

# Reflections on Genocides and Other Crimes against Humanity

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## Abstract

The Holocaust lingers forever considering the unnamable atrocities committed. This article attempts to go into the effects of the abominable crimes on the post war generations in Germany. Particular attention is paid to German literature and to the movie industry which continues producing films on the holocaust. A comparison is drawn to other genocides and crimes against humanity which have occurred since then and their treatment by the mass media and the film industry. What reality and which news are being projected to the public? The conclusion is a moderately positive vision for the future.

**Key words:** guilt, eliminate, mass murders, insensitive, shame, blame, compensation

## Resumen

El Holocausto vivirá por siempre, al considerar las innumerables atrocidades cometidas. Este artículo pretende profundizar en los efectos de estos abominables crímenes en las generaciones de posguerra en Alemania, con particular atención en la literatura alemana y en la industria del cine, la cual continúa produciendo películas sobre el tema. También se lleva a cabo una comparación con otros genocidios y crímenes contra la humanidad ocurridos desde entonces y su tratamiento por los medios masivos de comunicación y la industria fílmica. ¿Cuál realidad y cuáles noticias están siendo proyectadas al público? La conclusión es una visión moderadamente positiva para el futuro.

**Palabras claves:** culpa, eliminar, asesinos masivos, insensibilidad, vergüenza, ofensa, compensación

It is not an easy fate to be born a German after World War II. We suffer from Jung's famous *Kollektivschuld* (collective guilt). The war is mercifully receding in time, and we are now in the fourth post-war generation. It is clear that the atrocities shall not be forgotten, but is it politically and morally correct to still blame the offspring of criminal agents after all this time? What does it say in the *Bible* about the curse which lasts seven generations?

Many German people are generally not proud of their nation, many wish to live elsewhere and every year a greater number of German citizens emigrate, despite a well working social welfare and health system. Migration is part of our global society, but why do so many German people choose to leave their boundaries?

### A little bit of personal history

During the first generation which incidentally is mine, accusations tended to be quite direct. I lived in the United States in the sixties as a teenager, and I remember very vividly several incidents, one of which is perhaps worth mentioning.

After a school dance I was waiting to be picked up together with my twin friends, I must have been thirteen or fourteen years old. Another girl who was actually my classmate in almost all of my classes also waited and when her father arrived she introduced my twin friends and completely ignored me. That hurt! Especially in my case, as my family was also victim to the monster. My uncle did not approve of him, he produced and distributed pamphlets and writings against the regime and was cruelly executed in 1942 at the age of 33. Most intellectuals who opposed Hitler left the country – scientists, writers, film directors, ... -- and some were brave enough to stay and operate from home, and a great part of them were executed.

The survivors and offspring of Holocaust victims can always say that my suffering is nothing compared to theirs, which is correct. Nevertheless, each individual being feels suffering personally. It is also a fact that if a person commits a crime, an action which goes against the ethics of the community, this person suffers from pangs of consciousness.

To give credit to the other side, I also had a friend who invited me home, and the father still spoke German and recited *Die Glocke* by Schiller to me. He was quite disappointed by my ignorance and incapacity to recite the poem with him together.

This is perhaps the best place to narrate the story of one of my best and closest friends, Franziska Budzislowski, born 1901 in Berlin. She married her childhood friend who was some years younger than she and who had decided at the age of four to marry her. He was a physician and worked in the Charité, the most renowned hospital in Berlin. His plan was to be a scientist and do research. With Hitler taking over the couple decided to leave the country in 1934, and their next destination was Rome. Here Erich had to study and do his exams again in Italian, and he succeeded in establishing a set of patients, mostly

from the American Embassy. Then Hitler made the pact with Mussolini and the couple was forced to leave again, this time to Calcutta, which then was under British jurisdiction. They left behind Fränzi's parents who had joined them and did not want to go on such a long trip into unknown territory. So here again Erich had to study and redo his exams in English. Times in Calcutta were very rough, with lots of immigrants from occupied Europe who struggled for survival. The best time in this exile was when the British gathered these refugees from Germany and Austria as potential enemies, and put them into free confinement in the Himalayas, for one or two years, until the war ended. Once the war was over Fränzi and her husband returned to Rome. There Fränzi was lucky to find her parents again through a refugee newspaper. By some miracle and help from friends they were spared the murder of the Fosse Ardeatine, where the Roman Jewish community was thrown into a canyon. The doctor became a very humane and successful general physician, and the couple always took their holidays in Switzerland. They only once returned to Germany in the '70s, and when they sat in the cab which took them from the airport to Berlin, they were both very quiet. The driver commented that all this need not have happened.

