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Habermann: An Encounter of Facts and Memories
THESIS

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Introduction

The Second World War was the most lethal armed conflict in the history of mankind. Looking at the death toll in Europe, it has been estimated that nearly 36.5 million people deceased by war-related causes; of these, roughly 19 million were non-combatant civilians. In turn, 6 million of them were European Jews, mostly murdered in concentration camps and killing fields by the Germans and their collaborators. For its part, between the end of 1944 and 1948—during and after the war—, around 12 to 14 million of Volksdeutsche —ethnic Germans living beyond the eastern and southern borders of Germany— fled or were expelled from their homes; of these, 500 000 to 1.5 million perished due to starvation, diseases, deadly marches, exhaustion and attacks from angry mobs.1

Certainly, tragedies of such enormous proportions like these remain deeply imprinted on the hearts and minds of those who suffered them. The experiences of loss and suffering derived from both events have been gathered into a common pool called collective memory, which have sought different ways of recognition and externalization. The collective memory can be defined as a set of shared personal experiences of the past among a group of individuals of any level — family, village, city, region, nation, etc.—, which are represented in the present by means of different social and cultural practices.2 Nevertheless, this is not an exclusive dominion of the victims. The perpetrators, regardless of their condition as such, have also something to say, either to justify or acknowledge their deeds (or both). The bystanders are not aliens to this process either and are engaged in many manners. Thus, from this dialectic polyphony—immersed and moulded by different circumstances of time and space—multiple representations—means of recreating the past to address these experiences—have been produced in diverse scenarios: the political arena, the historiography, the arts (cinema, television, literature), among others.

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In this sense, and based on one of these representations—a cinematic production called *Habermann*—, the purpose of this thesis is two-fold. Firstly, to analyze how both memories are depicted and interrelated in the film. Secondly, to conduct a contrasting analysis between the manner the expulsions are portrayed in *Habermann* and the historical facts established by the historiography. For that purpose, this research has been divided into four main chapters.

Chapters 1 and 2 are essentially chronological itineraries along the way followed by the collective memory of the Holocaust and the German expellees, respectively. Both of them offer a historical contextualization that provide a general inside insight into their status from the early postwar years to the present day. Chapter 3 focuses on the analysis of the film. After providing key data and a plot summary, the interplay between both memories in specific scenes is evaluated. It is shown that the depiction of the German suffering supports relies on the well-known Holocaust iconography in two ways: by evocation and juxtaposition. Afterwards, a comparative scrutiny of historical facts between the way they are represented in the film and what has been established by the historiography is performed, pointing out convergences and divergences. The final balance shown in Chapter 4 rounds off the approaches considered above, offering a last evaluation of *Habermann* as a historical representation.
Chapter 1. Holocaust Memory: General Considerations

Introduction

The Holocaust—the conscious decision, planning, and implementation by the Germans in collaboration with many other Europeans to systematically annihilate the European Jewry—was a horrendous atrocity. It was a transnational crime organized by a state-run inhumane bureaucratic machinery that claimed the lives of millions of persons and scattered the survivors and their families around the world.³

Naturally, it was not the first genocidal act in human history. Not that long ago, in the early 1930s, Stalin introduced a savage policy of collectivization that condemned millions of Soviet citizens to starvation and a horrible death, particularly in Soviet Ukraine and Kazakhstan. It was not the last one, either. Only two striking examples: the brutal policies of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime in pursuance of a utopian socialist agrarian republic in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, as well as the mass slaughter of Tutsi in Rwanda in the hands of the Hutu in 1994.

Nevertheless, it is indeed the first time in human history that a collective trauma has become the universal moral landmark—at least in the Western world—, Auschwitz being the symbol of evil par excellence. Neither the Holodomor nor the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides have achieved the exceptional status of universality attained by the Holocaust since the end of the twentieth century.

This was not always the case. The total collapse of Nazi Germany in May 1945, the Nuremberg trial and other subsequent legal processes at the end of the forties did not automatically lead to a worldwide momentum of commemoration and massive dissemination of the Jewish genocide. Rather the contrary: the Holocaust became a very inconvenient truth, one of the unmastered pasts⁴ left by the war that had to be buried, ignored or blended into other grieving moments. It took decades for the Holocaust to pass from this condition of a weak

memory to a sort of civil religion in the Western world. The following pages provide a brief review of this transition.

**First Stage: The Culture of Forgetting (1945-1985)**

During the first decades from 1945 on, silence, indifference, apathy, even aggressiveness and open hostility marked the general mood of most people in Europe and the United States towards the Jewish survivors of the Nazi mass murder policies, concentration and extermination camps. Given the current acknowledged status of Jews as victims of genocide and the sensitivity of this issue today, this might sound strange. Therefore, it becomes necessary, at least in a general manner, to explore some of the circumstances that help to explain such unfavorable receptivity of postwar societies towards these people.

The first postwar years were a time of political and symbolical reinvention of those countries occupied by the Germans—either Western democracies or the new East-Central European, Soviet-supported Communist governments—to forge a new fresh start and sense of solidarity in their traumatized societies and peoples heavily hit by wartime hardships—material shortages, humiliations and persecutions, personal losses—and eager to get a fresh start and put behind such terrible experiences.

In order to heal and strengthen their badly damaged national consciousness and self-confidence, these regimes devoted themselves to building mythologies centered on the national resistance against the Nazi oppressor—of course, each in its own way according to particular wartime experiences—, which included uprisings, liberations, a pantheon of chosen heroes and martyrs, and the nation itself. Germans were seen as the only perpetrators and, therefore, were the ones to blame for all crimes and atrocities committed during the occupation along with a handful of notable collaborators.

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As powerful reminders of collective impotence and humiliation, actual experiences of occupation—sound military defeat, brutal subjugation, persecution, deportation, and murdering of fellow citizens, collaboration, merciless economic exploitation, liberation by foreign armies—would have threatened a postwar national recovery so badly needed in those times. Epic narratives of patriotic resistance played a key role serving as a prism to deal with these ordeals and make them more digestible, as well as a sieve both to select and remember all that might be advantageous to bolster heroic deeds or to send into oblivion anything not susceptible of useful rhetoric exploitation or whatever that could question them.

Under these conditions, there was virtually little or no room for public mourning, commemoration or the acknowledgment of the Jewish suffering as genocide. The public discovery of this horror did not pervade the general opinion, the media or governmental authorities. Anti-Semitism, although no longer legally and institutionally supported, still remained strong in the hearts and minds of many non-Jewish Europeans. Upon returning to their places of origin, many survivors were far from being welcomed. Some of them found their material possessions and homes taken by strangers fiercely reluctant to give them back—as it happened in Paris in April 1945—, others were submitted to new humiliations—as the stateless Jews who had gone to the Netherlands in the 1930’s, were deported by the Nazis during the occupation, and got arrested as ‘former German nationals’ after returning from Bergen-Belsen—or even pogroms and killings—e.g. in Velké Topolčany (Slovakia) in September 1945, in Kunmadaras (Hungary) in May 1946, and in Kielce (Poland) in June 1946.8

On the other hand, the Jewish genocide was intimately related to the thorny issue of collaboration, much more widespread than these patriotic memories were willing to admit. Fed by old prejudices and years of propaganda, the blatant anti-Semitism among local populations, legally and institutionally underpinned and implemented during the Nazi rule, helped considerably the implementation of the Final Solution. Diverse manifestations of this phenomenon were numerous across occupied Europe: the anti-Semitic legislation enacted by German allies and puppet regimes (Vichy France, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Slovakia), the murderous policies of the Antonescu regime in Romania in 1940-1944; the enthusiastic

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Trawniki men, Ukrainian guards and Baltic SS volunteers in Eastern Europe; the Jedwabne pogrom on 10 July 1942; the massive Vel’ d’Hiv round-up executed by French authorities in July 1942, the operation of transit camps—Drancy in France, Westerbork in the Netherlands, Mechelen in Belgium—operated only by French, Dutch and Belgian nationals, respectively. The guilt and shame brought by the recognition of these regrettable deeds would have revealed a wartime past that would have tainted the pristine image portrayed by the epic resistance narrative and, therefore, were clearly incompatible with the much-desired recovery of national self-esteem.

The result of all of this was the so-called de-Judaization (or de-Judification) of patriotic narratives, that is, the dilution or even erasure of the Jewish suffering from national memory. It was done simultaneously in two ways. On the one hand, assimilation: Jews were depicted as being part of the great mass of people displaced from their places of origin by the Germans—prisoners of war, forced and voluntary workers, political inmates and other concentration camp survivors, even fled collaborationists—, and surviving Jews were amalgamated with non-Jewish repatriates, masking their identity. On the other hand, exclusion: the denial of their experience as a unique event where they were the target of a state policy directed at their systematic physical annihilation.

The forgetting and invisibility of the Holocaust were one aspect of the phenomenon the French historian Henry Rousso called the ‘Vichy syndrome’: the intense wish either to block uncomfortable pieces of the past or else take from it what might be helpful to keep or tighten the cohesiveness of the postwar societies. The general watchword was something like this: despite all the miseries brought by the Germans and a few collaborators, you were brave and resisted heroically to the end; the war is over and all the culprits have been punished. It is time to forget, to look to the future and trust the established regimes.

Of course, there were brave and persistent voices that refused to remain silent and pushed for disseminating their own testimony. Primo Levi was one of them. Nevertheless, he barely managed to publish his book, *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man* or *Survival in Auschwitz* in the British and U.S. editions, respectively), in Italy in 1946 and in the United

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Kingdom in 1959, and it sold only a few hundred copies. His life story finally gained recognition only in the late eighties. Therefore, it is not surprising that such antagonistic environment induced most Holocaust survivors to keep their memories and personal painful experiences in the private sphere, within their fellow community and families.¹⁰

Admittedly, under different circumstances, a somewhat similar situation took place on the other side of the Atlantic. In many ways, the United States emerged as the real victor of the Second World War. Far from the main theaters of war in Europe and the Pacific, the country could keep all of its massive, powerful industrial and economic infrastructure intact (except Pearl Harbor), avoiding the terrible destruction caused by military operations elsewhere. Long gone were the waning years of the Great Depression. At the end of the hostilities, two-thirds of the world’s industrial production and practically all international financial reserves were in its hands. The U.S. exercised hegemony over the capitalist world, the western hemisphere and most of the oceans, replacing the older colonial powers. Along with the Soviet Union, it became one of the dominant superpowers.¹¹ Thus, there were solid grounds to feel optimistic about the times to come.

