

Andreas Michel

Heroes and Taboos: The Expansion of Memory in Contemporary Germany

The majority of Germans today know, or so at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived.

—W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural
History of Destruction*

ver since the 50th anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, and in particular since the new millennium, Germany has witnessed a proliferation of public debates reassessing post-WW II history. A slew of scholarly articles, political essays, TV series, and, in 2004, a German-made feature film on Adolf Hitler flooded the market of ideas with new perspectives on formerly taboo subjects.¹ In the center of this reassessment is the desire for an account of German suffering during the war years, a field of inquiry that before unification had been kept from public discourse. Besides this, several other aspects of German self-representation before 1990 have come under scrutiny. In this essay I propose to investigate two recent revisions of previous acts of German self-censorship that had gained the status of taboos: Peter Schneider's retrieval of German heroes, and Günter Grass's late rejection of the partial repression of memory. The questions posed by these texts contribute to the sense of a new departure in German public discourse.

Wide-spread interest in the issue of German suffering in WWII took center stage in the wake of a publication by W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), a writer and professor of German at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. In 1997 Sebald had given a lecture on "Air War and Literature" in Zürich, Switzerland, which,

upon publication, started a lively debate in the German national press. In this lecture, Sebald claimed that the horrors of the Allied air war against German cities had been inadequately portrayed in German literature and historiography.² The issue gathered further steam when, in 2002, Berlin historian Jörg Friedrich published a 564-page study on the topic entitled *Der Brand (The Conflagration)*, not yet available in English translation. A simple trip to the Internet reveals a still very lively discussion of these issues and, for the time being, there seems to be no end in sight.

It is interesting to speculate why this turn to German sufferings surfaces only now, 60 years after they occurred. Most commentators agree that ever since unification in 1990, a perceptible shift in Germany's self-image has been underway. Taking notice of this mood, German intellectuals in the mid 1990s coined the term of the "Berlin Republic," meant to refer not only to the national government's move from Bonn to Berlin but also to a careful departure from pre-unification values, policies, and perspectives.³ Given Germany's role in World War II and the Holocaust, there was as much alarm about such a shift as there was excitement, especially in the realm of culture.

One fitting example of a growing sense of disorientation in this matter can be seen in the public reaction to several literary works published between 1995 and 2001, among them the texts by Schneider and Grass that are the focus of this essay. By the spring of 2002, critics employed by well-regarded German and Swiss daily newspapers such as *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accused Grass and Schneider of participating in what the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* summarized as a creeping "transformation of a perpetrator society into a society of victims."⁴ Grass's novella and Schneider's historical account, together with writings by W.G. Sebald, Bernhard Schlink, and Dieter Forte, were considered suspicious because they strayed from the accepted norms within which 20th century German history ought to be portrayed; by doing so these texts might inadvertently contribute to minimizing the German guilt for the Holocaust. While Schlink's 1999 novel *The Reader* can be seen as one of the first texts in this new vein, W.G. Sebald's lecture "Air War and Literature" energized the debate.⁵

Although Sebald seems to have overstated his case, his lectures were widely perceived as puncturing the taboo against speaking out about German suffering. He had hit a nerve at the end of the 1990s, and the German public sphere was ready to engage with his diagnosis.⁶ In his lecture Sebald maintained that

... there was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the

country found itself was not to be described. The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged. (10)

The only novel, according to Sebald, that at least in part succeeded in rendering the horror of the times is Heinrich Böll's *The Silent Angel*, which, however, remained in a publisher's drawer until 1992.⁷ Sebald mentions five other texts and a number of historical studies that try to make palpable the experience of total destruction, but he finds most of them wanting. In his view, these texts

... often seemed curiously untouched by the subject of their research, and served primarily to sanitize or eliminate a kind of knowledge incompatible with any kind of normality. They did not try to provide a clearer understanding of the extraordinary faculty for self-anesthesia shown by a community that seemed to have emerged from a war of annihilation without any signs of psychological impairment. (11)

It is in these terms that Sebald draws attention to the evasion, even the repression, of the true dimensions of the moral, material, and psychological devastation wrought by the air war on an entire nation. His lecture is a plea to address this taboo, and by implication, many others that in his view haunt present-day Germany. Such taboos primarily concern the manner in which to tell the story of the German catastrophe—what to include or leave out, to emphasize or to repress. In what follows I will discuss two recent texts that address such acts of active repression. The incidents they relate were known, of course, just like the Allied air war, but there existed a similarly unspoken taboo against acknowledging them lest they contribute to a relativization of German guilt.

