



# Vergangenheitsbewältigung

The German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can be translated into English in different ways: as coping or coming to terms with, working through, accounting for or even overcoming the past.

The process it describes has been central for West Germany's post-war identity, public discourse and education. But it has not unfolded invariably. Over time, the Holocaust has been processed and reflected on quite differently by the West German society and its institutions.

This short presentation will mark major turning points in the way the Germans related to their past and the impact it had on the German educational system.

# East and West Germany

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) developed quite differently also in regards to their stance on and approach to their most recent past.

Wolfgang Meseth points out how strongly the two states' efforts to cope with the Nazi past were influenced by the political systems that had been introduced in the wake of the country's division:

„In contrast to East Germany, which declared that fascism had been irrevocably surpassed by the introduction of a socialist system, West Germany thought of itself as the legal successor of the 'Third Reich' and as a society charged with the responsibility to deal with the consequences of the crimes of the Nazi past (Lepsius, 1989). Hence, while the German Democratic Republic (GDR) externalized questions of guilt and responsibility and ascribed them to the capitalist West, West Germany internalized them” (14).

In the GDR, the National Socialist past served as a point of reference for the instruction on antifascist values, but it did not become a crucial part of identity formation, since the past was clearly attributed to a system that had been replaced and therefore neutralized.

Although in both cases (East and West), the Nazi past was part of the respective “tales of nation building”, according to Meseth the educational stance on the topic remained more or less static in East Germany (14).

In contrast to this, over time, the Holocaust became a key point of reference for West German national identity.

Meseth concludes: “What has become known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the uniquely West German concept of “mastering” or “coming to terms with” the past became both a constitutive component of its self-image and a reminder of the importance of securing the newly democratic order so that it could not revert to totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, and fascism” (14).

**The 1950s**

## „Re-education“

The Germans, however, did not initiate the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* voluntarily. In fact, efforts to deal with the past were initially more or less forced upon them by the Allied Forces.

At this early point, German society at large was, as Boschki, Schwendemann and Reichmann put it, “characterized by despair in the light of the lost war” and most “Germans thought of themselves as victims” (134). Therefore, they “avoided taking responsibility for the crimes committed against the Jews and others” (134).

Germans, in short, were very reluctant to face their involvement and their responsibility.

As part of the so-called “Re-education” (or “Re-orientation”), the Allied Forces bundled educational measures that were directed towards a democratization process of the German society.

All schoolbooks containing the National Socialist ideology were confiscated and new curricula were introduced. Through the Allies’ interventions, public discourses were initiated and a first wave of prosecution of the perpetrators was launched.

However, during the fifties, with the beginning of the Cold War, attempts to deal with the past decreased considerably. It is probably safe to say, that in the first decade after the war, most Germans did not display much of an independent interest in confronting their past.

**The 1960-70s**

## New Public Discourse

With the desecration of the Great Synagogue in Cologne in December 1959 and with the wave of anti-Semitic smearings and attacks that followed, however, the debate gained a new immediacy.

Also, the Eichmann trial in 1961 – which received significant media coverage in Germany – as well as the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt contributed to the emergence of a new public discourse.

The question of how the recurrence of anti-Semitic tendencies and violence could be prevented became more and more pressing.

# Theodor W. Adorno

A radio speech delivered in 1966 by German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno can be seen as emblematic and most influential in regards to a new approach to the Holocaust in German public discourse and education.

Adorno opened his speech on *Erziehung nach Auschwitz / Education after Auschwitz* with the statement that “the very first demand on education is that there not be another Auschwitz” (translation Meseth 21).

Adornos demands and his relentless social diagnosis were reaching much further than the previous consensus and sparked new debates. Not only did Adorno ask for education about Auschwitz, he put the entire project of education into the service of preventing a repetition of what he called the “failure of all culture” (*Negative Dialektik* 359).

According to Adorno the basic structures of society and of its members were still the same as those that had given rise to National Socialism and its crimes. In consequence, he pressed for a thorough examination of the mindset and preconditions of perpetrators and bystanders, demanding not only an examination of a German society of the past but an examination of the society as it was in the present.

He assumed, as Meseth points out, that “the greatest menace to German democracy lay in the remaining remnants of National Socialism in the individual and collective psyche” (20). Accordingly, he demanded a confrontation with what he called society’s “authoritarian potential”, as well as the development of educational measures to counter it (“Erziehung nach Auschwitz” 678).

Through this lens, education was a task encompassing society as a whole.

Adornos speech sparked a new wave of debates on the subject of education in the light of Germany's National Socialist past.

Boschki, Reichmann and Schwendemann summarize:

„A number of further theoretical and practical approaches followed in the wake of Adorno's lecture, creating a widespread horizon of “education after Auschwitz”. The quality of textbooks and history teaching on this topic improved, as a new generation of critical and historically aware teachers began to gain more influence in schools” (135).

# Student Movement

The confrontation with the past gained momentum with the West German student movements of the late sixties and seventies.

At its core lay a very outspoken revolt against the perceived failure of German society to fully rid itself of all elites implicated in the Nazi crimes, and the failure of addressing guilt and responsibility adequately.

**The 1980s**

## Historian's Dispute

With the 1980s, research as well as public discourse started to focus more and more on broader sociological approaches and thematized the role of the general population during the Holocaust. Furthermore, an increasing awareness of the scale of Nazi Germany's crimes, as well as of the corresponding responsibility could be observed.

As Meseth points out, the so called *Historikerstreit* (historian's dispute) can be seen as another "turning point in the public confrontation with the Nazi past."