Despite this adventurous life not really chosen by the couple they were both extremely witty and entertaining, and enjoyed life. Erich or Budzi as he was called by his friends was full of jokes and anecdotes, and he was a real "Mensch", which is a term Yiddish and German have in common, meaning in this context something like a decent person. He was the physician of the German Embassy and that is how my family got to know him. As a friend he would be very reluctant to charge adequately for his services, therefore the apartment was full of gifts he had received in recognition for his excellent work. While he was alive, Fränzi stayed in the shadow of her brilliant husband, but once a widow she turned out to be quite an entertainer herself. She was a great and generous friend, always available to offer help when needed. I learned a great deal from this wise and inspiring woman.

### **Germans coping with their past**

How does the average German feel? Deeply ashamed. Wondering how this could have been possible. Ever since the war all major literature in Germany deals with its after effects. It is not my intention here to go into the various ways writers have come to terms with their immediate or remote past, I will just mention some, and among others I beg Mr Böll's, Mr Grass', and Mr Lenz' pardon for not including them.

Suffice it to say that even Herta Müller, Nobel literature prize 2009, whose main theme is the drab life of German-speaking Rumanians under Ceausescu and their adaptation to more drab life in Germany, during the 80s, also refers to the non-heroic fight for survival during World War II with German soldiers occupying the country, when Rumania was allied with Germany. Other recent books include *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, where

the English title does not transmit accurately the meaning of *Der Vorleser*, the person who reads aloud to another person. Since this book has been put on the screen it is not necessary to mention the plot, it just shows how an ignorant and in this case illiterate person can by fortuitous circumstances end up being a criminal when under other circumstances this person could have led a quite decent and normal life. Another book worth mentioning is *Meines Vaters Land* by Wibke Bruhns, which narrates the story of a bourgeois merchant family from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to World War II. The author's father was a Nazi party member and officer until he became involved in the movement leading to the failed coup in July 1944. He was executed shortly after. What is remarkable in this book is the distance the daughter takes, repeatedly expressing her lack of understanding.

At this point a quote from *Der Vorleser* is appropriate to sum up the feeling of the post war German:

Was sollte und soll meine Generation der Nachlebenden eigentlich mit den Informationen über die Furchtbarkeiten der Vernichtung der Juden anfangen? Wir sollen nicht meinen, begreifen zu können, was unbegreiflich ist, dürfen nicht vergleichen, was unvergleichlich ist, dürfen nicht nachfragen, weil der Nachfragende die Furchtbarkeiten, auch wenn er sie in Frage stellt, doch zum Gegenstand der Kommunikation macht und nicht als etwas nimmt, vor dem er nur in Entsetzen, Scham und Schuld verstummen kann. Sollen wir nur in Entsetzen, Scham und Schuld verstummen?<sup>1</sup>

The main character of *Der Vorleser* asks himself what to do with all the information on the terrors of the elimination of Jewish people, when it is not possible to understand what is incomprehensible, to compare what cannot be compared, and to question. Should we become mute in horror, shame, and guilt?

Sebastian Haffner, a journalist and writer who left Germany in 1933 for London, reported in *Geschichte eines Deutschen. Die Erinnerungen 1914-1933* on historical facts, his experiences, feelings, and reactions, leading to his exile.

In *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* Haffner analyzes Hitler in sections: life, services, successes, errors, mistakes, crimes, treason.