The first text by German novelist and essayist Peter Schneider represents an historical account of the fate of a German Jew who survived the war in the Berlin underground because of heroic support from non-Jewish citizens. The second is the latest novella by Günter Grass, dealing with the sinking of the German steam ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* in January 1945. While Schneider addresses head on the issue of a lack of German heroes in literature, Grass highlights the problematic nature of selective memory and its repressions. Both authors offer re-articulations of taboos that, until very recently, may well have been their own. I would like to suggest, therefore, that these texts could not have been written before unification.

In the light of the Holocaust, the moral dimensions of such rearticulations of German history are always precarious, to say the least. Yet both Schneider and Grass come with credentials that should have put them beyond the charge of historical revisionism. Both are long-standing members of the West German political left, participants in or sympathizers with the student revolt of the late 1960s, which found its identity in the accusation and critique of traditional and even proto-fascist structures embedded in West Germany's political and cultural institutions. Both were instrumental in helping the Social Democrats gain power in 1969. Neither writer can therefore legitimately be seen to share any common ground with those whom Grass in his novella calls the "eternal Has-Beens," those who sixty years after the end of WWII hope to somehow return to a prewar state of affairs. In spite of all this, as we saw above, the breaking of taboos that Schneider and Grass perform in their texts has on occasion been severely criticized in the German press.

Retrieving German Heroes

If in November 2004 you had used a German internet search engine to look for "German hero" (*deutscher Held*) in its grammatical permutations, you would have come up with sites about business owners, professors, and scientists whose last name happens to be Held. Secondly, you may have come across sites of cartoon characters such as Shrek, Asterix, etc., and there would have been links to sites about protagonists, i.e., main characters in works of art. You may also have found links to real-life heroes from other countries, such as George Harrison and Arnold Schwarzenegger, or from other historical eras, such as Martin Luther and Casanova. The only non-literary German heroes you would have encountered are from the realm of sports, primarily soccer, car racing, and tennis.

A search for American heroes, on the other hand is instantly successful: on the very first pages you find links to sites on John Glenn, Ronald Reagan, Tecumseh, links to movies and lists with, about, and on American heroes, as well as questions such as who can legitimately aspire to the status of an American hero (the recent case of Jessica Lynch). None of this is surprising, of course, given 20th century history as well as historiography both in the United States and in Germany.

Nevertheless, this example brings a problem to the surface: who could have legitimately counted as hero for a majority of West Germans after World War II or, for that matter, who can count as hero even today? It seems that East Germany had less of a problem with this issue at first since its political and cultural elites were comprised of communists, socialists, and leftist intellectuals who had been persecuted under Hitler, suffered in prisons and concentration camps, or had been forced into exile. In the case of East Germany, history and political

conviction supplied legitimate hero status to individuals who could then function as role models for East Germans, at least in the early years. West Germany, on the other hand, accepted the status of successor state to the Third Reich and with it the responsibility for the crimes that had been committed in Germany's name. Faced with the enormity of such crimes, the official resistance fighters that West-Germans could lay claim to, the men of July 1944, were few and far between.

Role models could be found, if anywhere, in a post-war intellectual tradition predominantly influenced by the Frankfurt School. The basic orientation of this school of thought, however, was critical, dialectical, and anti-nationalist, attributes that do not lend themselves to the heroic which, on the contrary, is dependent upon strategies of identification. The critical interventions by the Frankfurt School held a moral reign over the intellectual sphere in West Germany, precisely because they took the Holocaust as its basic point of reference. For Theodor W. Adorno, Western civilization and the Holocaust were inextricably bound, and the German intellectual and cultural tradition had been carrying the seed of this horrible aberration for centuries. Such an interpretation of German history of course tended to reinforce the taboos mentioned above. It also led to a vacuum in the very place where heroes, in particular national heroes, would thrive. As we will see in the discussion of Grass's novella below, it is the West German post-war generation that is most confused about its heroes.