This attitude was based on the so-called ‘time regime of modernity’, that is, a temporal orientation deeply embedded as a cultural norm in U.S. society during the late forties and most of the fifties, which strongly focused on the future and wanted to leave the past behind. An unshaken belief in progress and the construction of a better world after so much destruction slammed the door on any attempt to remember and process traumatic experiences of the past, including the Jewish genocide, which was considered as an obstacle to the achievement of such noble cause. As a result, the Holocaust remained a marginal topic that had only a limited impact on the U.S. Jewish community—let alone the non-Jewish public in general¹²— and it did not become an essential component of its identity. As in Europe, most genocide memories stayed within the private domain of the survivors and their relatives. Emigres like Bruno Bettelheim

¹² It should be emphasized that the Holocaust was not an unknown subject for the U.S. popular culture during those years. Large portions of the American public had access to a considerable number of creative works (most of them made by non-Jewish individuals): television series and shows (CBS’s Look Up and Live, ABC’s Directions, This Is your Life, Judgement at Nuremberg, Homeward Borne, among others), plays (Thirty Pieces of Silver) and books (Ship of Fools, Diary of Anne Frank, also performed as a play and movie). Deborah E. Lipstadt, “America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965”, Modern Judaism, 16:3 (1996): 195-214.
and Ruth Klüger were advised to overlook their ordeals and were even considered to be eccentric persons who needed psychiatric help because of their insistence on pressing their case.\textsuperscript{13}

The Holocaust as a key component of collective memory in North America and Western Europe started to appear during the sixties. Diverse factors sat in motion a slow change of mentality that did not come immediately and many years had to pass before the effects could be perceived. To begin with, it was the time of a new generation who had reached adulthood. They were raised during what has come to be called the golden years—a period of astonishing economic growth, social prosperity and firm political and democratic stability embodied in the welfare state—and spared from living through the horrors and shortages experienced by their parents and grandparents.

Furthermore, a set of new outstanding legal processes against old Nazis highly publicized and broadcasted—the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961-1962 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials in 1963-1965—had a particular impact in countries like West Germany, where youngsters began to question the silence of their predecessors surrounding the Nazi past and the crimes committed. After the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, this new Western-oriented state under the leadership of its first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963), drew up its policy of memory aligning it with the country’s main political goals, both internal—complete economic reconstruction, as well as social and political stability under democratic guidelines—and external—total accommodation and acceptance in the new international order along with the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under the American protective umbrella against the Soviet foe—, which were perfectly achieved. That implied a collective, selective forgetting of much of the shameful Nazi past that focused on laying all the blame on Hitler and a handful of cronies for all the atrocities perpetrated and avoided any public mention or remembrance of the Final Solution, emphasizing instead German suffering and victimhood (POWs, bombing victims and expellees\textsuperscript{14}), and making hollow admissions of guilt. Certainly, the new tone from these young left-oriented Germans—also

\textsuperscript{14} Even this official support and recognition to German suffering was largely selective, as it is explained in the chapter on expellees.
inspired by the developments of May 1968 and the 68ers\textsuperscript{15}—challenged the way of remembering the past.

In other places, like the United States, the Eichmann trial was widely broadcasted: roughly 87\% of the U.S. public had learned about it four months before its conclusion. On the other hand, controversial reflections offered by Hannah Arendt in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in 1963, caused a huge, heated stir among U.S. intellectuals and in Jewish circles.\textsuperscript{16} Arendt stated that, almost without exception, the leaders of Jewish communities across occupied Europe (Jewish councils, police, and even special commandos inside the extermination camps) cooperated one way or the other with the Nazis. Nevertheless, none of these made a sufficient impact.

There were other major political events that contributed to the formation of a new generation of young American Jews very committed to political protest and remembering policies, thus changing the American public’s perception of the Holocaust. Firstly, the armed conflicts between Israel and its neighbors in 1967 (the Six-day War) and 1973 (the Yom Kippur War) were catastrophically portrayed as unsuccessful attempts at a second *Shoah* by the Arab states. Secondly, the continuation of the Vietnam War encountered strong external and internal disapproval. Many critics resorted to the Holocaust to construct a whole set of analogies—for instance, comparing napalm bombs to Zyklon B cans and the blazing Vietnamese jungles to gas chambers—, assigning the U.S. government and army the role of perpetrator and murderer aiming at genocide.\textsuperscript{17} Finally, the ethnic identity politics that emerged in the seventies—whereby different minorities (blacks, Native Americans, women, homosexuals, etc.), in a context of marginality and victimhood, started to claim for recognition and spaces of identity—served as an inspiration for young American Jews, who adhered to a counterculture

\textsuperscript{15}68ers is the popular Anglo-Saxon term used to refer generally to those individuals born at the end of the Second World War who, after reaching early adulthood, took a critical, rebellious attitude towards the existing *status quo*. Their prime took place during the civil unrest and protests during May 1968 in France. Further analysis of this issue can be found in Walter Laqueur, *La Europa de nuestro tiempo [Europe in Our Time]*, trans. Aníbal Leal (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara Editor S.A., 1994), 337-344; Eric Hobsbawm, *Historia*, 290-304; Tony Judt, *Postwar*, 390-421.

\textsuperscript{16}Lipstadt, “America”, 207-208.

based on a New Left-oriented Jewish identity policy that constructed an anti-establishment discourse that included “intriguing mixtures of support for Zionism, concern for the Holocaust, belief in feminism, and advocacy of public religious behavior.”

Related to all these intellectual, cultural and political changes, audiovisual media were key factors that galvanized public and institutional interest in the Shoah. Three of the most representative examples of these productions were the first to confer an iconographic status on the Holocaust and empower Auschwitz as the paradigmatic camp:


*Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* is a nine-and-a-half-hour miniseries produced by the broadcasting television network NBC and mainly focused on Jewish suffering during the war. Aired in the United States on April 16-19, 1978, it received an astounding reception: roughly 120 million viewers (half of the total population of the country). Shortly after, the West German television purchased broadcasting rights and it was transmitted by Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in January 1979. Almost 20 million people, one-third of the Western German population and one-half of the adults, watched the series. The same year, it was also put on the air in other countries of Western Europe.

The series became a milestone in Holocaust consciousness and in “the social role of television as a medium of mass communication,” which galvanized public interest and debate

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20 Rob van der Laarse, “Beyond Auschwitz?”, 72.
on the topic on both sides of the Atlantic. Three different types of impacts and collateral developments will be briefly outlined below.

Firstly, it is important to remember the noteworthy initiatives of broadcasters, official and non-official organizations and the media to sponsor and promote pedagogical material and spaces. Different strategies and resources were employed, including educational guides (one million in the U.S. and more than a quarter of a million in West Germany), seminars, and different forums of discussion that triggered a widespread concern to seek out more information on the Holocaust.

From these spaces of deliberation, intense and critical discussions about the suitability and legitimacy of commercially-oriented audiovisual representations to portray topics like these while employing canons of popular entertainment emerged. Their value as an educational and dissemination tool for Holocaust remembrance was questioned as well. Closely related, criticism was also aimed (and it is still aimed) at the so-called ‘Americanization of the Holocaust’—that is, the representation of the Shoah in line with U.S. cultural patterns and ways: emphasis on heroism and happy/hopeful endings; strong belief in individual abilities to control one’s destiny; eagerness to elicit lessons from painful situations; universalization through the projection of the Holocaust on universal predicaments such as oppression or persecution—, which could lead to a trivialization and aesthetization of such gruesome suffering.24

Finally, the widespread positive impact of the miniseries Holocaust in the FRG also stirred up the hornet’s nest of the unsettled (West) German memory culture. A sort of “counter-response” occurred when Flucht und Vertreibung (Flight and Expulsion), a three-part documentary—Inferno in the East; Those without Rights; Between the Unknown and Homeland—was launched nationwide by the Bavarian television in 1981, reaching an audience of six to ten million viewers. Until that time, nothing longer addressing the ordeal of German expellees had ever been made before. Subsequently, other television series were produced, such as Edgar Reitz’ Heimat (1984) and Die zweite Heimat: Chronik einer Jungend (Heimat II: Chronicle of a Youth) (1992), which can be considered as a reaction to the German stereotype

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23 Of course, the broadcasters (NBC especially) did not make these efforts for the sheer sake of culture and knowledge. They were also largely motivated by reaching as massive an audience as possible. Dreisbach, "Transatlantic": 81-82.

depicted by U.S. productions.\textsuperscript{25} Although weakened and marginalized, the German suffering discourse was not dead at all; it would resurface a few years later.

**Second Stage: A New ‘Memory Culture’ (1985 onwards)**

All the developments outlined above gradually shaped and led to the emergence of the so-called new ‘memory culture’,\textsuperscript{26} namely, a different way of remembering the past that differs from hitherto-existing others in many interconnected aspects. Its foundations can be traced back to the statements asserted by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 and further works.

First and foremost, Arendt affirms that the cataclysmic chain of events that occurred during the first half of the twentieth-century—ending with the horrors brought by the Second World War and a new potential conflict between the two remaining superpowers—marked a historical breaking point in civilization where a new era of uncertainties lay ahead. This implies that it is not possible to turn back the clock and aspire to restore “the old world order with all its traditions”\textsuperscript{27} nor build the future based on an imprudent optimism that condemns to oblivion everything that is undesirable to remember.

