10a:

The most active members of the FDJ took a very determined stance against such pupils who, it is true, appeared very progressive in some of what they said, but in their lifestyle behaved quite differently and happily lent their ear to the NATO broadcasting stations. Above all they opposed pupils who said: ‘We listen to broadcasts from the West too, because we want to be informed by all sides.’ The FDJ members quite rightly said to them that an all-round, comprehensive and correct orientation could only be achieved through the publication channels of our state. They asked their class comrades whether they really believed that they would receive information from the West that could be of use to our socialist state and its politics of peace. They demonstrated to them that there could not be a so-called independent standpoint. Either one stands on the side of the working class, on the side of the GDR, or one stands on the side of the enemies of our people.

... These FDJ members were so forceful in their approach because they felt they had the support of their parents and their teachers, which strengthened them in their correct attitude.⁹³

The young people in the FDJ—notably with the apparent support of their parents and teachers—had to explain to their classmates that Western ‘news’ was in fact just enemy propaganda and not helpful in forming an opinion or being well-informed. There was still, among those dispensing such advice, a sense of ideological mission, and desire to mobilize the young:

It is decisive that we succeed in awakening among school pupils an attitude to learning, work and life that makes them willing and able to participate in the great societal transformations of our time, and more precisely to be creative and active. In this context we emphasize that we cannot make use of an ideology of consumption and orientation among the up-and-coming generation, but rather a conception of life that is oriented to the solution of daily tasks.⁹⁴

But those growing up as young people at this time were far less likely than the generation who was now that of their parents and teachers—the 1929ers—to be mobilized in service of the communist cause. The ‘consumer ideology and outlook’ was to take ever increasing hold, and was even to a considerable degree fostered by the political leadership of the GDR, first and foremost by Erich Honecker’s beloved ‘unity of economic and social policy’.

⁹³ LAB, C Rep 706 Nr. 13, Wilhelm-Pieck-Oberschule, Schuljahresanalyse 1. Halbjahr des Schuljahres 1966/67, fol. 12.

⁹⁴ LAB, C Rep 700 Nr. 63, Rep., Haus des Lehrers, Lehrerakademie des Marxismus-Leninismus, Polit. Weiterbildung der Lehrer 1973–1978, p. 3.

Despite and sometimes even because of the best efforts of the SED regime, youth cultures were increasingly cosmopolitan: listening to Western music, yearning for Western consumer goods such as 'genuine' blue jeans, participating in the various aspects of an increasingly global popular culture. Studies by the Leipzig Central Institute for Youth Research (*Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung*, ZIJ) shed interesting light on the development of attitudes among succeeding cohorts of young people from the mid-1960s through to the end of the GDR. One survey was based on 548 questionnaires completed by members of the paramilitary Society for Sport and Technology (GST) in major industrial plants and training programmes, just under two-thirds (62 per cent) of whom were male. Given the connection with the GST, this was a group that might be expected to be rather favourably disposed to the regime. Yet it was clear that they watched and listened to Western television and radio about as much as GDR media.⁹⁵

When asked in 2005 about the 'greatest problems' they experienced in different decades, many of those born in the 1950s replied with comments that reflected their differing needs at different ages.⁹⁶ A male born in 1957, for example, reported as problems: in the 1960s, 'no "genuine" jeans'; in the 1970s, 'no PINK FLOYD RECORDS'; and, by the time of young adulthood in the 1980s, switching to the more pragmatic 'too little by way of building materials (own home)'.⁹⁷ Another male, born in 1953, gave as answers: '1960s: was a child and was not really lacking in anything'; in the 1970s, 'records that one liked, sound technology, jeans clothing'; by the 1980s, while harbouring lingering desires for such commodities, this person added 'but did one really need these things'.⁹⁸

It is true that Western beat, rock, and punk music were key aspects of a youth 'scene' in the GDR, and that official attempts to co-opt aspects of the changing styles while reorienting the message to more regime-supportive lyrics were only partially successful.⁹⁹ For those who participated centrally in these developments, the personal tensions could be considerable. But one should not leap to generalizations from the fact that it was precisely this aspect of youth culture which dominated SED concerns and, particularly where young people aroused official suspicion of engaging in 'hostile-negative behaviour', received its sedimentation in the archival records of the GDR, thus also arousing particular notice among historians.¹⁰⁰ The vast majority of these birth cohorts were more likely to complain

⁹⁵ BArch Bibliothek, FDJ/5803, Wolfgang Netzker, *Bereit und fähig zur Verteidigung des Sozialismus. GST-Mitglieder* (Leipzig, Juli 1986), fols. 39–40. However mindful one needs to be about the conditions under which surveys were carried out, trends and variations across time as well as across different social groups can be highly revealing.

⁹⁶ Questionnaire survey, 2005, as above.

⁹⁷ Q84, M. (1957). Capitalization in the original.

⁹⁸ Q160, M. (1953).

⁹⁹ See particularly Michael Rauhut, *Beat in der Grauzone. DDR-Rock 1964 bis 1972—Politik und Alltag* (Berlin: BasisDruck, 1993) and Michael Rauhut, *Schalmei und Lederjacke. Udo Lindenberg, BAP, Underground: Rock und Politik in den 80er Jahren* (Berlin: Schwarzkopf und Schwarzkopf, 1996).

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. Fenemore, *Sex, Thugs and Rock 'n' Roll*; McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany*; Marc-Dietrich Ohse, *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau. Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn (DDR 1961–1974)* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2003); Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins*.

of lack of exotic fruits (*Südfrüchte*) in the 1970s than lack of access to Western gramophone records. Many used the word 'accommodation' (*Anpassung*) as a means of adjustment: either of adjusting, even lowering, their own expectations, and enjoying that which was possible, or simply fitting in with the world around them in more or less grumbling fashion. There was however also the question of relative priorities; in retrospect, some aspects of life in the GDR were downplayed, while others acquired far greater significance than they perhaps had at the time.

Historians have devoted much attention to dissident youth cultures, and the penalties of dissidence—even for what appear to Westerners to be absurd penalties for such trivial matters as transgressing norms with respect to hairstyles and bodily appearance. But it is notable that the youth 'rebellion', such as it was, in the 1970s and 1980s was in a sense contained, kept to the level of individual expressions of difference or retreat into what could really only be life-style subcultures. The 'hopes and mission for the future' style of early twentieth-century youth movements had by now been entirely co-opted, routinized, and institutionalized in the state-controlled movements of the FDJ and related activities. 'Mobilization' was no longer a matter of an inner state or voluntary involvement, nor did it arise 'spontaneously' out of lived experience. There seemed in the GDR also to be far less by way of generational rebellion than there was either in the West, or in earlier decades of the century. There was very little room for critiques of the past or the parents' generation, in part because there was little sense that much could be changed. The one area where there did appear to be room for autonomous youth movements was in the sphere of culture—and even this could be to a considerable extent contained and channelled.

Those who grew up in the early years of the GDR were arguably quite idealistic in terms of the period in which they were educated, and had, through personal experiences as children in the post-war period, an acute sense of the need for making improvements and working for a better future. But in practice many had received quite mixed messages, given the state of the teaching profession and school system in the 1950s, and the very patchy youth coverage by the FDJ at a time when the influence not only of the family but also the Churches was still strong. By the time they reached adulthood, life plans and routes to achieve culturally informed aspirations were becoming clearer. But they were from family backgrounds with a large sense of 'before' (1945), and they themselves experienced another sense of 'before', in their case relating to 1961.

For some who were fostered and given new opportunities by the regime while there was still a very live sense of the effects of the war, there was also an acute awareness of the opportunities offered to them by the GDR. Wibke W., for example, whose contacts with the Stasi were more or less routine once she had become an Olympic athlete, was a classic GDR 'success story' in this generation. She was the daughter of the second marriage of a man whose first wife and children had drowned while hiding in a lake from invading Red Army soldiers at the end of the war. One might have thought that this would be a poor starting point for a pro-GDR attitude, but the reverse was in fact the case. Effectively growing up as a child of a single-parent family, following her father's own premature death, Wibke

benefited dramatically from state support—in her case, in a sporting career where she eventually became an Olympic silver medallist. She fitted the ideal GDR profile precisely: she was the child of a single mother who benefited from state policies for women and child care; the family had no Western connections, no independent means, nor much by way of income from her mother's job; and Wibke was highly aware of the fact that she owed all her opportunities to the state. She was moreover even relatively unaware at the time of precisely how well she had been checked out on all politically relevant aspects before her individual gifts were fostered:

there was never anything put in my way, I was probably the ideal—travel cadre, let's say, because I, my parents, as I said, they had no one over there, not from my father's side, not from my mother's side, they all stayed in the Eastern sector, and—there were no, absolutely no problems, and both my brothers did their service at the border, that is their military service, at the inner-German border, that is in Berlin, and—they passed this with flying colours—then the family was checked out, you see, all of that I've only found out later, in the Stasi files, so I could read it all later, so then there were evaluations carried out that my mother was probably bringing us up in the spirit of, of, of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, so that's to say in the spirit of socialism, and was a good mother, and, and, and, all that sort of thing was written down . . .¹⁰¹

This professional sportswoman was, by definition, one of a very small and select group. Her case was far from typical; it merely demonstrates just what the precise full parameters for such rare individual successes were. Not money or inherited privilege, but rather an acceptable political profile and total lack of Western connections, in combination with significant individual talents that could be fostered by the state rather than the family, determined the 'selection' and support of the careers of certain young people in the GDR.

The situation was again different for those born in later decades, with no memory of life before or beyond the Wall, and indeed little sense of what 1961 or 1968 might have meant in terms of direct personal experience. It could be argued that, while differences between different age groups and cohorts can of course be discerned in particular respects, the middle decades of the GDR were, in fact, a time without the formation of generations, at least without the formation of any group that was so distinctive in profile as the 1929ers.¹⁰² This was a period of changes, but not of major historical ruptures or transitions requiring the rewriting of life stories and the total reconsideration of a rejected past while at the brink of adulthood—until 1989. Yet living in the GDR did mark an imprint on typical patterns of behaviour and outlook.

¹⁰¹ Wibke W. (1956), 2005.

¹⁰² I am not here seeking to engage with a growing literature on labelling succeeding cohorts within the GDR in ever finer detail. There is some excellent work in this area, and some which is little more than typologizing and labelling on the basis of rather small samples or narrow source bases which do not really bear the weight of the conclusions drawn. See for a good collection and overview Annegret Schüle, Thomas Ahbe, and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive: Ein Inventur* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006).

Surveys in the mid-1970s found that those teenage East Germans who had been born around the time of the construction of the Wall were, in comparison with Western teenagers at this time, more disciplined and dependent, non-aggressive, and secure; they thought little about the future, since their own personal futures were relatively assured, more or less mapped out for them.¹⁰³ Indeed, in contrast to the usage among their parents' war-torn generation yearning for the 'normality' of an uneventful life, or seeking to highlight their personal distance from any kind of political complicity, the emotional import of the word 'normal' among many of these teenagers was subtly inflected, even reversed, by adding a derogatory prefix: everyday life could be criticized as 'stinking normal' (*stinknormal*). The threat of slow death by boredom seemed to have taken the place of an allegedly heroic death on the battlefield for this generation. And the major differences between East and West German teenagers at this time appeared to lie in the fact that, while Westerners were highly critical of their parents, young East Germans had generally good relationships with their parents at this time.¹⁰⁴ Both among these cohorts, and among those a decade or so older, born at the time of the foundation of the GDR as a state rather than its 'second foundation' with the building of the Wall, such 'rebelliousness' as did exist was not directed personally against any authority figures in the home, but rather against the wider state context and its paternalistic authority in the public sense.¹⁰⁵

There is much evidence to suggest that cohorts born in the middle decades of the GDR had predominantly what they held to be 'happy childhoods', perhaps as parents sought their own happiness and post-war 'return to normality' in the domestic sphere and engaged in attempts, like that described in her diary by Marie Ziegler, to compensate for their own pasts and the miseries of broken families. Even those who knew of the Stasi while still a child or young person seem to have treated it almost as a game, and only felt seriously emotionally wrought after unification, once the question arose of who might, among the circle of close friends and family, have been an informer.¹⁰⁶ The children of the 1980s enjoyed arguably the most positive experiences of all; they did not even reach the life stage in which participation in youth activities ceased to be one of excitement and sociability, of eager anticipation of being old enough to receive a scarf of a new colour, but rather became one of monotony, ritual, and boredom. Many of these 'later-born' children of the GDR registered difficulties, after unification, in talking to members of their parents' generation; they often felt an acute sense of a gap between what they knew, and what parents were willing to talk about.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Yves van den Auweele, 'Zukunftsvorstellungen von 15jährigen in der DDR und der BRD' in Walter Jaiide and Barbara Hille (eds.), *Jugend im doppelten Deutschland* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1977) pp. 250–68.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁰⁵ See particularly the research by Dorothee Wierling; while alluded to in a number of articles, she develops this argument most extensively in her study of those *Geboren im Jahr Eins*.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. the personal account in Claudia Rusch, *Meine freie deutsche Jugend* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2003).

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. Robert Ide, *Geteilte Träume. Meine Eltern, die Wende und ich* (Munich: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2007).

In terms of overall profile, then, what might be called the various 'FDJ generations' differed both from one another and from previous cohorts. The 1929ers remain striking as the relatively most homogeneous generational group of the entire century. Yet, for all the necessary qualifications, a few general comments can be made. Those born in the early 1950s were distinctive in three respects. At one end of the spectrum was a very small minority who as young adults rose to prominence in the dissident movements of the 1980s, and became engaged in political activism under the largely protective umbrella of the Protestant Churches. Remarkable among these unruly spirits was the fact that several individuals (and we are talking at most of only a matter of dozens) came from highly politicized backgrounds, with parents who were regime-sustaining in one or another capacity. The ideological aspirations of the parents to some extent rubbed off on the children, who were then increasingly frustrated at the ever growing, ever more evident gaps between ideals and realities in 'actually existing socialism'. Untrammelled by any emotional baggage of guilt and deference towards the antifascist founding fathers, in contrast to the 1929ers, they sought actively to criticize and to reform socialism from within.

At the other end of the spectrum were those who benefited massively from and were individually fostered by certain regime policies. This was particularly evident in the area of competitive sports, where again a relatively small but significant number of those born in the early 1950s rose to prominence as medallists in international sporting competitions. Despite the fact that some, who had been exposed without their knowledge to illicit doping or hormone treatments, only later realized the full cost to their own health at which their sporting successes had been bought, at the time—and in some cases also later—many were often also highly positive about the ways in which the regime had made their individual achievements possible.

In between, however, was the vast majority, whose horizons were increasingly constrained not only by the physical enclosure of the GDR but also by the progressive reduction of the initially visionary aspirations of those in charge. As Ulbricht's goal of building the better Germany in the future was overtaken by a concentration on the material concerns of everyday life in the present under Honecker, so the horizons of those growing up in the drab realities of 'actually existing socialism' were ever more constrained by the demands of the day. For the vast majority of those who were born into the GDR, 'coming to terms with the present' overrode the problems of 'overcoming the past' and 'building the future'. The nature of their experiences and the challenges they faced varied somewhat according to socio-political locations and time of birth. But the materialism and focus on consumer goods, in hopeless competition with the ever present West (ever more present, in fact, in terms of nightly television watching), which was ironically fostered and encouraged by Honecker's own concern with the 'unity of economic and social policy', was later to play a major role in the eventual downfall of the GDR.

10

Embodying the past

In exploring the ways in which people of different ages were involved in the GDR, it becomes increasingly clear that it was precisely those who were brought up within the GDR and barely conscious of prior historical states who played the major role, eventually, in bringing it down. It was not the in-built hostility of some of the older citizens, but the frustrations and critiques of the young, which ultimately acted as the major internal leaven dramatically changing and ultimately helping to destroy what had for some decades appeared to be an increasingly stable, indeed even stagnating state. Arguably for most younger East Germans, most of the time, coming to terms with the present was far more important than any kind of reckoning with the past.

Even so, for all East Germans constructions of the past continued to play a role in situating their own lives in an unfolding GDR present. The degree to which the past served to frame or problematize accounts of one's life of course varied significantly with politics and prior experiences as well as age, commitments, and particular incidents or issues in the GDR. But it is evident from a wide range of sources that the Nazi past continued to be a major factor in shaping 'acceptable' constructions of the social self in the GDR. More than this: people's memories, and the experienced sense of dissonance in their own biographies, played a key role in their later opinions and behaviour and hence how they contributed to the particular patterns of GDR development; and even to the kinds of lives they were able to lead, on a material level too, as those drawing pensions eventually discovered. There was always a complex interplay between pragmatic considerations and constructions of the past, further complicated at the individual level by emotional involvements that could not always be openly expressed in the terms and constraints of the times. The past was, then, not purely a matter of 'representation' but also of elicited perceptions and consequent behaviours, and of bearing, even physically, the scars of history through a new and very different era.

I. TRACES

Many of those who had been adults during the Third Reich had a past that could be problematic, whether they lived in East or West Germany—a fact of which both East and West German elites were well aware, as they engaged in mutual mud-slinging about former Nazis in high places. And the one kind of life story that was certainly not encouraged, and unlikely even to be covertly circulated, was that of

former Nazi enthusiasts in the GDR. As far as the SED was concerned, the principal aim was now to cast aspersions on the alleged persistence of Nazi influence in the Federal Republic, in supposed contrast to the 'anti-fascist state' of the GDR. At the same time, however, they were in private also concerned that all was not quite as well in their own state as they wished to portray. Hence both private vigilance and public activities were necessary to deal with problematic vestiges of the Nazi past. It is thus far easier to explore examples and moments during which the SED pursued vestiges of Nazism than to recover the traces and reinterpretations of their own lives among former Nazis in the GDR.

The SED was explicitly proud of the GDR's record on dealing with major Nazis, an issue that was, whether pursued openly or secretly, an integral aspect of Cold War rivalry between East and West Germany.¹ The GDR authorities also claimed, given their record on the treatment of former Nazis, that they did not need to follow West Germany's example in attempting to do what was in any event impossible, 'make good again' for the survivors of Nazi persecution. A letter to Walter Ulbricht from the 'Jewish Nazi Victims Organization of America, Inc.' of July 9, 1962, asked why GDR was not willing to engage in a compensation programme (the grotesquely misnamed 'making good again', *Wiedergutmachung*) like that of the Federal Republic of Germany. As the representatives of German Jews now living in the USA put it:

Each one of us came away from the hands of the Nazis and their local accomplices ill in body and spirit. Each one of us has lost virtually their whole family . . . None of us could return to the country where every location was the scene of a murder and where in every neighbour we could suspect a fellow murderer.²

The Norden Office which was charged with making the GDR's official response replied to the effect that:

By removing all tainted Nazis, all militarists and revanchists from societal life and by stripping them of economic power, we have completed an act of genuine justice, without which there can be no genuine compensation of the crimes committed by the Hitler fascists against the victims of fascist terror.³

There is some degree of truth in these claims, although a Cold War game on both sides was to point to former Nazis in high places.

Campaigns to bring prominent cases into the public spotlight included as targets West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's chief aide, Hans Globke, who had been one of the civil servants responsible for drafting the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, as well as Adenauer's Federal Minister for Refugees and Expellees, Theodor

¹ See Annette Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002); Henry Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit. Die geheime Vergangenheitspolitik der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2005). For particular cases, see e.g. Bundesarchiv, Ministerium des Innern (DDR), DP/ 3 / 2096.

² SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV 2/2.028 / 76, Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer in der DDR, fol. 76.

³ *Ibid.*, fol. 86.

Oberländer, an enthusiastic former Nazi and SA leader whose wartime battalion had been involved in atrocities on the eastern front. The Norden Office even focused on the embarrassing revelation that West German lawyer Erwin Schüle, the first director of the Ludwigsburg Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, had formerly been a member of both the SA and NSDAP; in effect, as the SED put it, here was an old Nazi abusing his position to protect former colleagues and focusing the work of his office narrowly on SS crimes.⁴

But none of this was to be at the expense of former 'minor' Nazis within the GDR who had shown themselves to be committed to the new state. By the 1960s, the SED was careful to maintain the distinctions drawn earlier between those major Nazis who were still to be called to account, and the millions of Germans who had, as it was now suggested, been 'blinded' by the apparent attractions of Nazism. As Arne Rehahn, who was at that time responsible to the SED Politburo for the 'exposure of the character of the Bonn state' (*Entlarvung des Charakters des Bonner Staates*), put it in June 1961 in connection with the Eichmann trial and the question of an 'unmastered past' (*unbewältigte Vergangenheit*):

Without denying the responsibility of millions of Germans, who did not heed the warnings of the communists but rather allowed themselves to be blinded by nationalism, one has to state clearly: today it is purely a matter of excluding from politics and pronouncing judgment on the most guilty, the pillars of the Nazi regime, the big, incorrigible criminals who without any scruple are preparing new crimes. No one today, sixteen years after the end of the war, is thinking of a new 'denazification', or of trawling through the past of the millions of 'little Nazis' or of accusing former German soldiers—no, not even the masses of former members of the SS—simply because they were at that time whipped up and used by Hitler's generals and SS leaders as cannon fodder against other peoples and misused for their criminal deeds.⁵

Nevertheless, the SED kept a wary eye on the reactions of the public, in both West and East, to these campaigns against prominent figures from the past.

Hermann von Berg, at that time an up-and-coming young SED functionary working in the GDR secret service (later more critical and exiled to the West in 1986) reported, for example, on Western discussions of East German attempts to unveil FRG President Lübke as a former Nazi. As one Western press officer, Dr Mühlbrandt, at that time head of media relations for the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (*Bundesvereinigung Deutscher Arbeitgeberverbände*) is alleged by von Berg to have put it:

But now the brakes have to be put on, ultimately the GDR too had enough Nazis, if you like, one would have to exclude from politics the whole generation of 40 to 60 year-olds, ultimately all of them had lived with the Nazis.⁶

⁴ SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV A 2/2.028, Vol. 7; see also the Spiegel report of 28 November 2008, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Ludwigsburg institute, (http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalbumbackground/3224/nazijaeger_mit_vergangenheit.html) (accessed 6 Jan. 2010).

⁵ SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV A 2/2.028, Vol. 21, Rehahn, 'Der Eichmann-Prozeß und die unbewältigte Vergangenheit', 5 Jun. 1961, fols 39–42, here fol. 40.

⁶ SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV A 2/2.028 Vol. 8, von Berg, 'Gespräche mit westdeutschen Journalisten in der Zeit von 2.2. bis 7.2.1966 über unsere Enthüllungen zum Fall Lübke' Berlin, 9 Feb. 1966, fols. 66–7.

Other Western reactions to GDR campaigns against former Nazis seemed also to confirm the existence of a consensus that, since most of this generation were similarly affected, evidence of involvement in the functioning of the Third Reich was neither newsworthy nor interesting to the German public of the later 1960s. Von Berg also reported one Fuchs, from the political section of the Munich Evening News (*Münchener Abendzeitung*), as commenting that this kind of story could hardly help to sell newspapers:

People are simply not interested in the Lübke case, one hears an indifferent 'Well, what's one little Nazi more or fewer!' This sort of thing sells poorly, and many feel personally injured, since ultimately all of them had worked for the Nazis . . . They had to make sure their tabloid paper would sell, and had ascertained that people did not believe in any guilt on Lübke's part, he was held to be so 'dutiful and decent'.⁷

Similarly, Herr Steinmayr, formerly Chief Editor of *Revue*, is quoted as saying:

Psychologically our action against Lübke would not go down well, most older citizens are in the same position as Lübke, they had all reached some form of arrangement with the Nazis and continued working in their professions . . . Naturally they see the moral disingenuousness, but since they all feel they are affected by this they would have moral solidarity with each other, and certainly that's no different in the GDR either, even if no-one would say this openly, since after twenty years people just want finally to have some peace. Our propaganda is being decried as 'dirtying your own nest' . . . We also don't want to forget that particularly after the revelations of the Auschwitz trial the reactions of the population are for the most part dulled, Lübke's actions are seen as harmless in comparison to these misdeeds. Perhaps we should consider that 'a certain hatred of emigrants' is of course fully justified, but a transposition into the 'German mentality' would probably never be fully realisable precisely because of course the few emigrants have impeccable political credentials while the majority of Germans stand burdened with guilt. This automatically generates a 'passive resistance'. The clearest example of this atmosphere in the Federal Republic is the electoral defeat of [former political émigré and resistance fighter, later West German Chancellor] Willy Brandt.⁸

It is not clear whether, given the very different conditions of public debate (or lack of it) in the GDR, similar reactions were prevalent among the population. But it seems highly likely that many of those adults who had earlier found ways of accommodating themselves to Hitler's regime were less than enthusiastic about attempts to deal with it more than twenty years later, even if they could not voice their views in public so readily in the GDR as in the West.

The SED leadership was secretly as concerned about the persistence of Nazism in their own state as they were in public about the prominence of former Nazis in high places in the West. While in some cases they took trouble to protect individual former Nazis who could be useful to them, more broadly the notion that pockets of Nazi sentiment persisted was highly troubling.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, fols. 71–2.

⁹ On the overall complexities and also details of individual cases, see further Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit*.

In one case, for example, GDR authorities explored in some detail the underground complex of tunnels (*Stollen*) near the former Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald, and the alleged secret *Führer* headquarters known as 'Olga', near Jonastal.¹⁰ There had been a Nazi labour camp in this area, Ohrdruf, which had employed tens of thousands of slave labourers to build underground tunnels, very probably for purposes of secret munitions production; many of these slave labourers had died on a death march led by the SS at the very end of the war. There was also a large military training area here, subsequently also used by the Soviets after the war. Whether there ever really was a secret headquarters for use as a retreat by Hitler late in the war is unlikely, although 'Olga' seems to have been both planned and named; nevertheless, the dogged defence of the site by the SS in April 1945 certainly fed the rumour mills, which had not died down even two decades or more later. The site had supposedly included buried treasures which were allegedly later found and secretly used: according to the rumours circulating in the area, huge concentrations of treasures including art, gold, diamonds, and jewellery, as well as munitions and personal items belonging to Hitler had been uncovered here. The report on a secret investigation in this area suggested also, more ominously, that the influence of the SS lived on among local GDR citizens even in the later 1960s:

Even still today there are inhabitants, for example of Crawinkel [a local village], who are financially dependent on former SS officers. They received at that time money in order to build houses.¹¹

Some of those still under the influence of Nazism could be identified, reaching even into the higher ranks of the local power structures, including the mayor's own entourage. Moreover, there were other suspicious aspects of local society that also needed serious attention:

- In 1965 under the floorboards of the Mayor's office in Crawinkel, Lübke files were found and collected by the Department K. Since then these files have disappeared. Officers of the People's Police confirm the existence of these files.
- During a 'fire practice' at the Mayor's Office the SA flag and other diverse things were discovered and taken into safekeeping.
- The development of the LPG [Collective Farm] Crawinkel has been stagnating for years . . .
- [SS] Hauptscharführer Schäfer, Röhrensee, who was sentenced to death several years ago, meets up in Kalkbruch Crawinkel with an engineer of the former Erfurt firm of Topf and Söhne [which designed the fittings of the gas chambers at Auschwitz] . . .
- Shortly before our tour around the tunnels, in which comrades from Arndt also participated, the latter were exposed to public threats in a pub . . .
- In 1964 in Gossel a citizen by the name of Schindhelm died, although in 1945 in Sonneberg hospital a certain Schindhelm with precisely the same biographical details and dates had already passed away . . .

¹⁰ SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV A 2/2.028, Vol. 11, Gesamtüberblick, 1 Jan. 1967, fols. 38–54. The exact nature of Nazi military-related activities and planning in this area still remains a matter of speculation; much of the area remains closed (as a continuing 'Sperrgebiet').

¹¹ SAPMO BArch DY 30 / IV A 2/2.028, Vol. 11, fol. 48.

- The accountant of the VEB [People's Own Factory] Sawmill Crawinkel, Werner M. was a former member of the SS and via three families in Gräfenroda is maintaining contacts across the state border in the West.¹²

If stagnating agricultural collectivization, discovery of SA flags, suspiciously lively dead Nazis, and diffuse threats and social networks were not enough, there was also the fear that the atomic research supposedly begun in this area under the Nazis had been continued secretly after the war under one Dr Berkei. This was the subject of particular emphasis, 'since these things were as good as unknown beforehand but on the other hand there are still consequences and connections right up to today'.¹³ While the alleged goings-on among former Nazis in the little village of Crawinkel are hardly likely to be typical of the rest of the area which became the GDR, nevertheless this investigation of rumours and remnants of the Third Reich serves as a startling reminder of how very present the Nazi past still was in the minds of both the ruling SED and ordinary adults in the East German population. The presence of the Nazi past could not so easily be disposed of through official ceremonies celebrating the role of the Red Army in 'liberation'.

How much by way of personal memories of the Nazi past were repressed among East Germans is hard to say. Suggestive hints occur only in later, often hazy accounts of recurrent themes or specific incidents. One East German woman remembered, for example, that as a teenager in the 1960s, her grandfather gave her additional help with her maths, a subject she found difficult at school. As an illustration of mathematical calculations, he repeatedly made her compute sums designed to prove that the numbers of Jews deported to the East for extermination could not have been as high as was officially claimed, since such large numbers of people could, on the calculations he set her, never all have fitted into the railway carriages and trains at the disposal of the *Reichsbahn*. Why her grandfather kept puzzling over this question and insisting that the official version of history was a pack of lies was a matter of deep embarrassment to the granddaughter. As an adult, she recalls that she never even mentioned, let alone revealed details of her grandfather's claims at school, or dared to explore his own role in the Third Reich. It was only after a visit to Israel, long after German unification and even longer after his death, that she was first even able to speak openly to others, including Jews, about this memory and discuss explicitly her concerns about what her grandfather's own role might have been.¹⁴

Those who were somewhat older during the GDR recalled quite openly, after unification, how former Nazis were reincorporated so long as they did not engage in critique of the system in the present (as opposed to the more limited criticisms of shortcomings of the system which were permissible, even encouraged, in the so-called '*Eingaben*' or letters of petition and complaint). As in West Germany, there was and remained considerable toleration for those who had made what were now seen merely as political mistakes in the past, following the 'wrong flag' in good faith. As Fritz E., a committed member both of the HJ and subsequently

¹² *Ibid.*, fols. 48–9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, fol. 49.

