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978-0-521-86495-4 - 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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To my parents, John and Ingrid

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	i
1 Stigma and Structure in German Memory	15
2 The Languages of Republicanism and West German Political Generations	38
3 The Forty-fivers: A Generation between Fascism and Democracy	55
4 The German German: The Integrative Republicanism of Wilhelm Hennis	74
5 The Non-German German: The Redemptive Republicanism of Jürgen Habermas	105
6 Theory and Practice: Science, Technology, and the Republican University	131
7 The Crisis of the Republic, 1960–1967	160
8 1968 and Its Aftermath	186
9 The Structure of Discourse in the 1980s and 1990s	219
10 History, Multiculturalism, and the Non-German German	229
11 German Germans and the Old Nation	246
12 Political Theology and the Dissolution of the Underlying Structure	263
<i>Index</i>	<i>285</i>

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[More information](#)

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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Cambridge University Press

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A. Dirk Moses

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Acknowledgments

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

ix

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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*.