Such era is labeled by the disclosure of the ‘truly radical nature of Evil’, a dreadful truth revealed during the final phase of totalitarianism and of such magnitude that goes beyond any human comprehension;\textsuperscript{28} the experience of totalitarianism showed that human brutality can reach boundless extremes and the horrendous events that produces are susceptible to occur again. Such situation requires a practical response that involves a new framework at different


\textsuperscript{26} Term coined by Assmann, “Transformations”, 26.


\textsuperscript{28} Years later Arendt relinquished this notion of radicalism, adopting in further works the concept of banality as a more suitable way to analyze evil and the atrocities of the Holocaust. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she alludes to it in relation with the former: “[…] we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous” (459). A more in-depth analysis can be found in James Phillips, “From Radical to Banal Evil: Hannah Arendt against the Justification of the Unjustifiable”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 12:2 (2004): 129-158; Cristina Hermida del Llano, “La naturaleza del mal en el pensamiento de Hannah Arendt” [The Nature of Evil in Hannah Arendt’s Thinking], *Cuadernos Electrónicos de Filosofía del Derecho*, 34 (2016): 162-181.
levels (legal, political, universal) to preserve human dignity—or, to put it in another way, a new human rights policy—, on one hand, and a strong commitment to a novel way to remember as an ethical obligation, on the other.

This ethical turn presupposes a comprehensive, self-critical historical memory of traumatic events where the voices of the unheard—women, marginalized ethnic minorities, victims of state violence, among others—can be seriously gathered, and responsibility and accountability of dominant actors—oppressive powers, crime perpetrators—can be acknowledged.

The memory of the Holocaust has been progressively built—although in an incomplete and controversial manner—under these precepts, consolidating its transformation from a historical event to a moving trauma/drama, namely, a powerful moralizing narrative that pretends to leave universal, edifying lessons about evil and produce a cathartic experience. As a process, remembering is a heterogeneous process where its frames of transmission—inter- and transgenerational mechanisms of dissemination of experiences—vary according to the personal membership of a given group of actors (victims, perpetrators, and bystanders), as well as historical connections, cultural traditions, and political contexts. Three different modes can be pointed out.

The identification mode is a form of memory proper to the Jewish community. As victims/survivors had been targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators for who they were, regardless of the country of origin, this condition of Jewishness extended to their families, offsprings and co-religionists created unique bonds among them as members of the same community that was on the verge of disappearing through extermination (at least in Europe). As such, individual identification and conveyance of memories are intimately linked to those of the Jewish collective (family, diaspora community, the Israeli state). This process has taken various forms, including the over-identification of the children of Holocaust survivors—where this 2G (‘second generation’) unconsciously appropriated the trauma of their parents as a part of their own self, in turn transmitting it to their scions through different acts of commemoration across

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generations, such as the symbolic gesture of picking the name of a murdered child in the Holocaust during the Bar Mitzvah celebration, the ‘march of the living’ and the re-enactment of ‘living history’—a pedagogical way to teach and learn history through identification.\textsuperscript{31}

For its part, the \textit{ethical mode} is a paradigm characteristic to those genealogically and historically related to the Third Reich. It emerged as the product of a generational rupture of the (West) Germans born at the end of the Second World War—spared from the horrors of the conflagration, recipients of the \textit{Wirtschaftswunder} (economic miracle) and brought up in a stable democratic regime—against the heavy silence and denial of their parents and grandparents about the deeds of the Nazi days. As a secret duty, these individuals were eager to explore and address the shameful past, accept guilt and responsibility for it, and ensure that this unearthed trauma will never be forgotten. This self-critical posture has been progressively adopted by the official establishment—first in West Germany and afterwards in the subsequent reunited state—in a commemoration pattern composed by the tribute to the victims, the preservation of this historical memory and a citizenship education based on human rights and democratic principles.\textsuperscript{32}

Finally, the \textit{empathic mode} is a more inclusive framework that encompasses bystanders—that is, individuals not marked nor attached by specific affiliations to the victims or perpetrators—, enabling them to assume an individual rapprochement to the brutalities of the Holocaust and, at the same time, keep a sufficient distance so that a conscious separation between self and other (victim or perpetrator) can take place. This latter is of the key features of empathy—the emotion that allows this stance, evoked by both personal interactions or through the media—, therefore distinguishing from sympathy or identification. Empathy also diverges from compassion—an emotion culturally and (in a considerable manner) genderly framed—, permitting individuals to include the other into their ‘circle of concern’ and develop a sensibility for the suffering of the other by putting themselves in his/her shoes.\textsuperscript{33}

As a memory, the Holocaust has been able to position itself in a prominent status—a \textit{global icon}—as the paradigmatic genocide in the world’s moral consciousness above other historical traumas. This form of cultural elaboration was reached through a process of symbolic

\textsuperscript{31} A more detailed explanation of these rituals can be found in Assmann, “Transformation”, 29-30.
\textsuperscript{32} Assmann, “Transformation”, 30-32.
\textsuperscript{33} Assmann, “Transformation”, 32-35.
reconstruction that involved different actions: de-contextualization—stripping the *Shoah* from its historical specificity and subsequently refashioning it into a new metaphysical and universal narrative—, symbolic extension—representing the Holocaust as the pure manifestation of evil and inhumanity, in turn conferring it a condition of universal moral norm—, emotional identification—generating empathy and emotional closeness among the general public, mostly through representations and recreations produced by different mass media: TV series, films, museum exhibitions, etc.—, analogy—making use (even abuse) of the Holocaust as a lever through comparison to legitimize diverse actions and claims and give them a moral halo—, and model—similar to analogy, capitalizing on the renowned symbol of the Holocaust to highlight and position other marginalized collective traumas.34

Naturally, a series of historical developments were fundamental in consolidating this new ‘memory culture’ and ensuring the dominant position of the Holocaust in western identity and memory. Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War during the late eighties and the early nineties was a milestone in this process. This astonishing event marked a turning point in world history because that is when the short twentieth century finished with the culmination of an age and the beginning of a new one35. As noted above, the political necessities of the early postwar years fostered narratives that repressed, ignored or biased unmastered pasts and favored a present or future-oriented mindset. Despite these triumphalistic and self-justifying official accounts—firmly fostered by the general climate of insecurity and geopolitical imperatives proper from the tensions and ideological constrains of the bipolar order—that began to be questioned from the sixties on, a radical turn could take place only with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The disappearance of the black-and-white perspective derived from the East-West dichotomy that colored every event with political meaning made possible the emergence of a global memory bloom and, with it, new spaces for a more self-critical addressing of thorny historical legacies: the traumatic episodes connected with the Second World War, the historical mistreatment and persecution of ethnic minorities, the tragic developments that followed the decolonization processes, among others.36

By the nineties, the dissemination of the Holocaust as a global icon had received a considerable stimulus by the articulation of different mass media and the wars unleashed in Bosnia and Kosovo. Perhaps, the most striking of the former are the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in 1993 and the launching of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* that same year—two key elements of the Americanization of the *Shoah*.

The USHMM is the culmination of a fifteen-year project that began with the creation of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust on 1 November 1978 by Jimmy Carter and chaired by Elie Wiesel, a Romanian-born survivor and reputed spokesman for Holocaust victims. Its mere location—adjacent to the National Mall in Washington, home of the most representative symbolic icons of the U.S. democracy—offers an initial idea of the great success in placing the Holocaust at the center of American life and establishment. Such ascendancy also can be explained by the way the commemorative, educational and entertainment functions of the USHMM could fit perfectly with the U.S. ethos. Indeed, through a comparative antithesis, it is intended to show that the horrors suffered by millions of people and the catastrophes produced by the Nazi regime were essentially a European event alien from the American democratic and egalitarian ideals. Of course, this self-affirmative stance entails the danger of externalizing evil (“it has nothing to do with me and my values”) and foster an acritical heroic self-image.\(^\text{37}\)

For its part, *Schindler’s List* is another outstanding example of the Americanization of the Holocaust. Rather relegating the Jewish victims to the sidelines—as well as the perpetrators—, the story is actually a particular recreation of the universal epic battle between good and evil personified in a reformed German profiteer (Oskar Schindler) and an infamous, crooked Nazi (Amon Goeth), respectively. Following this logic, the triumphant heroes of the horrors that occurred at the Kraków ghetto and Płaszów—thanks to their individual courage, daring, moral strength and, additionally, luck—are the rescuers and the survivors. Very telling is the idyllic image of the survivors singing a happy tune as they walk together in an open field heading to a hopeful future. Although this approach and its biases were exposed by diverse critics—J. Hoberman, James Bowman, Donald Kuspit and Claude Lanzmann, among others—, it is indisputable that the images offered by this powerfully emotive drama—the visual

repertoire of the elements of the Holocaust: Jewish victims, ghettos, concentration camps—have become iconic for millions of people in the U.S. and around the world. Such imagery collectively incorporated by the societies and the establishment of the United States and Europe were pivotal to mold the public reactions to the trail of bloodshed that were tearing apart the former Yugoslavia, as well as the arguments voiced to justify the diplomatic and military (NATO) interventions that followed. The evocative images—concentrations camps, massacres, razed villages, forced displacement of civilians—that came from the mass coverage of the war in Bosnia conjured up instantaneous, repetitive Holocaust analogies—identification of the Serbs with the Nazis, the Bosnians/Kosovar Albanians with the Jews, Milošević with Hitler—, many of which were oversimplified and unabashedly instrumentalized. This phenomenon became much more manifest during the subsequent war in Kosovo.