¹⁴ An East German academic, personal communication to the author, 15 Oct. 2009.

the FDJ and as an adult throughout the GDR a stalwart member of the NDPD, later put it:

We have, we formulated it this way in the party, those who in good faith followed the wrong flag. Germans, who in good faith followed the wrong flag. Quite simply put. And this is what we told them. That with goodwill and in good faith they had supported the Nazi regime. And you would have to be stupid not to see this. In retrospect the crimes of everyone were laid open. Similar to today, today too there are still lots of things that socialism is accused of, that are coming to light and which we also knew nothing about.¹⁵

Fritz E., born in 1928 and a typical 1929er in the extent of his commitment to the GDR, could of course plausibly claim that he had personally known little of the ‘crimes’ of the Nazi regime; but his blanket exculpation of older Germans here interestingly reflects official views in the GDR. Similar transitions and quite pragmatic approaches to the Nazi past are evident in many other oral history interviews with former GDR citizens.¹⁶

In an area as sensitive as this, sources are always a problem; and the context always colours both the contents and the character of the representation. Contemporary snippets and hints appear in the archival records of the GDR, particularly in relation to ceremonies commemorating the victims of fascism, and detailed reports were prepared accordingly.¹⁷ These show interesting developments in typical reactions among different age groups over time. Reports in 1975 relating to preparations for celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the ‘Liberation’ of East Germany by the Red Army, for example, repeatedly register disaffection and dissonance among older East Germans. Even against the backdrop of the mandatory success stories always prevalent in official reports, negative or ambivalent reactions are reported, however well framed as representing only a minority of voices. Reports from Bezirk Frankfurt an der Oder, an area hard up against the post-war imposed new border between East Germany and Poland suggested, for example, that:

In the discussions qualifications and disagreements about German–Soviet friendship arose only occasionally. So for example there were opinions, particularly among older citizens, such as:

— I can’t forget what the Russians did in 1945. They deported us.

Particularly in discussions with pastors, there are opinions such as:

— The 8th May brought catastrophe for Germans;

— It was our downfall.¹⁸

¹⁵ Interview with Fritz E. (1928), summer 2006.

¹⁶ As elsewhere in this book, there is a great deal more which could be said about the oral history interviews carried out after unification.

¹⁷ See e.g. SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4784, Maßnahmeplan zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des 20. Jahrestags der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes vom Faschismus für den Kreis Strausberg, Nationale Front Kreissausschuß Strausberg, 13 Mar. 1965.

¹⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4795, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Frankfurt (O.), Jan.–Nov. 1975, Aktuelle Berichterstattung Februar 1975, Frankfurt/Oder, 28 Feb. 1975, p. 2.

If memory was the problem for older East Germans, a ‘correct’ understanding of the ‘class’ character of the events was missing among both younger and older GDR citizens:

Among the citizens of our district the recognition is growing that friendship and cooperation with the land of Lenin was, is and remains the prerequisite and condition for the development of the GDR. It is still difficult for younger citizens to recognize the great significance of the historical act of liberation. They often see this only from the perspective of the liberation of our people from Hitler fascism. Older citizens find it difficult to judge the 2nd World War, the act of liberation by the Soviet Army and the resulting transformations from a class standpoint.

Among them opinions such as the following are expressed, that one should remember not only the heroes of the Soviet army but also the fallen German soldiers.¹⁹

Problems included the fact that:

Occasionally, because of suffering experienced personally as a direct result of the war, there are negative opinions of this [act of liberation by the Soviet Union];

— Why are we still talking about this, our own experiences were so terrible that we should keep quiet about it.

... Occasionally citizens, particularly the older ones, put the question:

— why are only the graves of the Soviet soldiers tended and not the graves of German soldiers?²⁰

In Bezirk Schwerin, in the north-west of the GDR, closer to West Germany than the Polish border, similar opinions were registered:

In connection with the political discussions with citizens the following questions and arguments arose, among others: . . .

— Why can’t we talk about ‘collapse’ in 1945?

— Without the reparations . . . carried out by the USSR we would have got ahead a lot faster in the GDR.²¹

The authorities put on what they considered to be lively slide shows with presentations under titles such as ‘Thank you, you Soviet soldiers’ and ‘Slide shows by tourists who spent time in the Soviet Union, . . . slide series which have been put together by themselves, as in Hoppenrade, Kreis Güstrow, in which it is shown how the community and its people have developed in the thirty years since liberation’, as well as ‘reading from books, . . . friendship galleries, . . . the knowledge competition “From

¹⁹ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4795, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Frankfurt (O.), Jan.–Nov. 1975, Vorlage für das Sekretariat des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front der DDR, Betr: Bericht des Bezirkssekretariats Frankfurt/Oder zum Thema: Erfahrungen und Probleme der Arbeit der Nationalen Front in Vorbereitung des 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung vom Faschismus, Frankfurt/Oder, 13 Mar. 1975, p. 3.

²⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4795, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Frankfurt (O.), Jan.–Nov. 1975, Monatlicher Informationsbericht April 1975, Bezirksasschuß Frankfurt/Oder, 11 Apr. 1975, pp. 4–5.

²¹ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4709, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Schwerin, Jan.–Nov. 1975, Informationsbericht, Schwerin, 14 Feb. 1975, p. 5.

friend to friend”, exhibitions etc.’. Nothing was left open to possible mishap: ‘The dignified cultural shaping of the anniversary itself is also left neither to the institutions of the locality nor to chance.’²² Yet despite massive efforts, awkward questions continued to be raised, including the following:

- Didn’t the [Western] Allies play the same part in liberation as the Soviet Union?
- We weren’t liberated by the Red Army but by the Americans (heard occasionally in communities where the Americans were the first to be present).
- Doesn’t the Soviet Union dictate what the GDR has to do?
- Is the GDR really sovereign with respect to the Soviet Union?²³

Interestingly, the celebration of this anniversary appears to have jogged people’s memories and brought up questions that had lain dormant for some time, or had not been registered by the authorities so explicitly. Without giving any specific examples, the report of 27 March 1975 comments that ‘There are a series of questions (isolated, not concentrated like the ones previously listed) that have played no role for a long time and have only come up again in connection with the 30th anniversary of liberation.’²⁴ A report of 14 May 1975 makes a similar comment: ‘In connection with the 30th anniversary of liberation a series of questions and arguments* came up—sometimes quite isolated—that had played no role for a long time.’ But in this instance a report writer has helpfully asterisked the point and added in below, in handwriting: ‘*Problems with resettlement and thus loss of house and farm, being a prisoner of war, etc.’²⁵ Clearly among older GDR citizens the memories of forced ‘resettlement’, loss of their former homes, and periods of captivity were, even thirty years later, still hurting sufficiently to get in the way of full and eager participation in the officially ordained celebrations of ‘liberation’. Similar comments are found from many other areas of the GDR, frequently including comments on the lines of: ‘Didn’t the military help from the English and the USA also contribute to the fact that the Soviet Union could be perpetually on the offensive from 1943 onwards?’²⁶ It is clear that a lively independent sense of historical accuracy persisted among older East Germans.

Curiously, by the 1980s it appears to have been younger citizens of the GDR whose lack of understanding for the ‘liberation’ of Germany by the Soviets in 1945 was officially deemed worthy of comment. A report from Schwerin in 1985, for example, suggests that:

It can be ascertained that it is particularly the older citizens who were present during the 2nd World War and consciously experienced the act of liberation, who with the aid of their personal experiences contribute effectively in the gatherings and discussions for

²² SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 4709, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Schwerin, Jan.–Nov. 1975, Aktuelle Berichterstattung, Schwerin, 27 Mar. 1975, pp. 4–5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1975, p. 3.

²⁶ SAPMO-BArch DY 6 / 4882, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Halle, Jan.–Nov. 1975, Informationsbericht, 31 Jan. 1975, p. 3.

the consolidation of friendship with the Soviet Union. Among younger citizens it is often evident that they have only fragmentary knowledge.²⁷

This is scarcely a ringing endorsement of GDR educational efforts among the younger generation; more interestingly, the apparent contradiction between this and the reports of a decade earlier dissolves once one considers what is meant by the adjective 'older'. If this was, by the mid-1980s, used to refer to people who were by now in their late fifties or early sixties and coming up to retirement, the reference would be to the cohorts born in the 1920s: thus including precisely those—the 1929ers—who had benefited most from the new opportunities offered to them in the GDR some forty years earlier. And it was they who, after unification and into the early twenty-first century, were still most loyal to and nostalgic about the GDR, as well as continuing to be concerned about world peace and about broader ideological issues. Meanwhile, younger citizens of the GDR were, in the 1980s, both increasingly concerned about peace and at the same time increasingly critical of what they saw as inadequate leadership on the part of the ruling gerontocracy with its by now ritual and formulaic rhetoric. By the mid-1980s, then, the principal concern appeared not to be the accuracy or otherwise of representations of the past, but rather the question of how best to ensure peace in the future.

Overall, what is striking when reading through reports of these commemorations is the way in which there is little mention of the victimization and extermination of the Jews: the emphasis everywhere is on the class struggle and the heroic Red Army. Occasionally there are comments suggesting the need also to remember German soldiers and German war dead; or challenging the concept of liberation and proposing that 1945 was really a matter of defeat and of bad experiences. But from neither side—neither that of the communist authorities, nor that of the East Germans who disagreed with the official line—was there much evidence of thinking about the Holocaust or about German guilt. This 'guilt-free' approach had consequences for the ways in which people framed their own life stories, both in the accounts that were officially solicited as well as in more informal interviews. And while the SED remained firmly in the saddle, remarks and approaches to the past were at best veiled, periodic, partial.

II. MODEL LIVES? THOSE ON THE 'RIGHT' SIDE OF HISTORY: THE LEFT (AND THE CONVERTED)

For a few—although probably many more than conventional histories of high politics in the GDR would suggest—the foundation of the new state and the attempted construction of a new society provided an often highly formulaic interpretive framework into which they inserted the details of their own lives, recasting their autobiographies as part of a wider historical narrative giving purpose

²⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DY 6 / 5121, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Schwerin, Jan.–Nov. 1985, Aktuelle Berichterstattung, Schwerin, 28 Feb. 1985, p. 3.

and meaning to the struggles and difficulties of everyday life. While the biographies of leading political figures have rightly received much attention, they are, by definition, rather atypical individuals. Nevertheless, the ways in which history and the past were officially presented had knock-on effects for the ways in which far more ordinary GDR functionaries sought to represent and reshape their own life stories. And these, in turn, were designed to stand as models for the rest of the population. These life stories were elicited precisely to serve as templates: to show other citizens what a 'good' life story would or should look like, to present a series of scripts into which people should fit their own individual variants. They therefore have a wider remit than the kinds of Western individualistic autobiographical accounts penned, if not for profit, then at least for the children and grandchildren (or even only for one's own satisfaction).

These model lives share a number of features in common, and reveal a particular kind of desired social self or biography, although with individual variations and always with one or two respects which do not quite fit the perfect mould. A brief selection of a few life stories reveals some of the ways in which people both professed to have thought that support of the GDR was a worthy cause, and massaged their own life stories into the wider historical narrative. They also—for all the cynicism which a Western reader might wish to bring to their interpretation—do reveal quite poignantly some of the twists and turns of fate and circumstance with which people born into these times and places had to deal: they help to uncover the challenges of those times, and highlight the particular values and responses to such challenges which were now officially praised and held up for emulation, as well as evidencing the peculiar generational patterning of certain combinations.

Some of these life stories were elicited in the 1960s, in the context of stories about how 'liberation' was experienced. A somewhat later series of 'reports from veterans' (*Veteranenberichte*) elicited by the Berlin SED organization in the 1970s and 1980s provides further glimpses into how those who had risen from more or less humble origins to positions as functionaries or representatives of the new state sought to present themselves and their lives in the light of the expectations of the established GDR—and with what apparent costs, on occasion, to their sense of self. These mini-autobiographies were clearly solicited and produced with the purpose of serving as exemplars of model lives and attitudes; but they were nevertheless rooted in real experiences, and the people who give the interviews appear to have believed their own rhetoric.

These officially elicited life stories have in common certain key features. Writers tend to ensure that adequate gratitude is registered towards the party for making things possible, for improving their own lives and giving them the opportunity to serve in the cause, seeking to make lives better for others in the future. But in their stereotypical character, they reveal the patterns in which functionaries reformulated and reinterpreted their own lives as recounted in the framework of norms and values that were dominant at a later date. And there are clear generational patterns to the accepted formulae of life paths.

It is striking that those who were old enough to have developed political attitudes prior to 1945 generally show both a combination of appropriate class background

and political ‘class outlook’, whereas the slightly younger ones—formerly the first Hitler Youth generation, but adults during the war and now part of the wider KZ generation—frequently have to demonstrate an appropriate conversion experience from socialization under Nazism to seeing the light under communism, often while a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union. Yet even some of the older ones were able to compensate for a less than political past—or at least less-than-perfect left-wing credentials—if they were prepared to commit themselves fully to the cause of ‘reconstruction’ (*Wiederaufbau*) under communist auspices after the war. Clearly some life-writers had slightly greater difficulties than others in carving the perfect biography from their own life stories, illustrating some of the tensions involved in aligning one’s own life with the requirements of the new regime even for those who definitively landed up on the ‘right side of history’.

The emphasis on service to the wider cause is particularly notable in life stories produced by those individuals who were born and bred in the labour movement, and who had suffered under the Nazi regime. They often reveal staggering continuities of political commitment from previous regimes, feeding into their notions of the construction of a new world; and it is worth reminding ourselves of the kinds of heritage and experience which lay behind the commitment of some of the less well-known supporters of the GDR, in order to understand why there was a degree of backing in some quarters for the new Soviet regime. Yet at the same time it has to be remembered that even the personal accounts of those who were later held up as having led ‘model lives’ were greatly constrained by the contexts of their self-representations and the prevailing discourses in terms of which they could be framed.

Max Opitz (1890–1982), for example, was one of the ‘front generation’ founding fathers of the GDR. He came from a socialist family with a long pedigree across generations. His father and grandfather had both been miners in Saxony; the grandfather had belonged to the Saxon People’s Party (*sächsische Volkspartei*) led by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, and had known them both personally.²⁸ Unfortunately, Opitz’s grandfather died in a mining accident in 1867, when Liebknecht and Bebel were elected as the first socialists in the North German Parliament of that year (*Norddeutscher Reichstag*). Opitz’s grandmother, however, lived to the remarkable age of ninety-six, and was the only female socialist in the whole area. Max Opitz himself was one of ten children, of whom seven girls and two boys survived to adulthood. Following training as a carpenter, he undertook military service in 1911–14 in Chemnitz, in the ‘Royal Saxon Cavalry Regiment Number 21, Emperor Wilhelm II’ and was subsequently called up in the Great War. He served first in France, then participated in the famous Tannenberg battle in East Prussia, was wounded near Riga in 1915, and remained out of military service for the rest of the war. Politically highly engaged, Opitz participated in the Soldiers’ Councils in 1918, and was active in a variety of capacities in the KPD in the 1920s, working with, amongst others, Ernst Thälmann. He also knew Walter

²⁸ SAPMO-BArch, NY 4274/3. Max Opitz, ‘Ich war glücklich’, fol. 434.

Ulbricht personally. Having been arrested in November 1932, Opitz was in and out of prison throughout the Third Reich, eventually sent to KZ Sachsenhausen in 1941. Given this background, it is scarcely surprising that on his liberation at the beginning of May 1945 by the Red Army, Opitz devoted the rest of his remarkably long life to the political cause, now in a more decisive role.

Opitz describes his post-war career, starting with a stint as Police President in Dresden from 1945, in the characteristic passive tense which is so typical of GDR life stories in service of the cause:

This I was until March 1949, then I became the leader of the Border Police and the Riot Police [*Bereitschaftspolizei*], until I was called to Leipzig as Mayor in May 1949. And then in June 1951 [GDR President] Wilhelm Pieck called me to Berlin . . . [A]nd Wilhelm Pieck made me Head of the Chancellery and his Secretary of State.²⁹

He remained in this position until Pieck's death in 1960, when Opitz was himself already seventy years old. He remained active in the People's Parliament (*Volkskammer*) and engaged with other matters until retirement in 1976.

Hans Rentmeister (born 1911), similarly described how he had arrived at the end of May 1945 from the USSR, where he had been a prisoner of war from 1943 to 1945. He had however previously been an active opponent of Nazism, having been a long-standing member of the KPD and, from 1931 to 1933, the KJVD, as well as having engaged in 'illegal work' during 1933–4; from 1942 he had belonged to an oppositional group known as the '*Knöchel-Beuttel*' (which sounds somewhat like 'sack of bones', although slightly misspelt, but more likely named after the communists Wilhelm Knöchel and Wilhelm Beuttel). On arriving in Berlin in May 1945, Rentmeister worked in the Berlin-Tiergarten area, and served as the 1st District Secretary of the KPD/SED Tiergarten from 1945 to 1949. He subsequently had a modest career in the SED, including from 1958 first as a candidate member and then until 1965 a full member of the Central Committee (ZK) of the SED, and served from 1965 in the Central Party Archive of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism (ZPA/IML) of the SED.

A younger example from the war-youth generation (now part of the wider KZ generation), is given by Heinz B., born in 1911 into a poor family in the northern German town of Schwerin. During his working lifetime he had made it from baker's apprentice to Principal Director (*Hauptdirektor*) of the People's Own Factory Conglomerate for Grain Production (*VEB Kombinat Getreidewirtschaft*) in Berlin, a position which he held from 1970 until his retirement in 1978. Classically for those in this generation who were able to rise to positions of some responsibility in the GDR, Heinz had a politically left-wing as well as an economically poor background; he had joined the KPD in 1930, and the SED after the war. He represented his own career successes, again typically for these groups, as all thanks to the party. The first part of his memoirs (*Lebenslauf*) ends with the statement:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 455.

I went to school for four years in Berlin and I spent four years in a one-class school in a village . . . I was able to complete my total societal engagement as Principal Director of an industrial conglomerate [*Kombinat*] and know that I could have had this sort of opportunity only in a workers' and peasants' state.³⁰

Not only did he come from the appropriately modest social background, but, unlike the slightly older Hermann E., Heinz B. could also demonstrate a model political background. He had been active in the KPD, which he had joined at the age of nineteen; unemployed in 1930, he was able to spend a lot of time on party work, including making collections. He got into difficulties with the Nazis, was arrested and imprisoned for a total of eight weeks. According to his own account, he had to serve in the army from 1941 but 'was lucky, was never in the fighting troops . . . [apart from two days in Belgium when] I never had to shoot, because we never saw the enemy'. The enemy must soon have shown up, however, since he was rapidly captured by the British, who used him as a translator, then by the Americans, before he was finally handed over to the French, who released him in 1947. This seems to have been a remarkably peaceful war, suggesting that he played little by way of an active role in the 'fascist army', and on his account he certainly never fought against the Red Army. Following his return to (East) Germany, for several years in the 1950s Heinz B. was involved in various *Aufbau* (reconstruction, 'building anew') jobs in the border town of Fürstenberg/Oder—the base for the prestigious project constructing the first new 'socialist town' of Stalinstadt, later renamed Eisenhüttenstadt—following which he was able to study engineering economics (*Ingenieur-Ökonom*) in Dresden, presumably fully supported financially by the new state. Like Max Opitz and many others, Heinz B. describes his career in the passive tense: 'After my studies I was deployed [*eingesetzt*] as a Works Director in Berlin.'³¹ The use of the word '*eingesetzt*' is also reminiscent of military vocabulary (as in '*Einsatzgruppen*'), hinting at the class war in the continuing Cold War.

Similar patterns are evident in the life stories of many others: autobiographical accounts of those who were adults in the Third Reich and subsequently committed supporters of the GDR are characterized by overwhelming professions of belief in serving a greater cause and a better future; and this pattern was later fostered, affecting the ways in which people constructed their life stories and thought about themselves. The 'social self' for those committed to the GDR project was inevitably a self embedded in the far greater historical narrative, with a real sense of wider purpose. Moreover, the idealism of these individuals was more than evidenced by their activities at a time when it was extremely dangerous to oppose Nazism; it was, then, not purely a fiction of their later, somewhat stylized accounts, shaped in the light of SED priorities and formulations; and the 'condescension of posterity' should not blind historians to the horrendous suffering many of these people had gone through in service to a cause long before it was part of the winning side.

³⁰ Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), E Rep 061-23 Nr. 28, Heinz B. (1911), p. 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

In terms of such accounts of one's life written in the GDR, unlike in the West, it was however not always necessary to suggest that one had 'always been against it' (*immer dagegen*). Many East German accounts emphasize rather how they only realized rather late, during captivity or even after the war, how wrong the Nazi cause had been. The key thing for those who sought to make a new life for themselves in the new conditions was to throw oneself into making a societal contribution in whatever way they could. But this depended on longer-term commitments.

Erich S. (born 1916), for example, a member of the slightly younger 'first Hitler youth generation', had, as he put it, served as a 'soldier in the fascist army' from 1937 to 1945.³² He only joined the SED (and the German Soviet Friendship Society, DSF) as late as 1956. As a professional gardener, he won many 'awards of distinction'. The key to his rise was a combination of coming from a poor working-class family and a willingness to convert and commit to the views and requirements of the new regime. In his memoirs, written for the party archives, he recalls the unemployment of his father, and the way his mother was able to help the family make ends meet by occasionally picking up work ironing for wealthier families. Crucial to their well-being was an allotment in which they were able to grow food to eat—which started Erich off on his career in gardening. He finished his apprenticeship in 1936, then, following a six-month stint in the Reich Labour Service, was called up in the 'fascist army'. He recalls his new birth on his return to post-war Germany, as a young man for whom things were still not yet quite clear:

For me that was a very interesting time, because one returned from war with ideas that were not yet ripe. The question was, how should things develop now. For me it was clear that I could best contribute to the improvement of provisions for the population through my profession.

According to his own account, during his supposedly humanistically motivated work as a gardener in the municipal gardens as well as his own garden, he became increasingly aware of class issues and class conflicts; and it was the way in which the new communist administration dealt with class oppression, personified in the form of a particular aristocratic estate owner equipped with carriage and threatening whip, that gave Erich his chance to develop his own career:

During this period I became acquainted with the owner of the manor, Haberland, on his estate of Prussendorf. Once when I was picking apples from the avenue of trees, he came driving along in his coach, that was around the end of 1945, and drove us away from this activity, threatening with his whip. When then the land reform was declared in 1946 [*sic*] and Haberland left for the West with all his possessions, a farm for the Martin-Luther-University was established here. For me this offered the opportunity to take up work on this farm as a gardener.³³

³² LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 14, Dr Erich S. (1916).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The land reform was in fact declared in 1945, but it is likely that many former landowners only actually left for the West in 1946, as recounted in this case.

From then on, Erich was able to take off, specializing eventually in the area of fruit production and contributing to the building of a better society under communist auspices.

An interesting variation among these predominantly male reports is the life story of Johanna K., also born in 1916 and hence a member of the 'first Hitler Youth generation'.³⁴ Like many of her age group, her political development was relatively slow; she only joined the KPD in 1945, but was able to demonstrate the stages of her political awakening and growing awareness through her childhood experiences and her passage through the Third Reich. Commenting on her childhood, she reflected: 'Childhood is naturally affected by the relevant social stage in which one is born. When I think back, I had a partially happy childhood.'³⁵ Johanna came from a working-class family, and her father was often unemployed, being, as she put it, a 'typical seasonal worker'. Her mother supplemented his periodic earnings by some work (earning 'not much') as a seamstress. She herself enjoyed, in her leisure time, participation in the workers' sports movement (*Arbeitersportbewegung*), to which she belonged until 1936 when a Nazi was installed in charge: 'Then they put in a Nazi at the top and then I withdrew.'³⁶ Having left school at the age of fourteen, during the 1930s she worked in stocks and sales, including for a Jewish firm; and then, following 'Aryanization' of this firm, for I.G. Farben which she described as being thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Nazism. She became 'stateless' on marriage to a Pole from Łódź in 1938 and was hence able to evade joining 'German' organizations such as the anti-air-raid auxiliary helpers in which most of her German contemporaries served. Johanna accounted for her growing political awareness in terms of exposure to racism and her own immediate responses and ever firmer inner convictions: 'From 1930 to 1938 I worked in a markedly Jewish firm and I was partly educated to be an apolitical personality. In this firm politics played no role.'³⁷ Clearly in her later view, recounting her life story, only organized political activities could be counted as 'political'; the situation of Jews in the 1930s, and continuing to work in a Jewish company, did not, despite the context, apparently appear intrinsically political in her mind. The company had around forty employees, of whom only one was a communist who wanted to celebrate 1 May; when she as an apprentice also wanted to participate in May Day demonstrations she was threatened with the sack. But eventually the situation of Jews dawned on her, and with the subsequent switch to I.G. Farben 'politics' soon became inescapable:

I remember a further incident. That was a meeting of the workforce in which the 'boss' as a Jewish person told us that he wanted to leave Germany. As far as fascism is concerned, I particularly remember the start of war in 1939. At that time I was working for I.G. Farben, the fascists had the 'say' there . . . On 1 September 1939 the whole work force had to come into the canteen and we had to listen to Hitler's speech about

³⁴ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 14, Johanna K. (1916).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

the start of the war in Poland. I still remember that the German anthem was sung and although no-one had raised their arm [in the Hitler salute], suddenly everyone raised their arm. I was the only one in the room who didn't sing along and I could not raise my arm either. That was an inner firmness that I had, against war and against fascism.³⁸

By virtue then of her class origins and her husband's Polish nationality, Johanna K. was not easily incorporated into the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. But such anecdotes as being the sole employee of the renowned I.G. Farben concern to refuse to raise her arm in the Heil Hitler salute on the historic day of the outbreak of war appear to have had to serve, in her autobiographical account, in place of any more compelling evidence of active political commitment at this time, let alone serious (and potentially risky) opposition to the Nazi regime. Her true political commitment came only after the war. Surviving the war, Johanna K. had only good experiences or at least good reported memories of friendly Russians, who, when they arrived in Berlin, were according to her recollection particularly nice to children (she has no comments on their less-than-welcome behaviour towards young women other than herself).³⁹ She immediately started working for the new, Soviet-run Berlin municipality, and also joined the Communist Party (KPD). From then on, her reflections on political developments are models of the required views.

In the case of Heinz B., to a lesser extent Johanna K., and other 'veterans' of the class struggle of a similar age who later became devoted supporters of the GDR, political outlooks or at least nascent 'class standpoints' had been formed already before and during the Nazi era. Those who were only slightly younger, born shortly after the Great War and hence members of what had been the most committed Hitler Youth generation, such early evidence of political commitment was far less likely. In those cases, a 'conversion experience' of some sort was generally required.

Another Heinz, in this case Heinz L., for example, certainly came from the appropriate class background: he was born in 1919 in a working class family; his father died young, in 1925, and his mother tried to feed the family through work as a seamstress.⁴⁰ Heinz L. left school in 1933, and took up an apprenticeship in cakes and confectionary (*Konditor*). Even in the peacetime years of the Third Reich, his life was hard. He was then called up in the army, served mainly in Norway, and appears to have met some awful soldiers. By 1944 Heinz L. was serving in the Soviet Union, followed by capture and around four years as a prisoner of war. Heinz L. laid much emphasis on his re-education during his period of captivity in the Soviet Union—a trope that was more than acceptable in the GDR. On Heinz L.'s account, he had benefited from being able to participate in many activities, had listened to lectures, met and talked with German émigrés and others, including getting to know Red Army comrades, all of which had apparently made a major impact on his previously erroneous views:

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁰ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 20, Heinz L. (1919); Veteranenbericht written for SED purposes, signed 8 Mar. 1979.

Through these lectures and political discussion I was educated into conscious political thinking and action. I met some of these teachers again later in my party the NDPD.

Then in 1948 I returned to my Heimat with a more or less firm basic knowledge. I immediately made myself available in order to help with the new beginning and the reconstruction [*Aufbau*].⁴¹

In this case, then, the appropriate social class background had been successfully complemented by conversion to the requisite class outlook through the influence of communist 'comrades', whether German or Soviet. After the war, by which time he was rising thirty, in 1948 Heinz L. joined first the SED, and then in 1949 switched to the NPDP (National Democratic Party of Germany), a 'bloc party' which had been established by the SED precisely for former German nationalists. He also joined the state trade union organization (FDGB), the Society for German–Soviet Friendship (DSF), and the League of Culture (KB, *Kulturbund*). He served in the District Executive Committee of the NDPD from 1951, was a deputy in the City District Council of Berlin-Köpenick from 1970, and served in a number of elevated capacities in municipal politics from then onwards.

Involvement in bloc parties was, for such later converts, a classic means of indicating commitment to the GDR while not quite going so far as joining the communist camp. Max R., born 1920, admitted that the path to attaining the appropriate class consciousness was not always easy, particularly for those who, like himself, came from religious backgrounds (in his case Catholicism). But, as a member of the bloc party targeted particularly at Christians, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), and active in Berlin municipal politics, Max R. suggested that class origins were key to the requisite ideological development:

Coming from my social background, from a Catholic working-class family, it did not take much reflection on my part to realize the particular responsibility, power and leadership of the working class. Although here too, above all at the grass roots, there was often a complicated path to persuading many like-minded people. But the longer the common path, the more effective was and is the common give and take, the working together of Christians, Marxists, and other humanists.⁴²

For Max R., memories of the end of the war and the anniversaries which celebrated the role of the Soviet Union in the 'liberation' of the Germans from Nazism played a particularly important role: 'I remember gladly the 30th anniversary in 1975 of the liberation of the German people from Hitler fascism by the Soviet army.'⁴³ At this ceremony, he was proud to have been able to stand next to 'eminent people, heroes of the Great Patriotic War, people to whom we owe the crushing of Hitler's barbarism'.⁴⁴

Life stories elicited for party purposes necessarily also had to show not only how individuals had reached their convictions and commitment to the GDR, but also

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴² LAB E Rep 061-23 Nr. 43, Max R. (1920), *Erlebnisbericht* signed 15 Jan. 1985, pp. 2–3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

how they had dealt with some of the key events, developments, and particularly flashpoints of post-war history. This was easier for some periods and topics than others. The immediate post-war years were perhaps the simplest to recount with respect to an individual's contribution to the cause, framed at this point in terms of the myth of 'reconstruction' (*Aufbau*).

