

4 Reunification and national identity in Germany

A return to normality?

Christian Wicke

If capitalism was among the winners of the Cold War, certainly nationalism was also. Western-style democracy and nationalism seemed to be forming a symbiotic relationship as the countries east of the Iron Curtain redefined their political systems. Germany, which was in many ways within the epicentre of the tectonic shifts in geopolitics that occurred around 1990 between Eastern and Western Europe, appeared to undergo a dramatic transformation. The divided country's reunification process, following the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, was a typical nationalist occurrence, adhering to the ideal that 'state' and 'nation' should be congruent.¹ But despite the suddenness of this huge change, perhaps the discontinuities of Germany's public nationalism before and after reunification were not that great. The Federal Republic had experienced long-term efforts by domestic elites in culture and politics to normalize the country's national identity, and these efforts transcended this historical turning point.

National identity is a plastic phrase that became fashionable towards the end of the last century; it can mean so many things.² To put it simply, here national identity refers to the representations of a nation by individuals, groups, and institutions, as it is almost impossible for historians to discover the 'inner truth' of their protagonists. The process of articulating particular images and imaginings of a nation is transnational, with influences from both within and outside the respective nation. Further, there is never only just *one* national identity, but rather a great diversity of official, public, and private images of nationhood, with some being more dominant or persistent than others. National identity is therefore not to be seen as conceptually distinct from nationalism, which comprises the virtually endless ideas and actions by individuals that secure the existence of nations, both intentionally as well as unintentionally. Like Michael Billig, I would see nationalism as an everyday phenomenon occurring 'here' and 'now,' and ensuring the maintenance and reconstruction of nations as 'imagined communities.'³ In this sense, most people in the early twenty-first century are nationalists, socialized in a world of nations in which nationalism has become normal.

Post-war Germany, however, has always struggled to achieve any kind of 'normal' nationalism; not only because of the geopolitical structures that held sway over Europe during the Cold War era, but also because the memory of Nazism tainted the representation of Germany internationally and domestically.

Many in the Federal Republic have actively resisted the normalization of its national identity. Some have even argued that Germans should reject the idea of national identity altogether. This idea was most famously put forward by the German intellectual and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who had a strong aversion to any kind of nationalism. Habermas believed that ‘a bond, rooted in convictions of universalist, constitutional principles, has unfortunately only evolved in the Kulturturnung of the Germans after—and because of—Auschwitz.’⁴ He was concerned that Germany would return to normality and felt that his country should rather become part of some kind of ‘post-national constellation,’ following a purely ‘constitutional patriotism.’⁵ Therefore he was opposed to reunification.⁶ Today, almost 30 years later, one may wonder if his concern was justified, since it still remains doubtful if the new German nation-state, with its reunified capital Berlin, really has reached a condition of normality.

This chapter suggests a four-fold typology of normalities of nationalism—ontological normality, territorial normality, ideological normality, and historical normality—through which we can understand the processes of normalization in German national identity since the end of the Cold War as part of a longer trend. These four normalities are strongly intertwined as they do not operate separately in practice. I am using them here to theorize nationalism as a socially constructed human condition that has transcended the end of the Cold War. I will relate this theory to the narratives of Germany’s peculiar historical trajectories (*Sonderwege*) outside the West, as well as to the role of Germany in the history of nationalism studies.

Building upon this typology of nationalisms, this chapter argues that the German mainstream and political leaders have articulated an ‘ontological normality’ of nationalism, which holds that state and society naturally would have to be organized as a nation. In 1990, Germany also became a nation-state, and thus achieved ‘territorial normality.’ The reunification process occurred within the European and transatlantic frameworks, that is the West, which allowed the Germans to also achieve a kind of ‘ideological normality.’ Thus, from these three perspectives the trend towards normality is clearly visible. However, while from these three perspectives German national identity can be considered to have been ‘normalized,’ in a fourth way, the parallel attempts by parts of the political and intellectual elite to move Germany’s historical culture out of ‘Hitler’s shadow’ and thus achieve ‘historical normality’ have not yet been successful. Before and after reunification, nationalist politicians and historians narrated Nazism as an overall positive series of national events, and simultaneously mirrored and thus relativized against the other, totalitarian history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Nevertheless, the Holocaust remains a crucial feature in representations of Germany’s national identity.

By discussing the events of 1989/1990 against the question of the normalization of Germany’s national identity, I argue that ontological, territorial, and ideological normality has been achieved, but that historical normality remains difficult to attain for the German people, who might, therefore, always seem somewhat odd

in the world of nations. There cannot be any absolute normality as long as there remains a wide recognition, domestically and internationally, of the Holocaust as a unique crime for which the German nation was primarily responsible.

Ontological normality: the nation in German history

In sociology, 'normality' is usually associated with the cultures of social control that developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michel Foucault, writing on the history of the prison, saw 'the judges of normality everywhere'; he saw them embodied in certain professionals, such as teachers, doctors, judges, educators, and social workers, who oversaw that social norms were maintained and implemented by distinguishing supposedly normal people from allegedly abnormal people.⁷ The 'order of things,'⁸ according to Foucault, is discursively constructed and institutionalized by society and as society; normality is thus not natural but social and historical.