As West German leftists, Grass and Schneider shared many of the Frankfurt School precepts and ideas about the German past, and subscribed to its unspoken taboos for most of the duration of divided Germany. Schneider was the first to move away from the orthodoxy of this position in the early 1980s, and it is no surprise that he is the one who takes on the task of retrieving German heroes. On 13 February 2000, Schneider published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* with the provocative title "The Good Germans," which is a precursor to the text discussed here. In both texts, Schneider is guided by the desire to tell the "story of the decent" Germans (Schneider, 15) in order to show that small actions, requiring an enormous amount of courage to perform, were possible even in Hitler's surveillance state. He wants recognition for those who withstood the pressures of totalitarianism and its race ideology. Those are the people he suggests that should be known to us just as much as the few acknowledged resistance fighters.

In the course of his historical account *Und wenn wir nur eine Stunde gewinnen* (*And if we were to win but one hour*), Schneider provides such a portrayal of everyday German heroes.⁸ He presents the true story of Breslau Jew Konrad Latte who managed to survive in the Berlin underground during the last two years of the war. Latte was born into an assimilated Jewish family in Breslau, where his father ran a textile factory. During the 1930s and the first years of

the war, his family and their friends find themselves steadily and systematically disenfranchised, until he and his parents are forced to flee Breslau in order to avoid being sent to the concentration camps. On the 1st of March 1943, they boarded a train for Berlin and from that time on they were dependent upon the good will of their fellow German citizens.

The people providing food and shelter for Konrad and his parents (until they are deported to Auschwitz in 1944), especially Harald Poelchau, pastor of the prison at Berlin-Tegel, are described by Schneider with awe and reverence. Poelchau ran his acts of resistance from within the very prison where the Nazis sent their enemies. Schneider calls Poelchau one of the most fascinating figures of the resistance. He saved the lives of dozens of people through the procuring of food stamps, places to stay, false papers, and temporary employment in non-Jewish Berlin families who were ready to take the risk. All of his acts of surreptitious heroism were performed under the direct surveillance of the Nazis.

Another person singled out by Schneider for praise is Ursula Meissner, at the time a 20-year-old actress with Gustaf Gründgens at the *Preussisches Staatstheater*. When Schneider interviewed the 78-year-old Meissner for this book, he asked her why she had agreed to risk her life for people she did not even know. She answered simply “What else was there to do?”—remarking that she had not thought of the risk to herself at first. Reflecting on Frau Meissner’s comment, Schneider argues that the people who helped

... first saw the needs of those in danger, and only later the danger that they themselves ran by offering help. None of them consciously accepted the loss of their own lives, yet all were spontaneously willing to take on huge risks—be it for reasons of empathy or self-worth—risks which they then tried to reduce to the extent possible. ‘One wants to be able to look in the mirror in the morning,’ as Frau Meissner put it. (75)

With this interpretation Schneider comes to what is most important to him: the display of moral courage on the side of those who offered help: “One cannot demand heroism. But to give a persecuted and ostracized person a piece of bread, to offer her a bed for the night, to find him a place to stay required decency, shrewdness, and courage, but not readiness to die” (Schneider, 14). It is in this spirit that, at the end of the book, Schneider reverses the priority generally given to resistance fighters, and provides the reason for what I called his “retrieval of heroes:”

In the end it is not the rightfully admired resistance fighters who decide whether a society is going to succumb to totalitarian seduction or resists it. The success of dictatorship, just as much as the resistance to it, depends not on some great leaders but on the civic virtues of average citizens. (152)

Schneider's argument is that German literature and historiography have dealt too rarely with the "mundane" heroism that was provided by a minority of Germans to a small number of Jews. Stories like the one he is telling demonstrate that even in Hitler's state surveillance was not total, and that the most courageous, or the most decent, were able to act in humane ways. This conclusion indicts all those who but for lack of civic courage could have helped lessen the horrors committed during the Nazi era.

It also helps counter the arguments of those who maintain that Schneider has succumbed to the notion of German victimology: quite the opposite is the case. Recognizing and celebrating the courage of the few German heroes and their documented actions of human courage and civil disobedience entails a devastating indictment of the majority of Germans who were *Mitläufer*, passive bystanders. Drawing repeated attention to such small acts of resistance by average people across the social spectrum demonstrates that resistance did not have to be restricted to the level of the "men around Graf von Stauffenberg," a group of army officers who plotted to assassinate Hitler in 1944. While one cannot demand the heroic, one can perhaps learn what it takes to possess civic virtues. This is the real reason why it is important to tell these stories, and why Schneider proceeded to break with the taboo against finding everyday heroism among the Germans.