Obviously Thomas Mann, who won the Nobel prize in literature in 1929, and who went into exile first in Switzerland and then in the United States, in California, was very concerned about what was going on at home. He spoke in radio transmissions to a German audience, he wrote letters, essays, and notes in his diary where he voiced his dismay. One fact in particular continued to bother him: why were the German people not able to overcome the monster? It would be necessary to go into what led up to the Nazi regime and already a lot has been written and speculated about that.

In 2009 Anne Nelson, an American writer, published her book *Red Orchestra: The Story of the Berlin Underground and the Circle of Friends Who Resisted Hitler*, after extensive research also into files which only

recently have become accessible to the public, and interviews. It is very well written for the post-war generations who have no direct recollection of the period in question. She describes the situation in the twenties and how Hitler legally took over the German government. Did anyone who is not an expert in history know about the role Stalin played in the Nazi takeover? In the twenties and early thirties the Socialist and Communist parties were both quite powerful, and during the 1933 election campaign he did not allow the Communist party to line up together with the Socialists, which would have prevented the Nazi victory. The book deals with the lives of a group of people who were involved in fighting and resisting the regime, which was not an easy task. Members ranged from intellectuals to communist workers, and the group was loosely fitted together, as one of the members compared their way of operation with a pebble thrown into a pond which creates circles, and when many pebbles are thrown into the pond some circles intersect. Actions went from secretly publishing and posting flyers to conveying military information on the planned moves to allies. Here again it strikes how Stalin did not act when he was briefed from three different sources on Operation Barbarossa, the plan to attack the Soviet Union. These people also helped their Jewish friends and neighbors to escape, as by the way also many other unnamed ordinary Germans did. The group was named Red Orchestra by the Gestapo, they themselves did not have a name. Everybody just did what they could, putting their own life at risk. An impressive number were actually executed after being submitted to torture, when the Gestapo decoded a message sent from an amateur spy agent in Moscow to another amateur spy agent in Brussels, supplying names and addresses of the key members of the group. The reason the Soviet agent acted so irresponsibly was that Stalin in another of his clever moves eliminated his experienced agents.

Is the average person aware of the lack of interest demonstrated by the American government in what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic? Nazi propaganda worked very well and Hitler had a not inconspicuous number of fans in the United States.

Anne Nelson does not end her reporting with the capitulation and end of the war in Europe, she deftly continues with depicting the complicated post war power games, where information on German resistance was supplied to suit different interests in the Cold War.

As for education, every school child is taken at least once to a concentration camp, during a one day excursion if one is close by, otherwise as a field trip. According to their age there are several books they have to read in school dealing with this period, just of mention a few:

*Damals war es Friedrich* by Hans Peter Richter, which describes the friendship between two German boys, one of them a Jewish child. They lived in the same building and were best buddies until Hitler and his crew infected the minds of the people. The action takes place between 1925 and 1942, and ends tragically.

*Damals war ich vierzehn* by Bruckner *et al*, where authors write about their memories of when they were fourteen years old during the war.

*Er hieß Jan* by Irina Korschunow, a first love story between a German girl and a Polish prisoner/constricted laborer, and the dangers they encounter.

*Die Welle* by Morton Rhue. This is actually a very impressive report on an experiment made by an American history teacher with a high school class. To explain how people can become extremely insensitive and cruel, he created a special kind of club with the class, where the first common denominator was “power through discipline”, which created a sense of community apart from the other students and adults. The other slogans were “power through community” and “power through action”. The experiment turned out to be more than the teacher could handle, friction arose with the students who were not part of the group and when one of them was almost killed he had to end the project. Very interesting is the description of how one of the boys who used to be an outsider becomes one of the most fervent supporters of this new idea of community. The experiment demonstrated that it is by no means a trademark of the German people to lose all rationale and ethics and contrive a method to systematically eliminate a certain group of people without any sustainable reason.

In Berlin there is a very impressive Holocaust Memorial, designed by the renowned North American architect Peter Eisenman and opened in 2005. After walking through undulating slabs of stone on undulating paths the visitor ends up feeling a little of the groundlessness and instability and utter disorientation of the victims.

On the sidewalk in front of the houses where deported Jews who died in the camp had lived, their name is engraved in a plate with the information concerning their birth and death.