Even scholars of nationalism, not usually considered constructivists, emphasize the artificial character of nations, and for decades have sought to disenchant the ideas of national mythology and the normality of nations that were so destructive in the twentieth century.⁹ As Elie Kedourie critically remarked before nationalism studies became a popular field in the faculties, the idea of self-determination promoted the belief 'that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics that can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government.'¹⁰ Nationalism, thus, manifests itself as an ideology suggesting that nations and their representations are normal. To quote Ernest Gellner,

Man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears; a deficiency in any of these particulars is not inconceivable and does from time to time occur, but only as a result of some disaster, and it is itself a disaster of a kind.¹¹

Nationalism is often viewed by scholars as a transitory force that 'invents nations where they do not exist,' as Gellner once wrote.¹² This understanding of nationalism as transient was at least the view of the groundbreaking scholars of nationalism in the 1980s, including Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. They viewed nationalism as an essentially modern phenomenon, being part of the process of modernization that created nation-states in Europe in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. In this sense, nationalism in the West had for a long time been considered a historical phenomenon, having lost its political edge after 1945 and been 'unfrozen' with the demise of the Soviet Union.¹³

However, viewing nationalism in the West as a largely transitory force that is primarily historical is too restrictive.¹⁴ If we wish to understand the development of nationalism as 'one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful belief-system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (and apparently also the

twenty-first), when questioning the legitimacy of the nation has come to constitute an immoral breach of a taboo,¹⁵ an approach taken by Billig will be helpful. As mentioned above, the social psychologist reminded us of the importance of studying nationalism in contemporary Western nation-states, and not just as a historical phenomenon, but instead as a ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ way of thinking, an ideological consciousness in everyday life.¹⁶ This ‘normal’ nationalism was forged by the lack of self-reflection that is inherent in nationalism, the ‘unimaginative repetition’ of singing the national anthem, waving the national flag during a football game, passing by a national monument on the way home, or having a day off work because it is a national holiday.¹⁷

Billig consequently called us to study what I view as ‘normal nationalism.’ Normal nationalism, in contrast to ‘modern nationalism’ as a transitory force, is a post-establishment type of nationalism. It exists when the transition from a pre-national (or sometimes also post-national) lifeworld to a national lifeworld appears to be complete.¹⁸ In modern nationalism the invention of tradition boomed; in normal nationalism invented tradition is being managed.¹⁹ Modern nationalism has been a process of connecting individual and collective identities; in normal nationalism, the individual and the nation cannot remain independent beings any more.²⁰ In modern nationalism, national narratives have functioned as epistemological narratives, assisting nations to become; while in normal nationalism, national narratives have functioned as ontological narratives, assisting nations to be.²¹ It seems to me that modern nationalism happens when time is out of joint, that is during fundamentally transformative periods for societies, whereas normal nationalism quite effectively organizes our lifeworld in times when a nation’s demand to exist is fulfilled. This can happen more than once in the chronology of a nation, which means that modern nationalism is relatively independent from static periods in world history.

The problem with post-war Germany has been that, until recently, modern and normal nationalism had entered into a complex relationship. As much as there has been a large and ongoing debate in nationalism studies over ‘when is the nation,’²² there is no agreement on the exact point in time when the construction of the German nation was realized. Ideas of German nationhood already existed in medieval times,²³ but nationalism as a mass phenomenon seems to be much more recent.²⁴ Ute Planert suggests there was a national *Sattelzeit* around 1800, during which modern nationalism in German-speaking regions emerged.²⁵ As the writing of nationalism from below remains a challenging exercise,²⁶ it also remains difficult to define the moment when the German masses became thoroughly nationalized. During the first German unification of 1871, under conservative Protestant and Prussian hegemonies, national identity was still highly contested, territorially and ideologically, and modern nationalism was required to forge national unity. This institutionalization of the ontological normality of the nation was achieved in large parts of Germany, probably before the First World War, when nationalism had become a mass ideology. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, wide sections of German society, including the working classes, had developed such a strong identification with their consolidated nation-state that normal

nationalism could thrive.²⁷ Destroying much more than just the vulnerable democracy of the Weimar Republic, the subsequent development of German nationalism had catastrophic consequences for the world and for the Germans themselves.

The Second World War and the Holocaust occasioned critical scholarship of German nationalism. However, a sense of national identity persisted, with the representatives of the GDR and the Federal Republic both claiming to be the 'better Germany' between 1949 and 1989. The West German government was legally obliged to commit to the somewhat utopian vision of reunification, and numerous efforts were made, especially by the conservative movement, to suggest that the territorial division of the nation was not the 'end of history.'