In contrast to those who would like to see the specter of the Holocaust disappear through a focus on German suffering, Schneider's retrieval of German heroism functions as a reminder of what would have been possible if more Germans had possessed the courage to resist.

Return of the Repressed

Like Schneider's historical account, Günter Grass's novella *Crabwalk*, which fictionalizes the sinking by Russian torpedoes of the German steamer *Wilhelm Gustloff* in January 1945, breaks with a long standing taboo.⁹ Before unification, few German writers, particularly those on the left, had dared tackle a theme which, by eliciting sympathy for the horrible plight suffered by German refugees near the end of WWII, might have been viewed as an attempt to relativize Germany's guilt for the war and the Holocaust.

But does the mere breaking of this taboo automatically amount to what some critics—by subsuming Grass's latest work among the recent "reassessment" of German history referred to above—have described as the rise of a new sense of a less-burdened German identity? To put it differently, does Grass's novella belong to the literature of the Berlin Republic after 1990, whose purpose it has been said to be to normalize and reinterpret the German past—so that the Holocaust might relinquish its stature as the defining aspect of German identity?

To anyone familiar with post-WWII German cultural debates the very idea that Günter Grass, of all German writers, might be interested in any way in relativizing Germany's guilt must seem at best far-fetched, and at worst, preposterous. It was Grass after all who, on the occasion of German unification in 1990, was of the opinion that the two Germanies ought to remain separate states. Grass was convinced that the Germans, due to the barbarism of the Holocaust, had forever forfeited the privilege of becoming one nation.¹⁰

And yet there are dimensions to Grass's text which, if read quickly, out of context, or without due respect for the intricately woven structure of the novella, can indeed seem revisionist when held up against the prevailing post-Holocaust etiquette concerning victims and perpetrators. By the end of the novella, Grass will have shifted the ground of all familiar identifications of victims and perpetrators—with the goal of demonstrating that a failure to confront the complexity of historical events may in fact lead to the very thing one most wants to prevent, namely, the return of the repressed.

In just over 200 pages Grass presents three different storylines, ingeniously woven into a single narrative. The storylines unfold around a particularly symbolic moment in German history, the disaster of the German steamer *Wilhelm Gustloff*, torpedoed by a Russian U-boat on 30 January 1945. The ship had close to 10,000 people on board, mostly civilian refugees from Eastern German territories, among them 4,000 children, but also 1,000 U-boat sailors, hundreds of injured soldiers from the Russian front, 370 female Navy personnel, and a flak battery crew. Over 9,000 people lost their lives in the greatest ship disaster the world has ever seen.

The overarching narrative is driven by the haunting question as to why the fate of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* has not held as central a place in German memory as that of the *Titanic*, where 1100 people lost their lives. It is also the story of the central conflict of 20th-century German history, namely the Jewish-German tragedy that continues into the present.

The first storyline concerns the historical trio of actors who set the events in motion. In 1936 in Davos, Switzerland, a Serbo-Croatian Jew by the name of David Frankfurter killed Wilhelm Gustloff, a Nazi functionary who was a recruiter in Switzerland for the Nazi Party. A newly built steam ship (which was

to be called the *Adolf Hitler*) was instead named for Gustloff in recognition of his martyrdom. The third historical character is the Russian U-boat captain, Marinesco, who sank the ship.

The second storyline concerns the ship itself. Built in 1936-37, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was designed as one of a number of pleasure cruise ships (*Kraft durch Freude [Strength through Joy]*) used by the Nazis for propaganda purposes. The party organized cruises on these classless ships for tens of thousands of German workers to vacation destinations they otherwise would never have been able to afford. The *Wilhelm Gustloff* was subsequently used for many purposes other than pleasure: as a transport vessel to repatriate German soldiers from the civil war in Spain, a hospital ship, a navy barracks, and eventually as a refugee ship.

While these storylines cover the period up to 1945, the third focuses on Konrad, a German neo-Nazi youth born in 1980. In 1996 Konrad killed a Jew by the name of David whom he had met through his website, exclusively dedicated to the memory of *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the man as well as the ship. After Konrad has committed the murder, he learns that "David" was really named Wolfgang and that he was not Jewish after all. Rather, in a philosemitic gesture, Wolfgang had assumed a Jewish identity.