Hermann E., a member of the war-youth generation, was born in Stettin in 1903—a town subsequently lost to Poland with the redrawing of boundaries after the war.⁴⁵ By the time of giving his life story in the late 1970s, he had demonstrated long service in municipal housing services. He had first dealt with refugees and expellees after the war, acting from 1945 to 1950 as Commissar of Refugees (*Flüchtlings-Kommissar*) for the Soviet Military Administration in the area of Schwerin, Mecklenburg, before those who had fled or been expelled and had hence lost their homes in other parts of Eastern Europe (like Hermann E. himself) were renamed 'Resettlers' (*Umsiedler*) and quietly incorporated into the run of GDR life. Hermann E. was then engaged in the reconstruction and rebuilding (*Wiederaufbau*) of Berlin in various roles until his retirement in 1968. He also served in the paramilitary 'People's Police in Barracks' (*Kasernierte Volkspolizei*, KVP) and the ensuing National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*, NVA). Curiously—and perhaps rather typically for the members of this generation who had held significant roles as young men during the Third Reich, and who were so often not able to demonstrate prior political commitment to left-wing causes—his life story is somewhat evasive and opaque about his experiences of the Third Reich. He devotes the major part of his life story to the period of *Aufbau*, evading precise details on his path through the Nazi era. Interestingly, too, his 'class standpoint' was not entirely certain, even around the time of the 1953 Uprising. An awkward part of the biography—which was elicited, as were the other 'Veteran's Reports', in the form of a taped interview, with the interviewer prompting with questions and gently guiding the interviewees back onto the right tracks where they appeared to be straying from the appropriate line—had to do with his experiences of the June events in 1953. Initially, Hermann E. gave slightly odd and evasive answers. He began by emphasizing that he was fully involved in a demonstration; the interviewer interrupted to remind him that it was not a matter of a demonstration but rather a strike which had to be suppressed; in attempting to recover political face, Hermann E. then corrected himself to say that he had actually meant to refer to an officially sanctioned counter-demonstration (*Gegendemonstration*) a few days later, when it had rained and rained. His rather incoherent account suggested a considerable degree of difficulty in this area. Given that the demonstrations of June 1953 had begun with construction workers engaged in prestigious new building works on the Stalinallee of East Berlin, it would in fact have not been at all surprising if Hermann E. had been involved on the 'wrong' side at this time, and had some difficulty in adjusting his account to fit the now desired framework; but equally, his participation in the armed forces of the GDR suggest that he might well

⁴⁵ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 11, Hermann E. (1903).

have been involved in its suppression. Either way, Hermann E. was either unable or unwilling to give a very clear account of his own role at the time, perhaps in part also due to confusion about what line he should even be taking. Similar moments of slight uncertainty, where the interviewee cannot quite remain on the right storyline about sensitive areas, are evident in other interviews.

By 1953 Johanna K., who had learned her political lessons rather slowly and partially through her employment in I.G. Farben during the Third Reich, was working in the area of Health Services and Trade (*Fachbereich Gesundheitswesen und Handel*). On 16 June 1953 a colleague rang her with the news that workers building the Hospital in Friedrichshain were going on strike. She allegedly reacted immediately, with apparently some success in the party cause:

For me that was a shock... Why should workers go on strike under socialism? I immediately went over there and spoke to the building workers. They picked up their work again.

Johanna K. cast the entire June 1953 episode in the official SED narrative of ‘Western provocateurs’ who were merely trying to stir up trouble among the innocent East German workers, and who needed to be forcibly dealt with accordingly. With a little stretching of the geographical imagination (Alexanderplatz is not on the way from West Berlin to the House of Ministries; quite the opposite in fact), she claimed:

On 17.6.53 I went through Alexanderplatz, there were people streaming past who had come from West Berlin and were going in the direction of the House of Ministries in Ernst-Thälmann Platz. They had bottles in their hands. I went into the New Town Hall, at that time the seat of the municipal authority, and went to Comrade Ebert. We exchanged views and I asked ‘What now, Comrade Ebert, how will things develop?’ He said quite calmly, ‘Don’t worry little one, we have just had a Politburo meeting, in two to three hours the whole thing will be over’. And true, at this moment, a Soviet soldier came past the New Town Hall and earned himself respect with his submachine gun in his hand. The provocateurs fled like rabbits towards the S-Bahn and disappeared in the direction of the West. It was unquestionably a provocation.⁴⁶

In the early 1950s Johanna K. also threw herself unreservedly into ‘persuading’ farmers into forced collectivization and agricultural cooperative farms (LPGs), apparently again ultimately achieving some success despite initial hostility:

If the peasants had said ‘yes’ during the daytime to entering the cooperative, at night they met up in the barn or in a flat and out came ‘no’ to the cooperative. So the next day it all started up again...

Eventually however all joined:

and so it happened in the end too. They said to me quite openly: Mayor—you have shit on us, but you are right too. Since this time I have been very attached to agriculture.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 14, Johanna K. (1916), p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The construction of the Wall, too, is presented in entirely the officially desired light. At this time, Johanna K.'s (formerly Polish) husband was a border guard of some sort ('*Kämpfer*' at the border), and for a week following 13 August she herself was so busy that she both worked and slept in her office. But it was for her a major and positive turning point, a political act securing the economic future of the GDR and one of which she could feel proud:

Securing the border was for me a decisive political act. I personally experienced, when I spoke to brigades in the factories, how they were constantly living in fear about whether people would come to work again the next day. If a leader had not smiled quite right on some occasion, or had made criticisms, then there would be the threat, 'tomorrow I won't be here any more'. I really did have a feeling of pride after this period...⁴⁸

Johanna K. had thus effectively committed her life to service of the party and the cause of building a better future, however difficult and against whatever opposition and obstacles in the present.

In contrast, Heinz B., the baker who became the Grain Conglomerate Works Director, did appear to have some difficulty in recounting his role in the construction of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961, although he clearly knew the right answers that he should give. There had been lots of problems in his factory, particularly with respect to 'border crossers' (*Grenzgänger*); but these difficulties were short-lived, and other problems had been solved by the construction of the Wall: 'From 1962 then there were no more arrears on the Plan, no more debts on the Plan. Quite the opposite, we fulfilled the Plan, over-fulfilled it...'⁴⁹ Even so, there remained emotional problems at which he hinted but did not want to go into any detail. And the following years were not merely characterized by an alleged over-fulfilment of plans, but also by major difficulties. In 1965 the decision was made on high to move everything that had been located too close to the border, including Heinz B.'s factory, following which production and other problems mounted.

Yet ultimately Heinz B. was not lost for his message. The interviewer put to him the rather ill-phrased question: 'What is important, what must our young generation, that is the generation that also will carry forwards what the veterans have bequeathed them, what sort of qualities should youth have?' Heinz B.'s answer included: 'to start with, the political-ideological consciousness must be correct...'. He himself had always tried to explain to young people that 'what we built up, they now have to take forwards'. And when thinking back on his own life and poor beginnings and what he ultimately attained, Heinz B.'s last comment is one of gratitude to the state for supporting him: 'So that is after all a development, a very notable one, in respect of which I would like to point out that I primarily have our workers' and peasants' state to thank for this development since 1945.'⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 28, Heinz B. (1911), p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

For Johanna K., the class struggle and the leading role of the party were epitomized and summarized in a photo as she stood at the lectern delivering the address on the occasion of the youth initiation ceremony (*Jugendweihe*) of the 9th Upper School Berlin-Weißensee in 1966. Above her hung the slogan:

Our standard is the Party
When it calls
We are there.⁵¹

Johanna K. herself summarized the question of the historical role of generations quite explicitly:

Our generation has created the preconditions for the functional and political development of the young generation in our socialist state. This we did not have. We were led, we learned, and we had to assert ourselves.⁵²

Those who were listening to her in the mid-1960s, born into a quite different world after the Second World War, would have very different views and attitudes.

A heartfelt concern with the lessons of history for the future, and the pressing urgency of communicating with and mobilizing youth, is evident in one of the unwittingly most poignant of these model autobiographies. This life story is also one where the costs as well as preconditions, or even benefits, of commitment to the communist state are mutedly apparent. Walter S. was born in 1915; his father was a metalworker or locksmith (*Schlosser*) and a member of the SPD, his mother a housewife. Walter S. recalled an impoverished but happy childhood:

My childhood fell in the times of the revolutionary post-war years. It was, all in all, a happy, carefree childhood, although my parents had to count every penny. At the age of seven I entered the 152nd parish school in Berlin-Kreuzberg, which I then attended for three years. Then for six years, up to just before Upper School, I went to the Leibnitz [*sic*] Grammar School. Because of the difficult economic situation in the times of the world economic crisis I had to leave school in 1931.

Until my 16th year my life was virtually no different from that of my contemporaries. A firm, orderly atmosphere at home, grammar school, in which life and history appeared to be something unalterable and given for all time, shaped my childhood.⁵³

But for Walter, there was one major respect in which he differed from the vast majority of his childhood companions:

My parents were Jews and after the fascist seizure of power until their deaths by being gassed in March 1943 in Auschwitz concentration camp they were perpetually exposed to persecution.⁵⁴

Apart from this one staggeringly laconic sentence, Walter S. barely alludes to his parents and their persecution and eventual murder as victims of Nazi racism; his

⁵¹ LAB, E Rep 061-23 Nr. 14, Johanna K. (1916), photograph.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵³ LAB E Rep 061-23 Nr. 36, Walter S. (1915), p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

account concentrates, as desired by the later GDR context, rather on actively fighting the Nazi regime. During the Third Reich, Walter S. became increasingly involved in Jewish youth groups and left-wing anti-Nazi politics including the left-wing and predominantly Jewish group around Herbert Baum. Walter S. retrospectively claims that he was increasingly close to communists at this time, but remained in Jewish groups in order to influence them, to work against Zionist strands, and (somewhat confusingly, given the context) to use as cover in relation to the Nazis. In 1938 his father's workshop was closed by the Nazis, but his parents did not leave Germany. In 1939 Walter S. chose to emigrate to Sweden, according to his account to engage in undercover organization for the communists there, but for practical purposes posing only as a Jewish émigré:

Since I only represented myself as a Jewish émigré, as the [communist] party requested of me, and not primarily as a communist, it was possible for me to receive standard official documents (residence permit, work permit) and to make contact with the [political] émigré leadership.⁵⁵

His memoirs recount the way in which he obtained work in Hälsingborg, and continued his undercover political activities, always careful to emphasize that whatever he did was in line with party orders, directives, and permissions, and not otherwise. His life story is thus constantly framed in terms of collective direction and party discipline, overriding individual decisions. As with other autobiographical materials, and particularly in the case of one written under the later constraints of 'official' GDR life stories, the underlying tensions and emotional inner conflicts are written out of the story. But it is clear that the general gist of Walter's account of his links with communist groups is substantially accurate. Surviving the war, Walter S. returned with a Communist Party group to Berlin on 15 March 1946, remembering that:

When I reached Berlin-Gesundbrunnen the reality exceeded everything I had imagined about the destruction of a city. When I saw the mountains of rubble, my first thought was: this Berlin cannot be built up again . . .⁵⁶

Walter S. was then present at the meeting formally merging the KPD and SPD to form the SED in April 1946. His modest career as a municipal party *apparatchik* began to take off in the 1950s, when, again typically, he recounted his life story in the passive tense:

In 1960 I was sent for a year to the Party High School, on the decision of the Secretariat of the SED District Leadership . . . Shortly before the end of the Party High School I received a phone call from Comrade Hans Kiefert, the 2nd Secretary of the SED District Leadership, who informed me that . . . I was designated for the function of Mayor of Berlin-Treptow . . . A totally new period of my life began for me as a City District Mayor.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Because he was in charge of a key East Berlin district right on the border with West Berlin, Walter S. was under particular strain in the early 1960s, and particularly around the time of the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961. As he put it, deploying the characteristic GDR turns of phrase and interpretive framework:

The beginning of the 1960s was a time characterized by many provocations by the class enemy against our state border. As City District Mayor of a border district like Berlin-Treptow, I was forced and obliged to sacrifice a great deal of time to questions of the security of our citizens.⁵⁸

But again, party orders determined a shift in his career: after two years in this job, Walter S. received a phone call from Paul Verner, First Secretary of the Berlin SED District Leadership, telling him that he was to become a city councillor in charge of economic affairs. 'All my protests were of no avail and since I was accustomed to following party decisions I agreed to this suggestion.'⁵⁹ Here, Walter S. interestingly allows a degree of personal agency to creep into his life story, intimating that he might have decided not to 'agree' to the 'suggestion' which was in fact first described as a 'decision'. In the event, the party's juggling of personnel did not entirely work out: Walter S. recounts that in his new post he missed working with people, and in 1967 he was 'allowed' to return to being the local mayor in Treptow, a position he retained until he was forced to retire in 1974 for health reasons. However, he retained a number of functionary posts until 1985, including as chair of the organization for 'Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters' in Treptow.

In reading Walter S.'s life story, it seems somewhat odd that he barely mentions any emotional pain about the loss of his own parents; their disappearance into the horrors of the Nazi extermination programme is passed over in one sentence, wholly subordinated to his account of how he followed the dictates of the party during the Nazi period, and the efforts afterwards to build a better society in the GDR. Yet the ways in which Walter S. talks about following the authority of the party suggest that in some ways the party seemed to take over for him as a parental authority figure, and one which gave him a sense of belonging and purpose in life. This receptiveness to the proffered paternalism of the party was not unique to Walter S.'s story; many others, too, without the painful losses of the Jewish background, also succumbed to a sense of quasi-avuncular care and authority on the part of a movement larger than themselves, in many cases arguably also on a personal level taking the place of missing or discredited father figures.⁶⁰

Like so many others of his generation and position, Walter S. was also highly conscious that historical understanding had to be geared to transmitting lessons for the present: he was emphatic that what was needed was people 'who don't only talk about the past, but also deploy their experiences and the lessons [of the past] for

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ The temptation to fall into a simplistic social psychology here, however, should be resisted, in view of the sheer numbers of 'sons without fathers'—and also daughters without fathers—in post-war Germany. See more generally on this topic Hermann Schulz, Hartmut Radebold, and Jürgen Reulecke, *Söhne ohne Väter. Erfahrungen der Kriegsgeneration* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2004).

the present and the future'.⁶¹ In a speech entitled 'Comrade Walter S. speaks to Youth!', delivered in May 1988 on the occasion of handing over a 'Cabinet of Traditions of the Anti-Fascist Resistance Struggle 1933–1945', Walter S. sought to suggest that the youth of the later 1980s were in some ways not dissimilar from youth in 1930:

They were joyful people, people who liked to laugh. No one loved life more than they did, since they knew what they were living for . . . It wasn't always easy for us either, in 'our' youth, to deal with indolence, pettiness [*Spießertum*], comfortable laziness. We repeatedly had to learn how hard it is to overcome the 'old'. Daily we had to engage with hostile influences, with the dangers and deceptions of imperialism. At that time, as young people we set out to overturn and transform the world, to raise the lowest to the highest. We wanted to rid the world of great injustice. We wanted the actual producers of value to be able also to harvest the fruits of their labour. We wanted everyone to be able to eat until satisfied and have a roof over their heads. We wanted everyone to have an equal right to education and that the phrase 'if you are poor, you must die younger' should be banished. We wanted everyone to have a right to work, to an apprenticeship, since only in work can people prove themselves, and exploit their ability and talents to the full. And the most important of all: War should be banned forever from the lives of the nations.⁶²

Walter S. ended this speech with some quite personal comments about the pleasures of talking with the young: 'For anti-fascist resistance fighters, for the "Activists of the First Hour", it is both a necessity and a pleasure to meet with the young people of today and to engage in discussions with them . . . But we also come to you because we enjoy it.'⁶³

Individuals like these, however much they may have been held up by the SED as model lives, were in a tiny minority: by definition, their lives were highlighted as showing paths for emulation and inspirations for the future in a continuing battle for hearts and minds which had by no means been won.

III. AMBIVALENCE

Only those who could make their lives conform to the officially desired patterns would have their autobiographical accounts actively solicited by the SED, paraded as a model from which others should learn the lesson for the present and future. The vast majority, however, could not speak so openly about their memories and experiences; or, at least, they found it harder to accommodate what they wanted to say within the discourses available to them. This inevitably had implications for patterns of intergenerational transmission of emotional responses to the past. Arguably, there was far less by way of a sense of shame transmitted in the GDR than in West Germany. On the other hand, questions of responsibility for involvement

⁶¹ LAB E Rep 061-23 Nr. 36, Walter S. (1915), p. 20.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 'Genosse Walter S. an die Jugend!', May 1988, pp. 2–3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

in war, or behaviour during the Nazi period more generally, did in some way remain present, even if hard to tap.

Some fascinating glimpses are afforded by historical sources that are less formulaic than the official records, even if they only capture the comments of a tiny minority of quite unrepresentative people. In March 1985, a German-born British Quaker, Roswitha Jarman, interviewed a handful of the tiny group of GDR Quakers about their lives under Nazism.⁶⁴ Both Willy Müller (interviewed in Erfurt) and Horst Brückner (Frankfurt an der Oder) were members of the war-youth generation.⁶⁵ Both had, as young men in the 1920s, consciously decided that they would have to take what was at that time the relatively unconventional step of actively leaving the Protestant Church in protest against its support for the Great War. They had been too young to fight in the war but both recalled that they had been shocked by the violence—in contrast to those from this generation drawn towards the Free Corps and paramilitary *völkisch* groups—and were impressed when by chance, quite independently of each other, they became aware of the Quaker peace testimony.⁶⁶ Brückner, who although of very modest means came from a somewhat more bourgeois background than Müller, was training as a teacher when he met an older colleague, Otto Papst, a member of the USPD serving as a city councillor in Leipzig. Brückner recalled that Papst ‘was deeply impressed by the Quaker policy of providing food which took place in his school, and could not rest, how was this possible, not long ago we were shooting each other down, and now people are coming from over there and feeding our children so that they are healthy again’.⁶⁷ He contacted the Quakers, came into discussion, and joined the Religious Society of Friends. Müller, from a more working-class background, had left the Protestant Church in protest against its war stance in 1920. He first came into contact with Quakers as religious socialists in the diverse youth movement circles of the early 1920s. In 1925 he was taken by a friend to a meeting in Hamburg: this was for him ‘deeply impressive’:

First of all this looseness, this feeling at home. I was a working-class child, that made a huge impression on me, that I too was accepted there, which I had really not expected, simply accepted by them.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ I am very grateful to Roswitha Jarman for giving me transcripts of the taped interviews. They were carried out very much in a religious spirit of exploring questions of faith, rather than searching for historical accounts, and methodologically cannot be seen as ‘oral history interviews’ in any strict sense; but this in itself is interesting, since it is clear from these testimonies just how significant the question of faith was for people living through intensely difficult times—a point which can be easily overlooked when ‘theological’ issues, loosely defined, are not part of a standard interview structure.

⁶⁵ Horst Brückner was born in 1904. Müller’s birth date is not given, but it is clear from his life story that he only reached adulthood in the 1920s and had been aware as a recently confirmed teenager of the Church’s role in condoning the Great War.

⁶⁶ This claims: ‘We utterly deny all outward wars and strife’; but advocates active non-violence, originally born of George Fox’s preaching in seventeenth-century England and in the mid-twentieth century obviously resonating with Gandhi’s teaching of active non-violence.

⁶⁷ Horst Brückner interview, Frankfurt an der Oder, Mar. 1985, transcript, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Willy Müller interview, Erfurt, 5 Mar. 1985, transcript, p. 2.

Following talks by Emil Fuchs and Rudolf Schlosser, Müller felt both surprised and impressed by the Quaker silence and spirituality combined with a deep concern for social issues and ‘the misery at that time’, as well as ‘the generosity with which people talked’.

These were, then, both deeply spiritual, independent-minded men, who had preserved their faith against all the odds through forty years of the atheist GDR. Their accounts of the Second World War are, in this context, thus perhaps a little surprising, and arguably betray the long-term impact both of socialization within the nationalist context of Imperial Germany (despite their different social backgrounds, and despite their overt disagreements with the regime in which they grew up) and of the later context of the SED and Cold War interpretation of German history. For, despite the pacifism which was of such importance to them, their life stories with respect to the Nazi period are remarkable for their apparently un-self-aware omissions.

It is quite clear that, for Willy Müller, a still unresolved inner conflict revolved around his decision, in the Second World War, that he should obey the Nazi state and fight for his Fatherland in a time of national trouble, rather than sustaining the Quaker Peace Testimony and upholding a principled commitment to pacifism and non-violence; this issue obviously continued to trouble Willy Müller even forty years after the end of the war. He also spoke more extensively than ever before about his experiences as a prisoner of war in the Ukraine: ‘I have never talked about that as much as I am doing now.’⁶⁹ Following an unsuccessful pre-war plan to emigrate—the date of departure had been fixed for 2 September 1939, a date then overtaken by events—Horst Brückner was nevertheless ultimately spared the decision about pacifism. Despite having previously been sacked from his job as a teacher for refusing to engage in paramilitary sporting activities to obtain the Nazi sports badge, Brückner’s later position as a book-keeper for a firm in Danzig put him in the category of ‘indispensable’ (*uk*), and he was not called up for military service. His experiences in this capacity, and indeed his failure to record anything he witnessed in the Nazi-occupied and incorporated Polish territories which his firm was helping to ‘Germanize’, appear strangely unreflective.

But Brückner was troubled by other memories of the war. He recalled as ‘the most terrible’ having witnessed, in January 1945, what he describes as a column of Russian prisoners of war being marched along in the opposite direction to that in which he was heading, as he and his firm sought to relocate westwards as the Red Army drew nearer to Danzig. Interestingly, in his recollections Brückner’s compassion for the state of the ‘captive Russians’ is prefixed by what is presented as a well-justified concern about what would indubitably have happened had they been overtaken by the now rapidly advancing Russian army:

Anyone who has experienced this, they would know for certain, if the Russians had caught up with us, no one would have got away with his life. These miserable figures, shrouded in blankets, their feet bound up with straw, creeping along—yes, they were

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

barely humans any more, what should one say, it was a creeping death. They were driven into large barns, there they were given raw potatoes, and then the next day they had to go on. And anyone who couldn't would be shot dead.⁷⁰

Nowhere in these accounts do either Müller or Brückner mention Nazi policy towards the Jews; only the pressures they felt themselves under, in terms of compromising their religious beliefs and accommodating themselves to the demands of the Nazi regime. But the description of the 'Russian prisoners of war' in the above passage does sound rather more like one of the death marches of concentration camp victims—again, not a topic either mentions explicitly. It seems possible that Brückner had elided in his mind what he knew of 'the Russians', and their later revenge on Germans, with a scene he had witnessed of Nazi maltreatment of Jews. The context of his own flight in advance of the Red Army perhaps required some justification, given that it was actually forbidden at the time and they had only been able to cross a road block using false papers; the story also worked better in the context of forty years of exposure to GDR propaganda, which had downplayed the fates of Jews and played up the suffering as well as the heroism of the Russian people and the Soviet Union. The possible misattribution or displacement of this vivid image would then have allowed it to perform a number of functions more suited to Brückner's later environment as well as the acceptability of his own life story.

Brückner lost both his parents, his sister and one brother in an air raid in February 1945. And his own serious injury as a civilian caught in an air raid at the very end of the war, and subsequent weeks of recuperation, brought him to an odd, essentially quietist conclusion:

This whole evil that was brought into the world by Nazism, that so clouded my soul that I said: if I ever get out of here, out of these conditions, if I survive, and the family survives, then the demands that I would make of life would be very small, I would be happy with anything, and grateful just for potatoes and cottage cheese.⁷¹

Both Brückner and Müller appear to be what non-Christians would regard as remarkably fatalistic throughout their interviews, assuming everything was in God's hands, and continually emphasizing that they retained their faith that whatever happened to them was God's will. Their versions of their lives are arguably highly unusual within the atheistic state of the GDR, yet not unique.

More typical, perhaps, are the interviews carried out by the East German sociologist, Dagmar Semmelmann, with 'ordinary workers' in Eisenhüttenstadt and elsewhere in the early 1980s.⁷² Margarete B., for example, was aged eighty by the end of 1981, when her series of interviews started.⁷³ Born in late December

⁷⁰ Brückner interview, p. 13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷² I am extremely grateful to Dagmar Semmelmann for making her files and transcripts of these unpublished interviews available to me. See also the well-known project by West German scholars Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

⁷³ Margarete B. (1900–82), Dagmar Semmelmann materials.

1900, she was the oldest of three siblings, brought up in a working-class, slightly left-wing but largely a-political family. She voted for von Hindenburg as president in 1932, although her mother voted for the KPD leader Ernst Thälmann. Margarete B. recalled being shocked at watching Jews being deported during the war years, but did not know how to act in the situation; she claimed she only really became politicized after the war. In answer to the question of what was her greatest disappointment, she responded: that ‘Russian soldiers’ had raped German women when they invaded. But she nevertheless excused them by virtue of a combination of ‘explanations’ for their conduct, including: what Germans had done by invading USSR; the soldiers’ extreme youth (she remembered them as being aged around sixteen years old); and what she still called their ‘race’—Mongolian. In 1948 she joined the SED, and also became very active as a functionary in the National Front. But she came under criticism, evidenced by a letter contained in her file dated 30 September 1958, from the SED Köpenick district leadership, for her work as a cadre leader in a ‘people’s own’ brewery (VEB Berliner Bürgerbräu), on the grounds that there were lots of undiscovered ex-Nazis still in leading positions and her membership work had not picked this up, thus allowing former Nazis to falsify their life stories. This kind of ‘ordinary’ biography, effectively rendering the past with little sense of self-doubt or questioning whether one might have been able to act otherwise in the circumstances, is likely to have been quite typical for discourses in the later GDR.

Philipp V., too, was born into a working class family, a decade later, in 1911; his parents divorced when he was still a child.⁷⁴ He gives a detailed description of the years of the depression and how he managed to survive by doing painter-decorator jobs, including ‘for Jews’, as well as engaging in mostly illegal dealings to get through. He was however unemployed for five years from 1929–34. He also provides a very detailed account of how he got involved in the workers’ movement, through a Jewish friend who was the son of an SPD politician. Yet at the same time, many of his former schoolmates went in precisely the opposite political direction, and played an active role in breaking up what had previously been a broad community:

Many, many of my schoolmates then went into the SA, because they simply thought, they would get work that way, or something. . . . And in the early period, after the takeover, they came and took away this one, and took away that one. There were also a lot of Jewish comrades there.⁷⁵

Philipp V. himself briefly sought to continue working in the left-wing underground; his last few actions as a KPD activist included disposing of a copying machine that had been used for printing illegal leaflets:

And then it was at an end! That was probably my last official act.
Yes, that was still in 1933.

⁷⁴ Philipp V. (born March 1911); Dagmar Semmelmann materials, interviewed Feb. 1981; ‘Lebensbericht eines gewöhnlichen Arbeiters in ungewöhnlichen Zeiten’.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

And after that it was deathly quiet! Then everything, everything was broken!
There were no connections any more, everyone had gone.⁷⁶

The somewhat younger female interviewer, Dagmar Semmelmann, repeatedly challenged Philipp on his subsequently passive 'attitude in fascism', a question she pursued doggedly through correspondence as well as in succeeding face-to-face interviews. Philipp V. responded energetically that he had nothing to be ashamed of, and felt no guilt about having given up any resistance work in the Third Reich:

You write: Why didn't you do anything then?

What should I have done as the only one left? I was totally broke! Without any connections: everyone had suddenly disappeared all at once.

You simply can't imagine this.

... Yes, yes, it would have been pointless. I won't let myself be... And everywhere where you went in businesses, it said: 'Let your greeting be German: Heil Hitler! And if you went in there and said 'Good Day', then they just shit on you.

How many other ordinary workers in the GDR shared similar experiences of the Third Reich, and felt equally powerless, lacking any sense of having been able to act differently, and hence any need for a sense of guilt or shame, is hard to ascertain. It is certainly least of all those in the kind of position that Philipp V. found himself in, and who nevertheless tried not to go along with the tide, who should have felt any guilt. Yet even though a majority of his compatriots conformed to Nazism, including most of his schoolmates, Philipp V. seemed to bear them no grudge either. The Nazi past seemed for him, and most of his compatriots in the succeeding 'anti-fascist state', to be not much of an issue most of the time. Quite possibly a sense of powerlessness rather than agency accompanied their experiences of both regimes, rendering them open to the notion that there was relatively little that 'ordinary people' could do to affect the course of history at any time.

Snippets in the private diary of Hubert B., a research chemist in a large synthetics production factory, suggest that the past echoed in rather more problematic ways for East Germans old enough to compare their experiences of militarism under the Nazis and under the SED rule. On 26 February 1983 he noted to himself:

A lieutenant-colonel, political officer, chest covered with medals, spoke in front of around one hundred trade union and party propaganda experts and me, the uninvited guest, about the military policies of the SED.

The educational officers of the Army had blown similar stuff into my ear forty years ago—and I had believed them.

Next the political officers of the Red Army did the same, and I had believed them too. And now this upright German comes with his 'we will struggle in order to be victorious', as though after the next war there will still be any victors and vanquished... 'The struggle for maintaining peace requires sacrifice!'

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Struggle, sacrifice, enemies, victory . . . As far back as I can remember, always the same words.

But today I don't believe any more . . .⁷⁷

Some of the similarities of life in the two dictatorships, one of which unleashed a World War and the other of which was a minor pawn at the front line of the Cold War, were thus not lost on their inhabitants. But the differences were arguably of far greater import.

IV. LIVING WITH SCARS: PAST AND PRESENT AMONG PENSIONERS IN THE LATE GDR

We now know, in hindsight, that the days of the GDR were severely numbered in the late 1980s. This was not so clear to contemporaries. And before the GDR actually came to an end, there was a brief period when, for many older East Germans, it was not only the future but also the past that was crucially at stake.

The later 1980s, as people entered retirement at precisely a moment when the opportunities for open discussion appeared unprecedented, reveal a surprising recovery of aspects which had remained relatively repressed over preceding decades. It is important for a moment to put the standard narrative of the unfolding revolutionary events on hold, as though we too did not know what was about to come; and to explore a less well-covered aspect of this odd and transient period when older people reviewed their lives, and reflected particularly on the personal legacies of Hitler's war, not realizing that within a very short space of time the world in which they were living would change almost beyond recognition.

For all older East Germans, the past had of course remained present, not merely as a matter of officially politicized representation, nor as a more or less formulaic life history, but also as a matter of some personal concern throughout the period since the 1940s. Not everything had needed to be repressed, particularly if it could be readily repackaged in acceptable political terms. By the 1980s, implicit references to what had come before 1945 but which explicitly focused on the post-1945 past could be fairly readily instrumentalized on an individual level. There were, for example, moments when older members of GDR society deployed arguments about how they had 'built up' the GDR and now deserved to be supported by younger East Germans. A degree of intergenerational jealousy was evident in reported remarks and complaints apparently current among older people, such as:

⁷⁷ Hubert B. diary, entry of 26 Feb. 1983. This diary, along with other materials, was acquired by Jeannette Madarász in the course of writing her book on *Working in East Germany*, where further details of the Chemiefaserwerk Premnitz can be found. Madarász is also planning to publish extensive extracts of Biebl's diary notes in a book provisionally entitled *Hidden Talk: 'Ordinary lives' in socialist East Germany in the 1980s*. I am extremely grateful both to Hubert B. for making his diary available for research purposes, and to Jeannette Madarász for providing me with a copy in advance of her publication.