German national identity was constantly challenged. Years after the establishment of the Federal Republic, and most effectively with the establishment of new social movements after 1968, a more critical historical and political culture became visible in West Germany, with the public analysing the causes of the two world wars, Nazism, and the Holocaust more critically than their relatively silent leaders during the formative period of the new state.²⁸ The legitimacy of the German nation was thus challenged significantly from within. Interestingly, however, intellectual leaders of post-nationalism, such as Jürgen Habermas, could not help but think and historicize in national categories in the years before reunification.²⁹ The conceptual tradition of the German *Kulturnation* continued to function either as a placeholder for, as mutually constitutive to, or as a counter-project to the German nation-state. In any case it implied a historicist assumption of the German nation as a continuous cultural unit in the chaos of history.³⁰

In 1989/1990, when unification was suddenly on the agenda, a sense of ontological normality was strong both among the West German leaders and the ordinary people of East Germany—that Germans were one nation and Berlin was their capital was self-evident to them.³¹ However, the decades-long division of Germany as two states meant that it required modern nationalism to realize territorial normality. That is the imagination of a reunited nation-state, followed by the invention of repetitive national celebrations (e.g. the Day of German Unity on October 3), and the construction of new forms of historicism legitimizing this new condition, in which the GDR was represented as another aberration from the historical trajectory towards normality.³² This ontological normality thus became institutionalized, real, and territorially normal with the reunification of Germany in October 1990. Risking a 'sleeping beauty' account of the history of German nationalism, I would probably argue that a great degree of ontological normality endured the Cold War era, since a common sense of who was German and who was not, prevailed and could be mobilized when the opportunity for constructing a new nation-state emerged.

The reunification of Germany and territorial normality

Most nationalisms make claims to the nation-state. The ontological normality of an imagined national community is usually not sufficient if the boundaries of the nation differ from the territorial realities of the state. This was the situation

of Germany after the Second World War. Yet in becoming a nation-state on October 3, 1990, the *Provisorium* of the Federal Republic entered a state of territorial normality that would assist in consolidating the ontological normality of the nation. Many thought that what was happening between November 1989 and October 1990 had been overdue. What Willy Brandt had said many years before, ‘what belongs together now grows together,’ seemed to become reality. Berlin (capital of the nation-state from 1871 to 1945, and capital of the GDR from 1949 to 1990) became the capital of the new German nation-state, not Bonn (the ‘provisional’ capital of the Federal Republic from 1949 to 1990) or Frankfurt (the short-lived capital during the 1848 revolutions). The Federal Republic was a product of the Cold War period. It was only meant to last as such until the reunification of the nation could be achieved. The Federal Republic during the country’s division has thus sometimes been described as following a ‘new *Sonderweg*.’³³ However over the years, the Federal Republic had itself become increasingly historically and territorially normal, that is as a state without nation-statehood or a state as a proto-nation.³⁴ This is rather interesting; normality is destructible and has rivals, even if its contingency is somewhat limited by the omnipresent ideal of the nation-state. For those interested in alternatives to nationalism, it is worth studying the history of future expectations in Cold War Germany.³⁵ To be sure, German identity during the period of division remained relatively strong in both East and West. Nevertheless, the divided country with its uniquely dark history provided fertile ground for experimentation in unconventional forms of historical culture, as well as post-national governance.

Legally there were two options for reunification, the dissolution of both the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR for a new state, or the quasi-annexation of the GDR. The second option was eventually realized and in 1990 the Federal Republic expanded over GDR territory. During the reunification process, the Federal Republican government eventually came to recognize the Oder-Neisse line as the permanent border with Poland. Few Germans today would contest this territorial normality. However, in recent years, the German media has paid increasing attention to the so-called *Reichsbürger*, a group of right-wing extremists who do not accept the Federal Republic as a legitimate state. They believe in the legal continuity of the German state, with the borders of 1937 and before. A recent theatre performance in Berlin ridiculed the strange world of this sect-like group, and the mainstream German population has perceived such political convictions as absurd, but the German police is taking this terrorist threat very seriously.³⁶ Such exceptional minorities, thus, stand for an abnormal understanding of German history that ultimately confirms the territorial and ideological normality prefabricated during the era of the Bonn Republic: the West German state expanded to the East.³⁷

Ideological normality: Germany’s belonging to the West

To appear completely normal, nationalism often had to be dressed in Western outfits. Efforts had been taken not only to nationalize, but also to Westernize society;

nationalization and Westernization were often strongly intertwined processes.³⁸ Indeed, good and 'normal' nationalism in the post-war era has been associated with 'Western nationalism,' following a liberal, civic, and political trajectory, and bad nationalism with 'Eastern nationalism,' following an illiberal, ethnic, and cultural trajectory. Germany's allocation within this ideal typology is debatable. Before 1945, German national identity was often articulated in opposition to the West.³⁹ Only thereafter did political and intellectual elites make great efforts to 'Westernize' German national identity. The reunification was in this sense a confirmation of this trend, as it confirmed Germany's place within the Western geopolitical framework.