The heated controversy on the question of historization and/or singularity between Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber on the one side, and Jürgen Habermas on the other, brought new attention to the scale of the crimes committed during the Holocaust.

The very publicly held dispute (most of its arguments were published in the major newspapers of the time) on these questions of historiography created, as Meseth puts it: a new “awareness of the nearly inconceivable dimensions of the industrial mass extermination of European Jews” and is to be “regarded as one of the most important moments in the recognition of Germany’s special responsibility to remember the past.” (25).

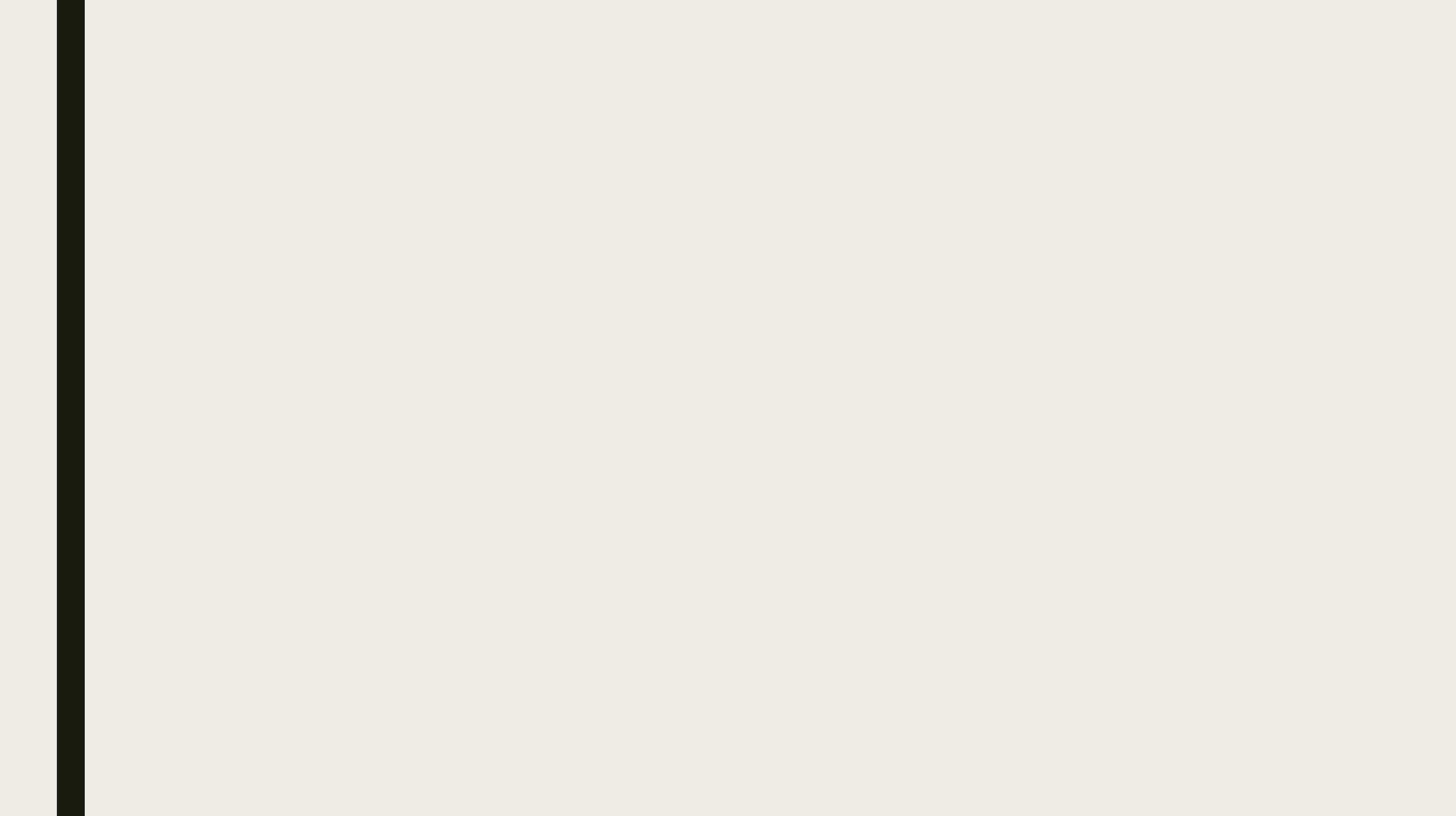
**The 1990s**

# Reunification

On April 1990, the newly founded government of unified Germany passed a resolution and declared itself as “a German successor state that shares responsibility for the historical legacy of the Nazi past” (Meseth 21).

At this point, the two very different educational traditions of East and West Germany had to be brought into accord. The integration of the GDR’s own history led to a certain opening towards a comparative perspective on totalitarianism, including the analysis of Stalinism into the history curriculum alongside National Socialism.

In the process, a shift towards a more universalist approach to Holocaust education can be observed as well. As Meseth puts it: “West Germany’s sense of national responsibility to remember the past was joined by a universalist ethical perspective on crimes of the Nazi period.” (26)



# Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. “Erziehung nach Auschwitz.” *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 10.2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, 1997, pp. 674-690.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 10.2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, 2003.
- Boschki, Reinhold, Bettina Reichmann and Wilhelm Schwendemann. “Education after and about Auschwitz in Germany: Towards a theory of remembrance in the European context,” *Prospects*, 40, 2010, pp. 133-152.
- Meseth, Wolfgang. “Education After Auschwitz in a United Germany,” *European Education*, 44:3, 2012, pp. 13-38.