Under the *Wiedergutmachung* (act of compensation, atonement – literally “making good again”) Germany contributed greatly to finance the state of Israel and paid compensation money to victims and their children. Again I repeat that this in no way “makes good again”, no action really can. But at least it is a try.

Every generation has been plagued by the same question: How could Hitler have risen to power and kept it for so long? What had happened to the civilized, refined, cultivated citizens in the country of philosophers? The latest confrontation with this issue is an exhibition at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin named *Hitler und die Deutschen. Volksgemeinschaft und Verbrechen* (Hitler and the Germans . Nation and Crime). It doesn't show anything new, it just presents the interconnection between the Führer and the people in a new way.

Today there is a small group of neonazis made up mostly of what modern society colloquially calls “losers” – an English word adopted into many other languages under this connotation. They do not represent German society. This is a very subjective and partial judgment, and unfortunately the same happens in Germany as elsewhere. Some people with well working brains take advantage of the fear for survival resulting from the high ratio of unemployment and from the financial crisis. Now the immigrants are blamed, although they more often than not perform jobs no native would be willing to do.

Obviously this leads to the consideration that when Hitler became a person known all over Germany and soon the rest of the world, a great number of people in the German empire saw themselves as losers, not having recovered from the Versailles Treaty and the depression, and the demagogue very smartly beguiled them with the effect everybody knows about. And the financial crisis culminating in 1929 also did its part.

A larger group does not want to be burdened anymore with this guilt for a crime committed by great-grandparents. But the elementary sensation felt when watching a tortured animal or mass murder is the same: a mixture of compassion, guilt, shame, and penance, and this is what most Germans still feel regarding their not so distant past.

A very interesting and bizarre phenomenon is how immigrants are dealt with. Other countries have no problems in how to handle the crimes and trespasses of their immigrants. In the Turkish culture it is not unusual for a man to kill his sister if she risks dishonoring the family by for example choosing a mate. This is evidently not considered a crime in Turkey. If a man does this in Germany under normal circumstances it would be considered a crime and the man put behind bars. But in the name of tolerance of cultural diversity the man who killed his sister on the street was not condemned. This raises the question: Can a person who lives and works in a country disrespect its laws? In France or Holland or Denmark this type of crime would not go unpunished. In Germany the authorities live with the fear of being considered *ausländerfeindlich* (xenophobic).

Another delicate issue apparently has been approached more successfully. There are many African immigrants in Germany, and as is known, clitoricision is widely practiced in several African countries. Since this practice is illegal in Germany, what many immigrants did was send their teenage girls to Africa during the summer holidays to undergo this "operation". Upon their return to the German airport the girls are now checked over, and if they have had this "operation" they are not allowed to enter the country.

## **Genocides and other atrocities after World War II**

This is by no means a comparison for what cannot be compared. Nevertheless, I would first of all like to mention the brutal elimination of two sets of people performed in the past in the new continent. When America was colonized by the Europeans, the local population was decimated or practically annihilated not only by fighting the invaders and being infected by imported diseases, as those who survived were put into slavery, where again many succumbed and died. Those who were strong enough to survive were broken down emotionally.

And what about the people from Africa who were taken to the other side of the ocean against their will and perished already on the vessel and were thrown to the sharks? Did anyone ever count these losses and is there a record? I will not go into what happened to them once they reached shore.

Before, during and after the war Stalin played the perfect counterpart figure to Hitler. According to estimates, he took the life of up to 10 million victims – political prisoners, laborers in gulags, people who were forced to resettle, people who died of starvation ... His criteria for selecting his victims was just as erratic as Hitler's.

In China, Mao eliminated during his 38 years of leadership up to about 40 million lives, through famine, capital punishment, suicides ... To date, Chinese citizens who think and act contrary to the party's interest are still being executed, at a reduced rate.

In Cambodia the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot killed one fourth of the population, up to two million, between 1975 and 1979.