The comparison between 'abnormal' Eastern and 'normal' Western nationalism go a long way back. Differences between the French *Staatsnation* and the German *Kulturnation* were already constructed in Friedrich Meinecke's work in the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ At that time, however, being Western was not necessarily seen as positive by German intellectuals. Until the Second World War, conservative nationalists presented German *Kultur* as superior to Western *Zivilisation*.⁴¹ Such distinctions foreshadowed a relatively established typology that corresponds with the various *Sonderweg* theses that developed after Nazism, when the idea transpired around the world that something fundamental had been wrong with the Germans and their history, and that their belonging to the West was becoming a geopolitical rather than only a philosophical question. Indeed, Hans Kohn, one of earliest and most important scholars of nationalism, in 1944 distinguished between civic nationalism, which he found to be Western, and ethnic nationalism, which he found to be Eastern. Germany he situated within the latter type.⁴² Kohn continued to support the cultural *Sonderweg* thesis that something had gone wrong with 'the German mind' in history when romantics had evoked the idea of a *Volksgeist* under the assumption that 'a nation could never be based upon a constitution protecting individual rights but only upon indigenous customs'—a dangerous intellectual stimulus that would pave the way towards Nazism.⁴³ This dichotomy between Eastern and Western nationalism has been challenged, revised, and improved by scholars towards the end of the twentieth century,⁴⁴ but some prominent voices in the field, such as Liah Greenfeld, have also fostered this ideal typology in support of a negative, intellectual *Sonderweg* in Germany's peculiar history, which was different to other Western nations that had taken a more civic shape.⁴⁵

During the post-war decades in the Federal Republic, two distinct models were discussed among intellectual and political elites: the nation-state and the post-national state.⁴⁶ Yet there was a loose consensus among them that Germany should belong to the West. The conservative-liberal notion of 'the West' was associated with representations of the Enlightenment, Christianity, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and European integration. 'The West,' in the conservative sense, was something really existing and was understood in opposition to 'the East,' whereas the Habermasian notion of 'the West' stood against the internal non-Western traditions that Germans still have yet to overcome completely. Habermas suspected a '*deutschnational eingefärbte Natophilosophie*,'

a commitment to NATO and the German nation, but not to the Enlightenment and cosmopolitan principles that he associated with the West.⁴⁷ He fundamentally disagreed with the German conservatives who conceptualized German nationalism as not being principally in conflict with Western traditions, but rather as intrinsically related to them. The Habermasian notion of ‘the West’ comprised some kind of universality that was capable of being valid outside the national framework.⁴⁸

Western principles were, in the Habermasian view, embodied in the Federal Republican constitution, with the inclusion of individual and human rights, the principle of *Rechtsstaat*, and, to some extent, secularism. Habermas insisted that patriotism should be to the constitution rather than to the nation. He argued that in order for Germans to belong to the West, they should accept that, after Auschwitz, there must never be a national identity in Germany that would legitimize reunification.⁴⁹ According to this philosophy, Germans had no right to normality anymore.

In the 1990s, constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*), as advocated by Habermas, lost its popularity, whereas liberal nationalism (as recommended, for example, by Yael Tamir and David Miller) became very attractive. Reflecting the spirit of the time, serious scholars believed in the positive potential of nationalism to promote solidarity within the welfare state and processes of democratization. They believed that the dangerous elements of nationalism could be tamed under the hegemony of ‘liberal’ values such as freedom, tolerance, and individualism. In the liberal nationalist account, irrational mythology could thus become useful for Western democracies.⁵⁰ This reconciliation of national and liberal traditions, rather than their complete divorce *à la* Habermas, has so far been pursued relatively successfully in the new German nation-state, which today holds a leadership position in the capitalist West.

And yet, this liberal nationalism was not an invention of the 1990s. Many traditions of the capitalist welfare system and the Basic Law that came to fruition in post-war Western Germany have continued to operate in the new Federal Republic, which remains firmly embedded in the Western frameworks of the European Union (EU) and NATO. This outcome was envisaged by the second chancellor of unification, Helmut Kohl, who suggested throughout the 1980s that the Western system of the Federal Republic constituted only a partial normality, and that complete normality would require the event of reunification within Western frameworks as well as the overcoming of Germany’s negative historical culture (which I shall discuss further below). In this view, the Germans in the GDR were forced into an abnormal historical trajectory, beyond their will and destiny, of becoming part of the Western nation-state. Here the correlation between ideological and territorial normality became especially apparent.

The strategic implications of ideological normality, however, remain somewhat problematic. Hans Kundnani, for example, sees the German role within the West after 1990 as somewhat paradoxical. Germany’s economic power did not correspond with its relatively weak military power. Kundnani points to efforts to break with the tradition of the *Bundeswehr* (armed forces) and to act only domestically in scenarios of defence as early as 1991 with the Gulf War. This must be seen as part of the national quest for normality, but a good number

of German thinkers and politicians still sought to prevent it. With Germany's participation in the war in Yugoslavia, Green Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer used his nation's dark past to legitimize military intervention, that is to prevent genocide! For a moment, therefore, the absence of historical normality played positively into the ideological normalization of Germany as a Western military force, which the Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder also desired. Germany subsequently became an important player within the changing West; the new nation-state fostered European unity by standing with France against the Anglo-American alliance in the second Iraq War.⁵¹