Young people are being furthered more and more and receive more and more support. We are not against this, since our children and grandchildren are among them too. But we are the ones who created the preconditions for this. And that is not recognized in the level of our pensions.⁷⁸

As another report put it:

Above all, citizens around the age of 60 are discussing the possibility of lowering the age of retirement. According to a report of the District Executive Committee of the NDPD, people are saying about this: 'We old people did the work of reconstruction. There are good and educated people coming up behind us, what should stand in the way of dropping the retirement age?'⁷⁹

In these cases, there was no need to reference the pre-1945 past. But in other cases, the origins of present troubles in the Third Reich or its immediate consequences were less easily avoided, particularly as people grew older.

For those who had been victims of Nazi racial and political policies, and yet were not part of the GDR's own favoured groups (the active 'anti-fascist resistance fighters'), the past could be hard to forget, however strenuously people sought to make new lives. Sometimes painful incidents could lie dormant for decades, only to be suddenly brought back to consciousness relatively late in life. For example, on 21 March 1989 one Frau S. approached Herr Seydewitz, the then chairman of the Committee of the Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters, Regional Committee of Dresden, requesting information on behalf of her mother, born in 1906, who had been forcibly sterilized during the Third Reich. Although the mother of Frau S. had previously founded a family, this medical intervention against her will had been a traumatic experience about which she had, after the war, never wished to talk. But her memory had recently been jogged and she was now keen to obtain clarification:

Up until now she had never spoken about this. Now, after she had had to undergo inpatient treatment, her past became present to her and she saw herself compelled to share things with her daughter.

She does not know the extent to which, after 1945, the doctors of this institution for euthanasia crimes and forcible sterilization were brought to account for what they had done.

She would like to know whether this has happened.

... Frau S. expressed the view that it was important to her and her mother to know how it had come to this intervention on her mother, who was responsible for it, and that her mother was mentally a completely sound person.

It did not appear as if she was also thinking of looking for compensation in this connection.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ SAPMO-BArch, Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, DY 6 / 5121, Eingehende Informationsberichte aus dem Bezirk Schwerin, Jan.–Nov. 1985, Report of 2 Sep. 1985, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Report of 28 Feb. 1985, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Bundesarchiv Berlin, Ministerium des Innern (DDR), DP / 3 / 2207, 243-45-82, Aktennotiz, 21 Mar. 1989, fol. 175.

This particular incident seemed to be occasioned purely by a wish to clarify and understand one's own life story on the part of an older woman who also wanted to rescue her dignity and sense of self-respect against a violation that had occurred decades earlier. Others had more pragmatic and immediate motives for wanting some re-categorization of their experiences.

On a far broader scale, however, a curious light is shed on the ways in which the past returned to haunt a far later present, and the ways in which some East Germans wanted to portray their own past, when many who had suffered the effects of the war and post-war years came to retirement age in the 1980s and became aware of the levels of their pensions—and this precisely at a rare historic moment when they felt they could openly speak their minds. Suddenly, with the new climate of discussion and critique in the revolutionary autumn and winter of 1989–90, and in a context of daily revelations about mismanagement of the economy combined with luxurious living among the political elite, older GDR citizens vented their spleen in ways they might previously not have dared to do. The letters of 'petition', or *Eingaben*, to the trade union organization (FDGB) at this time are quite remarkable for the vignettes they provide of the ways in which some individuals had experienced and weathered major historical transitions and now came to represent their lives. Their pleas with respect to pension levels incorporate the evidence of both physical and emotional scars from this violent century, and provide some illustration of the twists and turns that had been demanded of them. The sheer volume of such letters suggests a relatively high degree of typicality for these kinds of account.

A major issue was the fact that those who had suffered damage to their bodies during the Second World War faced lower pensions than those who had been injured in accidents (even, as one pensioner pointed out, accidents occasioned by alcohol abuse). They felt that their 'service to the Fatherland' was not being recognized in a just manner, and that, indeed, they were being treated as minor war criminals; often the replies they had received from the GDR authorities had suggested it was their own fault they had been in military service.

The issue began to be a matter of concern as people who had been seriously injured as young men during the Second World War reached retirement age in the mid-1980s. Willi B., for example, wrote to the SED Social Policy Department on the occasion of the XI Party Congress 1986, using at this time the appropriate language of petitions in the GDR which echoed the official jargon and political line of the day while also pressing the individual case.⁸¹ His letter of 1 March 1986 put the case very clearly, while appealing to the received party line as far as the broader contexts and goals were concerned; he even echoed the standard first person plural possessive in respect of 'our' state:

When after the VIII Party Conference the pensions for those with war injuries were raised step by step, everyone who was affected was pleased and satisfied. For they all

⁸¹ On *Eingaben* in the GDR more generally, see the further references in Fulbrook, *The People's State*, Ch. 13.

saw yet again that our workers' and peasants' state also was doing something for those from whom the criminal Hitler-war had taken away one of the most important things that a person possesses, his health.

But unfortunately this additional war pension element was to fall away as soon as the recipient reached full pension age and lost the war pension contribution of the basic wage packet. Yet the additional costs of personal care, transportation, or other means of coping with the physical consequences of war wounds remained, now compounded by old age. Willi B. argued that the additional pension contributions to cover these costs of care should be restored:

The partial pension that was taken away by the previous regulation should be paid back to the war disabled. The party could thus demonstrate yet again that it has a heart for all who, because of the politics of a murky past, are among those who have the most to suffer.⁸²

There were many other such letters running along the same lines—at this stage cautiously phrased in such a way as to prop up the SED's image as the caring state.

The collapse of the SED hold on power from November 1989 unleashed a veritable spate of letters on this matter. But now, far from echoing the careful tones of admiration and flattery evident in earlier '*Eingaben*', some letter-writers clearly felt they were able to emit previously pent-up feelings in far less guarded tones. Werner B. for example, wrote on 30 November 1989:

I lost my lower left leg at the age of seventeen in the 2nd World War. The pensions law exists to the effect that: partial pension for people with amputations because of the war, starting with effect from 66^{2/3} per cent [as a measure of the extent of physical damage]. A lower-leg amputation counts as 50 per cent, that means that I have not received a single penny of pension my whole life long.

Because of the amputation I always had a sheltered workplace. That means: earning only basic money, that means, not being able to enter into the voluntary additional pension payments. As a young man I wanted to join the workers' militia group, but as an amputee I wasn't allowed to do that either. That means, in turn, that after 25 years of belonging I had to do without the 100.00 Marks additional pension of the militia group members. When I obtained medical advice, a Professor in Halle said to me, literally, 'Why were you stupid enough to become a soldier'. At the age of sixteen I most certainly did not voluntarily go to war. I really think it is now high time finally to draft a new pension law that would benefit us.⁸³

Similarly, a woman named Luise B. wrote on behalf of her husband, Franz B., on 19 November 1989:

One hears only of renewal, of doing away with all the mistakes with which we have been overburdened for the last 40 years. People are pleading for suggestions from the population . . . In this connection we have a problem which has been really bothering us for years now.

⁸² SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393, copy of letter from Willi B., 1 Mar. 1986.

⁸³ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393, letter from Werner B., 30 Nov. 1989.

My husband, who is at least 70% heavily war damaged, at first only received a few Marks of war pension, which in the course of the decades rose up to 102 Marks of partial pension.

When he reached pensionable age, these 102 Marks were simply struck off. His legs are becoming ever worse. Every state has surely always cared for its war victims, this is after all well known. My husband has in all these years done shift work for performance-related pay.

Because of his work in the weaving mill he has noise-related damage to his hearing . . .

We would urgently beg you to work up a new law for war pensions, that would do justice to these people who have had to live for so long with such major disabilities.

We believe that we speak here in the name of many war disabled. Get rid of privileges for the few, including workers' militia groups, for once and for all.⁸⁴

Many felt that they had been mobilized against their will during the Third Reich, but were now being penalized as though they had been war criminals. A handwritten letter from Hugo B., dated 23 November 1989, written on lined paper from an exercise book and replete with spelling errors, gives some indication of the troubles with which people in this situation had been faced, and the ways in which they felt they had been casualties of history:

I, Hugo B., born on 12.12.1913, was called up to the former Wehrmacht on 24.8.1939 for eight weeks for a military exercise. These eight weeks turned into 4½ years.

On 4.3.1944 I was badly wounded by shooting and lost my left hand up to the knuckles.

In 1947 I put in an application . . . for a disabled pension. I was told at that time that I had not had to go to war and would just have to get used to my condition. I was shocked at this. My application was refused.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most irate of these letter writers was one Rudolf P., who emitted a series of letters over the course of several months. In the first of these, he let off steam about the way in which the GDR fitted into his view of his whole life. Now in his eighty-third year, he appears to have been something of a classic member of the war-youth generation (he was born in 1906 or 1907), for whom everything had gone downhill after the end of the Third Reich. He had been forced to have both feet amputated as a result of the war, and had clearly become increasingly embittered by the way he was treated in the GDR. As he put it in his letter of 4 December 1989:

I am coming up to 83 and have lived through many good and beautiful times through all the regimes and must unfortunately confess that the worst has been my existence in the '1st Workers' and Peasants' State'. I can remember a very long way back, right back to the Empire and our beloved King. I lived through the revolution and all the regimes thereafter, which all wanted to do everything much more beautifully and better. And if today, in my high old age, I try to draw a balance sheet, my answer would be: 'Above all it is always the older citizens who are only ever deceived and defrauded.' Our last shred of nerves and our trust have been taken away from us by the 1st Workers' and Peasants'

⁸⁴ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393, letter from Luise B., 17 Nov. 1989.

⁸⁵ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393, letter from Hugo B., 23 Nov. 1989.

State. I only ask myself who will recompense us for our 44 lost years, while others have been living high on the hog. . . . As a war-damaged person (both feet amputated) I have not had a single red penny of war pension right up to today, in this way I have been marked as a small war criminal, and all my war comrades, who had to defend their Fatherland whatever their religious confession, political party or otherwise inclined, were declared by the 1st Peasants' and Workers' State [*sic*] as war criminals and eternally trodden into the dirt. Nothing was left of decency and consideration. Even worse, our hard-earned cash as Activists of the First Hour was recklessly given away to others. What mountains of money were handed out for children's activities, holiday exchanges, children in Poland, and for our own personal children there was absolutely nothing! . . .

In general I could tell you an awful lot more about how we older people have been treated, it is a scandal for our state, and where do you think you can find any trust. There would have to be show trial after show trial like the Nuremberg war crimes trials or also the doctors' trials, expropriation of all the guilty, work camps and sentences according to the old trial regulations, just as other innocent citizens have been unjustly and severely sentenced.⁸⁶

In a further letter of 21 December 1989, Rudolf P. returned to the wartime themes which still clearly bothered him, now seeking to render the GDR on a par with the Third Reich in a highly confused tirade of abuse and bitterness, punctuated by inaccuracies of grammar and spelling (not reproduced in translation). His letter indicates just how much had been seething below the surface in some quarters of that deeply unlucky war-youth generation, who felt their trust had been abused and that they had come off worst in every regime change at particular stages of their lives:

My case is a crime against humanity . . . there was already something about it, that all ordinary soldiers who had to defend their Fatherland were little war criminals, the declaration of the then city councillor of the SED 'Elsa Fenka' that all ordinary soldiers who come back should be thrown into the Elbe river and drowned! This is how the 1st Workers' and Peasants' State was built up on the power monopoly of the SED and Stalinism . . . In the other part of my Fatherland I would be paid a monthly war pension of 342.– DM! The question arises . . . have our slave drivers lived at my expense and only made such laws to the advantage of themselves and the SED? It would be appropriate, to put it more clearly, to create a law saying that all older citizens who have reached their 65th year should be gassed, like during Nazi times, because we are all in the way and almost always in whatever respect we are being disadvantaged! Because of the permanent mismanagement of the economy that is only now being uncovered, the squandering and unjust enrichment from the value generated by the suspiring GDR people over more than four decades, my own war pension to which I have an entitlement has also been squandered! Who will give us, above all us old citizens, the stolen time back! Have we not *all* been persecuted behind walls? Have we not *all* got the right to a VVN [Association of those Persecuted by Nazism] pension? Wasn't it just a change of colouring from brown to red? We were treated like criminals and the VVN were free people! We should now all be able to draw the fat VVN

⁸⁶ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393, letter from Rudolf P., 4 Dec. 1989.

pensions. Most of these VVN have a peaceful and fat life behind them, in a small way like their big-wigs above them, far away from the action, have stayed hale and hearty, and are still despite their fat unjustified moneys sent 2 x [sic] a year on the sweat of the workers' backs to a spa for recuperation, they have spied on people and delivered them up for the knife! There too it would be time finally for a good clear out! This SED state didn't ever want, after all, to be a class state!

... Precisely the VVN are the sidekicks of the SED with its right of sole rule!

I raise again the scornful treatment of my case and demand that the fat VVN-pensions be annulled as fast as possible!⁸⁷

There are many letters from Rudolf P. in a similar vein, including the odd combination of comments and information that his 'brother Helmut died by being gassed with 'influenza' in Bernburg in 1941', and that his 'brother-in-law, comrade Walter R., was shot by Nazi police in Altenberg on 4.7.36 (memorial stone)'. He also continued with his earlier themes:

For both of these I haven't received a single red penny, why do the VVN get such unjustified high pensions? Are we not all today VV-SED more or less damaged and treated like criminals and 2nd class people!⁸⁸

By February 1990 Rudolf P. was even contacting the 'Thursday Forum' television programme, with much the same message but characterized by slight stylistic improvements in expression. At this time too the comparison with the West became more explicit: 'In the other part of my Fatherland it's quite different, also with the war pensions!' The way in which he had been a casualty of history, essentially a case now deserving of some form of additional compensation, was also underlined by an appeal to his mother's fate: 'My mother, even with 129. Marks hunger pension, because of hunger and cold landed up in the cemetery in 1947!' Finally, in the classically philosemitic manner of those who had not fully understood the issues involved, Rudolf P. included in his brief biographical details that he had been 'employed from 1921 to 1927 by an excellent Jewish lawyer'.⁸⁹ While the extent to which Rudolf P. pursued his case and the venom which he vented in the process were somewhat unusual, the emotions and attitudes can be found over and over again in collections of such letters demanding redress for experienced grievances. A sense of injustice and being a casualty of history several times over—first in the wounds of war, and then in the ways in which these were not adequately recognized or compensated—was clearly very widespread among affected members of this generation.

A further key issue was that of the years 'lost' through forced labour or internment after the war, whether in the area that became the GDR or elsewhere in eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. These years of often bitterly awful conditions and hard labour were not now being counted towards pension entitlements, in contrast to those who had led a doubly easy life: first, through being able to enter

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 Dec. 1989.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 Dec. 1989.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, letter from Rudolf P. to Donnerstag Forum Fernsehen, received 20 Feb. 1990.

the ordinary labour force immediately after the war without periods of forced labour or internment; and secondly, as now receiving, accordingly, higher pensions in retirement. A particularly interesting summary of some widespread issues—but also a quite representative letter—was written by one Kurt P. to the Executive Committee of the trade union organization, the FDGB, under its chairman, Harry Tisch. Headed ‘premature retirement for internees in the Soviet Union 1945–1949’, the letter, written by a self-confessed 1929er who was both a former ‘resettler’ and had also contributed positively to the ‘building of the GDR’, put a case couched quite explicitly in generational terms:

Everywhere in our country questions are now being raised. A personal question has been concerning me for a long time already.

To the issues:

I was born on 6.5.1929 in Groß-Möllen Kreis Pyritz, now in the People’s Republic of Poland. In February 1945 I was interned by the Soviet Kommandatur in the Soviet Union. The period of internment lasted until October 1949. I was released in Großenfelde near Frankfurt/Oder. The certificate of release is attached. I would like to emphasize that I did not belong to the fascist army. From 1943 until the time of internment I was an apprentice smithy in the District Town of Pyritz. For four of my five years of internment I worked in coal mining. The towns were Prokopjowsk in the District of Kemero Camp 7525-13 as well as the town previously called Stalinsk Camp 7525-15. There I worked in the shaft mine of Ordschonikidse in the production of coal.

Now my question to you: Will these four years of mining be added in for an early retirement?

I am of the opinion that I should have the same rights as everyone who worked in mining. I think that here it is a question of a befriended country, which is at the moment also rehabilitating a lot of citizens.

In the 40 year existence of our Republic much has been forgotten, in particular our year group and our generation. It should also be mentioned that during my internment I attended an antifascist course. I have been a member of the SED since 1954 and have always been actively involved on behalf of our socialist society. I have been honoured seven times with the title of Activist and with the Service Medal of the GDR for work achievements. Since 1984 I have had an occupational illness, list number 71 of the BK. The stages of my work were from 1950 to 1958 the People’s Own Factory the Sawmill Koldenhof in Neustrehlitz District, from 1958 until now the Synthetic Fabric Production Works ‘Friedrich Engels’ in Premnitz. In this works I am active as a factory foreman.⁹⁰

This appeared to be a highly deserving and clearly put case by a committed member of the SED and active GDR citizen. Yet even in this case the answer was in the negative: allegedly because Kurt P. had not served long enough in the mining work to qualify, needing a minimum of five years’ mining service to begin to attract pensionable time.⁹¹ Similarly Irene R. was given short shrift in response to her claim:

⁹⁰ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15394, letter from Kurt P., no date but stamped receipt 30 Oct. 1989.

⁹¹ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15394, letter of 20 Nov. 1989, from Hoppe, Abteilungsleiter.

On 11 July 1945 I was deported to an internment camp by the then GPU [a forerunner of the Soviet security service, KGB] of the Soviet Army. At this time I was 15 years old, I was neither accused nor sentenced, and in this sense I was never a prisoner in the legal sense. This involuntary period lasted precisely three years—until 13 July 1948.

As I only now discover, these three years are not being counted in my pensionable service. The laconic answer of a colleague in the pensions department of the social insurance office runs as follows: ‘that’s the law’. I would now be interested to hear which law lays this down. It would be beyond comprehension for this period to be valued differently from that of captivity as a prisoner of war.

Should citizens of our state, who after 40 years are still aware of their duties and responsibilities, and who contributed to the building up of our Republic, be disadvantaged because of this past?⁹²

Another woman, Inge B., unhappy with the progress of her parents’ case, ultimately even equated experiences of internment after the war with previous experiences of concentration camp victims under Nazism:

My parents are both pensioners. Because of the war they had to leave their Heimat (Königsberg) and came into Soviet captivity. My father for four years and my mother for one year.

I would like to know from you why the years of captivity aren’t being taken into consideration in the pension?

People who were in a concentration camp receive a higher pension than others.

With what right? My parents also experienced very bad and inhumane times in Siberia.⁹³

Inge B. here equated the ‘bad and inhumane times’ suffered under conditions of internment as prisoners of war with the experiences of survivors of Nazi concentration camps; she also seemed to consider that ‘suffering’—understood also to include loss of the homeland or ‘Heimat’ in East Prussia—to be grounds enough for receiving a higher pension, with no distinction according to the causes of suffering.

There are many similar cases in the files; in almost every case, the outcome for the petitioner was, in the short term, disappointing (in the longer term of course, the unification of Germany in October 1990 introduced a completely different situation with respect to pension levels and entitlements). The situation seemed to some even worse in light of the contrast with the preferential treatment for those in similar situations in West Germany. There was also regret for ‘lost opportunities’ throughout the best part of a lifetime, if people had actively chosen not to leave for the West before 1961. But the point here is less one of the details of pension arrangements in the dying days of the GDR than of the views of their lives which these letter writers demonstrate. For all the ways in which they had sought to come to terms with the changing conditions in which they found themselves, on reaching old age many East Germans registered a sense that their whole lives had been dramatically, and on the whole adversely, affected by the ways in which their own

⁹² SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15394, letter from Irene R., 17 Aug. 1989.

⁹³ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15394, letter from Inge B. of 23 Nov. 1989.

biographies had been peculiarly warped and shaped by wider historical forces beyond their control. Their emotions and claims were perhaps most readily expressed at the beginnings of a new moment of transition, in the uncertain months of the winter of 1989–90.

It was not only men who felt so deeply affected, even if they had borne the brunt of war wounds. Women too were affected both by the new climate of open critique and the rising sense of resentment at the ways in which they had been constrained at every stage of their lives, as they saw it, to give of their utmost, change political colours—and now receive little or nothing in recompense. By the summer of 1990—when the GDR still existed, but in a very different form, with the former power of the SED and the Stasi entirely broken—a letter of 1 August 1990 from the ‘Reich League of War and Military Service Victims, Disabled, and Those in Receipt of Social Pensions and Surviving Dependents of the Deceased, Landesverband Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Kreisverband Greifswald’, to Frau Dr Hildebrandt, still in position as GDR Minister for Work and Social Affairs, pleaded on behalf of the war widows who

are all aged around 70 or thereabouts. They had to bear sole responsibility for bringing up their children in the difficult years of the war and the post-war years and had to make the greatest of sacrifices without the state having any care for their concerns. But at the same time they were rubble women [who helped to clear away war debris: *Trümmerfrauen*] and in the post-war years they often had to while away their lives in underpaid work. In most cases the possibility of attaining qualifications could not even be considered. Do you, Minister, want yet again to exclude and punish these women?⁹⁴

These women, born around the end of the Great War, felt they had borne the brunt of the troubles of the mid-twentieth century. They were drawn from the cohorts who had at the time been most enthusiastic about Hitler and the Third Reich; but in this plea for help in old age this was not a matter for any explicit reference. Rather, they appealed to ‘eternal’ values related to women’s roles during the times through which they had lived: taking sole responsibility for the upbringing of their children both during and after the war, playing a major role in clearing the rubble and ruins, and working in menial capacities after the war, never having the chance for gaining further qualifications and thus experiencing the opportunities for upward mobility experienced by the slightly younger women in the cohorts coming after them. They now felt at risk of being once again excluded and punished simply for their age and the way their own biographies had intersected with historical events at different stages of their lives.

These older East Germans thus took the opportunity, once conditions changed and open critique became ever more prevalent, to unleash their animosity towards a state in which they had felt constrained in terms of both expression and treatment, and yet which many of them had helped to build up. They nevertheless experienced a continuing sense of dissonance in trying to bring the different

⁹⁴ SAPMO BArch, DY 34 / 15393.

periods of their lives together: there was no single script that would allow them to do justice to all the periods through which they had lived. Given the extent to which they had been exposed to the official GDR line, and clearly knew the parameters of the politically acceptable view of history, it is extraordinary just what versions and interpretations of the past came to the surface once the floodgates were opened.

Turning points

The last great rupture of the century was the rupture of 1989–90. Unlike the previous ruptures of 1918 and 1945, this was born not of war, but of a peaceful revolution—a revolution characterized by the slogan ‘No violence!’ (*Keine Gewalt*). And unlike the previous two post-war ruptures, there was after the break no ‘war-youth generation’, so shocked by the recent past that it felt it had to carry a burning flame, an ideological torch for building a new and better future. This time, in the context of major changes in the broader international system, the old regime was challenged from within: it crumbled and with loss of Soviet support ultimately capitulated in face of growing domestic pressure, though not without contest along the way; and the newly opened-up East Germany was in the course of 1990 unable to face the competition of the West. Continuing to haemorrhage population to the Federal Republic through the winter and spring of 1989–90, East Germany was eventually taken over from outside, by an already existent state, with no need to invent all anew from the ruins of the rejected old. The events of 1989–90 that destroyed the GDR appeared, almost, to be a revolution without and against ideology.

This was of course not the case: capitalism is in itself an ideological system, although one whose supporters often deny and denounce the concept. The vast majority of those East Germans who wanted fast takeover by the West, who voted with their feet after the opening of the Wall and through the ballot box in March 1990, wanted the Deutschmark: they wanted not only, negatively, to be rid of the SED and the Stasi; they also wanted, actively and positively, consumer capitalism and the democratic system which went along with it. Ironically, it was in part precisely because of the consumerist emphasis of Honecker’s brand of ‘actually existing socialism’ that so many East Germans were disappointed with the ever deteriorating and always drab economic realities of the GDR and so highly conscious of the apparently more glittering alternative in the West. And it was because the West had upheld, in its Basic Law, the right of Germans in the GDR to hold citizenship in the Federal Republic, that they were able to uproot and relocate in such masses that the West German welfare state soon became overburdened and unification appeared in the West, too, to be the only ‘solution’ to the ever more apparent, continuously exacerbated, economic imbalance between the two states. But once they discovered deeper aspects of the democratic and consumerist ideology—in particular, its individualistic rather than collective character—many East Germans began to have doubts.

This last, final rupture of the century was a rupture without war, which indeed brought to an end the Cold War; and it was a rupture without the emergence of an entirely new regime or proactive attempts at mobilization of new carriers of a future-oriented ideology. In the process, generations re-formed again. Those who had played different roles within and had different attitudes towards the GDR now found that their views of the past and their experiences of the present divided them yet again on generational lines. But interestingly, unlike after the rupture of 1945, surprisingly large numbers of East Germans after 1989–90 did not reject their past and define themselves against it. Nor did they fully embrace all aspects of the new ‘ideology’ of the West—an ideology that was in any event committed to improvements in the present rather than the building of a better future. For the post-Wall youth generations, the future was now, the past a matter of rosy memories rather than real nostalgia. But among older generations, there was a remarkable yearning for the past. And this yearning is not to be confused with one of its capitalist forms of expression, namely an *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) often expressed in objects and products which capitalists and the tourist trade were only to eager to cash in on. There was a deeper way in which perceptions and representations of the past were intimately bound up with a sense of social relations, and hence a sense of self.

At the start of her magisterial novel *Kindheitsmuster*, exploring a childhood in Nazi Germany from the perspective of an adult in the GDR, Christa Wolf commented on the ways in which people distanced themselves from the past, setting themselves up as ‘strangers’ to a past construed as a foreign country, while yet remaining very much alive.¹ This is certainly widely the case for those who lived through the Third Reich and made the transition from Nazism to the two post-war German regimes. But in the case of former GDR citizens after 1990, very often a somewhat different kind of relationship of the self towards the recent past may be observed. Rather than a self-distancing, there was more often a heightened sense of connection with or yearning for previously hidden, newly valued, aspects of former East German society, despite rejection of the repressive state. Increasingly, the eastern German ‘self’ after 1989 was even in large measure defined precisely in terms of a remembered or perceived and newly constructed pre-1989 social world. For many East Germans after unification, it was the united Federal Republic of Germany in which they felt they were ‘strangers’, and, far from seeking to separate themselves from the past, it was often precisely in terms of this past that they constructed new identities.

In exploring generationally distinct ways in which eastern Germans engaged with the new present of the post-1989 world, and reflected on the past they had lost, certain features are notable. First, actual experiences of transition and subsequent readjustment certainly did have an effect on the ways in which people reconceived their lives; but they did not fully determine such re-conceptualizations. Previous patterns of engagement with the world—rooted in different periods of socialization, degrees of enthusiasm for one or another cause, personal investments of time

¹ Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, p. 9; see above, Ch. 6, p. 247.

and emotion—continued to affect modes of response to the new. At the same time, heightened perceptions of the shortcomings of the new world threw into sharp relief some of the previously less consciously grasped aspects of the old.² Yet the changes came in the context of a relatively long period of personal ferment, with significant shifts beginning well before the dramatic and sudden events of the autumn of 1989. And the well-known phenomenon of *Ostalgie* is all the more remarkable when one recalls the unease within the GDR which had prefigured its ultimate collapse. The narratives of transition across this watershed have, as with all earlier ruptures and transitions, to be placed in the broader context of change.

I. STAGNATION, FRUSTRATION, AND THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

For all the growth in the size of the Stasi in the 1970s and 1980s, and for all the attempts of the SED leadership to constrain the population and produce propaganda proclaiming the GDR's successes, the realities of environmental deterioration and rapidly snowballing economic collapse were not so easy to disguise. The personal and the political were again closely intertwined, as East Germans of all ages ruminated in private about the pattern of their past lives and the difficulties of the present in the later 1970s and 1980s. For many, the crises of the East German economy and polity were reflected in deeply emotional personal crises; for others, life went on apparently as usual, if with greater difficulties in some areas; and for some, the late GDR was characterized by a sometimes heady, sometimes terrifying combination of growing frustration as well as hopes and action for change, until the extraordinarily rapid events of the autumn of 1989 threw everything into question.

Honecker's social and economic policies of massive subventions subsidized by massive loans were destined, in the longer or shorter term, to failure. The rate of decline was somewhat alleviated in the early 1980s by loans from West Germany (agreed by the CSU politician Franz Josef Strauss), and somewhat exacerbated by the renewed arms race of the late 1970s and 1980s (Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, siting of Cruise and Pershing missiles on German soil), alongside the lingering reverberations of the oil crises of 1973 and 1979. Whether or not Honecker was prepared to recognize the inevitable, the consequences were only too visible all around in the rusting industry and emptying shelves of the would-be consumer society of the GDR.

At the same, time, a period of *détente* was giving rise to renewed fears of war. Military service, and the increasing militarization of life in the GDR, including the introduction of compulsory military education into the school curriculum, was a cause of major concern, particularly among young adults. Far from aspiring to a

² Parts of the material and discussion in this chapter are also published, in rather different form, in my chapter on 'Living through the GDR: History, life stories and generations in East Germany' in Caroline Pearce and Nick Hodgin (eds.), *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German state since 1989* (New York: Camden House, 2010).

military career for their sons, a phenomenon so prevalent among bourgeois and aristocratic circles in Imperial Germany, parents in the late GDR now widely feared a nuclear conflagration.

Those committed to military careers were partly motivated by the advantages in terms of opportunities; probably very few were as internally committed as Thomas Fischer, born in 1971, who was one of the very last batch of eighteen-year-olds to serve in the military forces in 1989–90. He claims he had always been interested in matters military at school and was keen to join up. His retrospective account, based on his private diary of those days, suggests a real pride in his service, in what he looked back on as worthwhile and enjoyable days even if hard at times.³ But Fischer's sense both of the 'normality' of life in the GDR and the purpose of a career in the military were far from widely shared at a time of widespread and growing unrest. Rather more typical of those 'born into the GDR' was growing fear and concern about the future, although only a tiny minority—to be counted in the hundreds rather than thousands—joined Vera Wollenberger and others in the political activism growing environs of the Protestant Churches and human rights and environmental groups in the course of the 1980s. The majority of East Germans, before the major change in international circumstances in autumn 1989 and hence the very different context for action, continued to live their lives as though the GDR would last for the foreseeable future and any attempts at altering their broader circumstances were relatively futile. The 'routinization of evil' in a period of relative normalization should not be equated with political enthusiasm or massive positive support for the regime.

Even those who appeared to have made successful careers among the 1929ers registered and sought personal ways of dealing with growing distress in the late GDR—although, as so frequently, this was accompanied by considerable ambivalence. For Eva Schäfer (born 1924), a lifetime spent in conformity to those demands of those around her suddenly precipitated a mid-life crisis of rebellion against what she saw as her 'yes-saying' personality, a crisis expressed in what she termed her silent 'scream' against all she had done and perpetrated against herself. Her summary of what bothered her in the late 1970s can perhaps stand for the feelings of many East Germans of her generation:

My path is long . . . And in no way has it led to what I wanted, what I had learned to want, what I then believed and to the best of my ability sought to represent . . .