As an after effect of colonization, Africa is at present still shaken by unrest and violence. Boundary lines were drawn by the various colonizing powers, so that people like for example the Hutus and Tutsis are living in what is now Rwanda. In 1990 75% of the Tutsi minority, which up to then made up 10 to 14% of the population, was killed in 100 days, amounting to 800,000 deaths. What is most shocking in Africa is the lack of intervention by countries which could prevent these carnages. And what is happening in the Sudan, in Darfur? What about Congo? We sometimes get a glimpse of the tribal wars through courageous reporters and NGO's, on how the male population is rapidly declining and girls and women are systematically being raped by adversary soldiers. Many of them do not survive the rape or are being mutilated, those who do recover somehow must master their lives as outcasts.

The story was different in former Yugoslavia, when after the break up the Serbians perpetuated their policy of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina, exterminating 200,000 Muslims between 1995 and 1999, when finally an armed intervention of NATO forces put an end to this policy. During the Kosovo rebellion (1998-1999) 400,000 Muslims were displaced and there is no record of the victims. Again, only after strong political intervention and military threat did the Serbs cease fire. It is not the purpose of this paper to consider the reasons why Western countries would intervene in Europe and leave Africa to their own devices, practically bleeding dry.

### **Other inhumane acts**

One could also consider genocide the AIDS epidemic in Africa. This could easily be reverted as it has been in countries with more means available to combat this disease. First of all, it is still not quite clear how this disease came up initially, and why it would be allowed to spread so much in Africa. Scientists have already developed a cheap remedy, so why is it not effectively applied in the affected countries/regions? The latest encouragement came with the announcement by Pope Benedict XVI that in Africa under certain circumstances the use of condoms is permitted. The first reaction to this new



twist in Vatican politics is relief mixed with curiosity about the origin of this radical change.

In some regions under patriarchal rule women live an extremely dismal life, they are barely kept alive to fulfill their “duties” towards the master-owner, just because they belong to the female gender. This is not mass destruction, nevertheless many girls and women do not survive. For more information on women abuse Nicholas D. Kristof, who writes editorials for the *New York Times*, is a good source.

It is convenient and comforting to think that the worst scenarios are far away and do not represent our “civilized” society. Would anyone consider New York City as a slave center? According to Nicholas Kristof, a young woman accountant in China paid all her own and her family’s savings for a passage to New York, with the promise of improving her living standard. So what happened anyone can guess: she was trapped in a brothel, she was beaten and otherwise physically and emotionally abused and blackmailed, and she lived this life for six years until she managed to break loose to save a friend. Which makes me and I presume many women wonder who would be the customers? As in all matter pertaining to commerce, without demand there is no supply.

In a documentary seen on television, slave trade in the form of smuggling teenage girls across borders in South America was denounced. Girls are being picked up for example on their way home from school, either by conviction or by force, and brought to a brothel across the border in a country where they do not have the minimal protection. They are sold to the best bidder and forcibly stuffed with cocaine to produce more during the night.

And while we are at it, many people prefer to ignore the abuse of children and turn their eyes away. Children are the most vulnerable elements of society, and even parents who love their children are sometimes prone to physical and emotional abuse. The biggest obstacle to good parenting lies in the lack of adequate preparation, but how many parents actually are lucky enough to possess the emotional stability and wisdom to take a smooth ride through child rearing? Numerous children are cruelly beaten, tortured, abandoned, raped, locked up, used as cheap manpower (or rather childpower), sold for prostitution, trained as soldiers with real guns ...

What about drugs? Just as an example, crack is very cheap and extremely addictive as well as destructive. In November 2010 the Costa Rican daily *La Nación* arrived with a revealing as well as alarming article on the spreading consumption of crack in the country. This cocaine derivative mixed with poisonous chemicals is cheap and easy to come by. Now the question arises: who is interested in destroying mainly young people’s lives and render them incapable of being a productive and independent part of society? Who would profit from this situation?

This is a selection of ignominious acts against humanity, sadly there are many more. Looking back in history, each period had its manifestation(s) of unsurpassed, sanguine, and heinous violence. And as for the present, actually some situations are being deliberately excluded from this article.

## Human nature

Ever since the beginnings of time has man manifested his dual bipolar mode of thinking and acting, and supposedly good does not exist without bad. There is no yin without yang. On the other hand, for the fortunate of us who live in a sheltered dwelling and suffer no lack in food and water or material to cover up our vulnerable body, it is impossible to imagine how a person can perpetrate physical abuse such as flagellations on other people, and then have a decent dinner and go to church on Sundays. From what I can gather, the perpetrators consider their victims to be something less than human beings, and they have a set of beliefs to justify their acts, of which accusing their victims of killing/eating children is the most atrocious. It is also known that man's behavior can be and is often driven by fear and by greed.

## Movies

Countless movies deal with the holocaust, some are high standard and very moving. Who hasn't seen "The Diary of Anne Frank"? "Schindler's List" had many spectators leave the cinema with watery eyes and sobbing. "The Pianist" gives a perfect picture of life in a ghetto, "La vita è bella" is a real masterpiece, and "The Boy in The Striped Pajama" is also strikingly dramatic and touching. These are just a few films that come to mind, surely people of a certain age can come up with a similar list of striking films on the subject.

But in truth, how many films have been produced on other genocides? My conclusion is that in cases like in Africa in some way or other all countries in the Western hemisphere are more or less involved, and it is not common to point the finger at oneself. So it is easier to ignore the plight of people far away or even close by and thus not feel guilty. In the case of the holocaust the criminals and the victims are very well defined and give the rest of the world a feeling of superiority. Apparently there is no end to the inspiration the holocaust provides to the film industry. Look at what the Germans did, we would never do such a thing, we are so good and they are so evil! Granted that what was done cannot be undone, perhaps the film makers could turn their eyes to more current issues to sensitize the general public. Of course, this would mean taking responsibility for the state of the world today, and overcoming the dual position "I good – you bad". All can identify with that too easily, and it does not contribute to solving the current problems in any way.

Among my German friends I happen to come nowadays upon a certain resistance to the holocaust films, they are tired of them, and I admit I also have seen my fair share.

## Local peculiarity

After having lived in Latin America, namely Costa Rica, for quite a number of years, it is perhaps interesting to mention that many people have a

vague and transfigured picture of Hitler and the Third Reich. This shows for example in the names they give their children, like Rommel who was after all not such a bad guy, but in Europe nobody would call their child with a name associated with this period. And what about a person whose name is Hitler? This is not an invention. It was also a shock to run into so many Adolfos, nobody in their right mind would thus name their child in Europe. But this name is usually given without any reference to the Führer, people like the name for its own sake.

The latest incident happened a few weeks ago when a man who wore the uniform of Nature Air, the Costa Rican domestic airline, asked me whether I personally had known Hitler.

### **New perspectives**

Ever since the World Championship 2006 in Germany, people there are beginning to take pride again in their accomplishments, and fortunately the old age animosity between Germany and France is over. Curiously enough though, on random views of TV5, the French international TV channel, there are films on the German occupation, which is another topic, sometimes related to the persecution of Jews, mostly not.

Germany has also become friends with its eastern neighbor Poland, which can be considered quite an accomplishment. The European Union cannot be compared with the United States of America, the historical and cultural divisions are still too great. However, we are a lot better off than sixty years ago, there is a trend to accept and appreciate the differences which make up the colored variety of our components. Of course, in times of crisis each country becomes protective and blames the others, there is still a great autonomy. Nevertheless, the European Union has not fallen apart and in some way has been able to patch up even major problems.

In this day and age the goal should be to overcome national divisions and identities and rather consider each person as part of humanity with the same basic needs, which potentially can all be met. The miracle of life is that each human being is unique and cannot be replaced, as something called soul for lack of a better term cannot be cloned. It is ever more clear that fear and hate and blame are destructive to the individual and to society, and each person is called upon to act for a peaceful world.

There is just a finite amount of topics to write about, many words have been written about the Holocaust, but each person who puts his thoughts on paper believes she has something worthwhile to say. This topic is delicate to talk about, more so to write about, Whatever information I have is only partial, and I am writing as an outsider, having lived in Germany only four preschool years of my life. But I would like to end with the words from John Lennon: "Imagine there is no country...." That will be the day.

## Notes

- 1 Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser*, p. 99.

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