The institutionalization of the Holocaust as a transnational memory endowed with a widespread network, standard education and coordinated political agenda came at the turn of the millennium through the creation of a supranational agent. As a pedagogical/disseminator initiative from former Swedish Prime Minister Gören Persson, the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF) was officially founded in Washington in 1999. This intergovernmental network, originally composed by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Israel (Poland, France, Netherlands, and Italy joined in 1999),

39 The particular issues regarding the German military participation in Kosovo is addressed in the chapter on German expellees.
40 It is very important to mention that the numerous early public pronouncements and pleadings (many of them by prominent individuals) to stop the atrocities committed in the Bosnian War—which spanned for more than three and a half years between 6 April 1992 and 14 December 1995, leaving around 100 000 dead and two million homeless—did not imply an immediate, effective foreign diplomatic/political/military response. The first attempt to reach a solution (the Vance-Owen plan) only came in April 1993. The decisive deterrence finally took place in 1995, when the tragic events of Srebrenica led the United States and its NATO allies to intervene—largely due to the growing public pressure and the credibility of the Western alliance than the killing of civilians—and forced Serbs, Croats and Bosnians to sign the Dayton Accords. The delayed involvement in Bosnia helps to explain the considerably faster reaction from U.S./NATO to the Kosovo War—extended from February 1998 until 11 June 1999—, bending the Serbians again. A more detailed analysis can be read in Alan E. Steinweis, “The Auschwitz Analogy: Holocaust Memory and American Debates over Intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s”, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 19:2 (2005): 276-289; Levy & Sznider, “Memory Unbound”; Alexander, “On the Social”; Alm, “Holocaust Memory”; Daniel Levy & Natan Sznider, “Memories of Universal Victimhood. The Case of Ethnic German Expellees”, German Politics and Society, 23.2 (2005): 1-27.
underwent a crucial transformation and enlargement through the Intergovernmental Conference on the Holocaust (known also as the Stockholm Forum).\textsuperscript{41}

This high-level event was organized by Persson in Stockholm on 26-28 January, 2000—the 55\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops—and attended by 600 delegates from 46 countries, among them 23 heads of state. The resulting Stockholm Declaration, a brief document composed of eight paragraphs, emerged as a future-oriented reassertion of the Holocaust as a universal, immeasurable phenomenon whose memory must be preserved and disseminated. Furthermore, it encompasses a set of commitments on behalf of the signatories to achieve these purposes by means of education, remembrance and research actions. In subsequent years, the ITF continued to grow. Known as International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) from 2012 on, it currently has 31 member countries, two liaison countries and nine observer countries, whose delegations are headed by ambassadors or officials of a senior rank. Likewise, on 27 January, 2005, the European Parliament in Brussels and the United Nations declared jointly 27 January as Holocaust Remembrance Day\textsuperscript{42}.

The Stockholm Forum had a double objective in view: the transformation of the fading communicative memory of survivor-witnesses into a long-term cultural memory, and the creation of a supranational mnemonic community across European borders supported by extended networks of various kinds. Both of them entail implicitly other issues that are inherent to the current and future status of the Holocaust memory.

The first objective embraces the problem of maintaining an abiding memory that contains an emotional link or, in other words, implies the transgenerational transmission of the trauma lived by the survivors and keeping at the same time the affective charge attached to their experiences. Marianne Hirsch had already analyzed this phenomenon and coined the term \textit{postmemory} to describe the particular manner by which the second generation (the children of Holocaust survivors) has elaborated the trauma suffered by their parents, deeply transmitted by stories, images and behaviors in a frame of collective and individual identification\textsuperscript{43}.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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The two-word expression *post memory* is used to broaden this spectrum and includes all coming generations, not only those from survivors. Post memory presupposes a process of recreation of what has been produced by the media—images, narratives, information circulating through analog and digital communication channels—and available in archives. Those responsible to carry on this task are the so-called *second witnesses*, individuals from any condition who deal with the Holocaust through different symbolic representations—books, performances, films, exhibitions—creating a specific type of empathy by a *punctum*—an affective connection between the spectator and the representation—that can be recreated before a new media setting. In such a way, the Holocaust is addressed as an event in memory that keeps its emotional charge even after the last survivors (the first witnesses) perished.44

On the other hand, forging an international mnemonic community, which has led to a de-territorialization and homogenization of the Holocaust memory, brings complex (and sometimes undesirable) concerns. Despite the good intentions of creating an inclusive community with shared values and standardized educational tools, many historians and pedagogues have warned against such standardization. They argue that, albeit being the paradigmatic European *lieu de mémoire*, the *Shoah* was experienced in a different manner by each nation. The process of conferring it a unified character through a canonical narrative could lead to an undesirable abstraction and disconnection from local contexts that would blur the particularities and diversities revealed by different self-critical national memories.45

Chapter 2. The German Expellee Memory: General Considerations

Introduction

One of the most characteristic case of ethnic cleansing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was the forced displacement and expulsion of between 12 and 14 million ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) from East-Central Europe between the end of 1944 and 1948, most of them to both German states and Austria. Known as expellees (die Vertriebenen), the vast majority came from Poland—some seven million from the former German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line ceded to this country and the Soviet Union in 1945, and other 1.3 million from the old Polish lands—and Czechoslovakia—around three million from the Sudentenland. Likewise, 786 000 were cast out from Romania, 623 000 from Hungary and nearly 500 000 from Yugoslavia. The number of deceased persons resulting from starvation, diseases, deadly marches, exhaustion and attacks from mobs reached 500 000 to 1.5 million.\(^\text{46}\)

As heirs of their Nazi past and a defeated regime, one of the historical peculiarities of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the reunified country that emerged in 1990 is a twofold, simultaneous condition of a perpetrator/victim society. This feature has been at the center of intensive discussions in the political domain, popular culture, and historiography—among other spheres—in a nation where issues as politics, memory and history have gone hand-in-hand.

On the one hand, the responsibility of Nazi Germany and German society—as the totalitarian state was supported by most of its citizens—for the tragic events deriving from the Second World War in Europe is more than evident. Especially in East-Central and Eastern Europe where a brutal and murderous regime of exploitation and oppression was implemented in the occupied territories causing (either directly or indirectly) tens of millions of deaths and committing numerous atrocities against the non-German civil population.

At the same time, the whole German civil population—both inside and outside the Reich borders—was submitted to intense bombing campaigns (mainly by the American and British

governments), as well as persecutions, expulsions, and mass killings—for the most part in East-Central Europe and the eastern German territories. Millions of Wehrmacht soldiers suffered numerous tribulations as prisoners of war—particularly those captured by the Soviets—, and many of them did not manage to survive. There were also compelling reasons to feel victimized.

This writing provides an overview of the German expellees’ memory in the FRG and the reunified Germany, places where the full dynamism of this phenomenon has spread out. The authorities of the defunct GDR did not grant any public space for these people to express their experiences and include them in the country’s collective memory. The end of the war was depicted by the dominant standpoint as the liberation from Nazi oppression and the beginning of a new era of progress under the brilliant guide of SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Socialist Unity Party of Germany). Therefore, the responsibility of the expellees’ fate lied exclusively on the Third Reich. Under these conditions, it would have been very unwise and dangerous for an unpopular regime—sustained only by the support of the Soviet Union—to enable a sizable social group—nearly 25% of the GDR population in the late 1950s—to construct a rival discourse on the basis of traumatic suffering largely caused by its powerful ally. It is very telling that the terms “expellee” and “refugee” were erased from the official discourse and replaced with Umsiedler (resettlers) and Neubürger (new citizens).47

The memory of the expellees has not remained static in time. Its development and positioning both within German society and abroad have been conditioned by external and internal circumstances. Three different stages have been highlighted, applied to FRG and the unified Germany.48

First Stage (1945-1960s): Selective Positioning and the Rhetoric of Victimization

During the first two decades of the postwar era, the memory of expellees received remarkable recognition from different spheres in Western Germany. At first glance, it is relatively easy to understand, given the conditions where the FRG arose as well as the twofold perpetrator/victim status owned by Germans.

In the course of four years of occupation since 1945, much of the western part of Germany lay in ruins. Millions of Germans were refugees, expellees or homeless, having been victims of aerial bombings, expulsions, and killings. At the same time, this country was the cradle of a regime responsible for numerous sufferings and atrocities committed against non-German peoples living in occupied territories during the war, especially in East-Central and Eastern Europe. The Allies—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—tried to implement by force a policy of denazification, demilitarization and democratization, which was resisted by Germans who refused to assume a sort of “collective guilt” and declare themselves a nation of criminals for the perpetrated brutalities. When the FRG was founded in 1949, the issue of building an identity and a legitimate position to get rid of its international pariah status was a top priority. How to tackle such a burdensome legacy?

Of course, policies inspired by aggressive nationalism and militarism—both fully exploited during the German Empire and the Third Reich with calamitous consequences—were totally out of order. Additionally, the tremendous geopolitical value of Germany in the bipolar order was an inescapable factor to take into account. It was necessary to rely on others means. This is where the issue of the expellees—encompassed in a broader German suffering discourse that includes others groups such as prisoners of war and Allied bombing victims, and called by Robert G. Moeller as the rhetoric of victimization—acquired a particular importance in building the legitimacy of the West German government and the strengthening of its democratic credentials both abroad and at home. The diversity of spaces for expression enjoyed by expellee discourse was remarkable—the academic world, the press, the domestic political environment,

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50 Moeller. War Stories. Also, Moeller, “Germans as Victims?”
51 In this regard, it is worth to mention what is perhaps the first academic-testimonial study on the expulsions: Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus den Gebieten östlich der Oder-Neisse (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, [1954], 1984), which may be translated as Documents on the Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern-Central-Europe. Some of the most renowned German historians at that time—Theodor Schieder (director),
the national film industry, among others—but tended to be subordinated to political and ideological objectives.

At the domestic level, the issue of German suffering was resolved by the universal victimhood self-image—which does not distinguish between victims and perpetrators and minimizes the crimes committed by the latter—as an acceptable way to come to terms with the past. It portrayed Germans as victims, putting their tribulations on the same level with those of other peoples because of their ethnicity. At the same time, it helped to shift the heavy toll of the Nazi outrages on the shoulders of a few scapegoats: Adolf Hitler and a handful of his fanatical followers. Outside the FGR borders and through the denunciation of the Communist brutality, expellees became a good propaganda tool for Adenauer’s government. This helped to strengthen the country’s insertion into the Western bloc in the midst of a tense atmosphere produced by the aggressive Soviet Union’s foreign policy and the deepening differences with the former wartime allies.