And it is not bitterness, only the sort of responsibility of a chronicler who, because he sometimes feels he is called to do this, also takes himself seriously. As one of countless numbers, I would like to say. Therefore I will list what my talents might have led to by way of greatness. But which was not possible *because I once confused saying yes with ideological fidelity*. (When I realized the mistake, it was too late. See my personal report on the 13th August!)

- A. Not being able to read what I would like.
- B. Not being able to travel where I would like.

³ Thomas Fischer, *Polizeisoldaten. Kasernendienst—Straßenkämpfer—Atombunker* (Aachen: Helios, 2006).

- C. Not being able to work as I would like and as I think I could. Art being kept on a string pulled by politicians, who distrust the immense power and impact of art, because they are not even willing even to grasp this. Or can't.
- D. Not being able to live in the way I would like. And I'm not even looking for comfort here. Quite the contrary, precisely in contrast to the petty bourgeois people in whose vicinity I have been forced to live for fifteen years.

But I have less the intention of accusing the deformed social order. Rather myself, my tendency to say yes.

In the course of this investigation I also have to inflict on myself the naming of the *worst* stages of my yes-saying:

...

Not going when it was the right time for it, when I was still needed 'over there'. On several levels.

During the party meeting, the extraordinary one, when the Prague Spring had entered our countries and the tanks followed on.

(I kept silent, because I followed the advice of our director.)⁴

For all her claims that this was to be a purely personal reckoning, not a critique of a 'deformed' society, it is clear that Schäfer's regrets about things she should have done differently were deeply rooted in difficult situations and the appalling challenges of the social and political context in which she had lived her life. Her sense that she had been fulfilled neither in her marriage nor her work was closely related to her sense of effective imprisonment by the broader conditions in which she lived—and for which, as a long-standing and conformist member of the SED, she felt she bore some personal responsibility. Rather than recognizing that the challenges were too great and the risks too high, she blamed her own ineffectual responses, her own character—rooted in conformist behaviours, attempts at endearment with others and a search for personal security that she felt she had learned as a child—and chastised herself accordingly.

Schäfer's inner rebellion against the course of her own life now manifested itself not only in her diary outpourings, and indeed even in a posthumous letter of June 1981 to her deceased friend, the writer Maxie Wander, but also in excessive drinking. As she put it:

Here another point seems important to me: since I was then what I was, the observation escaped me that I have only just realized—during the last few months, that I *needed* the imagined wishes, the illusions, in order to be able even to get some air. And because I had this 'nose for it', I used alcohol for this purpose. I did not want *this reality!* Even today I cannot get rid of the impression that I fell into this life as into a train that is not heading to the right destination.⁵

Schäfer's observations, as well as her personal crisis, may have been particularly acute in their distinctive combination; but both the writing out of frustrations and the drowning of sorrows can be found, separately, on the part of many other East

⁴ DTA 93/ I /4, Eva Schäfer Tagebuch 1972–1981, entry of 24 Sep. 1978, her emphases.

⁵ *Ibid.*, her emphases.

Germans whose marriages did not collapse and who did not blame themselves and their own personalities for the shortcomings of a 'deforming' system.

One person who sought to stay not only sane but even happy in the face of some of the idiocies of everyday life in the declining years of 'actually existing socialism' was Hubert B. Born in 1925, in some respects Hubert B. was at first a classic 1929er, joining the SED already in 1948.⁶ Unlike many other 1929ers, however, he left it again in 1953, disillusioned by the June Uprising. But his hopes for building a better future were not at this time completely destroyed; they only eroded gradually, as the visions and dreams of the 1950s turned into the drab and disintegrating realities of the later decades. Hubert B.'s series of diary notes from 1982 to 1984 provide vivid insights into the life of a research chemist working at the synthetic-fibre production factory (*Chemiefaserwerk*) in Premnitz at a time when lack of materials, decaying infrastructure, underemployment and 'going through the motions' with respect to both work and political involvement were all too evident. On the occasion of a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of friends, Hubert B. and a number of his acquaintances reviewed the course of their lives and the ways in which things had changed since they first got to know each other. Again, the summary is revealing:

We have all known each other for 25 years. . . The anniversary was an occasion for us to look back.

It was not a sentimental review that makes facing death any easier, but it also didn't help to make continuing living any easier either. Everyone was agreed: however hard the 1950s had been, they had had a momentum and were full of hope. We were young, it was a time of progress, and that alone made us joyful. We pulled ourselves together and were full of confidence, although we already registered at that time that there was a suspicious creaking in the framework. And assuredly it would all have collapsed at that time too, if a Wall of concrete and barbed wire had not been introduced as a supportive corset.

We came to the view: everyone actually had some reason to be contented, no one was exposed to an icy wind, and life had not dealt any of us particularly hard blows. And yet, we are not happy. Everyone says, in these circumstances there's nothing in it for me any more! Everyone is looking for ersatz gratification and experiences of success outside their work—one this way, another that.

It is regrettable that even in such a small circle of friends the isolation of the individual cannot be broken into, since there remains a degree of mutual suspicion hindering any really human warmth. Even among such old acquaintances there is no way that a real heart-to-heart discussion can take place.⁷

For all the apparent conviviality of old acquaintances reminiscing, and for all the later much vaunted 'togetherness' of East German society, Hubert B. registered here a sense of slight caution, if not actually mistrust, among East Germans who had abandoned their hopes of building a better society in favour of the pursuit of individual happiness.

Perceptions of decline at this time were exacerbated by the somewhat improved possibilities for travel to the West, with a growing number of pensioners as well as

⁶ See above, pp. 427–8.

⁷ Hubert Biebl, *Kalenderblätter*, entry of 20 Mar. 1983.

people with 'urgent family matters' finally able to take advantage of slightly more relaxed visa permissions, particularly in 1983–4 (when Honecker was angling, unsuccessfully, for his own visit to the West) and 1987 (when Honecker also succeeded in making an official visit, welcomed by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl as a fellow statesman). In the process, an imagined Western 'Other' became a reality, which for some put a whole new perspective on their experience of the GDR. Hubert B. commented, for example, on the return of a colleague from celebrating his sister's sixtieth birthday in Cologne:

One week was sufficient to cause the collapse of the ideal secure world of the Master, the Chair of the Conflict Resolution Commission, and the passionate amateur radio and television ham. Speechless, perplexed, dejected, again and again: 'I've seen it with my own eyes, but I just can't believe it!' He talked as if he had been to the moon, to Mars, or beyond our solar system. And in between, again and again: 'I can't believe how poor we are!'⁸

In the meantime, for Hubert B. and other East Germans, the world of deeply boring and utterly predictable meetings, with their pre-written speeches and implausible declarations of meeting plan targets and over-production of norms, continued. As Hubert B. noted, after analysing his own overwhelming tendency to fall asleep the moment a meeting started:

On the other hand it bores you to death, what you get served up, with what stupidity the same platter is served up again and again. You know in advance what is coming, you know the course of the proceedings, the arguments, the successes and appeals, when to clap or when to put up your hand—it's just as much a ritual as a rosary sliding through the fingers.⁹

Such 'discussions' could do very little to deal with the mounting and very real problems faced by the GDR economy. Those who were still going through the motions were only too well aware of the farcical side of their lives, captured in widely current humour (referred to by Hubert B. as 'gallows humour').¹⁰ As Hubert B. noted in his diary with respect to the increasing underemployment of GDR employees, combined with the obsession of the GDR system with encouraging productivity by the ceremonial presentation of little monetary rewards as well as more symbolic gestures such as awards, titles, and medals:

When I came back from five weeks on holiday, my colleague admitted to me that probably no one would have noticed if he had stayed at home during my absence. Not one single time was he needed by anyone.

Now I could have said the same about him.

So we must now actually have the best chance of receiving awards on the next occasion for this, since it is still the case that:

Anyone who does no work also makes no mistakes.

Anyone who makes no mistakes counts as among the best.

Anyone who counts as among the best receives an award!¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of 25 Apr. 1983.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, entry of 5 Oct. 1983.

⁹ *Ibid.*, entry of 16 May 1983.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, entry of 7 Sep. 1983.

Hubert B.'s own strategy for dealing with the mounting frustrations of everyday life in the declining years of the GDR was to make little comments in his diary, capturing the idiocies of the system while conforming to its demands, and even holding a totally meaningless 'social function without which one can barely get by anymore nowadays'.¹²

Hubert B.'s situation as a 1929er is interesting: clearly at home, he was apparently quite contented in his personal relationships with family, friends and colleagues, and to some extent in the early decades of the GDR hopeful of building a new and better society. By the 1980s he had not succumbed to the despair (and alcoholism) of Schäfer and many others, but had found ways to enjoy life within and despite the shortcomings of actually existing socialism by maintaining an ironic distance and self-confident critique while never stepping over any crucial boundaries—a phenomenon not unknown in societies of whatever political colour and economic system. But not everyone in the deteriorating conditions of the later 1970s and 1980s was able to accomplish this balance. Eva Schäfer was, by May 1979, calling the GDR a '*Ghettostaat*', and in diary entries in June 1979 deeply regretting her trajectory through the GDR:

Our Party, to which I dedicated myself in 1950 lock, stock and barrel, has gradually brought me to a permanent state of a bad conscience . . . When I realized that it was no longer a matter of different tactics in a well-known strategy, but was rather a matter of breaking one's neck, then I became tremendously vigilant . . . But since I knew too little, I relied on faith, despite everything contradicting this . . . But when knowledge about human beings, Marxism-Leninism, was reduced to a system of faith, to a petty bourgeois belief in their own petty domination, administration as self-aggrandizement, persecution of comrade artists with fire and the sword, then I started to scream. And am still screaming today . . . For 30 years of my life . . . I have served this party. And when for once I take my own side, I say: it is not I who have betrayed it, but rather it me!¹³

Eva Schäfer was, of course, moving in the slightly rarefied atmosphere of the artistic circles; in the later 1970s, many actors, writers, and artists had been increasingly disaffected since the enforced expulsion of Wolf Biermann in 1976. But interestingly, the points Schäfer highlights in her diary entries are, repeatedly, 17 June 1953, and the impossibility of secret voting in communal elections. Notable too is the way in which, through her anguished rebellion and 'scream' at this stage of her life, she almost appears for the first time to be speaking for and on behalf of herself rather than an external voice of authority from which she was seeking approval and acceptance.

Outside the circles of the semi-critical, yet effectively state-sustaining cultural intelligentsia, and also beyond the small groups of dissidents who engaged in discussions within the protective confines of the Protestant Churches, many individuals increasingly began to challenge dominant cultural norms in the more manageable compass of their own lives. If the 'iron cage' of the GDR had led many

¹² *Ibid.*, entry of 30 Jun. 1983.

¹³ DTA 93/ I/4, Eva Schäfer Tagebuch 1972–1981, entries of 20 May 1979 and 5 Jun. 1979, her emphases.

to feel that their own lives were being 'deformed', and if neither the world nor the GDR could readily be changed, then one solution was to make small changes within individual lives. Mobilization for the wider collective cause, which had been such a prevalent theme in this century of violence, was increasingly not merely rejected but actively abandoned in favour of self-transformation in the present—an East German variant on the self-realization projects so prevalent in Western societies at this time.

A process of seeking individual fulfilment rather than commitment to collective goals became evident through the 1970s and 1980s. It was not purely an individual matter, however, but was also in some respects fostered by the consumerism of Honecker's policies. It was also increasingly registered in officially sanctioned cultural life: one needs only to compare Heiner Carow's popular film, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973), with the literature and films of the pre-1965 period, let alone the almost unimaginably different atmosphere of Wolfgang Staudte's classic 1946 'rubble film', *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, to register the shift. Even so, developments were not entirely as officially desired. Changes in youth culture towards a greater focus on individual satisfaction at the expense of commitment to the GDR's officially proclaimed collective goals did not go unnoticed among East German social researchers, declining from a peak of positive attitudes in the mid-1970s.¹⁴ By the 1980s, it was as though working on the self and relationships with others on a personal level could help to alleviate, if never entirely lift or dispel, some of the constraints imposed by a system that was increasingly exposed as failing on so many levels. And Eva Schäfer was far from alone in her resort to alcohol in an effort to dispel the miseries of everyday life.¹⁵ These changes in prevalent attitudes stood in sharp contrast to the situation in the early decades of the century; and conceptions about private lives and interpersonal relations changed with shifts in generations.

Homosexuality, which had from the late 1950s been less harshly treated and was also decriminalized earlier in the GDR than the West, began to be more openly discussed and tolerated, although the SED authorities were still concerned to ensure that it did not lead to literal, geographical 'border crossing', linking up with groups in the West, on top of what was still seen by the SED gerontocracy as the transgression of the moral borders of an older generation.¹⁶ Sexual preferences

¹⁴ See e.g. the work of the Leipzig-based Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, represented in Walter Friedrich and Hartmut Griese (eds.), *Jugend und Jugendforschung in der DDR: Gesellschaftliche Situationen, Sozialisation und Mentalitätsentwicklung in den achtziger Jahren* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1991).

¹⁵ See further Fulbrook, *The People's State*, Ch. 5.

¹⁶ See e.g. Barbara Bertram, *Adam und Eva heute* (Leipzig: Verlag für die Frau, 1988); Christina Karstädt and Anette von Zitzewitz, ...*viel zuviel verschwiegen. Eine Dokumentation von Lebensgeschichten lesbischer Frauen aus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Hoho Verlag Christine Hoffmann, 1996); Jürgen Lemke (ed.), *Gay Voices from East Germany*, English-language version edited and with an introduction by John Bornemann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Edgar Nastola, *Individuelle Freiheit und staatliche Reglementierungen. Lesben und Schwule in der DDR* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 1999); Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen. Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links, LinksDruck Verlag, 1991); Kurt Starke, *Schwuler Osten. Homosexuelle Männer in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1994).

in the GDR remained a relatively private, individual matter, whether heterosexual or homosexual; increasingly separated from conceptions of marriage in an era of high divorce rates, and separated from any 'scene' that would give cause for the SED to make accusations of 'illegal gatherings' (*Zusammenrottung*). This too was generationally experienced, although as always there were exceptions. One woman, born in 1941, had been brought up in an already 'progressive' family: as she put it, 'naturist body culture [including nudism] was a matter of course for us'.¹⁷ For her, recognizing and openly declaring her own sexuality, including to her parents, was not a problem. But she felt this was very rare among women of her generation:

The so-called and also no doubt also quite real generation conflict plays itself out on two levels. On the one hand there is the totally private, which sometimes also becomes evident in small group work or in working for the [gay and lesbian] movement. But I think the other side of this is the question of visibility, and many young lesbian women today are much more open about themselves and this topic. Sexuality today is no longer a social taboo . . . I also don't think one can solve generation conflicts . . . I am very sad that there are so few older lesbian women who can offer a successful experience of coming out as a stimulus for younger women.¹⁸

By the later 1980s, these and many related matters were on the wider agenda of a range of activist groups, who directly grasped the interrelationships between the 'personal' and wider political conditions. Not only the seemingly 'private' issues to do with sexual preferences, or the alternative life styles of those who sought to compensate for the GDR's drabness through art, poetry, and domestic idylls (as best they could), but also the clearly political issues, which increasingly came to be seen as—literally—vital to the future, came to the forefront of the agenda for those risking political activism in the environs of the Protestant Churches, and sometimes beyond. Peace movements, the environment, human rights, were all championed in an age of visible and palpable economic decline and rising pollution.¹⁹

On the night of 9 November 1989 when, for the first time since 13 August 1961, GDR citizens were able freely to come out of the GDR, a further film by Heiner Carow registered new shifts in attitudes: *Coming Out*, a story of love between two young men, with one scene portraying an embittered older man in a gay bar muttering about his appalling treatment under the Nazis, had its own world premiere. Needless to say, the minds of most Germans were entirely elsewhere. As Western television cameras focused on the surging masses at Berlin's few crossing points to the West, following the unexpected announcement by Politburo spokesman Günther Schabowski that travel restrictions were to be radically revised, crowds of East Germans began to rejoin the Western world in reality as well as vicariously on the nightly flickering television screen. But however tiny the audience and the groups which Carow's film sought to portray, this film,

¹⁷ Gunne Bohne, in Karstädt and von Zitzewitz, . . . *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 69.

¹⁸ Gunne Bohne, in Karstädt and von Zitzewitz, . . . *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 79.

¹⁹ See further Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*.

too, was symbolic of historic shifts in patterns of attitude and behaviour, dominant norms and discourses, on the eve of the close of the 'short twentieth century'.

II. REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF THE GDR

Whether from the tiny minority of individuals actively involved in political dissent, summarized in the slogans 'We are staying here!' (*'Wir bleiben hier!'*) and 'We are the people!' (*'Wir sind das Volk!'*), or from the far larger majority of those fleeing West in the summer and autumn of 1989—first embodied in the slogan 'We want out' (*'Wir wollen raus!'*), later joined by the slogan *'Wir sind das Volk!'* as the movements coalesced—it was predominantly from among the first generation of those 'born into the GDR' that the internal energies came precipitating the collapse of the SED regime. If those 1929ers who had been brought up to be good Nazis had assisted disproportionately in the building of communism GDR-style, then members of the FDJ generation, born in the early 1950s and brought up to be model 'socialist personalities', were at the forefront of ensuring the GDR's demise. The extent to which they had been mobilized, if at all, by the regime into which they had been born was only limited: restricted horizons, and a capacity to accommodate themselves to the regime's demands, did not in the end amount to a will to keep it afloat in the light of what appeared, in 1989, to be the more attractive alternative of the consumerist paradise of the democratic West.

But to reduce 1989 to a generational game would be to misrepresent the significance of this historical moment; among the vast majority of East Germans, among people of all ages, there was a recognition of an urgent need for change, and for dialogue about change. And as East Germans took off the brakes and engaged in making history, so at the same time the new willingness and opportunity to speak allowed the wounds of the past to be re-examined and reworked in the light of later needs, even if still, in this late moment of the GDR, being somewhat constrained by the as yet uncertain parameters of a rapidly collapsing present.²⁰ The autumn of 1989 was a moment of widespread debate and dialogue, accompanied by a real sense of the possibilities of shaping the future. Less than a year later, following the March 1990 elections, the currency union of July 1990, and the rapidly accelerating final collapse of the East German economy over the summer months, the shape of that future was determined.

This was not only a matter of negotiating major and fundamental issues to do with international security arrangements and economic and political reconstruction, in the rapidly unfolding momentum of an unravelling end of the Cold War, which have been the subject of extensive focus. It also, as with all previous upheavals of the century, entailed for those living through this transition, a sometimes quite fundamental reworking of the self and an individual's own

²⁰ See e.g. the discussion of pensioners' concerns in Ch. 10, above.

biography and view of the world. And not everyone who was forced to adjust had previously been aiming towards such a revolution.²¹

Fascinating glimpses into the processes of rethinking that were prompted by the rapidly unfolding events of the autumn of 1989, even among those who had been most loyal supporters of the regime—and indeed had never known any other state—are afforded in the diaries of a teacher, Elviera Thiedemann.²² Born in 1951, she lived in an East German border area where Western television was not available, and the lack of news from Western channels is very evident in her diary. A member of the SED and holding a leading position in the local women's organization, the DFD, Thiedemann was highly committed to the GDR, and had brought up her four children as good citizens who had not followed other young people of their age group to the West when they were on holiday in Hungary in the summer of 1989. Committed to the ideals of socialism as proclaimed in the GDR, neither one of the powerful nor of the dissident groups, Thiedemann felt, on deciding to publish her diaries a decade after unification, that she spoke for a silent majority of her fellow citizens and that many thought and reacted as she had, but very few had kept a diary at the time. Her diary had however not originally been written for publication, but rather to sort out in her own mind precisely what she thought at each point. In her introduction, Thiedemann portrays the years 1989–90 as a time of massive breaks in people's biographies, with attendant difficulties in explaining to Westerners why East Germans acted and thought in the ways that they did.

In the early autumn of 1989 Thiedemann was increasingly concerned about the fact that more and more young people were leaving for the West via Hungary. Her relief that her own children returned was massively marred by the news that a friend and colleague, who was a teacher in a neighbouring school, had committed suicide after her own children had left for the West; she did not live to receive the postcard from her son announcing his safe arrival, let alone the fall of the Wall just a few weeks later, since she could not face what she thought would be permanent separation from her children, exacerbated by the shame and ridicule of colleagues at work and ostracizing by the local SED. Thiedemann, totally unsettled by this shattering personal event, could not understand why developments were taking this course, nor why there appeared to be so little leadership or guidance from above. By late October she had however been rethinking her views, and made notes on articles which she found particularly thought-provoking. On 25 October, Thiedemann reflected on an article by Christa Wolf in the *Wochenpost* about youth, where Wolf argued that the GDR had not given youth enough space to discuss things. Thiedemann—an educator herself—started wondering where they might have

²¹ As always, the well-known accounts are those of major dissident figures, people who were notable as 'victims' or 'heroes' or major players on the historical stage in some capacity. Here, again, I have sought to highlight the concerns and conceptions of those who rarely appear in the historical records: without any claim to being 'representative', they nevertheless provide subjective insights into rapidly changing life worlds.

²² Elviera Thiedemann, *Es kam ein langer lichter Herbst. Tagebuch der Wendezeit 1989/90* (Berlin: trafo verlag, 2000).

gone wrong. She realized, with some ambivalence, just how far they had been acting out a game based on pretence, rather than challenging the rules:

My feelings on thinking through this problematic are very ambivalent. Quite certainly, even if often unintentionally and to varying degrees of intensity depending on the person, we all contributed to a behaviour of pretence [*Scheinhaltung*]. Conduct in all spheres of our society, with its so-called inherent constraints and repressed discussion of mistakes, as well as 'rules of the game' which the vast majority of the population more or less accepted, but not a minority!²³

Her own lack of knowledge about the full extent of pretence and the less comfortable realities behind the 'game' were only revealed to her when the dissident singer Wolf Biermann was invited to talk in East Berlin for the first time since his expulsion some thirteen years earlier. Interestingly, she could not even quite recall the date, let alone the precise reason for this expulsion, although she dimly recalled the name of Biermann, 'who was expelled from the GDR ten years ago because of his defamatory statements.'²⁴

By the time the Wall fell, Thiedemann's education about the state in which she had lived was proceeding apace. On 12 November 1989 she recorded watching a television programme that absolutely shocked her and provoked wider philosophical reflections about the nature of 'truth':

In the evening, I experience a television reading from Walter Janka's book 'Difficulties with the Truth'. I am completely churned up. My sense of history, the respect I have been taught to have for the great writers of the 1950s, are shattered. And the worst of it is, that during our schooldays we were given justifications for the sort of thing that happened to Janka. We believed it. Why should we not have believed it? We didn't know anything else, after all. That too I have to digest. Now a massive problem is building up for me: the Truth.

Can one scientifically determine it? Is it to be equated with healthy common sense? Does it change when the 'leaders' [*Führer*] change? Who can say if today's apostles of truth are not connecting new lies with this? I feel sick when I start sounding out this chain of thoughts.²⁵

The process of rethinking all the certainties of her world, and the doubts these raised about the meaning and purpose of her own life—her whole life so far—continued to plague her all night. Her own sense of somehow having been betrayed, misled, taken in, as well as the effects of these revelations on others around her, are registered vividly in her diary the following day:

Last night I could not sleep. The enormities that were openly mentioned in Janka's book. Shattered me deeply. I'm afraid that something similar could happen again.

²³ *Ibid.*, entry of 25 Oct. 1989, p. 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, entry of 27 Oct. 1989, p. 35.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, entry of 12 Nov. 1989, pp. 44–5. She is referring to Walter Janka's book, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1990). Janka, a communist activist who had been persecuted by the Nazis, participated in the Spanish Civil War, and eventually fled to Mexico, was after the foundation of the GDR involved in the film studio DEFA and also director of the Aufbau publishing house. In 1956 he was subjected to a show trial as an alleged 'counter-revolutionary', released from imprisonment following international protests in 1960, and finally fully rehabilitated in 1990.

After all we always believed that such things could not happen in socialism. The individual stands in the centre. No one will suffer injustice.

Honour—dignity—individuality.

Was it just naivety, that I and many others did not see through this?

For what did I work night and day, take on responsibility with all my might, in the most diverse areas, and in the process ruined my health, sometimes neglected my family?

Why did I make myself a laughing stock, when in the evenings and at weekends I went about trying to solve the problems of others, and was ridiculed by those who only pursued their own personal pleasures? And there are not a few of them who today are crying out for dialogue and democracy, but who were previously never willing to lift a finger for the general good. There are certainly not a few people who have been made ill by this whole mayhem. It is particularly difficult for older people to work through everything. Honest, sensitive comrades, who have never done a stroke of harm to anybody, are breaking down because of unjustified sweeping judgements about the party. Apparently some 1st Secretaries of the District Leaderships have already shot themselves.²⁶

These reflections led on to her musing further about the question of youth, and finally to the newly topical issue of the Stasi, prompted by a news item on developments in the parliament (*Volkskammer*) highlighting the chief of the MfS Erich Mielke:

But when Mielke appeared I want to sink into the ground with shame. With that sort of a minister at the top this ministry could never have done justice to the demands on it. The accusation is certainly justified that the activities of the MfS (above all in the big cities) was more targeted at spying on people and their opinions than on influences from outside. The political opposition nevertheless found the best informants in our ranks. Right up to today the Western media know more, and more precisely, what is happening here than we ourselves do.²⁷

Day by day this not quite forty-year-old woman, who had committed her life to the proclaimed goals of the GDR, was forced not only to keep up with the pace of events seen purely as ‘news’, ‘history in the making’, but also to recast her own identity: rethinking the character of the regime entailed also rethinking her own role within it. This meant, thus, to see herself no longer as an able, capable, professional teacher and mother of four well-adjusted children, but rather as someone who, along with millions of others, had been duped; who had been dumb, blind, naïve; who had committed all her energies and ruined her health in service of a cause which was no more, or was not what it had seemed. This involved a strenuous process of personal readjustment—complicated in her particular case by the ongoing break-up of her marriage—and was at the time a not entirely happy challenge, involving as it did such a fundamental recasting of identity.

People faced the challenges and rethinking of the tumultuous year between the fall of the Wall in November 1989 and the unification under Western auspices in October 1990 in different ways, depending greatly on political views and expectations. But age mattered too. As one woman put it, in a letter to her uncle:

²⁶ Thiedemann, *Es kam ein langer lichter Herbst*, entry of 13 Nov. 1989, p. 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

One thing however we must say: our life has already been made markedly more difficult by these changed circumstances, and new barriers are heaping up around us daily that can only be overcome with difficulty. This is true not only for us but rather everyone who has lived in the GDR has problems in sorting themselves out in this new daily life, in an everyday life which we are not used to, where there are no certainties any more, where everything has begun to fall apart and is being regulated in new ways. The reorientation required is actually quite easy for young people—like Andreas and his family—yet it makes even us rather uncertain, but the really old people see only something new, unintelligible and unimaginable, coming towards them: they are constantly bewildered and sometimes don't know whether they are coming or going! We help where we can; but in our new circumstances helping others has also become very rare; what counts right now is the power of the elbow and as far as possible 'get-rich-quickly'.²⁸

The writer of this letter, Nina Benedict, had for more than three decades been a financial expert in the GDR state administrative apparatus. Being forced into early retirement was a heavy blow for her; but at this stage, in the summer of 1990, she was still more optimistic than her husband that they would be able to work things out and build a realistic future. Her reactions changed quite rapidly in the following months, however, as depression set in.

The character of initial reactions among older East and West Germans across the now collapsing physical inner-German border were also somewhat ambivalent. Surviving members of the Chemnitz school group, for example, registered a degree of tension—and some extraordinary views on the rupture of 1945, too—in their letters over the year following the fall of the Wall. Ruth, who had settled so well and risen to the status of a School Director in the GDR, had by now died, early enough not to have witnessed the end of the state to which she had devoted her life. Käthe, one of those who had left and settled in the West, commented in April 1990:

Yes, we are witnesses of a great historical turning point, that we may live through with gratitude and full of joy, and must commit ourselves to this from the depths of our hearts. It cannot be that for 40 years we have only talked of this without now being prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. Have we made ourselves so comfortable in our secure existence that we find the violent transformations disturbing? We must commit ourselves to our community of fate and to the unity of our people [*Volke*] with all that this entails, and offer our help.

... We will always experience disappointments, just as people in the GDR will be disappointed by Federal [West] Germans! In this connection I think with sadness of our Ruth, she probably did her work with idealism and belief in a good cause, it must be hard to recognize at the end that it was all in vain. We have of course experienced something similar but at that time we were still young enough for a new beginning.²⁹

²⁸ Nina Benedict, *Böse Briefe über Deutschland* (Schkeuditz: GNN-Verlag 1993), letter of 3 Jul. 1990, to 'Lieber Onkel Pepil', p. 41. Some doubts have been cast on the alleged 'authenticity' of these letters; but the emotional point that they try to convey has a ring of veracity, and the collection certainly brings to the reader's attention keenly felt aspects of the experience of unification among a particular group for whom the author wished to speak.

²⁹ Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, 'Klassenbriefe', Vol. V, 4.90 – Ende, Käthe, Karlstadt, letter of Apr. 1990, fols. V/1–3.

It is interesting that this by now elderly West German still appealed, among her school friends, to the values they had learnt as young people together in Nazi Germany: the ‘necessary sacrifice’, the ‘community of fate’ and the ‘unity of the people [*Volk*]’—the latter concept nicely resurrected and given a clean political bill of health by the East German deployment of it in the revolutionary autumn of 1989 in the slogan ‘We are the people!’ In the context of the GDR in 1989, of course, it was deployed not as a racial but rather as a political concept to challenge the SED’s paternalist claim to speak on behalf of the people. Käthe also registered just how committed she and her classmates had been to Nazism before 1945, and what an effort by way of making a ‘new beginning’ that had required.

Another of this school group who had settled in the West, Inge, wrote from Munich in a letter that she significantly dated ‘on the eve of “the 17th June” 1990’:

I will just hope + believe that things will get better for the ‘had-to-be-GDRers’ [*‘Muß-DDRler’*]. For many others there will be big problems. They all want of course to keep their ‘social achievements’, their ‘good old’ conditions. So I can’t be as happy about the future as Käthe is. Her idealism has been marked by the FRG, but my impression is that over there things are rather different.—Okay, enough said, we survived 1945, we won’t fall apart in 1990 either.³⁰

Inge’s concern here was rather to highlight the acquired discourse of East German citizens, suggesting the illegitimacy of the official GDR world view while also alluding to the crisis of identity that they had themselves experienced with the crashing around them of the world of their own youth in 1945.