These inverse mirror killings of the Nazi *Wilhelm Gustloff* by the Jewish David Frankfurter in 1936, and of "David" (who is not Jewish) by Konrad (who calls himself Wilhelm on his website) in 1996 provide the frame for the overarching narrative of *Crabwalk*. In 1996, then, a German neo-Nazi calling himself Wilhelm avenges the crime committed against the historical Nazi Wilhelm Gustloff sixty years earlier. Konrad is a copy cat killer, he commits his crime in the same manner, and for the same reason, as did David Frankfurter in 1936. The 1936 David had said "I fired because I am Jewish." In 1996, Konrad says "I fired because I am German." This painfully obvious parallelism of motives, hatreds, and actions obviously calls for closer scrutiny, not least because such parallelisms generally suggest symbolic equation.

The three storylines are connected by a family of three generations to whom, in the interests of clarity, I will only refer as mother, narrator, and son. Mother, born in 1927 grew up in Danzig—at that time a free city. Together with her parents, she boarded the *Wilhelm Gustloff* on 30 January 1945, in order to escape being captured by the advancing Russians. She was eight months pregnant. When the torpedoes hit the ship, she was one of the few to be rescued; on the boat that saved her she gave birth to Paul, the narrator of *Crabwalk*. The narrator, thus, was born on that fateful day, when "the downfall of the Greater German Reich had already been rung in" (130). The sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* is therefore emblematic of the demise of the Nazi regime, twelve years to the day after they came to

power. Coincidentally, January 30th was also the birthday of Wilhelm Gustloff the Nazi recruiter killed in 1936. Konrad, the 1996 murderer, is the narrator's son, and it is not hard to see that the three generations are identified with three Germanies: Mother representing the Third Reich; her son Paul (the narrator) divided Germany; and his son Konrad Germany after unification.

Expanding German Memory

The novella begins with these words: "WHY ONLY NOW, he says, this person not to be confused with me" (1). Addressing the narrator directly, this "other person" wants to know why the narrator talks only now about what happened on 30 January 1945? In the mid-1990s, the narrator of *Crabwalk* is a free-lance journalist writing for different newspapers. As the book begins, he is finally ready to start researching the *Wilhelm Gustloff* disaster. During his research he discovers that his estranged son runs a neo-Nazi website in memory of the Nazi functionary killed in 1936.

The novella takes the form of an objective report, constantly shuttling back and forth among the different storylines described above: the murder of Wilhelm Gustloff, the sinking of the ship in 1945, and post-WWII life in divided Germany and unified Germany. The point of all this shuttling back and forth, the narrator's *Crabwalk*, his continuous advance by retreating and moving sideways, is to emphasize the parallelism between the two murderers and their actions. Konrad's 1996 murder is a carbon copy of David Frankfurter's 1936 murder. One murder is avenged by another, both committed for the wrong reasons: Frankfurter's, it is suggested, because of an unstable mind, Konrad's because of an unsound mind. Does Grass establish a simple parallelism between the two, and thus open the door to relativism?

At first it seems that way. Grass lets Konrad have most of the "last word" in his novella. When he defends his actions in front of the court, Konrad is finally allowed to present his ideas on the Nazi's *Strength through Joy* program, as well as on memorials, topics he was not allowed to discuss in school. In prison Konrad reads extensively, and it is suggested that he learns more about the Nazi period and rejects much of it (he removes the pictures of Nazi functionaries, and states that he learned from "David"). Grass thus gives the impression that Konrad might potentially be excused, vindicated, his actions made understandable in the manner that the murder of Wilhelm Gustloff is understandable with hindsight. This would turn Konrad into some form of tragic hero, and could possibly lead to a symbolic equation of Jewish and German atrocities. Konrad would gain the contours of a tragic hero who has to atone for his guilt.

But of course Grass does not go there. Despite the parallel murders, he leaves no doubt throughout the narrative that mother's as well as Konrad's irrational anti-Semitism, which led to an act that would never have happened otherwise, is an evil that no extenuating circumstances can minimize. What, then, if this is the case, is the function of the parallelisms that Grass clearly does establish between the actions of Jew and neo-Nazi? Why would Grass draw parallels between the two murders, the two boys, and their families at all? Why would he resist clear lines of demarcation between victim and perpetrator?