The anti-Communist tone showed in the official rhetoric of the expellees can be seen through some comparison strategies. Communism and Nazism were equivalent by virtue of their totalitarianism. Both committed equally horrendous crimes. The suffering of victims in Auschwitz or Treblinka was the same nightmare underwent by millions of Germans fled and expelled from Silesia, Pomerania, the Sudetenland and other territories.

Of course, the discourse of German suffering from those years is not void of biases, including its selectivity. A marked absence of self-criticism permeated Western Germans as a result of their anxiety of distancing themselves from the Third Reich. The emphasis on German victims was simultaneously accompanied by the minimization or absence of awareness in practice of Nazi victims’ voice, despite the parity declared by the official rhetoric. This was reflected in the circumstances in which war reparations paid by the FGR to the nascent State of Israel took place or the denial of compensations to other groups of victims (such as gypsies and homosexuals).53

Moreover, during those years the rhetoric of victimization had the support of Western German cinema. Some productions of the fifties—included in the so-called Papa’s Kino by the

Hans Rothfels, Werner Conze, Martin Broszat, Hans-Ulrich Wehler—participated in this project funded by the FRG. A very comprehensive analysis of this work can be found in Moeller, War Stories, 51-87.
New German Cinema as well as into the *Heimatfilm* genre\textsuperscript{54}— gave rise to modeled stories on expulsions comfortable to the receiving public that helped to build an acceptable past in the FRG.\textsuperscript{55}

Generally speaking, those films feature redemption and “spiritual restoration.” A Manichaean, quasi-religious struggle between clearly distinguishable heroes and villains left moral lessons learned after experiencing loss and suffering. Any hint of guilt or responsibility of possible *Volksdeutsche* participation in war crimes is never mentioned or showed. Expellees are portrayed as a symbol of achievement and rebirth, not remaining in the past nor missing the old days. On the contrary: they prove themselves as useful individuals that are essential to building the new Western German society by successfully combining their traditional values from the old *Heimat* with modern times. Examples include *Grün ist die Heide* (*The Heath Is Green*, 1951), *Ännchen von Tharau* (*Annie of Tharau*, 1954), *Suchkind 312* (*Lost Child No 312*, 1955), and *Waldwinter: Glocken der Heimat* (*Forest in Winter: Bells of Home*, 1956)\textsuperscript{56}.

**Second Stage (1960s-1990): Marginalization and Rhetoric of Perpetration**

The 1962 Cuban missile crisis was one of the most critical episodes of the Cold War. The two superpowers barely missed a point of no return. Nevertheless, East and West could enjoy a period of *détente* when this situation was overcome. A sign of this rapprochement was the *Ostpolitik* implemented by Willy Brandt since the end of the sixties with the aim of establishing closer relations with East Germany and its Warsaw Pact allies. Of course, a tough anti-Communist rhetoric was no longer useful to accomplish this objective.

\textsuperscript{54} Moeller, *War Stories*, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{55} Of course, there were other films that deviate from the rhetoric of victimization and raise sharp questions on the German responsibility for the war. These include Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Morder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are Among Us*, 1946), which addresses the issue of the civilians killings in Poland, and Frank Wisbar’s *Nacht fiel über Gotenhafen* (*Darkness Fell on Gotenhafen*, 1959), which focuses on the German guilt and deals with the sinking of the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff*—boarded mostly by German refugees and wounded soldiers from East Prussia—by a Soviet submarine in the Baltic Sea at the end of January 1945; later, this story was taken up by Günter Grass in his novel *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*, 2002) and Joseph Vilsmaier’s docudrama *Die Gustloff* (2008). On the former see Moeller, *War Stories*, 125, and on the latter Elke Heckner, “Televising Tainted History: Recent TV Docudrama (*Dresden, March of Millions, Die Gustloff*) and the Charge of Revisionism”, *New German Critique*, 38.1 (2011), 74-76.
\textsuperscript{56} Moeller, *War Stories*, 123-170. A very thorough description and analysis of these films can be found there, as well as another one that approaches the experiences of German POWs in Soviet camps, euphemistically known as the lessons in the “barbed-wired university”.
On the other hand, the sixties were the beginning of the positioning of the Holocaust memory as the “civil religion of the Western world” and the core event of German history in the twentieth-century. This is an example of what Enzo Traverso calls the transition from a weak memory to a stronger one.⁵⁷ Events as Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials from 1963 to 1965 received considerable attention in West Germany.⁵⁸ The Six Day War took place in 1967 and Israel was generally seen by the non-Arab world as a heroic country struggling for its survival and determined to avoid a new annihilation. This strengthened Shoah memory contributed decisively to the shift in the way Western German society assumed its Nazi past.

Those were also the times of the generational rupture incarnated in the events of May 1968 and the so-called 68ers. In the FRG, they were mostly young adults born at the end of the war who did not undergo the horrors of war and enjoyed the prosperity brought by the Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle). Misery and deprivation were left behind and, having the democratic system firmly established, there was a permanent concern of knowing what happened in the past, that is, why socially accepted rules of a civilized country were broken and violated in such a way.⁵⁹

These circumstances did not benefit the memory of the expellees in the West German society. Of course, this does not mean that an anti-democratic environment was required for a favorable positioning of the various ways of remembering those manifestations of German suffering into the FRG public memory. As previously stated, this was possible in the early postwar period and, as it will be shown later under very different conditions, after the end of the Cold War. Rather, what is meant to imply is that the radical shift of apprehending the recent past was a product of a change in circumstances and a very critical reaction of the 68ers towards the silence of their parents and grandparents regarding the crimes of the Third Reich.

⁵⁸ Moeller, “Germans as Victims?”, 169.
Although, during the early years of the postwar era the expellees were a key part of the rhetoric of victimization and the building of an acceptable past of the FRG, their experiences were not fully included in a collective shared memory. Nevertheless, the marginalization of these people was to be far greater two decades after the end of the Second World War. A reflection of their irrelevance as a social group can be seen in the lack of interest of being taken as an object of study by the Alltagsgeschichte (history of everyday life) school.\(^{60}\)

Even their importance as a political instrument ceased to exist. The following is a good example. The conciliating approximations from the Brandt government towards Poland—the signing of a treaty in 1970 to normalize ties between the countries and the West German \textit{de facto} recognition of the Oder-Neisse border—were strongly criticized by expellees organizations, whose claims for compensations, public recognition, and other demands were irritant for many Soviet bloc countries. Marked as “radical and dangerous” by Brandt himself, these associations began to be considered as backward, extreme right-wing supporters, and a legacy of the Nazi past reluctant to acknowledge Third Reich atrocities.\(^{61}\)

The pendulum radically swung towards the opposite side. Criticism of the representations that portrayed Germans as victims soon followed. Especially from the left-wing, the new generation thought necessary to abandon this position and take responsibility for the crimes committed during the war by its parents and grandparents. It happened at this point in time that the guilt-and shame paradigm\(^{62}\) or the rhetoric of perpetration as a guideline to build up the past in FRG, as well as in the ways of remembering and commemorating, gained a dominant place. Thus, the German suffering was being displaced by German acts against Jews, Gypsies, various European national groups, homosexuals, etc. An idea developed that all burdens and loss experienced by Germans and Germany was a fair price to pay for what they had done during the Nazi period.

It is commonplace that this rhetoric of perpetration was being co-opted by its supporters in a quasi-dogmatic way, although the same could be said about their opponents. The former vigorously questioned any account that did not strongly condemned National Socialism or

\(^{60}\) Schlüze, “The Politics of Memory”, 371.


\(^{62}\) Expression taken from Heckner, “Televising”
exposed the German guilt, considering that these alternative viewpoints could minimize or avoid responsibility for the Holocaust and other terrible crimes. The latter—not necessarily extreme right-wing followers or people associated with expellees’ organizations—claimed that such representations were not enough to understand the different German suffering manifestations during and after the war.

No fewer than five major controversies have arisen since the eighties around these conflicting discourses, where politics, historiography, and mass media are unavoidably mixed—a notorious feature of the West German society: the Historikerstreit (1986-1987), the Broszat-Friedländer exchange (1988), the heated controversy around Daniel J. Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners (1996), the discussions raised during the Historkertag of 1998, and the commotion caused by an exhibition in Hamburg on the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht (1995-2002). This essentially reflects the immense difficulty of coming to terms with a very problematic past. The former will be briefly discussed below.

The Historikerstreit—the historians’ quarrel—was an intense debate. Initially limited to historiography, soon acquired political overtones facing both West German left- (social democratic) and right- (conservative) wing supporters, crossing the FRG boundaries too. It began with the publication of an article written by the conservative historian Ernst Nolte in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (June 6, 1986) called “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will” (“The past that won’t go away”). According to Nolte, Nazism was a product of the Russian Revolution and the Holocaust was on the same level as the “class genocide” practiced by the Soviets, being the former a preventive measure to prevent the latter from happening in Germany. These claims were heartily contested by Jürgen Habermas in Die Zeit (July 11, 1986). He accused Nolte of normalizing the past and diluting Nazism responsibility for its crimes. His criticism on these “apologetic trends” was also extended to Andreas Hillgruber’s Zweierlei Untergang (Double Downfall)—where Holocaust unicity is questioned and the juxtaposition of this tragedy with others from German suffering is made, including Eastern front soldiers and expellees—, to approaches from the historian Joachim Fest, and to Michael Stürmer, who served as advisor to Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

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63 This issue is addressed by Traverso, El pasado, 81-86.
64 A further deepening on the Historikerstreit can be found in Traverso, El pasado, 82-84, Josep Fontana, La historia de los hombres: el siglo XX [The History of Men: The Twentieth Century], (Barcelona: Crítica, 2002), 108-111. An analysis of Hillgruber’s book can be read in Bard, “Historical Memory”, 66-71.
Third Stage (1990 onwards): New Perspectives

The end of the Cold War was one of the most significant events that took place in the early nineties. This represented, according to Eric Hobsbawm’s words and perspective, the closure of the short twentieth century. Of course, there have been tremendous implications for such a fact, thus directly impacting the dynamics of German expellees’ memory and discourse. Nowadays, they and their experiences have been receiving a boost through different channels and spaces, among them the German governmental agenda, the press, historiography, literature, and the film and television industries.