The East Germans among these classmates seem to have taken a far more pragmatic approach to registering the changes and the challenges posed in this transitional period. Ursel, one of those who had remained in the East, living in Chemnitz (renamed in the GDR Karl-Marx-Stadt, and in unified Germany once again reverting to the original Chemnitz), wrote in the summer period following currency union but before the final collapse of the GDR and unification with the West:

The price differences are enormous and much more expensive than in the West, as far as Western products are concerned, but even with our own makes there are some difficulties. It is above all a mixture of greed and incompetence. Yes, in this short time it can’t be learned immediately. 40 years of planned economy, that is at least two generations that have learned nothing else As always in such transformations there are winners and losers—and the level of contentment varies with the way in which each person is affected.³¹

Lisa, a classmate who had also remained in Chemnitz, was one of those determined to enjoy the new freedoms: ‘We can all experience a united Germany again and be joyful about this.’³² Perhaps, in this situation of continuing uncertainty, as a GDR citizen who had learned how to accommodate herself and adjust her opinions and expectations, looking for a peaceful life, she also did not want to register anything

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Inge, letter of 16 Jun. 1990.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Ursel, letter of 21 Jul. 1990, fols. 12a–b.

³² *Ibid.*, Lisa, Chemnitz, 16 Oct. 1990, fols. V/15–16, fol. 15.

much deeper by way of social and psychological observation or contribute to the ever more evident tensions between the former school friends.

Between them this little class group registered many of the tensions, joys, and anticipations of Germans of their generation after forty years of division, and some of the hesitations and difficulties of expression that were attendant on yet another historical rupture and transition across ideological regimes. But by and large, younger West Germans had far less interest in the East than their new eastern German compatriots had in the West. And the views of East Germans were very soon sharpened by a keen sense of contrasts and a re-evaluation of the kind of society they had built up. While they had rejected and brought down the SED regime, many came to realize that they had been 'at home' in East German society; and with the loss of the state, they had also lost things that had been precious to them.

On 3 October 1990, the GDR was dissolved and the five new regional states (*Länder*), which had been created just in time, acceded to membership of an enlarged Federal Republic of Germany. There were, it is true, massive public celebrations of this event, accompanied by the traditional displays of both classical music and public fireworks, and at least in this sense a considerable bang. But the private responses of many East Germans were strangely muted, as the realization dawned that, without physically moving home, they were entering a whole new world and that, particularly for those born into the GDR, this was the end of the society in which they felt at home.

A unique collection of diaries was solicited by researchers at the University of Potsdam in the autumn of 1990, providing further intriguing glimpses into both the everyday concerns as well as the reactions to events around them of people living in the area. This is clearly a far from representative sample of people living across East Germany, yet as with all such soundings of inner thoughts, it provides some fascinating hints about modes of 'making sense' of the transformation.

It is striking that the diaries of women who had been 'born into' the GDR from the 1960s onwards, ranging in age from teenagers to mothers in their mid-thirties, were all tinged with a degree of melancholy and regret about what they were witnessing. Moreover, not old enough to have experienced an undivided Germany—and often indeed with parents who had little conscious sense of a Germany before division either, let alone a peaceful one—they all had a strong sense of a GDR identity in contrast to the new system coming from the West. This was less rooted in any absorption of 'official' GDR teachings than in a sense of habitus, of 'feeling at home' in a particular web of social relations and practices, the significance and value of which they were only now becoming consciously aware. (One could see this as yet again, ironically, a Western success story: where the SED failed in instilling a sense of GDR pride, the Federal Republic posthumously succeeded.) A thirty-year-old mother of two children, who was also a teacher of sport and German, ruminated for example about what the day of unification meant for her:

A day I have neither consciously registered, nor do I really quite know how I should see this in any wider order of things. A country is erased, just like that, struck out, finished,

over, full stop. Now we are Germans. Citizens by accession, relocated, annexed; without name or face. Helpless—well yes, that goes for me.³³

In part, such regrets were rooted in a sense of loss of agency. As this woman put it:

At the beginning—a year ago—we did it ourselves, we discussed halfway through the night, in the family, with friends. Then the ‘speakers’ arrived, all of them best quality imports. And the people [*Volke*], that had wanted to be one and wanted to become itself, was silent, listened, let itself be lulled. Gently and peacefully let everything be taken out of its hands, just as peacefully as it had earlier taken things up.³⁴

Furthermore, there was a sense of uncertainty about what would follow, and how well they would be able to cope. As this 30-year-old teacher commented:

To be oneself is an honourable motto, it is true, but it often brings me into conflicts. Not least because now I have to be wary again of what I say to whom. Oh, everything in me revolts when I think of this. One lives, works, resides under totally new conditions and has not a clue about them.³⁵

A thirty-five-year-old medical technician for x-ray diagnostics and mother of one teenage child had similar reactions. On the ‘Day of Unity’, she was called out to deal with a Polish man who had broken his jaw:

The interpreter (circa 50 years old) apologized on behalf of the young Pole, that he had had to disturb ‘my day of celebration’ merely because of this. But when I replied that today was no cause for celebration, his jaw dropped . . . Yet there are many who think as we do. It will take a long time yet before we stop thinking about distinctions between circumstances in the former GDR and now the FRG. The mentalities and feelings, the solidarity with one another, the being-there-for-each-other, will be progressively lost.³⁶

Similarly, a 26-year-old journalist, mother of a toddler, already separated from her husband, commented on 1 October that:

The farewell song for the GDR is getting ever louder and my mourning, probably also because I can now fully concentrate on it, ever greater.³⁷

On 2 October, the eve of the day of unification, she ended her entry: ‘I am “celebrating” this sad day like my Grandma celebrates New Year’s Eve—I’m going to bed early!’³⁸

Younger East Germans, still teenagers, seemed generally more concerned in their diaries with issues in their immediate surroundings and personal relationships than

³³ DTA 1350.131 (female, aged thirty, teacher of sports and German, mother of two children aged eight and six), entry of 3 Oct. 1990.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ DTA 1350.123, female, aged thirty-five, medical technician for x-ray diagnostics, married, one child aged fourteen, entry of 3 Oct. 1990.

³⁷ DTA 1350.102, female, aged twenty-six separated, mother of an eighteen-month-old child, entry of 1 Oct. 1990.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, entry of 2 Oct. 1990.

with wider questions of identity. Yet they too frequently registered a degree of melancholia tinged with fear of the as yet unknown; and even though such reactions appeared to be widespread, there was clearly a sense of fear about being seen in public to be against what was held to be the dominant, officially solicited celebratory mood. One student, aged nineteen and still living with her parents, plagued by her parents' disapproval of her somewhat younger boyfriend, and her diary entries, mostly short, primarily revolve around her conundrum in this area. Even so, she too had a melancholic reaction to the demise of the GDR. On 2 October she commented:

If only one did not have to feel so afraid, today I would hang the GDR-flag out of my window with a wreath . . . Today is for me just a farewell party . . . The bad thing about it is that one can now do absolutely nothing any more, that one can't prevent it.

It is a pity about this country, somehow sad . . . We are heading into life in a state that is totally foreign to us, we are simply damning our own, which was after all a good home for us.

I am afraid.³⁹

On 3 October, she commented into her diary:

This night was so terrible for me, when everyone stood up at 24:00 and with shining eyes sang the national anthem of a state that is foreign to us . . . afterwards I ran out, because I could no longer bear the sight of these ecstatic people. At this moment my heart felt so burdened that I wanted most of all to scream out loud.⁴⁰

It is curious that, just over a decade after Eva Schäfer was letting out a silent, metaphorical scream for all that she hated about both herself and the GDR which had encouraged and fostered her tendency to capitulation and acquiescence, her sense of bad conscience, and her effective incarceration, this young woman was by contrast registering a desire to scream at the death of precisely that state. Yet youngsters such as this nineteen-year-old were subsequently to turn into the 'winners' of unification, while those who were already older in the event found it far harder to adjust their lives under new circumstances. The anomie, or sense of normlessness, which accompanied this historical moment of transformation was, yet again, dealt with most easily by those precisely on the cusp of adulthood, if they were able and willing to seize what new opportunities there were; it was far harder for those who had made their lives and already become relatively set in their ways in a previous state.

The reactions of Elviera Thiedemann, now approaching the age of fifty, were characteristically painful and ambivalent, for all the learning processes she had been undergoing over the course of the previous year, as she recorded in her diary on the eve of unification:

Now only a few hours separate us from the historical event of the unification of the two German states. It is painful, as though someone were trying to tear apart my body and my soul. From tomorrow I will no longer have a Fatherland, I will first have to feel my

³⁹ DTA 1350.030, female, nineteen, student, single, entry of 2 Oct. 1990.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, entry of 3 Oct. 1990.

way around the new one. That will take a while. One can't simply step out of one's body and look for a new one.

It's not bad that unification is being accomplished but rather *how* everything is being accomplished and has to be digested.⁴¹

Thiedemann was highly scornful of Western media attempts to educate their audiences on the character of the GDR, as she recorded on the evening which would, had events not turned out the way they did, have been the 41st anniversary of the GDR:

Yesterday a programme on SAT 1 [television channel] in order to get to know the GDR.

The long and short of it was:

The Eastern Provinces are made up of orderliness, hard work, garden gnomes and marching music.

Well, thanks for this profound piece of reportage!⁴²

This television presentation was, as it turned out, something of a harbinger of further belittling portrayals to come, providing part of the background to East German re-evaluations of their own former lives after unification.

But Thiedemann's and similar responses were not merely defensive reactions against patronizing Western portrayals of 'their' state: this was not a matter solely of disputed representations of the GDR, but often also of rather deeper existential dimensions. For East Germans who had devoted their entire adult lives to the GDR, the consequences of unification could not be 'merely' political, economic, social, and cultural. They also had deep implications for people's personal identities, their very sense of self. It was, then, not just a matter of anomie and not being able effectively to play the new 'rules of the game'; nor a matter of inadequate depiction and understanding; but also of a far more fundamental challenge to identities that had been constructed over decades in a set of social relations that were now being dismantled.

Nina Benedict was perhaps a relatively extreme case, in terms of the severity of her reactions, but her mood of depression by late November 1990 was by no means unique. Given their different reactions to the 'turning point' of the demise of the GDR, her marriage was by now in difficulties. As she put it in a letter to her husband, written because she felt she could not talk this out with him face to face:

It is true, our world, in which we lived, worked and loved each other for over 40 years, in which at the same time we were burdened with many problems, has shattered—it does not exist any more; but we have to live with this.⁴³

But their reactions to the collapse of their world were so different that they could do nothing but criticize each other: while her husband had broken off entirely with his past, Nina Benedict needed somehow to hold on to hers. And in a note to herself, a

⁴¹ Thiedemann, *Es kam ein langer lichter Herbst*, entry of 2 Oct. 1990, pp. 175–6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, entry of 7 Oct. 1990, p. 176.

⁴³ Benedict, *Böse Briefe über Deutschland*, letter of 22 Nov. 1990, p. 58.

little over a week later, she registered her own deep depression, claiming her life had become:

Meaningless . . . just vegetating along—without substance, without goals. No one needs me any more, I can't move things along any more, I am cut out of making any necessary changes, and the offensive and untrue attacks and the exaggerated accusations made against the now no longer existing state of the GDR, that everything was supposedly false, bad, directed against humanity and against the citizens, these accusations are such brazen and outrageous generalizations that I should actually not be affected by them, but lies and charlatanism as we have on today's agenda have always outraged me! Only that in the now disappeared state of the GDR there wasn't half as much lying, deception and cheating as there is now!

. . . Apart from that I think it's all meaningless anyway, I'm not needed any more anyway, I am totally superfluous, there is no one any more who asks for my advice, or wants to know anything from me! Who am I anyway, and why am I still here? Isn't that at the same time an identity crisis?⁴⁴

She continued:

No one asks me for my advice any more, my experiences, my learning and my knowledge count also—as with so many—for nothing any more! Who today wants still to hear, or indeed ever to have heard, a body of thought that was once 'infected' by socialism?

I stand by my identity, I won't and can't deny my past (like so many are doing today!), and I am proud of the fact that in my area of responsibility, under my leadership—within the realms of what was possible—good, successful work was done. But today that all counts for nothing any more!

So, just as our state was smashed to pieces by naming and shaming, so too in many cases will its citizens probably be 'named and shamed'. That makes me seethe with rage and yet at the same time without hope. I can't fight against this any more! And when even my own family advises me: 'Just stop it with the whole business, it doesn't exist any more!', then I get fainthearted, I can't battle on any more, and ask myself: Have I perhaps lived, worked and been involved in vain?⁴⁵

This sense of utter purposelessness may not have been widespread, but it certainly echoed and resonated among those who had, recently, seen themselves as in the prime of their lives, capably carrying out what they saw as worthwhile and fulfilling functions, and now suddenly flung aside as apparently worthless, with all the travails of the preceding decades apparently devalued to the scrapheap of history, along with their own selves and identities.

The paradox of German unity was to be that the East German system which so many of its former citizens had hated and sought to bring down posthumously enjoyed, after its disappearance and absorption into the new 'Berlin Republic', a re-evaluation and belated recognition of newly discovered virtues, in the eyes of many East Germans; virtues relating to their own identities and lives that had gone down along with the malfunctioning economy and oppressive political structures.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 'Ich über mich . . . Dresden am 30.11.90', p. 61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

III. THE DIVIDED PAST IN UNITED GERMANY

East Germans had themselves played a major role in overthrowing the SED regime. In all the exploration of the ways in which eastern German selves had been shaped by the period through which they had lived and the regime (in every sense of the word) within the constraints of which they made their lives, it should not be forgotten that, when circumstances changed in 1989–90, the vast majority of GDR citizens had wanted rid of the SED and the Stasi, and voted in favour of the Deutschmark and Western democracy. Whether by constant grumbling over many years, by making visa applications for visits to the West, or by nightly virtual exodus while watching Western television and daily consumption of Western goods when available, East Germans had hankered after another kind of state of being. Yet for many East Germans, initial delight at the fall of the Wall in November 1989 was rapidly followed by grumbling over economic and social dislocation, not only through the transitional year of ‘still-the-GDR’ (*noch-DDR*) but also in the decades following unification in October 1990.

In some respects, views of the East German past were initially even more critical, although reactions were often deeply ambivalent. In part, former GDR citizens were shocked by scandals to do with the (extraordinarily modest, by Western standards) corruption and self-serving luxuries of their political elite; in part, they were devastated by revelations concerning the extent of Stasi surveillance. The latter, in particular, was a very real concern, given the number of people who now felt affected by what they saw as ‘betrayal’ by friends and family members whom they had previously trusted absolutely. But they were often also completely taken aback by the utter rejection by the Western media of everything to do with the GDR: while shocked by revelations about the mismanagement of the economy and the extent of Stasi repression, they were also often hurt by what they perceived as an accompanying Western denigration of their own lives.

In the early 1990s there were virtually daily media revelations about people in high places who had been former Stasi informers (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, IMs). The two long-running and apparently exhaustive 1990s parliamentary commissions of inquiry (*Bundesenquêtekommissionen*) for ‘understanding the history’ and, in a second round, ‘overcoming the consequences’ of the ‘SED-dictatorship’ were, despite the incorporation of quite vociferous and articulate critical voices, also predominantly, indeed overwhelmingly, highly critical of the GDR regime. It was almost as if utter rejection of the GDR past by West Germans after 1990 could make up for the faltering, partial, inadequate approaches to denazification and ‘overcoming’ the Nazi past in Adenauer’s West Germany of the 1950s. This continued and dominant mode of condemnation of the GDR in public debate provoked a regrouping and more proactive stance on the part of very recently discredited political forces, in the form of the former SED/re-formed PDS/re-aligned ‘The Left’ parties (in various forms over the two decades after the fall of the Wall); such regroupings served further to create chasms and transform the meanings of eastern German identities.

In everyday life, unification did not immediately deliver the promised 'blossoming landscapes'. Former GDR enterprises went bankrupt and were bought up by Western entrepreneurs for laughable prices, often only to remain closed given the costs of renovation; unemployment rates rose alarmingly; towns were variously 'sanitized' or fell into further ruin with a continued depopulation and flight to the West; and, at the most basic level of everyday life, supermarket checkouts with their automated systems of reordering goods rapidly displaced former GDR products with Western goods. Jokes about 'Ossis' and 'Wessis' abounded. Many East Germans were disappointed by their experiences of what the new system actually meant in practice, once unemployment and displacement became realities of everyday life in the new Germany.

Moreover, other unresolved historical reappraisals were very much in the air after unification.⁴⁶ Interpreted differently in East and West, the war years returned to haunt Germans with major controversies over sensitive topics, ranging from memorials for victims (as in the Berlin 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe'), through the involvement of ordinary soldiers as perpetrators, as in the controversial *Wehrmacht* exhibition, or far wider involvement in the Holocaust, as in the debates unleashed by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's controversial *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, to attempts to recast Germans 'as victims', whether as 'war children' or as innocent targets of air raids on civilians. These debates ran alongside attempts to 'deal with' the 'second German dictatorship', inevitably raising questions of similarity and difference between the two regimes.

Thus, despite the rejection of the SED regime in 1989–90 by a majority of its citizens, in this later context the wider attacks on the whole system of the 'GDR as dictatorship' and the apparently wholesale rejection of the former East German way of life by Westerners, began to fall on far less receptive ears. Many ex-GDR citizens now felt that they were being looked down on by their newly discovered 'Western brothers and sisters', whose alleged sense of superiority appeared to be displayed in almost every walk of life. Not only the former regime but their own social and personal identities now appeared to be subject to critical scrutiny. People often felt they were being cast as 'dupes', former 'fellow-travellers', as 'victims', and in a range of other roles that seemed to reject the richness and differentiation of the ways in which they had engaged with the world through which they had lived; and that the default Western position was one not of attempted understanding, but rather rejection. This, in turn, provoked somewhat self-defensive reactions in terms of individual self-representations. 'Memories' of the GDR in the years after its demise have to be seen in this far broader context.

If the SED had never succeeded in its unrealistic aim of creating uniform 'socialist personalities', diverse experiences of the GDR had certainly left their mark on succeeding generations of its citizens, in ways that they only began to

⁴⁶ Here too there is an ever growing literature. See e.g. A. James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the legacy of the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2002); Bill Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims: Remembering the past in contemporary Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

grasp after the demise of the state through which they had lived and which so many had helped to bring down. And if the life stories recounted by East Germans do not stand as adequate histories of this regime, nevertheless historians cannot fully understand the GDR without taking these subjective experiences, perceptions and representations of their lives into account.

Bearing all this in mind, East German accounts of their own lives produced in the decades following unification provide an intriguing source of critical reflection on the constraints and challenges of living within different systems; for people were, through their own experiences, acutely aware of the distinctions and the relative merits and disadvantages of each. Such self-representations thus provide a rich source to which it is well worth paying sensitive and respectful attention. For people's feelings, and the vocabulary and philosophical frameworks within which they represent their lives, are themselves part of the ways in which such systems were lived and experienced; and they help to explain the ways in which different systems were carried, able to operate, challenged, and subverted. 'Eye-witnesses' may not in fact be very good guides to an overview of the structures and causes of particular historical developments; but they are experts with respect to their own feelings and subjectivities; and the culturally shaped patterning of self-representations also provides a very good guide to wider discourses about the past under changing later circumstances. Such material may not be any kind of adequate guide to the 'past as it really was'; but it is certainly the only way we can access the lingering consequences of a reinterpreted past for a later present. Perceptions, subjectivities, and the discourses within which they are framed and with which they take issue are, too, part of social reality.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most striking thing of all to emerge is the way in which, a decade and a half after unification, large numbers of East Germans still expressed a sense that they barely knew the new 'rules of the game'. Changes in perception, and patterns of re-evaluation of the GDR, come across very clearly in responses to a questionnaire, filled in by residents of the Berlin/Brandenburg area.⁴⁸ A sense of 'anomie', 'normlessness', not knowing how to deal with things, was still widely expressed, even so long after the rupture of 1989–90, along with a yearning for what was seen in retrospect as a quieter, more peaceful life in the GDR. While the sense of

⁴⁷ These remarks are developed further in M. Fulbrook, 'Histories and memories: Verklärung or Erklärung?' in David Clarke and Ute Wölfel (eds.), *20 Years After: Remembering the German Democratic Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴⁸ See further M. Fulbrook, "Normalisation" in retrospect: East German perspectives on their own lives'. Efforts were made to ensure this was roughly representative of the general urban population in the area: the percentage of e.g. unemployed adults matched the percentage in the wider population; and the survey covered a representative cross-section of workers as well as members of the socialist intelligentsia. This was, however, no sociological survey along the lines of the mass opinion pollsters; but by virtue of the open-ended questions and spaces for occasionally lengthy commentary, it provides fascinating glimpses into the lives of significant numbers of former GDR citizens who would not otherwise have sprung into print with their views and experiences. It thus provides a very helpful complement to the spate of memoir literature and often media-driven sensationalism of better-known figures, as well as the purely statistical summaries produced by the professional opinion pollsters, who often offer little or nothing by way of life story background to contextualise the attitudes expressed by given percentages of the population at any particular time.

normlessness is in some respects similar to that prevalent in Germany after 1945, a key difference is of course that the former GDR citizens were looking back to over four decades of peacetime, and not to the most bloody war of the century. And now, in retrospect, many of them saw the GDR as an ordered oasis of calm. A sense of preference for living within what now seemed less stressful times was common across the older generations, the 1929ers as well as those born through to the 1960s, although there were slight differences of emphasis among different age groups. The continuing sense of uncertainty for some was closely linked to very real difficulties in the new present.

Very large numbers of East Germans, irrespective of age, also now claimed that there had been better 'relationships between people' (*zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen*) and more 'togetherness', 'being there for each other', 'belonging together' (*Miteinander, Füreinander, Zusammensein, Zusammengehörigkeit*) in the GDR; that their society had been in some way 'kinder' than that of the capitalist West; that they had been able to lead more peaceful and 'ordered' lives—and all this despite the very obvious physical constraints and the breaches of human rights committed by the SED regime and the Stasi.

Other themes also emerge which cross-cut age groups. One such was that of education and childcare facilities, widely viewed with retrospective approval. The sense that the GDR had offered good nursery provisions and after-school care, the possibility of a good education and further training leading to well-qualified employment, as well as generally mutually supportive social relations was very evident in many of the responses. As a woman born in 1925 in East Prussia, who was the sole person in the sample to be a member of the LDPD (the 'Liberal Democratic' bloc party in the SED-dominated National Front), put it:

In the GDR there was a very good neighbourhood support system; and in general neighbourly love was very significant. I would also like to mention the great child-friendliness. Every child had a right to a free place in after-school childcare.⁴⁹

Yet virtually all of those who took the trouble to write additional comments at the end of an already lengthy questionnaire about their retrospective perceptions of the GDR produced highly differentiated views, highlighting certain aspects and registering an awareness of the respective costs and benefits of different elements in a complex moral, social and political weighing scale.

For all the common themes that emerge, it is also very notable that different generations had both different experiences of the GDR (and its prehistory), and different experiences of the practical consequences of the so-called 'Wende', or turning point, for their own lives.⁵⁰ While these did not entirely determine the

⁴⁹ 159: F, 1925.

⁵⁰ Some purists, particularly Rainer Eppelmann and others associated with the *Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur* (roughly, 'Foundation for Coming to Terms with the SED Dictatorship') refuse to use the term 'Wende', saying that it had been first appropriated by SED leader Egon Krenz when he took over from Erich Honecker in October 1989, and insist on calling the events culminating in the collapse of the SED regime and the demise of the GDR the 'peaceful revolution' (*friedliche Revolution*)—which of course also begs a whole range of questions and does not

ways in which they reflected on their lives, and there were major variations within particular cohorts depending on political views, generational differences nevertheless remain relevant in understanding patterns of selectively remembering and re-evaluating the character of life in the GDR.⁵¹

Reaching young adulthood in 1989 and the years after unification, 'Honecker's children' were best placed to take advantage of the new opportunities which the fall of the Wall opened up for them. They had 'benefited'—as many of them retrospectively saw it—from the childcare facilities, the emphasis on youth organizations, the education and training of the GDR; and they could now go on to further study or into the workplace relatively well-equipped to take advantage of the new opportunities opening up to them. Members of these cohorts, who may now be termed the '1989ers', were no longer restricted by the physical and metaphorical boundaries and borders of the restrictive SED regime. They were able to study wherever they wanted, provided their applications were acceptable on academic rather than political grounds and funding was available, and able to move and work wherever they wanted, provided their skills and experiences matched the needs of the economy, again on an individual rather than a political basis.

These groups had quite contrasting experiences of the periods before and after 1989.⁵² They had generally 'happy memories' of their childhoods in the GDR: many recalled the activities of the Young Pioneers and Free German Youth as fun, sociable experiences; and they had less exposure to the Stasi than did those who were adults during the GDR. Even where they did have Stasi experiences, these were often treated as less than serious; as one put it:

I experienced it as rather humorous to be observed now and then and subjected to controls by the Police (probably out of youthful flippancy?!)

But I also didn't really have to suffer negative consequences—the occasional summons or questioning by the police could easily be endured.⁵³

This particular individual was on the cusp of generations, and involved in the various environmental and peace groups around the Church, as well as the 'unofficial scene' in the 1980s. Yet she strongly agreed that it was possible to 'lead a perfectly normal life' (*ein ganz normales Leben*)—adding, however, 'but anyway, what is normal'.

The 1989ers were already relatively cosmopolitan or international in outlook, growing up in a period of mass exposure to international media and particularly

fully encapsulate the processes leading to the unification or absorption of the ex-GDR into the Federal Republic. The term '*Wende*' or 'turning point' is in this sense more neutral with respect to characterisation, and has gained such common currency (in contrast to Krenz's almost universally forgotten use of the term) that it seems ridiculous not to use it in the sense in which most Germans now understand it.

⁵¹ For significant differences in the meaning of 1989–90 for individual biographies, and an attempt at defining distinct 'types' among younger East Germans, see H.-J. von Wensierski, *Mit uns zieht die alte Zeit. Biographie und Lebenswelt junger DDR-Bürger im Umbruch* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1994).

⁵² There are of course differences between cohorts within this period, which I shall not go into here.

⁵³ 152, F., 1960.

global youth culture. After unification, 'Honecker's children' were best placed to take advantage of new opportunities. They had 'benefited'—as many saw it—from GDR childcare provision, youth organizations, education, and training programmes. They were now able to study and work wherever they wanted, provided their skills and experiences matched economic needs. After unification, they mingled with relative ease wherever they moved. Unlike previous youth cohorts following moments of historical rupture, aiming for utopian transformation, the '1989ers' were content to make their lives in the present. 'Mobilization for a transformative future' was no longer on the historical agenda.

Those who were in the middle cohorts—'Children of the Third Reich' (born 1933–45) and the 'first FDJ generation' (born in the later 1940s and 1950s)—experienced the transition of 1989–90 very differently. Many had silently in one way or another come to terms with the regime, as we have seen. But the 'first FDJ generation' was also the one which disproportionately played the most proactive role in bringing down the GDR: they had been at the forefront of the movements which led to the fall of the Wall, whether through seeking 'exit' (large numbers) or 'voice' (a minority); they had risked their jobs, their futures, and the well-being of their families by seeking to leave the GDR once the borders became porous, or by organizing protest actions and coming out on the streets at a time when the outcome of the demonstrations of the early autumn of 1989 was still highly uncertain.

The small handful of those dissidents who had been active in oppositional circles in the 1980s, and who played leading roles in the events of autumn 1989, had virtually all been born in the later 1940s or early 1950s; Vera Lengsfeld (formerly Wollenberger), Ulrike Poppe, Bärbel Bohley, provide examples both of the generational bias of these movements, and of the gender shifts which had taken place in the 'workers' and peasants' state' which had so prioritized the fostering of female participation in the workplace and organizational life.⁵⁴ Socialized in the most idealist phase of the GDR under Ulbricht, many of these had grown up believing in high ideals; they had come to maturity with the crushing of the 'Prague Spring' in 1968, which for many provoked the first critical engagement with the shortcomings of the regime. As young adults and as parents of young children in the later 1970s and 1980s, members of this cohort had been increasingly concerned by the growing economic and environmental disaster, the signs of which were ever more evident all around them, following on the oil crises and in the context of Honecker's sacred cow, the 'unity of economic and social policy'. Increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of the gerontocracy around Honecker even to concede the existence of the problems, let alone attempt to deal with them, they increasingly turned to the protection of the Protestant Churches in the course of the 1980s to try to push the boundaries and provoke dialogue and change. By 1989, they were among the first to be chanting 'We are staying here!' and 'We are the people!' (*Wir bleiben hier!* and *Wir sind das Volk!*).

⁵⁴ See Ch. 9, above.

But these vocal dissidents remained a tiny minority of the cohort; far more typical for members of this group was the response of attempted flight, first across the border between Hungary and Austria, or through fleeing to the safety of West German embassies in Prague and elsewhere, then, within East Germany, through the chant of 'We want out!' (*Wir wollen raus!*) in the hope of being arrested and deported to the West. They were the young adults of the 1980s who had been increasingly disaffected by the economic and environmental decline in the crumbling GDR, and increasingly worried about the future for their children; but who felt there was little hope for a reformed GDR. Their flight had played a major role in precipitating the regime crisis of 1989 that ultimately brought down the GDR. They had thus disproportionately undermined the claims to legitimacy of Honecker's regime by their mass flight to the West, literally and metaphorically, and had played a significant role in the destabilization and demise of the GDR.

And yet these cohorts were also the greatest 'losers' of the ways in which unification and transformation actually took place. The vast majority were still of working age; and many found it difficult either to retrain in light of the new circumstances or to retain their old positions. Women were particularly adversely affected by disproportionate unemployment rates; and there was a loss of cheap, subsidized childcare places, affecting all working parents. So those who had fought hardest to reform or escape from the GDR were those who found it hardest to adjust to the new system which replaced it. Having achieved what had for so many of this generation been a long-term aim of 'arrival in the West', they now found it held little by way of future prospects; accordingly they radically revised their views of the East German past.

Somewhat more than 20 per cent of East Germans of working age were unemployed at the time of this survey in 2005. The sense of sheer desperation about future prospects comes through very strongly in the responses of those born in the 1950s, even when they were not currently themselves unemployed. So many mention phrases such as 'existential anxieties', 'not being needed', 'no professional prospects', 'not knowing how to go on', 'insecurity in the job', and 'gradual social decline into being long-term unemployed' that it would be impossible to quote individuals separately. Hardly surprisingly, the 'best times', in retrospect, for the overwhelming majority of those from this 'first FDJ generation' are seen, in undifferentiated fashion, as the period before 1989 in general; not only because of professed happy memories of actual experiences, but because at that time 'the future was rosier', one had a 'secure future'.⁵⁵ Again and again they mention as their reason for retrospective preference of East German society terms such as: 'social security' (*soziale Sicherheit*), a 'secure existence', 'a sense of social safety' (*soziale Geborgenheit*). Life in the GDR is characterized as having been 'in order' (*in Ordnung*), an ordered, regular, even peaceful existence: 'a more peaceful life', 'more peaceful and socially more secure', 'lived more peacefully', 'not so stressful'.