Why, for example, have the young David, before he is killed by Konrad, *desecrate* (Grass's term) Konrad's holy ground, namely the memorial site for Wilhelm Gustloff? Here Grass clearly alludes, in reverse, to the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and other anti-Semitic attacks after German unification in 1990. Secondly, why is Konrad's defense in front of the court couched in terms of wanting to *bear witness* to the memory of Wilhelm Gustloff, both the man and the horrible disaster? There can be little doubt that Grass chose the terms "desecrate" and "bear witness" for the connotations they evoke with reference to the German-Jewish past. In a third example, a film actor who plays David Frankfurter explains the reasons why his character killed Wilhelm Gustloff by saying "I wanted to strike at the bacillus not at the person" (71). Is Grass here equating vermin, a term the Nazis used for Jews, and bacillus? And, to repeat, why construct parallel murders and protagonists with similar obsessions and aggressions?

The answer emerges when we consider the fact that the David of the 1990s, Konrad's adversary, is really someone named Wolfgang and is not Jewish at all. In the 1990s, in other words, the acting out of racial hatred occurs between two Germans who have probably never met a Jew. "They could have been taken for friends, they went to so much trouble to work off their mutual hatred, like a debt" (Grass, 49). Thus, what looked at first like an inverse historical parallel, is transformed on the post-unification stage into an inner German, contemporary affair: Konrad's anti-Semitism is countered by David's philo-Semitism. The two youths play out opposite poles of the German reaction to the trauma of the Holocaust.

With this narrative turn, the focus shifts from drawing a parallel between past and present, Jewish and neo-Nazi, to a statement about divided Germany's failure to effectively memorialize the combined heritage of the Holocaust and Germany's own sufferings. The issue of memory and memorialization then moves to center stage, and the perspectives Grass opens on Germany's post-1945 management of its own past are sobering. Through his focus on the entire history of the circumstances surrounding the *Wilhelm Gustloff* disaster, rather than merely the Nazi period, Grass shows how three generations are adversely affected by the almost complete repression of this traumatic event.

Appearing on the edges of the novella as the “old one” who should conceivably have talked about the Gustloff affair as early as the 1950s, Grass includes himself in the failure to remember. Danzig and its surroundings are his very own turf after all, yet he did not address the ship tragedy until now. Mother is of the “old one’s” generation, and although indelibly marked by the sinking of the ship, she uncritically glorifies its golden past as a cruise ship. Her unacknowledged trauma blocks out a clearheaded view of other aspects of Nazi Germany, and she unwittingly keeps alive an attitude of unreflected anti-Semitism.

Influenced by his grandmother’s love for the ship as well as its policy of classless access, Konrad sees only the positive aspects of the Nazi Wilhem Gustloff. In school, Konrad’s attempts at learning more about the classless ship and exploring the need for memorials in general are suppressed. Deprived of a critical engagement with this subject matter, he turns to neo-Nazi websites, the only public arena addressing his questions. Konrad’s failure, like his grandmother’s, is to become fixated on one aspect of Nazi policies while losing sight of the bigger picture—and this makes possible his own irrational anti-Semitism.

The greatest blame, however, seems to be placed on the post-war generation and its handling of the German past. Paul, the narrator, describes himself throughout the novella as a loser: his marriage failed, his son is estranged from him, and he is estranged from his own mother whose only referential framework, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* trauma, he left behind when he fled from East to West Germany before the wall was built. As a journalist he writes without much conviction or direction both for the right-wing Springer papers, and for the left-wing *Tageszeitung*. He does not stick his neck out, is listless, depressed, and without ambition. The post-war generation (the narrator, his wife, and Wolfgang’s parents) is paralyzed by the trauma and by unspoken rules of effective memorialization. Groundless anti-Semitism and a self-denying philo-Semitism are the result, and are passed on to the next generation.

In *Crabwalk*, Grass portrays a culture of tortured remembrance concerning the Holocaust, and dangerous repression concerning crucial aspects of German suffering. German guilt and trauma have wrought a pathological state in post-WW II Germany, where the failure to deal adequately with German memory and suffering leads to what the narrator refers to as acts of “coherent insanity.” The neo-Nazi attacks on Jewish cemeteries that swept through Germany after unification are—like Konrad’s murder—an expression of insanity: having no first-hand knowledge of its victims, post-war anti-Semitism lashes out against “its own.” At the same time, Konrad’s actions are perversely coherent because they are fueled by an unfulfilled desire to acknowledge without blinders the nature of the recent past, including the suffering of non-Jewish Germans.