Today it seems as if the pre-manufactured architecture from the Cold War era is crumbling, which will further put into question what is Western and, thus, what is normal. The historicist assumption that everyone would eventually become Western is being revised, as the future of the European Union does not look as bright any more as it did in the early 1990s, and the increasing 'Disneyfication' of US politics under the controversial President Donald Trump fails to make Western identity more appealing. Thus, the happy end of German history, which Heinrich August Winkler traced along a 'long road west,' might not last forever.⁵² Joschka Fischer is prophesying that the Germans 'will be on their own,'⁵³ and *Bundeswehr* strategists are calling to prepare for a decline of the West.⁵⁴

Historical normality? Nationalized pasts and contested identity

While ontological, territorial, and to a wide degree, also ideological normalization have been successful, German national identity is still lacking historical normality. The Second World War, Nazism, and the Holocaust are still very 'hot history' in Germany, which remains *Weltmeister der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.⁵⁵ While it is hard to think of any nation that does not have some dark heritage, German national identity has been special during the second half of the twentieth century, as it has drawn strongly on a "cathartic memorial culture" due to the expectation that, by facing the darkest part of its history, the nation may be able to cope with the burden of its past and to shape a better future.⁵⁶ The Nazi past, which had previously been seen by some intellectuals and politicians as an obstacle to a conventional national identity, in recent years has hardly impeded this reconciliation, if we associate with 'democracy' the originally Western, capitalist, and representative parliamentary system that has expanded eastwards. In Germany during the Cold War era, the existence of the nation was perceived as being at stake, with some dreaming of a post-national and others of a re-national future. The question of whether Germany is becoming a normal country has been extensively discussed since the national unification of 1990.⁵⁷

As Dirk Moses explained, there was no consensus over the way 1945 should be historicized among the post-war intellectuals in the Federal Republic who had experienced Nazism when they were young, and who all identified with the West. There were differences of opinion between the rather conservative 'German Germans,' who emphasized positive continuities in German history that would legitimize a normal national identity, and the more left-liberal 'non-German

Germans,' who called for a radical break with the national traditions of the past.⁵⁸ The German Germans seem to have won this historical battle, even if their vision could not be entirely realized. German historian Michael Geyer (a teacher in the United States), for example, was tired of 'the post-fascist exceptionalism of the old Federal Republic' with its negative nationalism (George Orwell), and felt that left-wing intellectuals in Germany should realize that nationalism and democracy can go well together.⁵⁹

These divisions were reflected in Germany's historiography. This has been so since the 1960s and the outbreak of the Fischer controversy. The notable German historian Fritz Fischer advanced the thesis that the German nation was responsible for the First and Second World Wars. He was then denied public funding to travel to the United States to spread this view. This caused domestic and international furore.⁶⁰ Germans at that time began to undermine the moral integrity of their ancestors, whom many of their compatriots felt to be a thorn in their flesh. A divide developed between more left-liberal intellectuals, who found it important to trace the origins of the Nazi horror in German history, and more conservative-liberal intellectuals, who sought to relativize the Nazi episode against the wrongdoings of other nations and the otherwise positive past of the German nation. A counter-narrative developed, arguing that something had been going wrong with the Germans for quite a long time: various *Sonderweg* theses emerged, maintaining that, in comparison to other Western countries, Germany had not been normal. To put it in very simple terms, historians diagnosed that the dual revolutions of industrialism and Enlightenment capitalism and liberalism had combined in a healthy way elsewhere, while the German mind had disconnected these two forces and industrialized rapidly by the end of the nineteenth century without managing to develop a liberal political culture.⁶¹ Teleological trajectories were drawn from Luther to Hitler, from Herder to Hitler, and from Bismarck to Hitler.⁶² The history wars of the 1980s centred on the questioning of the *Sonderweg* paradigm and the notion of the Holocaust's singularity.⁶³ It was the culmination of conflicting narratives of the past that had been internalized by political and intellectual elites from the early years of the Federal Republic, and it was a conservative reaction to the critical historical culture of the post-1968 era.⁶⁴

The history wars would have been inconceivable without the polarizing political climate under Chancellor Helmut Kohl's leadership (1982–1996). Kohl, who formed alliances with conservative historians, most notably his advisor Michael Stürmer, was responsible for a series of political acts and scandals concerning history, which have been relatively well researched and documented. The divide between those public voices who sought to relativize the Nazi past through the narration of positive continuities and those who sought to maintain the break of 1945 as the most foundational experience for German democracy was widest during this period. Conservative efforts to draw a line under the Nazi past, to finally 'walk out of Hitler's shadow' and thus to instill a more 'positive' national identity have been successful to some extent, for example through the construction of national history museums and monuments, and the reinterpretation of heritage.⁶⁵ However, while this movement began to relegitimize German nationalism through

the promotion of what Kohl called 'historical consciousness,' 1945 remained the key moment in Germany's national mythology.⁶⁶ Unexpectedly, the mission to re-nationalize society seems to have rather amplified what they sought to minimize. It was a catch-22: if normalization required re-nationalization through history, it could not really be removed from Hitler's shadow. The image of the Germans thus remained shady and complete normality could not be achieved.