⁵⁵ 2, F., 1951.

Frequently the comment is made in contrast to contemporary united Germany, as in the following selection:

Until 1990: Life was in ordered tracks with normal highs and lows, without anxieties.⁵⁶

I was neutral, but in contrast to today a person was still worth something. One did not have to fear for the future.⁵⁷

If you aren't needed any more, you get trampled on.⁵⁸

Or, at somewhat more length and with some repetition, which in its sentiments and phraseology can serve to stand for many similar sets of comments:

No existential anxieties (as we have today). The togetherness between people was at that time very close. Today an elbow society even within families. Everyone now only thinks of himself.

In the former GDR one was socially secure. There were no existential anxieties like today. Today a person is only a number. Today we live in a bureaucracy state.⁵⁹

Interestingly, given their previous critiques of lack of political democracy in the GDR, as indicated in the last quotation many felt that political impotence was even worse in the new Germany. As one woman, who had been born and grown up in the then socialist new town of Stalinstadt, later renamed Eisenhüttenstadt, put it:

In the GDR work provided one's livelihood. One had work. Childcare in order to go to work. Subsistence in the FRG (now) can no longer be afforded through one's own means. (Hartz IV.) One has no life of one's own any more. Everything is determined by the state.⁶⁰

People of this generation even registered a sense that—despite all the constraints about which they had complained and against which they had eventually come out to demonstrate—the possibility of some form of personal authenticity or self-realization was greater before than after unification: 'it was a much more secure, peaceful life and one had more time to be oneself'.⁶¹ They also, frequently, commented on the way in which it was previously possible to combine time for family and a full working life.

The 1929ers, in their late fifties or early sixties at the time of the fall of the Wall, were frequently able to go into early retirement. In a sense, then, their experiences of 1989 should have been somewhat similar to that of the older KZ generation. But they had been personally the most deeply committed to the 'project' of the GDR. Their problems after 1989 were, then, not so much economic as more existential: they were forced, in a sense, to re-evaluate the whole of their lives. In the light of 'history', their own 'life stories', which had been so closely and directly connected with the history of the GDR, with a period of both private and public '*Aufbau*' in the 1950s, might now in some sense be seen as having been in vain. And, given the deep effects on their consciousness of the experience of violence as teenagers and the

⁵⁶ 56, F., 1949.

⁶⁰ 100, F., 1958.

⁵⁷ 2, F., 1951.

⁶¹ 160, M., 1953.

⁵⁸ 7, M., 1955.

⁵⁹ 8, F., 1957.

dramatic ideological transitions they had experienced at a highly impressionable age during the historical rupture of 1945–9, the 1929ers remained in some respects more idealistic than the vast majority of younger eastern Germans. They expressed concerns about the consumerism and individualism of modern capitalism and its wider effects on the planet in ways going far beyond the considerations purely of their own personal situations that were, as indicated, for the most part relatively secure.

The 1929ers perhaps retained the widest horizons in their comments on the character of their former state and its place in the world. One of the most ‘utopian’ of all the responses came from a woman born in 1930 in a small village near Weimar. Hers is a highly typical profile for the 1929ers who were carriers of the GDR, and, even if she was particularly idealistic in expression, her comments well illustrate the way in which some of the attitudes and world views persisted into the unified Germany of the early twenty-first century. She came from a relatively poor social background: her father was barely educated and did a variety of odd jobs, as did her mother, including some domestic service.⁶² She herself benefited from the GDR’s policies of further education and, apart from periods raising her children, worked in a number of clerical and white-collar positions during the GDR. A classic 1929er, she held a variety of functionary positions, first in the FDJ and then the DFD, and was a member of the SED from 1954 to 1989. The ‘best times’ in her life are described as:

Pre-school age until 1937 or the start of the war: the loveliest memories of my father, who did not return from the war, of a harmonious family life, despite poverty, with him, my mother and sister—despite being poor, a care-free life.

1951—marriage.

1953—when we gained our first flat and straight after that our child was born.

Variou. When our child had recovered from serious illnesses and that he was able to follow his interests, study and pursue his desired vocation.

She strongly agreed that the GDR had given her ‘new life chances’:

- it made possible: an early conclusion of training
- through the 1st Law for the Furthering of Youth: [becoming an] assistant in a factory
- I could not take up further possibilities that were offered for study through the ABF [Workers and Peasants’ Faculty] or a special course of study because my mother was dependent on my earnings and because of marriage and the desire to have children.

Interestingly, she combines gratitude to the state for having at least offered the possibility of further study with a firm sense of her own agency in choosing to support her mother and enter into her own family and childcare responsibilities. ‘Happiness’ for her came through what was a very widespread combination of family and work satisfaction as well as the less frequent mention of idealistic concerns:

- my child, my marriage
- friendships both within the country and beyond
- learning, and caring for my family

⁶² 85: F, 1930.

- at work: the collegiality, and satisfaction in good results at work
- that we did not have another war (but sadness that there are still so many in the world)

Somewhat dismissive of materialistic and consumerist critiques of the GDR, she commented: 'That depends on the aspirations of the individual person. Some can never have enough, others can live a happy life without great demands. Apart from that it depends on the financial situation of the respective family.' Adding to listed reasons for commitment to GDR institutions, she wrote in: 'And for the maintenance of peace.'

Nostalgia for the GDR among the 1929ers was in part based in the perception that, as one woman born in 1932 put it, in the GDR 'times were more peaceful and intelligible'. She had experienced the end of the war as '1945 the flight from Poland to Silesia/Saxony/Berlin. It was minus 20°'. But, despite this background—a period often mentioned among the 'worst times' in older people's lives—this woman, the daughter of a doctor and herself a university graduate so clearly not lacking in education, named as her own 'worst times': '1990: after the *Wende* everything was different and very hard to understand.'⁶³ A man born in 1931, who had been continuously employed in the (various versions of) armed forces from 1948–89, and then was unemployed from 1989 until he was able officially to go into retirement in 1993, remembered as the 'best times' in his life the period 1948–89, giving as his reason: 'Everything was on good tracks.'⁶⁴ Similarly, a former office worker (*Angestellter*) mentioned as his 'best times': '1951–89: socially secure, peaceful, healthy, family intact.'⁶⁵

Retrospective evaluations of the GDR in comparison with the capitalist, democratic united Federal Republic were generally nuanced, but had a sense of wider ideals, as in the comments of one of the women:

What was good included work, free education, social security, childcare, the health service.

No consumer goods glut and no media hype with much public abuse and defamation of personalities.

Now more information—but of what use to the population!

Now more democracy is possible—but five million unemployed with consequences for their families.

And how will things develop? Will peace be kept? What future prospects do young people have?

What the rich 'need' and what will become of the environment:⁶⁶

Another had spoken among her 'worst times' of:

After the war:

— for years, unfulfilled hopes for the return home of the father who had gone missing

— the shock of what my country had done to others; responsibility for the war, hearing about the KZ crimes

— the continuing of the hunger which had already begun during the war.⁶⁷

⁶³ 68: F, 1932.

⁶⁶ 62, F., 1930.

⁶⁴ 49: M, 1931.

⁶⁷ 85, F., 1930.

⁶⁵ 61: M, 1930.

She was proud of the GDR's record on peace, social equality, and prospects for young people. Thus, although personally after 1989 the majority had little or nothing to lose, 1929ers generally remained most stubbornly defensive of the ideals and achievements of the state with which their lives had been so closely bound. Some even came out with statements defending the much critiqued Stasi, as in the comment that the MfS represented the 'protection of the reconstruction which we had achieved' or 'there is this sort of service in all countries'.⁶⁸ They were also concerned about the future in which their children and grandchildren would live, as in comments such as 'not only our own lack of security but also that of the children and grandchildren'.⁶⁹

Members of the by now dwindling and aging 'KZ generation' (including the former war-youth generation and first Hitler Youth generation) remained deeply ideologically divided, despite changes over the forty years of the GDR's existence. Consumerism and the promise of material plenty today had long been incorporated into the GDR's official arsenal of aims, overriding the emphasis on making sacrifices today with the promise of utopia tomorrow; and ideological disagreements became less immediately relevant to everyday life. Individuals who had by the 1970s and 1980s reached retirement age were relatively easily able to visit relatives in the West; the GDR welfare state had no interest in retaining them as a burden on its resources if they chose not to return and Western relatives or friends were willing to support them. The events of 1989 came as a shock for the older generations; but they were not so directly affected by it, except insofar as they had concerns for their children and grandchildren, or experienced personal difficulties in coming to terms with the new structures and practices in a capitalist land which had come to them without their ever having to move. Yet the patterns of remembering the GDR among this generation, too, betrayed traces of forty years of living through a kind of society which was very different from the newly imposed Western capitalist democracy.

Many East Germans may have felt, after 1990, that they no longer had any kind of future; others were simply no longer concerned about the future. But the past, it seemed, would always be present. And post-unification attempts at 'overcoming' the East German dictatorship were linked in complex ways to the pre-1945 past; a perceived degree of West German triumphalism and superiority was rooted in claims to having successfully 'overcome' a dictatorship already, while East Germans were arguably unduly defensive in their characterizations of life in the GDR, concerned to paint it as 'not all bad', in view both of their assumptions about Western attitudes (whether justified or not) and their own sense that it was wholly inappropriate to suggest that the GDR was similar to the Third Reich. Meanwhile, the question of alleged 'continuities' as well as 'breaks' in German history, the longer-term roots as well as the legacies of Nazism, continued to puzzle anyone touched by the events of this extraordinary century.

⁶⁸ Interestingly both from former 're-settlers' and members of the SED: 52, M., 1925, born Breslau; 61, M., 1930, from East Prussia.

⁶⁹ 52, M., 1925.

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Conclusions

Generations in an age of violence

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

...

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form . . .

...

. . . the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations . . .

...

. . . We appreciate this better
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,
Involving ourselves, than in our own.
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,
But the torment of others remains an experience
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.

(T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*)¹

Hans Paasche agonized in 1918 that he had not earlier spoken out more forcefully about what violence really meant, and had not expressed more honestly and openly his anguish at playing a role in the suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion in 1905. But history was not foreordained in 1905, nor in 1918; it was constantly a matter of contestation; and under changing political constellations, sections of a younger generation were mobilized, seeking to build what they saw as a better future by continuing the fight, rather than challenging the legacies of violence and defeat in the Great War. Those who lived through the succeeding decades had eventually to

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', the third of the 'Four Quartets' in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 195.

account for what they had or had not done, which might, in retrospect, have changed the course of history not only for Germans, but for tens of millions of people across the world.

Violence in colonial Germany may have played some role in the character of atrocities in the Great War, but it did not in itself lie in a direct line with, let alone explain, what was to come during the Third Reich. 'Continuities' in any supposed 'traditions of violence' can only be sought through specific lines of transmission of outlook and behaviour: these were in part real, but always tenuous; and their outcome was contingent on innumerable other factors in any given situation. Had Hitler not been appointed Chancellor in 1933 and maintained in power through the 1930s even when his ultimate goals and brutal methods were more than clear, the course of world history would have been quite different.

For those a generation younger than Hans Paasche, it was the far greater violence in Hitler's Germany that was to cause a lifetime of disquiet and unease, if not always of soul-searching. The position of unresolved feelings of partial responsibility and a legacy of guilt was—or should have been—far worse for those who had been actively involved as carriers of the Third Reich. Yet the answers were highly divergent, and for some, appeals to a notion of 'generation' seemed to provide an explanation, if not necessarily exoneration. As Udo K., a member of the war-youth generation, later put it, at the close of the volume of his memoirs covering his life up to the end of the war:

Virtually no other generation was so closely entangled with the Third Reich, right from the very beginning, as ours was. No other generation, at the end of the war, was subjected by the victors to such a massive accusation of guilt as ours was. Our generation has to live with this. It will probably not be able to make clear to succeeding generations why it was not possible to organize a really meaningful opposition to the regime of injustice (*Unrechtsregime*). All due respect to those conservatives, liberals and socialist opponents, who nevertheless attempted this. They mostly paid for such resistance with their lives, without having been able to change anything. My generation by contrast was, by tradition and education, oriented to fight for its own Fatherland in war. That we did, and even in this I can see no basis for any accusation of guilt. May a more objective history eventually determine here what was guilt and what fate or destiny (*Schicksal*).²

In the course of this book, it is precisely the task of a 'more objective history' which has been taken up: not however by looking at history in terms of 'guilt' versus 'fate' (let alone 'destiny'), but rather by exploring the degrees of leeway and choice faced by individuals from different generations, as they variously responded to common challenges, later confronted or camouflaged their roles in history, (mis-)represented or reflected on that past to subsequent generations, and betrayed the hidden inner legacies of the past in a later present.

The majority of 'succeeding generations' had little sympathy with Udo K.'s claims: they largely turned their backs on the Nazi project, in different ways in

² Archiv des Landesverband Rheinland (LVR), Nr. I-208: Udo K., *Erlebt—Überlebt. Erster Teil. 1910–1948* (also entitled *Erlebt – Davon gekommen. Erinnerungen—Band I—1910 bis 1948*), p. 265.

West and East Germany—or exile abroad, for those who had escaped Nazi terror but lost their homeland in the process. For some, particularly the 1929ers, the radical left-wing alternative of the GDR proved for a while to be a vision for which they were prepared to struggle, a project of building a new society, but which was never realized—and with which even the committed became increasingly disillusioned. This project too, which was subjected to radical critique by generations it had itself produced, ultimately became yet another failed historical experiment.

The injunction of Brecht's poem to those fortunate enough to have been 'born afterwards' should also be borne in mind: for it was impossible to live through these times of violence without some 'distortion of features', as well as far deeper effects on any sense of self and place in the world.³ And this includes those who are still struggling to understand the recent past.

Both dictatorships raise fundamental moral and ethical questions, and inevitably provoke emotional responses. The fact that this is still such recent history, with continuing reverberations, has further tended to colour even academic debates. Clarity of conceptual approach and empirical analysis, always fundamental to good history, is especially and obviously urgent with respect to these cases. Yet while many of the essential details are widely known and accepted, particularly concerning institutional structures and major political developments, explanation and interpretation is not simply given by the 'facts'; and in seeking to make sense of what is known, historians often have to go well beyond the reach of the material available.

What is offered here, then, is an attempt to reflect on what wider conclusions and interpretations might be suggested by this selective probing of experiences of living through the German dictatorships, trying to highlight some similarities and differences, and pointing to ways forward in the interpretation of these regimes.

I. CONSTRAINT, AGENCY, AND ENACTMENT IN THE GERMAN DICTATORSHIPS

The Nazi and communist dictatorships were very different from one another in character and aims, beyond some striking but ultimately rather superficial similarities. It barely needs rehearsing here that, despite the dominance of the ruling party in both dictatorships, and some apparent similarities in reliance on public rituals of power, state-controlled social organizations, and coercive organs of repression, nevertheless the actual structures of power, the ideological goals, and the character and targets of violence were very different; so too were the respective social and economic configurations. More important in the present context, and far more difficult to explore and evaluate adequately, are the related differences in the ways in which people of different backgrounds and generations related to and were affected by the respective political contexts. The fact that one dictatorship succeeded the

³ See Ch. 1, above, above, p. 1.

other adds further complexity, since lingering memories and consequences of experiences under Nazism had implications for the ways in which people related to the communist dictatorship and the ways in which this developed. To appeal to blanket concepts such as 'totalitarianism' may assist in denouncing these dictatorships for their repressive aspects, but it does not help very much with a differentiated understanding of the ways in which people experienced life in these rather different forms of dictatorial regime. It will be helpful briefly to review the well-known profiles of power and violence in each regime before addressing the question of how to conceptualize and interpret different patterns of popular involvement.

The constantly developing quasi-feudal structures of the Nazi state were focused around the charismatic *Führer* figure of Hitler, who was both represented and widely perceived as a 'saviour' figure in a very specific historical context. The Third Reich was increasingly characterized by multiple, competing, and often overlapping centres of power, in which for structural as well as personal reasons only the *Führer's* voice had final authority.⁴ Moreover, Hitler's personal power was developed and exercised within a context where the general values and goals to which he appealed—particularly a revisionist, militaristic nationalism—were widely shared, well beyond the circles of those who would admit to adulation or even respect for what they saw as the socially upstart *Führer*. The Nazi reliance on terror as a political weapon was also more than evident, even well before the NSDAP actually came to power and acquired progressive state control of the means of violence. Targeted against both 'enemies within' as well as enemies abroad, violence in the Third Reich was a matter of growing and always obvious brutality: murderous from the outset, Nazi terror was always visible but nevertheless increased exponentially over time. There were always gradations, with some groups subjected to brutal exploitation that was often fatal yet not directly aimed at annihilation, while others were ultimately targeted for extermination.

In the GDR, by contrast, however many pictures of Ulbricht and Honecker might be displayed in public places, any gesture towards charismatic authority was insignificant in comparison with the explicitly theorized 'leading role of the party', which was in turn embedded in a far more streamlined bureaucratic edifice, again explicitly based on the principles of 'democratic centralism' and, unlike the Third Reich, capable of self-reproduction over forty years. At the same time, of course, the goals of the GDR's leading communist party, the SED, were imposed with the backing of a foreign military power against whom Germans had very recently and unsuccessfully been waging war; these imposed goals were far from being shared, let alone enthusiastically endorsed, by the majority of the population most of the time. Certain aspects of social policy, however, such as secure employment and social welfare, enjoyed somewhat more popularity—particularly posthumously—than might have been expected under these circumstances. Violence was also, for

⁴ The work of Ian Kershaw has been seminal in developing an approach combining the notion of a 'polycratic' state, as suggested by 'functionalists' such as Hans Mommsen, with the continuing significance of Hitler as an individual, as argued by the so-called 'intentionalists' who, however, generally proposed an inadequate model of the state.

much of the GDR's existence, more muted and less visible than it had been in the Third Reich or the immediate post-war period. The early post-war years were characterized by massive and obvious brutality, starting with the widespread rape and robbery carried out by Red Army soldiers, and moving through the expropriation of land and other property, and the arrests and incarceration not only of former Nazis and war criminals but also of political opponents of quite different persuasions. Conservatives, socialists, liberals, Christians, communists suspected of 'Western' sympathies, entirely innocent youngsters, members of previously privileged social groups, and an array of others were caught up in often chaotic, partially paranoid attempts to combine retribution with political and social renewal. The early-to-mid-1950s saw uprisings and show trials not only in the GDR but across Eastern Europe, yet the possibility of redemption through evidence of commitment to the new state was also extended to former opponents of communism. Ironically, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and a concentration of violence at the borders allowed an apparent relaxation of repression within. Yet the internal system of terror and repression continued to develop in ways that were not always apparent to contemporaries, with the ever growing Stasi exercising veiled and manipulative power behind the scenes—hence also more shocking following post-1990 revelations. Victims of GDR violence were primarily perceived as 'enemies within' even if, in the Cold War context, they were seen as the long arm of the 'class enemy' without; unlike the Third Reich, the GDR did not actively wage war and spread terror abroad. The consequences for individual victims of Stasi repression were horrendous; but the overall scale and character of terror nevertheless pales in comparison with that of the Third Reich.

Both states also had in common, although for very different reasons and with very different consequences, a high degree of physical restraint over the movements of their respective populations, and of particular groups within their populations. In the case of the GDR, the Wall remained the ultimate symbol of restraints on human liberty, which of course included not only restraints on freedom of movement but also on freedom of speech and association. With the exception of the relatively thin strata of the politically reliable, the so-called 'travel cadres' (*Reisekader*) with permission to travel in the West, as well as pensioners who were seen as merely a drain on the economy, the vast majority of East Germans were highly restricted in where they could go. Nazi Germany was, by contrast, internally a society that was far more dramatically and indeed murderously divided. For many Germans during the peacetime years of the Third Reich and even during some or much of the war, life was experienced as good: materially, many Germans benefited from the expropriation and repression of others, at whose expense their own circumstances improved; culturally and socially, even while struggling against adversity many bought into the strongly propagated notion of 'racial' superiority, a sense of which arguably even grew, for a variety of reasons, during the war. For vast numbers of other Germans, however, including those designated as 'asocials', 'non-Aryans', and opponents on political, religious, and moral grounds, as well as for the millions of non-German victims of Nazism, it was ultimately less a case of *where* but rather of *whether* one could live at all: it was life itself that was at stake,

epitomized in the walls of the ghettos and concentration camps, the war, and the Holocaust.

This is not the place for a rather static 'comparison of dictatorships', however; of far greater interest in this context are the ways in which these regimes both drew in and affected the lives of those who lived through them, and yet were at the same time themselves shaped and formed by the ways in which individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and outlooks were willing, or could be constrained, to act. The attempt at 'total control' of the population by a regime, as implied by the controversial concept of 'totalitarianism', tends to emphasize primarily the project of rulers bent on maintaining and extending power from above; it fails to focus adequately on the subjectivities of those involved in these systems, implicitly assuming that simple demonstration of the existence of a relatively comprehensive system of repression is sufficient to show how a regime was maintained, without in-depth examination of whether the population really was cowed into conformity or had other ways of understanding the system and making their lives. Moreover, the ways in which people are themselves changed over time, as they practise new patterns of behaviour, and articulate and rationalize their behaviour to themselves and others, is a crucial component of understanding the functioning and long-term consequences of such regimes, in a way which cannot be achieved by a focus simply on structures of power, even when patterns of popular opinion on specific issues at any one time are explicitly taken into account.

What is most striking, when the history of twentieth-century Germany is viewed in this way, is the sheer extent to which people are formed and transformed by the conditions through which they lived; and the fact that people are—it seems a little strange to have to emphasize this explicitly—living physical beings, who grow up, mature, and eventually die. Any analysis of 'history' that constructs the subject in terms primarily of, on the one hand, structures (political, social, economic), and, on the other, 'the people' (or 'the Germans' or 'society' or 'popular opinion'), as though the latter were some continuing collective entity, misses this truly crucial point. This is obviously relevant for any regime that persists over a relatively lengthy time span. Whether 'the people' hated the East German dictatorship in the early 1950s is a quite different question from whether 'the people' hated the East German dictatorship in the 1980s, for example: not only the character of the state and the structures of power had changed, in ways which are by now very familiar, but also the very constitution, memories, aspirations, assumptions, indeed physical beings and life spans, of those whom we all too often tend simply to lump together as 'the people' (or, in more differentiated fashion, in terms of groups such as 'members of the intelligentsia', 'workers', 'Catholics', and so on). But it is also true even for the dozen years of the Third Reich, which dramatically and rapidly affected and altered people's perceptions of themselves and others, in which younger generations were socialized, and by which they were massively influenced. Moreover, history did not simply stop and start anew with the change of regime after 1945; diverse experiences of the Nazi dictatorship had implications for different responses to and hence shaping of the succeeding communist dictatorship.

Analysis of individual lives from a generational angle and in broader historical context thus provides an entirely new perspective on history.

To focus on the two dictatorships in the dichotomous terms of ‘coercion versus consent’, ‘repression versus consensus’, and similar, misses the complexities surrounding different degrees of constraint and a related sense of agency, a capacity to negotiate or to affect the course of one’s own life, a sense of inner distance and strategies for survival, the shifts from repeated enactment to belief in one’s own story and new behaviours, and so on. To focus only on structures at the expense of the subtleties of changing subjectivities also misses the crucial point that contemporaries are not always the most accurate guides to their own societies, but that their misperceptions are often key to understanding how they acted and with what consequences. At various times, there are different concentrations of power and resources among different groups. A subjective sense of agency can be entirely mistaken: people may simply not know enough about the actual structures of power and the way a regime operates to realize that they really have little hope of changing things, or that their lives have been subtly affected by forces of which they were unaware, or that there was in fact greater leeway than they thought, whether at the time or later. Furthermore, there are different inner perceptions, responses, and ways of making sense of and understanding one’s life that vary not only with cultural and social milieus but also with generation and what is assumed to be ‘normal’ and internalized. Analysis of structures of repression alone will not capture these aspects.

Patterns of subjectivity are significant, but in complex ways. In neither dictatorship were contemporaries privy to an adequate overview of the structure and manner of functioning of the state. Accounts of people’s own lives should not be taken as adequate guides to the overall contexts in which they lived. Yet subjective professions about the character of past lives, and particularly any widespread and commonly voiced assertions about the nature of past states, can be of considerable interest for what they often inadvertently serve to reveal.

An attempt to map what might be called ‘topographies of ignorance’ may be instructive here. What was it that the respective populations of the Third Reich and the GDR later claimed they ‘never knew’? What was it that they later self-defensively claimed about their lives under the respective dictatorship?

In the case of those who lived through the Nazi dictatorship, the widespread claim that they had ‘never known anything about it’ was a form of self-exoneration: a profession of ignorance held up as a profession of innocence. The ‘it’ about which they had never known anything was a systemic crime on a massive scale against others; against victims of stigmatization, brutal maltreatment, exploitation; and ultimately mass murder. By distancing themselves from knowledge of the overall outcomes of the system as a whole, people could shield themselves from accusations either of direct culpability through having played however small a role in the system, or having committed a sin of omission by not having engaged in any form of resistance and opposition. The myth of ignorance was thus a defence against an implicit or explicit accusation of having been culpable of harming others who were victims.

In the case of the GDR, the corresponding self-defensive claim is arguably that of having allegedly led a 'perfectly normal life': a widespread claim which arouses the hackles of those who say such a thing could not have been possible under the conditions of a communist dictatorship. This too can be seen as at least in part an exculpatory claim, precisely in relation to the same issue of implicit criticism for not having mounted any more active opposition—although, given the significance of popular unrest for the events of autumn 1989, such a claim would be rather missing the point. But it also has to be taken seriously in another way. The crucial area of 'ignorance' on which this claim is predicated is again knowledge of how the system as a whole worked. And here, the claim to lack of knowledge is rather more genuine than it is in the case of Nazi Germany. Vast numbers of East Germans genuinely did not realize the extent and consequences of Stasi surveillance of and intervention in their lives. The shock of revelations after the opening of the archives was precisely because for the first time it became clear just how many people had been involved in informing on their friends, workmates, neighbours, relatives, and even close members of their own families. The 'we never knew' here refers, then, not to the damage inflicted on others by collusion in a system of victimization and oppression, but rather the damage inflicted on themselves as unwitting victims of an oppressive system.

There is a complete asymmetry here. In the case of Nazism, a profession of ignorance is effectively a refusal to acknowledge one's role, in however small a way, as a participant in a system of which others were the victims; in the case of the GDR, a profession of ignorance is a refusal to be cast in the role of victim oneself. For the Third Reich, a claim to lack of agency ('following orders', having no effective choice) is a means of seeking self-exoneration. For many people in the GDR, by contrast, there remains a claimed sense of having possessed agency: having sought to make the best of a difficult situation. Accounts that emphasize the system of repression and manipulation in the GDR can then appear an affront to the ways in which people value their own selves and their lives when they have not been accused of having victimized others.

The topography of individual happiness is also instructive in this comparison. Happiness *despite* certain aspects of the system in which one was living is a very different matter from happiness *because of* certain aspects of the system in which one was living. Happiness despite material shortages and the restraints of living behind the Wall is very different from happiness because of a new-found affluence derived from taking over properties and possessions from Jews ousted from their livelihoods under duress. If the question, 'at whose expense?', is posed, the relatively high living standards of many Germans through the peacetime and early wartime years of Hitler's Germany do not fare so well. To raise this to attention is not to suggest that anyone would necessarily prefer the inefficiencies of the East German planned economy that produced the rather different ruins of the 1980s; but it is to remember that neither popular satisfaction nor material affluence are always valid measurements, taken out of context, of what might be held to constitute a 'good society'. Moreover, any historical approach must register major shifts in aspirations and the cultural relativity of conceptions of what it takes to lead a 'good life'.

Historians have to be mindful—and where necessary respectful—of differences in subjectivities over time, even or perhaps especially when they do not take people's stories at face value.

To bring the lives of ordinary individuals to the forefront is not, then, intended as a version of biography, even of 'collective' biography, nor is it a return to what used to be called 'methodological individualism'; there certainly *is* 'such a thing as society', and social relations are a major key to understanding both the course of individual lives and people's own perceptions and constructions of their lives. Nor is the focus on individual lives an attempt to prioritize 'texts' over 'contexts', or to look purely at constructions without exploring the integral connections between perceptions and questions of power in the 'external' or 'real' world in which people acted and reacted.⁵ The point rather is to explore, through the prism of different renderings of individual experience, some of the ways in which people are both inherently shaped by and also shape history; and the ways in which their ever changing perceptions of the past and the present, their constructions of their situations and aspirations, intersect with structures of power and changing circumstances, key historical events and developments, in varying ways at different times of their lives and across major historical transitions through which they lived.⁶

II. HISTORY FROM WITHIN

What then is meant by 'history from within' as an approach to these questions? Although there may superficially appear to be similarities, the subject of 'history from within' should not be conflated with the 'history of everyday life' nor the 'history of experience'. It is not an attempt to capture the experiences and perceptions of 'ordinary people' who have escaped official sources, nor to recount the details of life that fail to surface in accounts of major political developments. Nor, it should be emphasized, is it some new version of 'psycho-history', seeking to understand individual biographies in terms of formative experiences in childhood and youth. Oral history has also frequently been seen as a paradigm in terms of methodological approach and new object of history. But oral history is basically a technique, not an approach: it is about the active production of a source, in a particular context, providing material for exploring the ways in which individuals choose to represent their lives at a particular moment. Without additional recourse to other materials—accounts and documents from other contexts, other times—it is essential to analyse such material in its own terms, as a product of that particular moment.

⁵ There are many stimulating recent approaches to generational themes in German literature, frequently focusing on the issue of 'second-' and 'third-' generation approaches to Nazism; but this question of 'representations', and particularly representations in creative literature, is not what has concerned me here.

⁶ This too is key: the Third Reich and the GDR are rarely set together in this perspective, which may thus shed a rather different light on the character of the two dictatorships.