By thus addressing the consequences of the repression of memory, Grass manages to subtly shift the post-war intellectual terrain that so clearly divided Jewish victims from German perpetrators. The noticeable shift towards an account of German suffering is made in the face of historical events that threaten to bring about a return of the repressed. Grass's reactivation of German memory is designed to combat the resurgence of old hatreds, so that unlike Konrad and David/Wolfgang, future German youths will not be condemned to reenact them.

Notwithstanding the fact that he tackles a formerly taboo subject, Grass's book does not belong to the literature that attempts to rearticulate the German relationship to its past. His views on German re-unification have not shifted much, as evidenced by the indictment of the postwar generation. The difference is that, in *Crabwalk*, he includes himself in the failure of not effectively memorializing all the dimensions of the German past.

Like Schneider, Grass is not a revisionist. He is also much more reluctant to supply a positive German role model than Schneider. In *Crabwalk*, one searches in vain for the kind of hero portrayed by Schneider. Quite the contrary: the principal characters of the novella—three generations of one family plus the chief actors of the historical *Wilhelm Gustloff* affair—are all indelibly marked by the most troubling aspects of the German past.

The end of the novel, too, refuses to be uplifting. Konrad seems to have learned something in prison, where he builds a replica of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and then smashes it with his bare hands, as if to reject or eradicate his troubled relationship which the boat has come to represent. On the Internet though, beyond Konrad's control, new neo-Nazi groups are forming, identifying him as the martyr they want to follow. This fact makes his father, the narrator of *Crabwalk*, despair: "It doesn't end. Never will it end" (234).

In their different ways, then, both texts expand German contemporary memory by challenging taboos that had previously delimited the accepted boundaries of the trauma of 20th-century German history. When read attentively, these texts do not allow Germans to steal their way out of their past. On the contrary, the re-visions by Schneider and Grass are designed to preempt the resurgence of simplistic interpretations and commemorations of the Nazi period. Both texts are designed to counter positions that, in Grass's words, exhibit an "emotional need for clear-cut victims" and "the desire for an unambiguous enemy" (109).

“Bomben-Holocaust”

But history often catches up with fiction’s most enlightened intentions. While writing the conclusion to this article in late January 2005, there occurred an event in the German state parliament of Saxony that adds another twist to my story. The NPD, the German National Party, which had been elected into Saxony’s parliament in the fall of 2004, is responsible for the most recent scandal in the “never-ending” story of the German past. During a session of the Saxony parliament on 18 January 2005 that was to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the fire-bombing of Dresden, regional NPD leaders Holger Apfel and Jürgen Gans referred to the bombing of Dresden as the “holocaust of bombs.” In addition, according to the website of the German radio station *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, Gansel said during the parliamentary session: “There is no causal connection between the “*Bomben-Holocaust*” and 1 September 1939 or 30 January 1933.” The website continues:

After denying the connection between the destruction of Dresden and the beginning of the war as well as Hitler’s rise to power the members of state parliament of all other parties left the room. When regional NPD leader Apfel spoke of “mass murder” (with respect to the aerial bombing, AM), and of the “Anglo-American gangster companions,” the microphone was turned off.¹¹

Earlier in the day, the members of the NPD had in their turn walked out to protest what they considered the forced observation of a minute of silence in commemoration of all of Hitler’s victims sixty years after the liberation of the Auschwitz camps. They had gathered to commemorate the German victims of the Anglo-American “*Bomben-Holocaust*” exclusively.

During the following week, the state prosecutor in Dresden looked into suing the two NPD members for using the term “*Bomben-Holocaust*,” but it never came to a lawsuit. Members of state and federal parliament enjoy immunity as long as it cannot be proven that their statements were intended to mislead the public in a manner harmful to the political community (“*Volksverhetzung*”). There were reports in every German paper and, on the national level, the political parties were quick to use the scandal for their own ends. While the NPD profited from the national spot light, the big German parties (Christian and Social democrats) indicted each others’ policies for the growing popularity of the NPD in former East German states. Among the reasons given were the record post-WWII unemployment figures (five million people are at present out of work in

Germany), as well as the recent introduction of tough social reforms by the Red-Green Coalition. Some went so far as to raise the specter of Weimar.