As the authors of this volume discuss the effects of 1989, I should emphasize that Germany's history-politics over the last three decades cannot be understood without the geopolitical contextualization of the Cold War and its legacy. In the 1980s, Ernst Nolte triggered the vibrant debate over the singularity of the Holocaust with his view that there had been a 'causal nexus' between the Soviet Gulag, which existed first, and Auschwitz. Around the same time, Kohl compared Gorbachev to Goebbels and accused the GDR of keeping political prisoners in 'concentration camps.' After reunification, Germans were confronted with two dictatorships in their national history. It transpired that important elements of the historical culture of reunified Germany had already been established in the old Federal Republic. Kohl's visit to Buchenwald in 1991, where he commemorated not only the victims of the concentration camp but also of the Soviet Special Camp No. 2 (1945–1950), epitomizes the problematic doubling of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* between Nazism and communism. Historians who had previously been critical of conservative revisionism in the *Historikerstreit* debates have called for further critical enquiry into the atrocities of the GDR, which should not be impeded by the apologetic tendencies of the left.⁶⁷ Paradoxically, this comparative doubling could itself be interpreted as a fruitful effort towards historical normalization, as it relativizes Nazism against the effects of another ideology. This suggests that some degree of normalization in German history has succeeded.

Intellectual debates, however, suggest that the question of historical normality remains subject to dispute after 1990. For example, the controversy over the work by Daniel Goldhagen from 1996, who held that ordinary Germans were responsible for the Holocaust,⁶⁸ sent a strong signal that the German history wars were to continue after reunification. In 1998, Martin Walser caused furore when he called on Germans to develop a more positive historical culture.⁶⁹ And ongoing investigations into the negative continuities between Nazi and Federal Republican institutions, such as a study of the activities and ideology of the foreign ministry during the Nazi period,⁷⁰ suggest that the German nation cannot expect complete normality in the new century. The very recent trials of Holocaust perpetrators remind us that the last individuals who actually experienced this terrible era are now very old and few.⁷¹ But sites of former concentration camps, and, most powerfully, the relatively new Holocaust monument in the centre of the German capital, remain physically present and continue to shape the historical culture of reunified Germany.

It is too early to interpret the current revival of extreme conservatism in the politics of the German mainstream, as manifested in the 2017 federal elections when *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) gained seats in parliament, as a sign of

further historical normalization of German nationalism. Björn Höcke's peculiar view of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as 'a monument of shame' caused strong domestic and international reactions against such revisionist efforts of historical normalization.⁷² The responsive memory activism of artists was remarkable.⁷³ The European context almost 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, suggests indeed that right-wing nationalism and fascism are re-establishing themselves within the mainstream, and it will be important to watch the role of German citizens in these transnational movements.

Young Germans are still confronted in a special way by the dark heritage of their nation, not only in the built environment but also in the education system. The Holocaust as an international crime concerning the global community has not only informed national identities, but also allowed for the construction of a cosmopolitan memory of past events that transcends such national identities.⁷⁴ However, the internationalization of Holocaust remembrance, for example, in school education around the world, does not necessarily overthrow the dominant understanding of it as a particularly German phenomenon, as a recent study found. Since the 1970s, there have indeed been efforts to free the history of the Holocaust from methodological and emotional nationalisms by moving towards a more human rights-oriented narrative.⁷⁵ Subsequently, responsibility for the Holocaust has been increasingly recognized as being shared by non-Germans. Nevertheless, no other country's national identity, perhaps with the exception of Israel's, has been affected so strongly by its genocidal past. In Germany there remains a consensus that the Holocaust must be part of the school curriculum, even if its significance in comparison to other 'dark episodes' of the past does not remain unchallenged, as historian Wolf Kaiser points out. According to Kaiser, German school teachers perceive teaching this subject as a moral duty, more than any other historical topic, as 'they must insist on the special responsibility people living in Germany have.'⁷⁶ History, Falk Pingel remarks, is still taught predominantly as national history rather than as a 'history of humankind,' and the pedagogy of Holocaust remembrance is dependent on historical and political cultures that usually do not transcend national boundaries. In those countries that were occupied by Nazi Germany, the genocide has been taught and remembered differently from how it has been taught within Germany, where the years up to 1945 cannot be historicized as a period of 'heroism, resistance, and the suffering of the majority of the population.'⁷⁷ In some Central and Eastern European nations the political turning point of 1990 led to a further decline of Holocaust remembrance, as both communism and Nazism could subsequently be represented as dialectic forces in an age of ideologies that killed millions.⁷⁸ In school textbooks for some countries, the suffering of the Jews became neglected.⁷⁹ In other countries, however, the Holocaust is taught as a warning, something that could also happen again elsewhere, as a critique of racist politics more generally, and, in a number of places, as a way to undermine Western morality.⁸⁰ Sometimes schoolbooks use the Holocaust to condemn other genocidal moments and attacks of their own nation.⁸¹ Thus, if Holocaust memory is becoming globalized,⁸² it nevertheless remains doubtful to what extent it will affect other nations' identities.