The concern of history from within is rather with the 'social self' over longer stretches of time and across major historical transitions. The focus is collective, and it is a focus precisely on the complex intersection of wider structures and key historical events on the one hand, and the constantly changing constructions and reconstructions of the individual's 'inner' thoughts, perceptions, and representations of their interactions with the 'outer' world at particular stages of life, on the other. 'Inner' perceptions are simultaneously socially, culturally, historically shaped and formed, yet are always distinct from outward behaviours and interactions in ever changing networks of social relations under different kinds of regime, in the widest sense of the word. This approach is relevant not only, of course, for the kinds of dictatorship dealt with here, but also in the apparently most anodyne face-to-face encounters and constraints inherent in any web of social relationships. The culturally variable 'presentation of self', with all the attendant issues including 'saving face' or 'putting a good face on it', is a perennial aspect of human societies.⁷

To understand a historically emergent, collective 'social self', one has, paradoxically, to consider the most private and individual sources: ego-documents which give some insight into what is going on 'inside' people's hearts and minds.⁸ The use of ego-documents is, in this approach, subtly different from, or complementary to, their use to provide snapshot illustrations of eye-witness perceptions or to build a quasi-authentic sense of 'atmosphere' at any one time, or to analyse individual motives for action. While these aspects remain vitally important, history from within seeks (also) to use ego-documents for other ends. It seeks to explore the ways in which 'social selves' are formed under specific constellations; the ways in which later behaviour can be understood in terms of earlier experiences; the ways in which the hidden shadows of earlier eras are themselves historical forces in later periods, in a manner not easily captured by conventional categories; and it seeks to explore changing constructions of the 'self'. Although individuals experience a strong subjective sense of individual distinction and continuity across time, their 'social selves' are in large measure shaped both by the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts with which they interact over time, and by the changing terms of their own self-understandings in different circumstances.

This approach has implications for our understanding of time, history, and personality. Through the social self, earlier periods of history are, however subliminally, still present in later periods. This becomes evident when reading letters and diaries dealing with the everyday present, as well as autobiographies or memoirs directly focusing on the author's past. It is remarkable how frequently references back to previous experiences, events, and traditions occur in the private writings of individuals; and even when they are not explicitly aware of it, selected aspects of a perceived and recounted past are always present, as reference points, comparators,

⁷ The insights of Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959) are of some relevance here, although I depart from his approach in several respects, particularly with regard to exploring wider political contexts and patterns of change over time.

⁸ See also the special issue on ego-documents edited by Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, *German History*, 28(4) (2010).

guides for action to shape the future, and as markers for identity both personal and social. But this is not a simple, innocent or straightforward presence.

Any given past can become active in a later present only through the mediated way in which salient events and experiences are selectively recalled, conceived, and deployed at a later conjuncture. There is thus a complex interplay between the ways in which individuals reconstitute their own personal past, and the conditions, demands and challenges of later situations. There are very often strong incentives to provide a particular account of one's own past. This is particularly evident, for example, in war crimes investigations, where memories of those accused of being perpetrators often prove remarkably hazy or inaccurate, while among former victims, there are often insistent, traumatic memories but less by way of contextualization. It is equally evident when claiming particular pensions or compensation, which require a certain story about the past; or, on a far wider scale, after times of political upheaval, when people try more broadly to cut the cloth of their past to fit the new roles required by a different regime (often quite literally changing their colours, dying former brown shirts or army uniforms to suit a later civilian life). A widespread variant is to pick up and highlight genuine former areas of dissonance: individual moments of sympathy with a victim can be called upon to outweigh years of service to the perpetrators' cause; momentary pangs of conscience, or memories of occasions when conformity was less than willing, can be harnessed to buttress the claim that one was 'always against it'. This was extremely common among Germans after 1945, but again later contexts partially influenced the extent to which such strategies had to be deployed; far less so, it would appear, in the GDR, where a combination of professed conversion and later commitment could compensate for an apparent lack of individual consistency, than in the West.

More generally, there are often issues around which people constantly circle, however much they struggle to come to terms with them; and other aspects of the past which only resurface when brought to relevance by some external prompting. The contexts and demands of later life may temper or obviate a need to dwell on particular elements of the past; or they may sharpen sensibilities and provoke constant licking of wounds. At the same time, how later events are perceived, and what becomes seen as relevant, are both determined by the heritage of past experiences and related conceptions, and simultaneously constructed in the light of both earlier and later categories of perception. Dissonance can on occasion be acute, as in the case of those who lost limbs or relatives in service of their Fatherland, or subsequently lost years of their lives in forced labour for the victor, recast as 'liberator', and later found it hard to be satisfied with the official sense of justice and recompense in old age. Or it can be quite muted, as when individuals resist the interrogations of historians and refuse to display any evidence of a guilty conscience where they feel none is warranted.

There is thus a constant interplay within the minds of humans as reflective and historically shaped, historically conscious beings, whose perceptions and interpretations develop over the course of their lives. This is not however a purely individual matter. Public discussions and politically dominant and culturally salient groups shape discourses, set agendas, define the kinds of 'sides' people think they can take

and the lines of argument they might want to develop—even if in opposition to dominant discourses. Such shaping does not completely determine, but certainly powerfully constrains, the kinds of choices individuals feel they face, and the kinds of lives they feel are worth leading.

Exploring the ways in which members of different cohorts became involved in different structures of power, and how they represented their involvement both at the time and later, may help in understanding some wider questions of significance. An analysis of the twentieth-century Germany dictatorships from the perspective of history from within reveals that people may simultaneously hold quite varying views, and may act in ways which are at odds with private reflections, allowing them later to select and emphasize one or another aspect of their former selves. ‘Enactment’ of prevailing scripts does not always entail a high degree of congruity with inner feelings shaped by previous eras or marginalized groups. And it is often not the presumed motives of the individual, but rather the capacity of a regime to mobilize large numbers of people, that explains particular historical outcomes. By focusing on individual lives and exploring the degrees of dissonance between reflections and actions, it paradoxically becomes increasingly clear that we need to shift the level of explanation: to reinsert not merely ‘individuals’ into ‘history’, but also ‘history’ into ‘individuals’.

III. AVAILABILITY FOR MOBILIZATION

The two dictatorships had in common, for all their differences in ideology, the attempt to mobilize the minds and bodies of millions of people in the service of creating what was variously perceived as a radically new and better kind of polity, society, and related personality: a form of mass mobilization in ways that other authoritarian states, including the absolutist states of a previous era, had not necessarily either aimed for or had the means to achieve. In some respects, it is this goal of mass mobilization for ideologically driven societal and personal transformation that perhaps most distinguishes this kind of regime from other kinds of dictatorship.

Often what is at issue is neither the question of individual motives, nor that of some faceless ‘structural causation’, but rather what one might call ‘structural and cultural availability for mobilization’, irrespective of individual motives. This would suggest a rather different approach to understanding the lives of those who lived through the German dictatorships than that taken by historians looking primarily at individual motives for action.

We need here to make a key theoretical distinction. ‘Motive’ refers to that which moves an individual from within: it is a reason, within the individual’s head, for wanting to act in a certain way. ‘Mobilization’, on the other hand, is that which moves an individual from without: the person in a certain position may or may not have individual motives for acting in a certain way, but is structurally placed in a situation where certain behaviours are elicited, with particular systemic consequences—which may be close at hand, or at such a remove that the person may

be barely aware of the consequences of their actions in that role. If one switches the explanatory emphasis from motive to mobilization, a more differentiated picture of patterns of living through the German dictatorships may be developed.

'Structural availability for mobilization' refers to the extent to which, in a given position, a person has a degree of choice over their movements. One obvious example here is that of ordinary soldiers in the Second World War, when many Germans who were not among the professional and social elites found themselves being mobilized against their own will, but had little or no leeway for resisting conscription, little chance of arguing that their work on the home front rendered them 'indispensable'. Yet, once mobilized, living with dissonance is extraordinarily difficult, and changing circumstances affect how people choose to see the world and what they are asked to do in it.⁹ Ordinary soldiers, particularly in the early years of the war, were exposed to energetic ideological influences, or were personally affected by engaging in the behaviour required of them, often making them feel both compromised and liberated from 'civilized' constraints and norms. But others in more elevated positions in the social hierarchy had a greater degree of leeway and choice in where they found themselves and what it was that they did or felt they had to do: it is the combination of responsibility and only very belated and even then rather minimal explicit recognition of the criminality of the Nazi project among the elites that renders their behaviour particularly problematic. Still others were ideologically mobilized but were not in a situation in which their behaviour could make much difference: the young, massively exposed to the changing patterns of Nazi organization and socialization, were, to varying degrees depending on age, relatively readily mobilized. As explored in more detail above, a matter of a few years could make a significant difference to the ways in which the shock of violence was perceived and hence what were the long-term consequences of mobilization for war among different groups. Age and prior position in the social structure could make a huge difference, both to degrees of structural availability for mobilization, and to the consequences of that mobilization for the ways in which people behaved (or were forced to behave) and conceived of their behaviour both at the time and later.

'Cultural availability' refers to inner predispositions. Reactions to and involvement in the development of Hitler's racial state varied quite remarkably across the political and moral spectrum. Although for many there was little choice in terms of the ways in which they were categorized and affected—in terms of stigmatization, victimization, and ultimately exclusion from the *Volksgemeinschaft*—among those deemed part of this racially defined national community there nevertheless still remained wide variation in the extent to which individuals were enthusiastic and cooperative, or by contrast willing to take the risks of engaging in active resistance, and hence the ways in which they responded to opportunities, challenges, threats,

⁹ I am not seeking to draw on any psychological generalizations in this historical analysis, but the work of Leon Festinger and others on 'cognitive dissonance' is clearly of some relevance here. See e.g. the classic early text, Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

and constraints. Those coming from certain milieus were, it is well known, far less likely to succumb to the supposed allures of the Nazi project than others. For some people, prior moral, religious, or political beliefs made cooperation with different aspects of Nazi policies either more or less 'culturally possible'.

The emergence of mass murder as the 'final solution' was predicated on large numbers of Germans being both structurally and culturally available for mobilization, and thus acting in roles which allowed this to become the ultimate outcome, even though they were personally not actually involved in physically killing Jews, were not guilty as 'murderers', and could later claim they had 'always been against' Nazism. So, for example, the members of the civilian administration, such as the *Landräte* (chief executives of 'county' level administrative units) who put into effect restrictions on where Jews could live and move, overseeing the forcible seizure of their houses and possessions and their removal to ghettos or forced labour, were essential cogs in the pre-machinery of genocide, even if they were not themselves centrally involved in deportations and executions in the same way as the Gestapo or the SS guards who actively oversaw the practical mechanics and implemented the murderous end results of the 'final solution'. Yet civilian administrators could later claim to have been 'merely' officials of local government, not even aware, apparently, of the murders going on all around them. Both the proximate precipitants and the preconditions of the genocide were embodied in the active production of a situation in which Jews had neither the means to live, nor the means to escape. These wider circles were thus actively involved in genocide, but managed to evade the narrow post-war legal framework of culpability for murder through individual motives and causation of actual physical harm to specific individuals. As civil servants they had a degree of latitude and freedom of manoeuvre, in some contrast to the low-level soldier (*Landser*) at the front who, having been called up, had little choice other than to kill or be killed, whatever his private reservations or ideological commitment to Hitler's war. A new category, that of 'Hitler's willing facilitators', would capture more adequately those who should be caught within the conceptual net of systemic responsibility for mass murder. Making a sharp distinction between the mass murder of the extermination camps and the slow imposition of starvation and disease, and failing to register how they acted as cogs in a far larger machine, was fundamental to the later claim that they 'never knew anything about it'; and this in turn, was a precondition for subsequent lack of a guilty conscience.

At a lower level of responsibility, perhaps, might be the category of 'willing beneficiaries': those who actively and knowingly benefited from, for example, the proceeds of 'Aryanization', taking over businesses or houses formerly belonging to Jews or buying furniture cheaply from the '*Treuhand*' (trustee) organizations, dividing the spoils of robbery and death without any thought for the sufferings of those whose possessions, livelihoods and lives had been taken from them. Closely related to this is the question of what might be called the mental or attitudinal preconditions for mass murder: the ways in people thought about or distinguished between 'Germans' and 'others', the 'superior' and the 'inferior'; the ways in which they went along with and enacted new scripts, rather than challenging the demands of those in power; and the ultimate consequences of these wider patterns of attitude

and assumption, irrespective of their particular role in the system. Had there been public outcry against any of the prior stages and preconditions for the separation of the Jews from mainstream society, their ultimate removal and murder would have been very much more difficult if not well-nigh impossible.

Germans could later thus both represent themselves as 'victims' of the consequences of war and yet have at the time played a role in a brutal system, the ultimate outcome of which was mass murder for which they denied any responsibility. Similarly, it was possible for a soldier both to have been involved in horrendous acts of brutality, and yet at the same time to feel he had no choice and was simply compelled by situational logic to act in the ways he did, in the process suffering experiences that more frequently than not damaged his own physical and psychic well-being, if not his very existence. This simultaneity of being involved in actions with specific consequences within a given system, and yet retaining a sense of inner distance, means that in subsequent self-representations, one aspect could be selectively recalled at the expense of the other.

The sense of having been constrained to act by historical forces beyond one's own control, as well as personal experiences of suffering—air raids, captivity, flight and expulsion, post-war hunger, robbery and rape, uncertainty, the need to begin again from scratch and start a new life in a new environment, worries about the denazification process or the possibilities of making a new career—could thus all 'authentically' take precedence over thoughts about why such developments might have come about in the first place. The complexity of people's involvement with the Nazi regime—famously beset by internal rivalries and squabbles from the highest levels downwards—also meant that, if necessary (perhaps more so in the West than the East, though that is another story) people could frequently rehearse their own tales of 'conflict' with Nazi authorities, providing a degree of verisimilitude to claims that one had 'always been against it'. So, in a later incarnation of the social self, it was always possible not merely to represent oneself as, but even genuinely to believe in one's own story of having been, a 'victim'. But even this sort of later self-representation was not always necessary, depending on later circumstances.¹⁰

Critical historical analysis of ego-documents in the context of other sources is vital here. For it is startling how frequently common patterns are used by those who were actively involved in the machinery of racism but later wished to disassociate themselves from culpability for, or even knowledge of, mass murder. Thus in large numbers of post-war defence statements, memoirs and other accounts of past lives, Germans who had been deeply implicated in the Nazi system engaged in a self-distancing from the SS as the chief purveyor of evil, constructed 'Auschwitz' as the principal locus of murder ignoring all everyday sites of inhumanity, and reverted to the topos of the honourable army, service in which constituted justifiable patriotism or 'love of the Fatherland'. It was in large measure because so many 'acceptable'

¹⁰ These comments point somewhat beyond what it has been possible to explore with respect to generations through the German dictatorships, and are the subject of an AHRC-funded project, based at UCL, on *Reverberations of the Second World War in Europe*, for which I shall be writing on aspects of *Reckoning with the Nazi Past*.

post-war life stories had been constructed in these terms that the *Wehrmacht* exhibition of 1995, exploding the myth of the innocent army, proved so shattering to so many Germans.¹¹

Similarly, one can adopt this approach to analyse participation in and widespread adjustment to political processes and structures in the GDR. Again, some fine distinctions are in order. To suggest that the vast majority of East Germans had, by the 1970s, in some way come to terms with a situation which at the time they felt to be unalterable, is not to suggest that the GDR was carried by a tidal wave of popular support or was 'legitimate' in any Western democratic sense. Inner perceptions and outer conformity did not necessarily easily overlap. Debates over this matter have to date revolved largely around assertions rooted in prior presuppositions, with difficulties in assessing what empirical evidence we have. Many historians (particularly but by no means solely Westerners) simply cannot believe that apparent evidence of commitment or consent is anything other than 'dissembling' (*Heuchelei*), and that contemporary sources about attitudes, those produced within the GDR—whether official reports or whether letters of complaint written by citizens—are deeply tainted and unreliable in one way or another. There is an accompanying tendency to discount positive retrospective views, after unification, as mere nostalgia for the lost East (*Ostalgie*), which are considered to be principally reflections on an uncertain present rather than representations of real experiences of the GDR past. Such approaches provide little means of accessing patterns of subjectivity. An approach through 'history from within' from a generational perspective may begin to help in mapping the extent to which, again, we need to distinguish between degrees of mobilization from outside and an inner sense of distance, as well as changes over time.

The passage of generations over the course of four decades made a large difference in what was perceived to be 'perfectly normal', what was simply taken for granted, often noticed only after it was lost. Older GDR citizens continued to experience and express a sense of dissonance between the official views propagated by the SED regime and their own memories of the war and its ending, whereas younger East Germans appear to have had more trouble with the officially imposed interpretations of the present. Yet perspectives on the Nazi past were multifaceted, varying greatly with both issues and individuals. And, throughout the existence of the GDR, perspectives on the past were continually bound up with positions in the present and inevitably politicized struggles for what was conceived to be a 'better' future.

While it is unwise to generalize unduly, those who most likely to commit themselves most fully to building up the new GDR regime were to be found among the 1929ers, for whom the late shock of Nazi violence and the establishment of new lives on a personal level was often combined with an idealistic desire to

¹¹ See Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995); and Hannes Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter. Der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt, aber keiner war dabei* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004).

improve the post-war world, vestiges of which remained even when disillusioned by the way the system turned out. Those who were older and those who were slightly younger than the 1929ers retained a greater sense of dissonance with respect to accommodation in the divided present. But for virtually all, as the system developed the early post-war impetus for mobilization for the future dissipated under the growing burdens of the present. A state in which life paths and patterns became predictable and routine to the point of greyness and boredom, in which the penalties for non-conformity and the rules of the game were widely known and could for the most part be negotiated, sometimes at the price of inner unease and sometimes with far more severe personal consequences, is nevertheless very different from the constant drive for expansion and violent exclusion characteristic of the Third Reich; and younger generations faced, accordingly, not mass death and destruction but rather constrained lives that were patterned in very different ways. At the same time, reinterpretations of the Nazi past remained significant, in the constant and constantly contested quest for a 'useful' rendering of the past. Far from being merely 'remembered' or 'represented', the legacies of the past were periodically challenged and re-appropriated for new purposes in the ever changing later present, with varying degrees of relevance or indeed inescapability for people of different ages and outlooks.

The ways in which differing subjective experiences and perceptions mapped on to the undoubted structures of power indicate greater complexity than a simple labelling as 'totalitarian' would suggest. Many East Germans sought ways of living and developing a more authentic sense of self than the restrictive corset of GDR structures seemed to allow. It was only after the collapse of the GDR and the unification of Germany under Western auspices that East Germans came to appreciate aspects of the society they had by then lost. And ironically, it was precisely because the united Germany disproportionately failed to deliver the goods for which many East Germans had aspired, the life styles for which they had challenged the SED regime, that made them subsequently come to realize just which aspects of GDR society they retrospectively had come to value. There is thus a complex interplay between often nostalgic later memories of East German society and experiences before 1989.

Through analysis of the formation and transformation of social generations, it is thus possible to gain a sense of patterns and variations: of the ways in which particular age cohorts, born into distinctive historical conditions, responded to the challenges which faced them at any given stage, and later sought to make sense of the ways they had lived their lives in the worlds into which they had been born and across the historical ruptures they had faced. By combining a focus on broader trends and major historical developments, on the one hand, with a deeper understanding of individual lives and the subjective interpretations and personal representations of selected individuals, on the other, personal life stories provide some sense of the tragic sweep of twentieth-century German history and the social impact and legacies of the two dictatorships, Nazism and communism, for the generations 'born after'.

IV. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOCIAL SELF
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMANY

This book has been concerned with generations living through an age of violence. This phrase can be taken to refer not only to the appalling age through which twentieth-century Europeans lived, but also to the significance of an individual's age for the ways in which he or she lived through this period of history, often dubbed the 'age of extremes'.¹² The ages at which people experience and are involved in and respond to different types of violence are crucial. The experience of violence may be more significant for those who experienced it tangentially, at a distance, not as fully responsible adult participants. Age is also crucial at times of transition, with respect to the ways in which people can become involved in new regimes and societies. Those just attaining adulthood at a time of major transition have quite different opportunities and reactions than those who are older, already involved in previous regimes, or those who are younger, often merely bewildered and lacking the power to shape their own future. But the directions in which such experiences may lead 'rising' generations can be quite variable, depending not only on the character of violence but also the broader historical circumstances in the context of which they put into practice any lessons learned.

The significance of this becomes particularly clear when we compare the experiences and later activities of those born shortly after the turn of the century, who were too young to fight in the Great War—the first war-youth generation—and those of cohorts born in the later 1920s and early 1930s, who were too young to participate fully, if at all, in the fighting of the Second World War—whom I have termed the 1929ers, and others have variously called the 'air force auxiliary generation' (*Flakhelfergeneration*), the '1945ers', or the 'reconstruction generation' (*Aufbaugeneration*). These generational groups had in common that, in their adolescence, they witnessed the adult males of their world involved in one of the 'total wars' of the twentieth century: volunteering or being called up to fight at the front, or being unavoidably involved in war-related activities on the home front. Both of these generational groups were, for much or all of the duration of the two World War periods, themselves too young to be called up into active military service or to be engaged in positions of responsibility in war-related activities, although both males and females among the 1929ers, in particular, were heavily mobilized in a variety of paramilitary capacities. After the respective wars, the first war-youth generation and the 1929ers drew very different lessons from such experiences for their roles in the future.

After the Great War, a significant and highly visible minority of the first-war youth generation was disproportionately found among the most ardent supporters of and participants in paramilitary violence in the 1920s, on both the right and the left; after 1933, when the options for other political orientations were closed off,

¹² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*.

willing members of the war-youth generation provided the mainstay of Hitler's thugs, whether organized in the HJ, the SA, or the SS; they disproportionately joined Nazi organizations and supported the aggressive and racist Nazi project; and those who had by now eschewed radical physical violence were willing to rise up through the ranks of the newly pruned civil service, taking all the opportunities available in the expansive Reich for rapid upward mobility in state service. They supported the drive for overcoming the perceived humiliation of Versailles and seeking revenge for the defeat or death of their fathers, elder brothers, and uncles in the Great War. They appeared, in other words, to be still imbued with the nationalist spirit that had famously informed at least public demonstrations at the outbreak of the Great War in the summer of 1914; and they appeared to feel a debt towards both nation and family to complete what had been truncated in 1918. For those members of these cohorts who rode the radical right-wing tides of the 1920s and 1930s, there appears to have been not critique of, but rather admiration for, the dominant ideals and goals of the preceding generation, and a determination to complete its mission. One should of course not generalize from the relatively small minority of activists and radical right-wingers, largely male, among the total birth cohorts here; but what we are talking about here is a 'sore-thumb generation', a highly obvious group of roughly the same age whose activities made a significant difference to history in highly visible ways. Moreover, although women were by no means as evident in the paramilitary training and physical violence which was an integral part of the right-wing movements of the 1920s and the Nazi organizations of the Third Reich, it is among this age group too that significant understanding of and support for the Nazi project was to be found. Yet, as with those who were somewhat older, the much-vaunted (if ill-defined) 'front generation', this cohort remained internally deeply divided.

The situation is very different with respect to the lessons apparently learned by the 1929ers, who were in effect a second 'war-youth generation' in relation to the Second World War. In contrast to the first war-youth generation, the 1929ers rejected almost entirely the project of preceding generations: they became, whether in East or in West Germany, the most staunch supporters of the two new states founded on the ruins of Hitler's Third Reich, explicitly rejecting the legacies of that Reich. At a political level, they made themselves available for the radically new projects of the respective occupying forces, whether in capitalist or communist colours. At a personal, emotional, and attitudinal level, they appear to have had a far more ambivalent relationship with those who in less traumatic times might have been classified as their 'elders and betters'. Rather than taking the 'parental project' (in its widest sense) forwards, they rejected both the project and the authority of the parental generation. And yet they were still emotionally tied and attached to the older members of their families. This could produce unbearable ambivalence and often explosive conflict. The question of 'youth revolt' thus potentially became a dominant theme, if expressed in manifold different ways, in the era after the Second World War. But the opportunities for expression of such revolt, and perhaps even more importantly the opportunities for the young to 'try to change the world' in practice, were quite different on the two sides of the Iron Curtain dividing

Germany; and it is striking that those who did eventually engage in the youth protests of the later 1960s were somewhat younger, and were not the generation of 1929ers who were so ambivalently still emotionally tied to their rejected elders while yet trying to build an entirely new world against that in which they had been brought up.¹³

Why were there the striking differences in responses to the sometimes only second-hand experiences and inherited memories of violence among these two war-youth generations of the First and Second World Wars?

Part of the answer may lie in the question of availability for mobilization after a lost cause. The young may have captured the sense of defeat and the need to rebuild after both wars; but the dominant forces driving the rebuilding were, in the first case, largely domestic (even if strongly constrained by international circumstances in the post-1918 era), and in the later period, the occupation powers and their domestic political representatives (in the West, the acceptable democratic parties; in the East, the communist SED). If the energies and impulses to build anew were common to both generational groups, broader political contexts—both domestic and international—determined the colour and character of the new political commitment in each case. But the structural opportunities for rapid upward mobility differed greatly in the two states. In the GDR, in contrast to the West, there was an unusual constellation giving rise to particular, and indeed unprecedented, opportunities to those willing to seize them; there was also, increasingly, a system which held those, once caught, in its grip.

It has also to be remembered that we are talking about dominant, visible forms of commitment and activity. What was visible depended in large measure on prevailing political circumstances and the balance of forces. Those who were 'selected' by or chose to support the new hegemonic forces rose to pre-eminent positions visible in the historical record; those who opposed might be defeated, silenced, or choose to withdraw. Selection mechanisms and dominant discourses, then, played a major role in determining which strands and approaches could leave historical sediments and which did not enjoy the opportunity and were (in the words so beloved of the Stasi, but with as much relevance for the preceding forces of repression), 'throttled at birth'.

It is, then, not only the experience (whether at first or second hand) of violence that determined subsequent developments, but also the cultural climate and subsequent political circumstances in which the 'lessons of the past' were drawn. Depending on these, there were major consequences for the relations between generations—whether of 'fulfilling the unresolved mission' of those who had gone before, or rejecting that project entirely and fundamentally querying the authority

¹³ Bernhard Schlink's best-selling *The Reader*, and the 2008 film based on this novel and directed by Stephen Daldry, capture emotional aspects of the generational dynamics brilliantly, whatever other criticisms may be levelled at the work; original German *Der Vorleser* (Zurich: Diogenes, 1995). A comparison along these lines between generation formation in post-war West and East Germany can only be intimated here, since the concern in this context has been primarily with the question of living through the succeeding German dictatorships.

of the older generation, while yet simultaneously often inhabiting a web of close personal and emotional ties.

For both of these war-youth generations, the world entered at adulthood was unstable, precarious, full of continuing challenges. For both, there had to be a mission to improve the world. It was left to subsequent generations to try to pick up the pieces and heal the wounds that had been left behind and to try to 'come to terms' with the horrendous legacies of the world their forefathers had made for them.

In the case of the GDR, visible physical violence—along the lines of the atrocities committed at any time from the suppression of uprisings in Germany's African colonies at the start of the century, through atrocities in the Great War, and the paramilitary thugs and pervasive street violence of the tumultuous and unstable Weimar years, to the state sanctioned mass brutality on a previously unparalleled scale in the Third Reich—was eventually off the historical agenda. After the early post-war years of massive deployment of force, and in a context with a continuing highly visible presence of Soviet troops and domestic forces of repression on the front line of the Cold War, violence in the GDR was increasingly a matter of guarding the borders of the regime. This too—whether the borders to be transgressed were behavioural or geographical—had an effect on personalities and patterns of behaviour and self-representation, but in quite different ways from those that had gone before. Even those who had clung most persistently to some continuous notion of a collective identity for 'Germans' were surprised when, with the fall of the Wall in 1989–90, it became widely apparent just how much those living in the East had grown apart from their newly recovered compatriots in the West. Living through the GDR had left its mark, in different ways depending, among other things, on the stages of life through which succeeding cohorts of East Germans had experienced it, betraying the hidden force of circumstances in shaping aspirations and attitudes, with lingering reverberations persisting even two decades after the demise of this second German dictatorship.

This book has, then, been concerned with the impact of a particularly violent past, of massive historical ruptures and rapid changes of regime, on those who lived through it: those generations that, by virtue of their 'social age' at a particular time, disproportionately bore the brunt of the major historical events and challenges, and those who felt that they had a mission with respect to transforming the world their forebears had bequeathed to them. It has also been concerned with the implications, shadows, and reverberations of the receding past on those born later, transmitted in submerged, often suppressed, or even innocently unconscious ways through habits of behaviour, attitudes, fears, enthusiasms, and assumptions to generations born into an entirely different age, affecting their emotional economy and aspirations for their own future. For the history of Germany in the twentieth century is also the history of attempts at mobilizing the generations of the future to make radical changes, to produce the new personalities that would bear the torch of social and political transformations where previous ages had failed.

And, with each rupture, with each total rejection of the age that had passed and each attempt to build a better future, the project of the parents' generation was key, whether taken forward or rejected, while emotional bonds tied the builders of the new in ambivalent ways with the failures of the past.

It was not 'Germans' who somehow magically changed overnight, as regimes changed, but rather the structures of the world around them. And as people came to adapt to the new circumstances in which they were constrained to live, so behaviour patterns changed—and the ways in which individuals of different ages and backgrounds sought to account for their past behaviour. Over time, perceptions of the past changed too, and stories about the past were recast in a new light, reframed to accord with a new present. Motives that at one time seemed personal, completely internalized, individual reasons for behaviour were now externalized, reinterpreted as the way one had to behave under the constraints of a previous era which had allegedly 'forced' one to behave in certain ways.

Yet under the new circumstances, to which adaptation had often originally been a matter of little choice and much coercion, for large numbers of people 'internal' motives or norms were over time 'brought into line' with what was expected and demanded of them in everyday life. The dissonance of perpetual opposition, whether passively by way of 'internal emigration' or actively in resistance and dissent, was one with which relatively few people could live. Moreover, by living within new sets of interpersonal relations, people themselves changed: the stresses were different; the rubbing points altered; some personality types, social scripts, and patterns of behaviour were favoured over others; new norms became dominant; certain lifestyles could be chosen with greater ease while others were discarded or denied expression. Prevailing models of social habits, life styles, virtues, and character imperceptibly shifted until the prevalent militarist cultures of Imperial Germany and the Third Reich were ultimately displaced by emergent pacifist emphases on non-violent solutions to conflict in the late GDR and the new Berlin Republic; the racists and homophobics of the 1930s were displaced by a largely more tolerant society accepting a degree of diversity by the end of the century.

The 'passage of generations' may account for the shifts in the apparent 'character' of a 'nation'; but this is not merely a question of generations succeeding one another in a regular cycle of births and deaths, but rather of the ways in which historical challenges are actively faced, and the development of new structures and patterns of interpersonal relations which are more conducive to altered forms of behaviour and mentality. The complexity and multifaceted character of these processes, and the myriad of voices resonating from the past to a later present, does not allow the writing of an easy, simple narrative; but if this analysis is at least on the right lines, then these reflections on the experiences of individuals born into and living through an age of extreme violence and dictatorship may give some cause to consider more carefully how we collectively shape and negotiate changing institutional structures and cultural norms now and in the future.

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