But this incident, and in particular the coinage of the term "*Bomben-Holocaust*," attests to the volatility of the issues broached in this essay. As of this writing, no one has blamed the historians and writers mentioned in this paper for fomenting a climate which makes possible the creation of such terms. Yet I fear that it is merely a question of time before such a reproach will be levied against them. For it is precisely the shifting of the terrain discussed above that seems to invite such hyphenated expressions as equating the extermination of Jews with the killing of German civilians.

This is precisely the kind of event feared by the critics of the turn towards a more comprehensive account of German postwar history. It seems to validate the position of those who argued that the new directions in the Berlin Republic are running the risk of turning a perpetrator society into a society of victims. And yet, as I have tried to show, the breaking of taboos by Schneider and Grass—and, I submit, the texts that address the Allied Air war against German cities as well—are performed in the spirit of reaching a more complex understanding of exactly what happened during and after the war. Unfortunately, it is also true that the spirit of such investigations can always be hijacked by anyone with a political agenda, as has obviously happened in Saxony.

The proper response to potential broadsides from the extreme right is to directly and publicly take on their statements, as suggested by Eckhard Jesse, political scientist at the Technical University of Chemnitz. In his view, the NPD should have been held accountable for the expression "*Bomben-Holocaust*," made to explain its use of the term, and asked to describe its position on the Holocaust.¹² Such a strategy, Jesse surmises, would have presented no small problem for the party. Of course, it also puts a premium on an enlightened public sphere that trusts in the values of a barely fifty-year-old democratic tradition. It would constitute a test of the maturity of Germany's political culture. In my view, united Germany has arrived at a point where the second democratic experiment is ready to be put to such a test. Fears of "normalization" and of resurgent patriotism in the Berlin Republic may be unfounded as long as the experiment with democracy can be trusted.

Germany is at a crossroads where it is being asked to test its resistance to a minority view that implies a sympathy with national socialism. Schneider's and Grass's reassessment of German heroes and German suffering discussed in this essay is directed against such sympathies as well as the parallelism of victims implied in the term "*Bomben-Holocaust*." Their writings represent a necessary

component in the process of the incremental normalization of German self-understanding, one in which the Holocaust maintains a central position.

Notes

1. In September 2004 appeared Oliver Hirschbiegel's movie "*Der Untergang*" (The Downfall) which set out to humanize Hitler. Written by Hitler scholar and biographer Joachim Fest, it featured Bruno Ganz, one of the darlings of German new wave cinema, in the title role.
2. An English translation of these lectures together with essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Amery, and Peter Weiss has been published as W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (Trans. Anthea Bell), New York: Random House, 2003.
3. See Jürgen Habermas, *A Berlin Republic. Writings on Germany* (Trans. Steven Rendall), Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
4. "Unter Generalverdacht." *Der Spiegel*, 15/2002, 178-81; here p. 178.
5. Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (Trans. Carol Brown Janeway), New York: Vintage, 1999. In the United States this text sold hundreds of thousands of copies, partly because it was chosen as an "Oprah" book.
6. It seems that Sebald had published similar reflections in earlier writings with far less success. See Susanne Veas-Gulani, "Bombenkrieg und Literatur," <http://www.bombenkrieg.historicum.net/themen/literatur.html#7> (accessed 29 November 2004).
7. Heinrich Böll, *The Silent Angel* (Trans. Breon Mitchell), New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
8. Peter Schneider, *Und wenn wir nur eine Stunde gewinnen. Wie ein jüdischer Musiker die Nazijahre überlebte*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001.
9. Günter Grass, *Crabwalk* (Trans. Krishna Winston), Orlando, Austin: Harcourt, Inc., 2003.
10. Günter Grass, *Two States—One Nation* (Trans. Krishna Winston, Arthur Wensinger), Orlando, Austin: Harcourt, Inc., 1990.
11. Quotation and sequence of events as reported on *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* (MDR) website entitled "NPD spricht von Bombenholocaust," accessed 9 February 2005: <http://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen/1783891.html>
12. The interview with Eckhard Jesse entitled "Die NPD ist keine Einheit" was conducted by the German TV news magazine *Tagesschau* and was accessed on their website on 9 February 2005: <http://www.tagesschau.de/aktuell/meldungen/o,1185,OID4030410,00.html>

ANDREAS MICHEL is an associate professor of German at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology. He has written on German writer and art critic Carl Einstein, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism, and contemporary Germany.