While historical cultures in divided Germany were predominantly shaped by alliances between politicians and professional historians, they have, since unification, been increasingly shaped by actors outside the history departments, including film, video games, and other media.⁸³ The treatment of the Nazi past is therefore experiencing interesting changes beyond any historical realism. The often surreal and counterfactual portrayals of German Nazis seem to affirm a sense of historical abnormality. Unselfconscious dealings with the Nazi past, such as Gavriel Rosenfeld's recent film *Hi Hitler!*, should therefore not be interpreted as historical normalization.⁸⁴

Conclusion: 1990 as a return to normality?

Nationalism, to borrow an expression from correspondence I had with Tom Nairn a few years ago, is 'over the hump.' New nation-states mushroom all the time, but in the world today nationalism is a dominant ideology that does not so much aim any more at the construction of new nations, but rather at their maintenance and adaptation to new circumstances. Nationalism has become ontologically normal. And Germans, in overcoming their post-national tendencies that were visible in the Cold War era, have conformed to this trend. Reunification has not only led to a territorial normalization of Germany, that is the (re)construction of the nation-state, but also rendered void the alternative visions that had grown strong during the 'provisional' condition of double statehood.

In Germany, both peculiarities, the territorial and the historical, were intrinsically related: the singularity of the Holocaust provided for an exceptionally intensive and wide-reaching discussion on the deeper reasons for this human catastrophe, and it undermined the legitimacy of conventional forms of nationalism. The conservative efforts to realize this nation-state within the transatlantic and European frameworks of the West have allowed the Germans to become *almost* normal again. Almost because, in the Federal Republic, the 'dark side' of national history, which played an increasingly visible role in public debates towards the end of the Cold War, has not subsequently gone away. Despite great efforts by historians and politicians in Germany to normalize national history, that is by relativizing the Nazi past and 'restoring' overall positive continuities, the break of 1945 has remained foundational to the identity of the Federal Republic, as has the break of 1989/1990 that restored 'normal' nationalism in other ways. 1945 remains a kind of holy grail for the Germans. Even if the democratization of historical cultures led to a situation in which all nations discovered their dark past and developed a sophisticated culture of transitional justice, it remains doubtful to what degree the unique crimes committed by the German nation would ever fade from a discursive and international memory regime, with competing interests in the future role of Germany. If, until now, normality has required being a Western nation-state with a relatively positive past, it will be exciting to see how long this remains the case. Belonging to the West might not necessarily be something that the masses around the world will hold as a virtue for much longer, while national identities remain strong at the

beginning of the twenty-first century. Perhaps they will grow even stronger, or become uglier, while adapting to highly urbanized, globalizing, and digital societies.

Eric Hobsbawm, in a critical piece about nationalism, once reflected that ‘Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market.’⁸⁵ He rightly pointed to the intimate relationship between history and nationalism. Nations have a dire need for supposedly reliable narrations of the past.⁸⁶ Following Hobsbawm’s analogy, most contemporaries are like heroin addicts: most of us are nationalists, and the demand for public history as national history has been booming. But there seems to be no evidence that constructions of national identity cannot go beyond the conception of the nation as a brand that requires positive advertising through self-congratulatory narratives of the past. The German case could be paradigmatic. It remains doubtful, however, to what extent Germany’s public nationalism corresponds to the private nationalism of German families, where memories of Nazism are perhaps articulated in a less critical manner.⁸⁷

Notes

- 1 Wicke, *Helmut Kohl’s Quest for Normality*, 46–49.
- 2 Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur*.
- 3 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- 4 Habermas, ‘Eine Art Schadensabwicklung.’
- 5 For the concept, see also Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism*.
- 6 Habermas, *Die Normalität einer Berliner Republik. Kleine Politische Schriften VIII*.
- 7 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.
- 8 Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.
- 9 See Wicke, ‘Constructivism in the History of Nationalism since 1945.’
- 10 Kedourie, *Nationalism*: 9.
- 11 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 6.
- 12 Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 169.
- 13 Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*.
- 14 Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 168.
- 15 Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machkämpfe and Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, 194–195.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 17 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
- 18 For the concept of ‘lifeworld,’ see Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 108–109.
- 19 Think, for example, of the Scottish kilt that was invented by an Englishman in the eighteenth century and subsequently became part of the standard image of the Scottish people. See Trevor-Roper, ‘The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland.’ Or, in a German context, think of the many Bismarck towers that mushroomed across the country after the death of the heroic chancellor of unification during the consolidation phase of the first German nation-state. Germans today walk pass these well-maintained towers on their hikes during the summer holidays, or Sunday walks in the park.
- 20 Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machkämpfe and Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, 196–197.

- 21 Somers, 'Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation,' 603; Hearn, 'Narrative, Agency, and Mood: On the Social Construction of National History in Scotland.'
- 22 Ichijo and Uzelac, *When Is the Nation? Towards an Understanding of Theories of Nationalism*.
- 23 Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany*.
- 24 Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany, from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich*.
- 25 Planert, 'Wann beginnt der "moderne" deutsche Nationalismus? Plädoyer für eine nationale Sattelzeit,' 25–59.
- 26 Van Ginderachter and Beyen, *Nationhood from Below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*.
- 27 Van der Linden, 'The National Integration of European Working-Classes (1871–1914)'; Berger, 'British and German Socialists Between Class and National Solidarity,' 31–63.
- 28 Cf. e.g. Mausbach, 'Wende um 360 Grad? Nationalsozialismus und Judenvernichtung in "der zweiten Gründungsphase" der Bundesrepublik,' 15–47.
- 29 Habermas wrote of the *Kulturnation* (cultural nation) of the Germans. Habermas, 'Eine Art Schadensabwicklung.'
- 30 Historism: I am following Stefan Berger's suggestion to distinguish between 'historism' and 'historicism.' Berger, 'Stefan Berger responds to Ulrich Muhlack,' 21–33, especially 28 f.
- 31 I am grateful for the helpful correspondence I had with Bärbel Bohley in 2008.
- 32 Jäckel, 'Die Doppelte Vergangenheit.'
- 33 Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness Since 1800*, 176 ff.
- 34 Schweigler, *National Consciousness in Divided Germany*.
- 35 Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*.
- 36 Schwengsbier, 'Die absurde Welt der Reichsbürger.'
- 37 For the concept of prefabrication as related to the new order post-1989, see Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create a Post-Cold War Europe*.
- 38 See e.g.: Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*; Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909*.
- 39 Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*; Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*.
- 40 Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*.
- 41 See: Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*; and Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*.
- 42 Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background*.
- 43 Kohn, *The Mind of Germany: The Education of a Nation*.
- 44 See e.g. Brown, 'Are There Any Good and Bad Nationalisms?'
- 45 Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*.
- 46 Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*.
- 47 Habermas, 'Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung.'
- 48 For reasons of space, I cannot discuss the problematic tension here between universality and Westernness. Cf. Nolte, 'Westen ist Überall.'
- 49 Habermas, 'Staatsbürgerschaft und nationale Identität.'
- 50 Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*; Miller, *On Nationality*.
- 51 Cf. Kundnani, *The Paradox of German Power*. See also Harnisch and Longhurst, 'Understanding Germany: The Limits of "Normalization", and the Prevalence of Strategic Culture,' 49–60.

- 52 Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West*.
- 53 Fischer, 'Wir sind auf uns allein gestellt.'
- 54 Von Hammerstein, 'Denken auf Vorrat.'
- 55 Lorenz, "'Hete" Geschiedenis: Over de Temperatuur van de contemporaine Duitse geschiedenis.'
- 56 Kaiser, 'Teaching about Perpetrators of the Holocaust in Germany.'
- 57 See, for example, Taberner and Cooke, *German Culture, Politics and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*.
- 58 Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*.
- 59 Geyer, *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, 317.
- 60 Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography*.
- 61 Kocka, 'German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg.'
- 62 For the cultural Sonderweg see e.g. Watson, *The German Genius: Europe's Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution and the Twentieth Century*. For early cultural Sonderweg explanations of Nazism, in which Protestantism ('from Luther to Hitler') also played a role, see e.g.: Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*; Viereck, *Metapolitics: from Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler*; Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. The slogan 'from Herder to Hitler' is borrowed from Dahmen, *Die Nationale Idee von Herder bis Hitler*.
- 63 Augstein et al., *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?: Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*.
- 64 See Wicke, 'Between Eternal and German Spirit: Kohl's Politics of Historical Memory in Biographical Perspective.'
- 65 Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*.
- 66 Wicke and Wellings, 'History Wars in Germany and Australia: National Museums and the Re-Legitimation of Nationhood.'
- 67 Gathmann, 'Von einem Schlußstrich kann keine Rede sein'; Gathmann, 'Die DDR war vom Anfang bis zum Ende eine Diktatur.'
- 68 Eley, *The Goldhagen Effect: History, Memory, Nazism—Facing the German Past*.
- 69 Mohr, 'Total Normal?'
- 70 Conze et al., *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik*.
- 71 BBC News, 'Reinhold Hanning: Convicted Nazi Guard Dies Before Going to Prison.'
- 72 Olterman, 'AfD Politician Says Germany Should Stop Atoning for Nazi Crimes.'
- 73 Lowe, 'World War II Crimes: Holocaust Memorial Rebuilt Outside Far-Right Politician's House by German Activists.'
- 74 Levy and Szaider, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory.'
- 75 Bromley and Garnett Russell, 'The Holocaust as History and Human Rights: A Cross-National Analysis of the Holocaust in Social Science Textbooks.'
- 76 Kaiser, 'Teaching about Perpetrators of the Holocaust in Germany.'
- 77 Pingel, F, 'The Holocaust in Textbooks: From a European to a Global Event,' 79.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 82 Levy and Sznajder, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*.
- 83 Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies.'
- 84 Evans, 'Hi Hitler! By Gavriel D Rosenfeld Review. Is Nazism Being Trivialised?'
- 85 Hobsbawm and Kertzer, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today.'
- 86 Berger, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe*.
- 87 Hensel, 'Opa war kein Held.'