The German reunification was one of the most striking products of the end of the bipolar world, “a unique case of fusion in a decade of fission.” In practical terms, it meant the complete absorption of the GDR into the FRG. The fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 and the rapid collapse of East-Central European Communist regimes—both simultaneous phenomena only possible thanks to the Soviet voluntary abandonment of its Warsaw Pact satellites—overturn any feasible future for East Germany, perhaps the most dependent client of the Soviet Union. In less than a year and after speedy negotiations, its demise and total integration into the West German socio-economic and political system took place in the form of the Unification Treaty signed on 31 August, 1990 and celebrated on 3 October.

A new sense of ‘nationhood’ emerged with the reunification. Most Germans acknowledged the existence of a past where suffering and loss had taken place. These experiences and representations were now freed from taboos and distortions induced by the heavy political-ideological burden of the Cold War. For instance, East Germans could already remember and speak freely about the expulsions and atrocities committed by the Soviets without fear of state repression. Meanwhile, in the western part of the country a renewed interest in these events arose partly due to the trips made by many Wessi to East-Central Europe who had no relation with the former territories or homes lost after the war. It enabled them to see for themselves similarities between the expellees and the current residents in such regions.

65 Judt, Postwar, 638
66 Judt, Postwar; Hobsbawm, Historia.
67 Moeller, “Germans as Victims?”, 171-172.
By all means, that is not to say that the ways of remembering, commemoration and building the past were (are) free from deformations, manipulations, and disputes nor a unique, unequivocal manner of addressing German suffering has arisen. Nevertheless, the disappearance of an onerous subordination to strategic and geopolitical goals imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union has provided opportunities to rethink and explore new paths to tackle a still controversial past.

For example, the opening of borders and the expansion of the European Union have allowed to develop many approaches unthinkable before. These include the conclusion of binational agreements—such as the Czech-German Declaration of 1997—aimed to settle sensitive issues pertaining to their shared past and its ongoing consequences. Although there are still unresolved hot topics on the part of the Czechs—including expellees’ claims with regard to financial compensations and restitution of property—, these agreements generally build a communication bridge that has led to progress in terms of reconciliation and public recognition.\(^\text{69}\)

There have been also encounters where German and East-Central European academics have exchanged knowledge and postures *vis-à-vis* the troubled recent past shared by their countries. At the same time, archives previously classified and inaccessible by the former Communist regimes are now valuable primary sources that could provide new insights about the German occupation during the war and the subsequent expulsions.\(^\text{70}\)

Other less friendly events have strengthened the positioning of the expellees’ memory. The reshaping of borders in Europe since the end of the Cold War has not always been as peaceful as in Germany or former Czechoslovakia, divided since 1993. The breakup of the Soviet Union since 1991 has left a range of still-unresolved conflicts in some of its former

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\(^{70}\) Moeller, “Germany as Victims?”, 172.
regions, including Transnistria and the Caucasus. The Yugoslav wars of the nineties are perhaps the most well-known case.

During this decade and within the context of globalization, the Holocaust ceased to be a particular experience limited to certain national histories. It became a universal symbol of evil beyond any comprehension, delocalized from time and space. Within the framework of human rights, it began to act as the benchmark par excellence of other past and present scenarios of injustice and trauma around the world. The memories of such events are positioned by this comparative perspective in a global discourse; they are intertwined by certain categories, *ethnic cleansing*\(^71\) being one of the most commonly used. These “cosmopolitanized” forms of memories are related with other national versions in a context of tensions, negotiations, and balances among them.\(^72\)

The above allows a better understanding of the participation of German troops in Kosovo as a part of a military contingent under NATO in 1999. Since the former Yugoslav wars, the public has been accustomed to watching pictures and televised representations of this tragedy: destroyed cities and towns, massacres and violations, refugee camps, civilians driven from their homes—the very same images associated with the memory of the Holocaust. Serbians were compared to Nazis; their actions against the Albanian minority were considered ethnic cleansing that had to be stopped.

The German Social Democratic government headed by Gerhard Schröder sought to justify the dispatch of soldiers as a humanitarian cause. To this end, the German left-wing had to get rid of its old defense of the uniqueness of the Holocaust—one of the pillars of the rhetoric of perpetration—and adopt a comparative, universalist perspective—supported by the right-wing—of what was happening in Kosovo. Intervening there meant to stop a tragedy similar to the *Shoah*. After obtaining an overwhelming parliamentary majority and overcoming their internal party opposition, Schröder and his Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer—he himself from a German expellee family from Hungary—were able to send troops to the Balkans. This was a

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\(^71\) This term has become popular since the Bosnian War in 1992. From a theoretical point of view, ethnic cleansing is set within the wider context of the forced transfer of populations as a political solution to self-determination conflicts. The two main forms are the population exchanges—as the 1923-1924 Turkish-Greek experience—and expulsions—for instance, the German expellees. See Stefan Wolf, “Can Forced Population Transfers Resolve Self-Determination Conflicts? A European Perspective”, online, Internet, September 5, 2012. Available: [http://www.stefanwolf.com/files/ethniccleansing.pdf](http://www.stefanwolf.com/files/ethniccleansing.pdf)

\(^72\) A very thorough analysis on the relationship between these perspectives of memory and the specific case of the German expellees can be found in Levy & Sznajder, “Memories of Universal”.
big triumph of German foreign policy, beating the internal and external resistance to a potential German military participation and consolidating a positive status of responsibility and leadership of the country to preserve the stability and security of Europe. As a result, the baleful memory of the Wehrmacht operations in the Balkans and the brutal Nazi occupation gave way to a benevolent image of the Bundeswehr actions in the name of the defense of human rights in Kosovo.\(^73\)

On the other hand, it was also possible to make simultaneously the comparison between the Holocaust and the barbarous acts in the Balkans with those of the German suffering, including the expellees. The ordeals of the Kosovo Albanians were equivalent to those undergone by the ethnic Germans more than fifty years ago. The doom of distress and expulsions endured in the past by Germany during and after the Second World War was rediscovered and placed in this new perspective thanks to the present tragedies of the Balkan wars. Thus, it was possible to include the German expellees’ ordeal into the universal victim collective under the ethnic cleansing label. This and the discourse convergence of German left and right regarding the ecumenical meaning of the Holocaust to justify the military involvement in Kosovo meant opening the door to German suffering to the domestic political arena, pulling it out from the ostracism and the marginality, and conferring it a respectable status as a discussion topic. This was reflected, for instance, by the speech given by Schröder at the annual meeting of the Union of Expellees in September 2000, or by the vigorous debate around the establishment of a Center against Expulsions.\(^74\)

These changes in the manners of perceiving and appropriating the past in Germany have not been limited to the political domain. Attempts have been made from the academic, literary and cinematographic worlds to elaborate more comprehensive representations where the twofold German condition of perpetrator/victim is shown in a way as balanced as possible, thereby discarding the mutual exclusivity logic of both categories and overcoming the biases


from the rhetoric of victimization and perpetration. In the words of Hans Rothfels, this means remembering the past “in its horrifying totality.”

Following this trend, various German-language novels produced in the 2000s address the expulsions from a perspective of partial repression of memories at the generational level and its subsequent impacts on the ways to cope with the loss of the Heimat, both for the grandparents (those who underwent it directly) and their offspring (parents and grandchildren). Examples of these are Jörg Bernig’s Niemandszeit (No Man’s Time, 2002), Reinhard Jirgl’s Die Unvollendeten (The Unfinished, 2003), Tanja Dückers’ Himmelskörper (Heavenly Bodies, 2003), Olaf Müller’s Schlesisches Wetter (Silesian Weather, 2003), Michael Zellner’s Die Reise nach Samoch (The Trip to Samoch, 2003) and, of course, the renowned Günter Grass with Im Krebsgang (Crabwalk, 2002).

Regarded as the first attempt of a well-known German writer to take the issue of the expellees in a literary work as its main theme, Crabwalk unfolds around one of the key milestones in the memory of this collective: the sinking of the ship Wilhelm Gustloff—boarded mostly by German refugees and wounded soldiers from East Prussia—by a Soviet submarine in the Baltic Sea at the end of January 1945. In essence, the conveyed message is a critic to the left and the center-left—Grass himself belonging to this political trend—for abandoning and ignoring the memory of the German expellees and the refugees, allowing the far-right to adopt it as part of its propaganda.

In the world of cinematography, some productions from the 2000s portray the surrounding context where the debates on the German suffering have taken place during the last years. This is the case of Roland Suso Richter’s Dresden (2006), Kai Wessel’s Die Flucht...

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(March of Millions, 2007) and Joseph Vilsmaier’s Die Gustloff (2008). In this regard, three particular features can be considered.

First and foremost, these films have followed a sort of third way that distinguish them from any other unequivocal manifestation of the rhetoric of victimization/perpetration. There is an attempt to place the German suffering in a wider political-cultural context which recognizes the heavy legacy of this twofold victim/perpetrator condition. The different manifestations of such suffering (bombardments, displacements, expulsions) are represented without suggesting or justifying any exoneration or minimization of responsibilities for the involvement of ordinary Germans in war crimes because of these ordeals. Likewise, it is evident that a distance is taken from the guilt-and-shame paradigm through the thematization of episodes from the German past ignored for decades.

Another outstanding aspect is a projection of the present into the past—within a context of German post-unification—using characters who display specific traits from Western democratic ideals, among them moral and political sinlessness, humanitarianism and compassion, bravery and courage to face and question Nazi tyranny and brutality. They are sheer survivors living in tough times, admirable representatives of those “good Germans” who will be key actors in the new post-Hitlerian Western German society.

Finally, these productions are inclined to seek for reconciliation on three levels. Firstly, a transgenerational dimension where there is an attempt to bring to light stories of experiences of suffering and the ways to remember them by grandparents, parents, and sons, confined for so long to the family sphere. This acknowledgment can take place at national and transnational scale (second and third level). The latter aims to bring together the former enemies during the war and make explicit multi-perspective narratives from the involved historical actors, including regrettable deeds, excesses, and injustices committed on all sides.

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80 Heckner, “Televising”. It has to be said that this point of view is not shared by other authors as Bill Niven. To a large extent, Hackner’s paper is a reply to Niven’s analysis, who considers these productions as a way to exculpate and elude German responsibility for the atrocities committed during the Nazi era.
81 Heckner, “Televising.”
82 Heckner, “Televising.”
Chapter 3. Habermann: An Analysis

Key data

*Habermann* is a 2010 Czech-German-Austrian co-production. Filmed in eight locations near Prague (between 8-140 km), the movie is based on real events portrayed in Josef Urban’s novel *Habermann’s Mill* (German: *Habermanns Mühle*; Czech: *Habermannův mlýn*). Although it is a German-language movie, Corinth Films (a distribution company) launched an English-dubbed version for the United States and Canada. Some details are shown in the following fact sheet:

**Table 1. Habermann’s fact sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original title</th>
<th>Habermann</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Period drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>104 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>German with English subtitles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Germany, Czech Republic, Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producers</td>
<td>Karel Dirka and Art-Oko Film GmbH &amp; Co. Filmproductions KG(^{84}).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-producers</td>
<td>KN Film Company, Wega-Film, Werner Herzog Film, Apollomedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsors</td>
<td>FFF, DFFF, FFA, Filmstiftung NRW, SFČR, TV NOVA, ÖFI, ORF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributors</td>
<td>Entertainment Value Associates EVA, Corinth Films (for the United States and Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Juraj Herz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Cast           | Mark Waschke (August Habermann)  
|                | Hannah Herzsprung (Jana Habermann)  
|                | Karel Roden (Jan Brezina)  
|                | Ben Becker (Major Koslowski)  
|                | Wilson González Ochsenknecht (Hans Habermann)  
|                | Franziska Weisz (Martha Brezina) |


\(^{84}\) Copyright owner.
Awards

- New Hope Film Festival (United States, 2011): best picture
- Jewish Eye – World Film Festival (Israel, 2010): best feature film
- Bavarian Film Prize (Germany, 2010): best actor (Mark Waschke) and best director (Juraj Herz)

Synopsis

The story revolves around August Habermann, a Sudeten German mill owner from Eglau, a fictitious town located in the Sudetenland (see the image below). Since the 12th century until 1946, this region was the home of an important ethnic German minority, numbering around three million people. Before 1936, three out of ten inhabitants of Czechoslovakia belonged to this community.85

Image 1. Sudetenland region annexed to the Reich, 193886

The story begins as it finishes: with scenes of the expulsion of all Sudeten Germans from Eglau as they are being forcefully boarded in freight trains to Germany. Between these two extremes, the account that takes place can be divided into three parts.

The first one stretches from 1937 until 1 October 1938. Jana, August’s Czech fiancée, arrives at Eglau railway station along with one of the nuns from the orphanage where she grew up. Both are picked up by August and his very close friend, the forest ranger Karel Brezina. The wedding takes place a few days later. Those were happy, idyllic times. Nevertheless, rising anxieties about the possible annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany are revealed by a conversation between Karel and the mayor Hartl regarding Jana’s baptismal certificate—where her half-Jewish background is disclosed, though neither her nor others will be aware of it until much later. Such concerns are confirmed by a radio announcement of Hitler on the very same day Melissa, August and Jana’s daughter, is born. The annexation, carried out on 1 October 1938, is good news for many (like Hans, August’s younger brother) and fatal for others (Karel).

The second part starts on the abovementioned date, the day of Melissa’s christening. The German troops entering the town to take possession on behalf of the Reich are warmly welcomed by the population in general. Sturmbannführer (Major) Kurt Koslowski—the assigned SS commandant—comes into the picture, storming into the celebration. From this time on, happy times go away—except for a few moments—and August’s constant struggle to protect and defend Eglau’s inhabitants from Nazi arbitrariness—motivated mainly by insurgent activities—is shown. Yet he does not always succeed: he is incapable of preventing Hans’ enthusiastic recruitment into the Wehrmacht or bookkeeper Hora’s execution at the hands of Koslowski.

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87 This event resulted from the Munich Agreement, signed by Germany (Adolf Hitler), Italy (Benito Mussolini), United Kingdom (Neville Chamberlain), and France (Edouard Daladier), by which the Czechoslovak state was officially dismantled. This was also the last achievement of the aggressive German territorial expansion without unleashing a war. Germany incorporated all the Sudetenland. Poland received the small district of Teschen. In March 1939, the Third Reich occupied the remaining Czech lands as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, while establishing a puppet regime in Slovakia —also stripped away from large territorial swathes ceded to Hungary under the First Vienna Award in November 1938—. The Czechoslovak government, headed by Edvard Beneš, and the Soviet Union were excluded from the negotiations. A brilliant pooled analysis connecting this episode with the chain of events that led to the Second World War can be found in Hobsbawm, Historia, 29-61 and 148-181.
The last section of the story is developed from a string of chained events that start with the death of two German soldiers caused by the stupidity and hastening of Mašek, the troubled mill foreman who is the son of Eliska, August’s housekeeper. These episodes include the terrible negotiation between August and Koslowski regarding the usual collective reprisals taken by the Germans in retaliation to attacks against them as well as Jana’s fate after her Jewish background has been revealed to the SS by the mayor Hartl; the execution of Czechs randomly chosen by Koslowski, who spared the lives of ten in exchange for August’s family jewels; the deportation of Jana and Melissa; the hasty runaway of the German occupiers from the Soviet troops; Koslowski’s death after his failed escape.

The fatal climax of this whirlwind of events is the humiliation, torture and assassination of August at the hands of the very same people he strove to protect. His death was provoked both by his confused and unclear role in the execution ordered by the Sturmbannführer and the predatory opportunism of some characters, including mayor Hartl, Brichta (a mill worker), Pospichal (the hotel manager), Eliska, and Mašek. The latter is hanged as he is unsuccessfully trying to take hold of Habermann’s assets after learning he was his half-brother (a secret only known by her mother and August). Finally, some men burn August’s body in a boiler to erase all traces of the crime.

Expulsion scenes shown at the beginning of the story are resumed again. Jana and Melissa have just returned from captivity and are disoriented after seeing their plundered home and hearing nothing from August. On their way to town, they are dragged to the railway station along with the battered crowd of Sudenten Germans and forced to board a freight train. There they meet Hans. Before leaving, Karel gives Jana the necklace Koslowski took from her when she was deported. Following the train’s departure, the film ends with a note about the futile formal accusation made by Karel against Hartl and his accomplices for the murder of August, a charge exonerated for lack of evidence (the dead body).

An Encounter of Representations: The German Expellees and the Holocaust

Undoubtedly, Habermann is a tragic story. Happy moments do not abound and the sorrows and misfortunes suffered by many of its characters are the reflexion of a remarkably
challenging period. The poster of the American version of the film offers to the audience a glimpse of a painful account.

**Image 2.** Poster of the American version of *Habermann.*

This image is very powerful and evocative: a mother and her daughter (Jana and Melissa) hugging each other strongly, ragged, and looking fearfully. Putting aside the white swastika and the absence of the typical yellow David star, it may be thought that the story centers on the ordeal of a Jewish woman and her child during the Holocaust.

As stated before, the story revolves around August, not Jana. It begins and ends with the expulsion of Sudeten Germans from Eglau. Nevertheless, the story is not developed around the

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experience of the expulsion either. What it is intended to recreate is a particular chain of events before and during the war that led to the expulsion of Germans from a small (fictitious) town of the Sudetenland. In other words, Habermann is a representation that aims to contextualize the tragedy of the expulsions at a local level (Eglau) through the reconstruction of perspectives from different historic agents embodied in symbolic characters. The film is about the German expellees, not the Holocaust, and the producers make that quite clear. While it is evident that diverse elements of the Holocaust iconography appear in different scenes, it is also necessary to elaborate on it.

To begin with, let’s take a look at the expulsion. A large, terrified throng of helpless women, children, and elders—all of them Germans—are gathered at the railway station. These people are brutalized and beaten, not by the SS or other auxiliary troops, but by an angry mob of Czech civilians and militiamen identified with red hallmarks. They are forced to board a freight train, not to a concentration/extermination camp, but most probably to Germany. These people do not wear a Star of David; instead, many of them have white armbands with a green painted “N” (němec, German in Czech language). Their suitcases are not marked with Stars of David either, but with white swastikas. It can be noted that this collection of images shown in the film about the expulsion evoke the well-known analogous set that has been widely disseminated by other audiovisual representations.

Having said this, it is highly important to clarify that it is not a calculated superimposing set of iconographic resources from one event (the Holocaust) to another (the expulsions). There is a great number of historical facts and diverse photographic material (see image 3) that support this staging. A peculiarity of the expulsions from Czechoslovakia is that they took place in two phases. The first one—between around the spring and summer of 1945 and the end of the Postdam Conference on 2 August, 1945—is what has been termed ‘wild expulsions’ or divoký odsun. These are the ones shown in the film, and they were carried out in a brutal manner mainly by soldiers, security forces, and local militias. It is estimated that approximately 700 000 Sudeten Germans were expelled, about 19 000–30 000 of whom died violently as a result of massacres, summary executions, forced marches, diseases, and starvation. Based on the

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89 Not only in the story per se, but in the additional information provided by both the DVD booklet and the online press book from Corinth Films. With a pedagogical sense, these materials contain, besides the featuring production information, historical facts, news articles, and suggested educational resources on the expulsions.
Potsdam provisions and the Beneš decrees, a second phase developed between January and December 1946 through a systematic expulsion of around 2,000,000 people that had to be executed “in an orderly and humane manner.” This did not prevent, however, that thousands more perished. What is shown in the film corresponds to the first stage.


90 In general terms, the Beneš decrees are a set of legal measures conceived by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London, led by Edvard Beneš. Based on the principle of collective punishment, they allowed the expulsion of ethnic Germans and Hungarians (the latter living in Slovakia) from the country, loss of their citizenship, confiscation of property, as well as exemption of liability for anyone who had committed any use of excessive force against those people. Further analyzes of their features and nuances can be found in the references listed in the following footnote. An English language version of the decrees can be read in EVA Distribution GmbH, Habermann. “A Story”, online, Internet, 3 April 2018. Available: https://web.archive.org/web/20130717025058/http://www.habermann-film.com:80/en/benes_decree.php


Evocation is not the only modality of encounter between German and Jewish suffering. Habermann exhibits at least two moments where these two experiences are juxtaposed. First and foremost, the passenger train transporting wounded German soldiers from the Eastern Front to Bayreuth temporarily stops at Eglau. A couple of the soldiers, having heard that they would die there, are very afraid to be on board. On the parallel railway, there is a freight train at standstill marked with white Stars of David carrying Jewish children. It is an interesting and weird scene, as the rails are linked by a sort of common, fatal fate.

On the other hand, the final sequence bears a great deal of meaning. After removing her coat to cover Melissa and receiving her lost cross necklace from Karel, Jana exposes the Star of David sewn on her blouse while the train is put in motion. Indeed, half-Jewish by birth, Czech by upbringing, and (Sudeten) German by marriage, Jana embodies the multi-ethnic character of her homeland. Each one of these identities was subjected to persecution and discrimination at some point. After suffering deportation for being half-Jewish, she is expelled for being married to a German. Forced to board one of the same trains used by the Nazis to carry their Jewish victims to camps, Jana, with her Star of David exposed, is the Jewish victim travelling together with the German victims into exile. In this way, the tragedy of the expulsion of Germans is placed on the same level as the Holocaust.

**Representation and History**

As mentioned before, Habermann is not limited to highlight the suffering of the expulsions. Likewise, the film depicts this event as a combination of different factors based on historical facts. As such, it is a representation that has interesting traits, as well as noteworthy biases.

Let’s start with the first part. As already indicated, anxiety regarding the annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany arose in a conversation about a radio broadcast by Hitler. This scene shows the atmosphere and the context surrounding the historical path followed by the region since the nineteenth century, as well as what is to come:

Hans: “August, did you hear? We’ll belong to Germany again. It’s going to be again: One Reich, one nation, one Führer. It’s been agreed upon in Munich.”
Karel: “You’re lying. England and France can’t abandon us like that. If they’re doing that to us today, it’s going to be their turn tomorrow.”

Mašek: “In 1918 it was the imperial and the royal monarchy. And now we have the Nazis. Yes, yes. We always had to serve some masters as slaves.”

Bríctu: “Talk Czech!”

Mašek: “Why? You heard it! We have German schools. All the public offices are also German! We belong to Germany.

These lines reveal tensions—rather rhetoric, not always real—between Germans and Czechs that lived together within a single state controlled by the latter. They are rooted in the ethnic nationalism emerged during the last decades of the nineteenth century and spread throughout the different national communities of East-Central Europe ruled by great imperial polities —Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Ottoman empire— with aspirations of building national, homogeneous national states. Some of them were successful in doing so after 1918.93

Over the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech nationalist mythology considered Germandom from a negative, mutually exclusive perspective—aristocratic, feudal, and authoritarian—in contrast to Czechness—middle class, modern, democratic. Likewise, the ethnic Germans settled in the Czech lands for several centuries are judged by this rhetoric as invaders, immigrants, and colonisers. These chauvinist declamations became an important part of the Czech popular discourse after the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, accentuating its virulence during the Nazi occupation. On the other hand, the demise of Austro-Hungary, the inclusion of the Sudetenland into the new Czechoslovak state and the futile attempts of ethnic Germans to determine their own destiny based on the principle of self-determination caused a profound psycho-social effect on a community accustomed to enjoy a favored position during imperial times. Under the new circumstances, this community considered itself as an independent national group rather than a minority. Thus, “the Germans were now, all of a sudden and against their will, transformed from a privileged Staatsvolk into what they perceived as second-class citizens of third-class state(s).”94

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93 A wider analysis of ethnic nationalism in East-Central Europe can be consulted in Bideleux & Jeffries, *A History.*

Nevertheless, and despite certain forms of real or perceived ethnic and linguistic discrimination—among them the agrarian reform of 1921, the access to bureaucracy and education policies—, Sudeten Germans and other ethnic minorities in Czechoslovakia benefited from constitutional guarantees: proportional political participation—there were six political parties that represented Sudeten Germans interests and had at least one high-level government ministry office—, cultural autonomy, and the right to conduct official businesses in their own languages. Moreover, the Czechoslovak state accorded every citizen the right of choosing his/her own nationality. Accordingly, regardless of flaws of the state system and bigoted nationalist rhetoric, ethnic minorities experienced a strikingly privileged situation in comparison to what was happening in the neighborhood. Czechoslovakia was the only country with a stable, functioning democracy in East-Central Europe during the inter-war period.95

Tensions were exacerbated by the Great Depression of 1929 and Hitler’s accession to power as German Chancellor in 1933. The Sudetenland was the heartland of the Czechoslovak industry—one of the most important in Europe—and the main source of employment for the Sudeten German population. The economic crisis was a very tough blow for them; it is estimated that they made up of approximately 50% of the unemployed in the country in 1932.96 Gradually disappointed with the Czechoslovakian state for this situation, many Sudeten Germans felt seduced by an aggressive extreme right that favored an unredeemed nationalism and the union with Germany. The growing power and prestige achieved by the Third Reich in the thirties made a decisive impact.97

Indeed, the Sudeten German Party—created and headed by the former bank clerk Konrad Henlein and financed by the German Nazi Party—obtained 64% of Sudeten German votes in 1935; this share increased to 90% in 1938. Such electoral support gave Hitler a powerful argument to support his claims of annexation, which culminated in the Munich Agreement.

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96 This context helps to gain a better understanding of a phrase said by August about the broadasted annexion: “And it shouldn’t matter to you if you get paid in marks or kroner, as long as you have work?”
Years later, it was also a strong reason for the Czechs to view the Sudeten Germans as traitors that must be expelled.98

It is difficult to elucidate if the film’s intention was to show the ethnic tensions between Germans and Czechs in 1937 or there is a flaw depicting those times as idyllic and free of major conflicts before the German troops came to Eglau. Several scenes may provide some clues, for instance the one about Jana’s wedding dress, a cherished possession of the Habermann family:

Jana: “Well, if I have to wear the dress of the former lady of the house […]”
August: “Yes. Today, no one can sew like this anymore, Jana. This is the traditional costume of my compatriots”
Jana: “They’re not mine”
August: “Do me that favour, please!”

Reconciliation and tolerance of traditions and identities are shown depicted. It is the Czech Jana—still totally unconscious of her Jewish heritage—who agrees to get married in a dress from the Sudeten German culture that August belongs to. The happy, peaceful coexistence takes place during the wedding, Melissa’s birth and christening. Czechs and Germans share and celebrate together. There are no heated discussions due to nationality issues, not even in the broadcasting scene. Thus, both possibilities are valid and simultaneous: a context of tensions and mindsets is recognized, but they do not lead to physical confrontation. The motto would be ‘we had our own problems, but our life was happy before the Nazis came.’ As noted before, things were not so easy in the inter-war period.

It is precisely the occupation that makes life difficult for Eglau villagers. Karel’s words about the annexation predict the coming dark days:

“Here come the vultures descending on their prey… Damn right we’re dead. A corpse that the world wants to get rid as soon as possible.”

The establishment of Reich authorities headed by Major Koslowski and the war break up the previous harmony. It is no wonder. The frequent, open chauvinism flaunted by the

Sturmbannführer towards everything Czech (it will be shown later) is the typical representation of the Nazi racist ideology and its pretentions of Herrenvolk. The new climate of intolerance also erupt among some of the characters:

August: “Well, what’s the big change? What does it matter if the border is here or there?”
Karel: “Oh well, you’re German. Nothing much will change for you. But for us Czech, everything will change”.
August: “A lot of them will do much better. Hitler brought us work. We can sell our wood and our floor all the way to Bavaria now”.
Karel: “If you think this is all so great, take a flag and go wave it with the rest of them. Why don’t you go, August? Just like the rest of your people”.

August: “These days, no German is safe from a Czech”
Jana: “And the Czechs are not safe from the Germans”

However, these arguments do not define August’s temper. Just like the heroic characters of the docudramas Dresden, Die Flucht y Die Gustloff, the miller displays a compassionate, democratic disposition most of the time, bravely faces the Nazi brutality to protect the community and his family, and, in general, he maintains an impeccable moral behavior.

As a good friend, August helps Karel with money without demanding further compensation. As a loving husband and father, he is affectionate with Jana and Melissa and tries to protect his wife from her vulnerability as a Jew. As a compassionate boss and citizen, he celebrates with his workers as equals—either Czechs or Germans—, safeguards them from Koslowski’s arbitrariness—even if some are ungrateful and dangerous—, does not exploit his fellow countrymen—he refuses to implement Koslowski’s proposal to withhold a tenth of their flour to fulfill the imposed quota by the Nazis—, and is willing to sacrifice his own life to save his family or others’.

August’s contempt for Nazism—another of his democratic traits—is manifested by his reject to Koslowski’s chauvinism—showing mockery sometimes—, his displeasure for Hans’ Hitler Youth uniform, as well his manner to refer to Hitler:

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99 In other to gain a better understanding of the concept of new order (Neuordnung) that the Third Reich sought to impose in Europe and the role of Herrenvolk theory, it is suggested to consult Arnold J. Toynbee, La Europa de Hitler [Hitler’s Europe], trans. Pablo Uriarte (Madrid: Sarpe, 1985) 61-84.
100 Heckner, “Televising”. 
Koslowski: “The father is German?”
August: “Yes, I’m German. And my wife is Czech”
Koslowski: “Couldn’t you find a suitable German girl?”
August: “The heart, after all, doesn’t differentiate between races, