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978-0-521-14571-8 - German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past

A. Dirk Moses

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German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past

This book analyzes how West German intellectuals debated the Nazi past and democratic future of their country. Rather than proceeding event by event, it highlights the underlying issues at stake: the question of a stigmatized nation and the polarized reactions to it that structured German discussion and memory of the Nazi past. Paying close attention to the generation of German intellectuals born during the Weimar Republic – the forty-fivers – this book traces the drama of sixty years of bitter public struggle about the meaning of the past. Did the Holocaust forever stain German identity so that Germans could never again enjoy their national emotions like other nationalities? Or were Germans unfairly singled out for the crimes of their ancestors? By explaining how the perceived pollution of family and national life affected German intellectuals, the book shows that public debates cannot be isolated from the political emotions of the intelligentsia.

A. Dirk Moses was educated in Australia, Scotland, the United States, and Germany. He has taught history at the University of Sydney since 2000. Moses' studies concern postwar Germany and comparative genocide, for which he has received numerous fellowships, including a Charles H. Revson Memorial Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, a German Research Council Fellowship at the University of Freiburg, and an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. He is the editor of *Empire, Colony, Genocide* (2008); *Colonialism and Genocide* (2007, with Dan Stone); and *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Aboriginal Children in Australian History* (2004). Moses is an associate editor of the *Journal of Genocide Research* and sits on the advisory boards of *H-German*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, and the *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*.

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“*German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* is a brilliant contribution by one of the most original voices today on German memory. Dirk Moses provides a novel and challenging interpretation by arguing for the presence of an underlying structure of post-Holocaust memory in West Germany, made by two rival projects, that represented German political, theological emotions. A book of arresting analysis!”

– Alon Confino, University of Virginia

“Dirk Moses illuminates post-fascist German political culture with a clarity of vision, incisiveness of analysis, and sureness of context that make his book a rare pleasure to read. The uncertain and arduous process of reclaiming the nation – the commitment to re-grounding democratic values in a society where the past seemed banished beyond reach – is at the core of his account. Too frequently abstracted from their institutional, political, and broader discursive histories, the debates of German intellectuals about the Nazi past are presented here in rich and compelling detail.”

– Geoff Eley, University of Michigan

“A major rethinking of postwar German liberalism. Moses pierces through the outpouring of writing by German intellectuals since 1945 – and the great accumulation of scholarship about their work – to uncover a ‘deep and enduring structure’ of public memory that characterizes the search for German national identity after the Holocaust. A masterful analysis, written with mordant insight.”

– Max Paul Friedman, American University

“Dirk Moses has written a masterful and engaging account of the long-standing and still ongoing debates surrounding interpretations of the Nazi past in the postwar Federal Republic of Germany. He challenges, and ultimately refutes, the facile yet increasingly common argument that Germany has now overcome its history and has entered the world of ‘normality.’ Instead, Moses shows how a deep intellectual disagreement about the future shape and direction of German republicanism first emerged in the early postwar period, and he demonstrates how this debate has adapted, evolved, and persisted over the course of the last six decades.”

– Marc Morjé Howard, Georgetown University

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To my parents, John and Ingrid

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Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time coming. A prototype was accepted by the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley, as a Ph.D. dissertation in 2000, but its origins lie in the Midwest. Between 1992 and 1994, I was a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame, where I first began to ponder the Federal Republic and its vehement public debates about National Socialism and the Holocaust. A. James McAdams, an expert on contemporary Germany, encouraged this interest, and the Polish intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki taught me the existential significance of ideas for thinkers, an insight that has remained with me to this day. I have never had a chance to publicly acknowledge their support, or the friendship of Bill Miscamble, CSC, who suggested I follow his example of setting off for South Bend from Brisbane.

He could understand, then, that there was no ignoring the call of the Bay Area's eucalypts, and in 1994 I moved to Berkeley with its embarrassment of intellectual riches. Students of German history found a home in the Center for German and European Studies, ably led by Gerald Feldman, who, along with Norma Feldman-von Ragenfeld, became a mentor as well as a steadfast friend. Other members of the faculty were also inspirational teachers: Carla Hesse, Tom Laqueur, Peggy Anderson, Vicky Bonnell, and, not least, John Connolly, who gave his feedback over pints at the Bison. I was fortunate to encounter a cohort of gifted students, many of whom I later met on the road in Germany. Sharing the ups and downs of graduate school and beyond, they have become both friends and colleagues: Paige Arthur, Max Friedman, Jennifer Hosek, Marc Howard and Lise Howard, Christine Kulke, Ben Lazier, Sam Moyn, and Line Schjolden.

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In Freiburg, I was warmly received by Ulrich Herbert and his brilliant team, Bernhard Brunner, Sybille Buske, Isabel Heinemann, Jürgen Lillteicher, Christina von Hodenberg, Karin Hunn, Jörg Später, and Patrick Wagner, as well as by Jürgen Zimmerer, Nicolas Berg, Egbert Klautke, Gerd Leutenecker, Majid Sattar, and Sabine Russ from neighboring institutes. Uli integrated me into the German academic system, affording opportunities to present my theses at conferences and symposia, and even contriving financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. New friends Ingrid Horning, Reinhart Flessner, Annette Pehnt, and Christian Straub made Freiburg a congenial *Heimat*. From this base between the Black Forest and Kaiserstuhl, I could venture forth to the archives and meet the locals. Those who submitted to interview have my thanks: Hans Albert, Hans-Joachim Arndt, Ralf Dahrendorf, Andreas Flitner, Ludwig von Friedeburg, Imanuel Geiss, Antonia Grunenberg, Hartmut Jaeckel, Gerhard Kaiser, Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Ernst Jeismann, Reinhart Koselleck, Kurt Lenk, M. Rainier Lepsius, Hans-Joachim Lieber, Nikolaus Lobkowicz, Herman Lübbe, Hans Maier, Ernst Nolte, Dieter Oberndörfer, Otto Pöggeler, Günter Rohrmoser, Walter Rüegg, Gesine Schwan, Ernst Schulin, and Rudolf Vierhaus. Wilhelm Hennis, a virtual neighbor in Freiburg, always answered my many questions with unfailing courtesy and characteristic verve while I sat, sipping excellent tea, with his late wife in their elegant living room. I learned much from him. The staff of the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, the Free University of Berlin's archive, and the Hauptstaatsarchiv of Nordrhein-Westfalen were also helpful.

Ned Curthoys and Andrew Beattie kindly proofread the doctoral manuscript after I moved to Sydney to take up a lectureship in 2000, while Martin Braach-Maksyvitis, Julia Kindt, and Neil Levi made suggestions about new material six years later. Our Sydney German history reading group gave two chapters a thorough going over, while other chapters were aired at seminars hosted by Volker Beghahn at Columbia and Peter Fritzsche and Matti Bunzl at Illinois. The belated transformation of the manuscript would never have been possible without Natasha Wheatley whose careful readings, intellectual partnership, and loving support were instrumental in redesigning its architecture. My colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Sydney understood that the revisions would take time, especially while I was working on new projects in comparative genocide; I am grateful for their forbearance.

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with whom it was a pleasure to work. Most of all, I thank my parents, John and Ingrid, themselves fabulous scholars, whose humanism and ethical commitment are shining examples of the socially engaged life of the mind. This book is dedicated to them.

The end product of this global itinerary is not what some were anticipating. Having published and presented papers on the “forty-fivers” cohort of intellectuals (born in the 1920s and early 1930s), the expectation was that I would be their generational biographer. Although the forty-fivers feature in the book, I found that what required explanation was the underlying, transgenerational structure of political discourse and political emotions centered on questions of stigma, trauma, and basic trust in national traditions. This bundle of issues, highlighted for me by readings in psychology and anthropology as well as through an ethnographic immersion in German intellectual culture, accounted for the vehemence and polarization of public debates about the Nazi past in the Federal Republic. These debates were not seminars in the sky, ivory tower exercises, or common room spats. They were discursive battles in a cultural civil war to determine the meaning of German history and identity, a history that was now identified with evil and a national identity that was stigmatized. The intellectuals who threw themselves into verbal and written combat were not just reprising academic abstractions but fighting for national – and indeed personal – redemption. This is what I hope to have succeeded in showing in *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*.

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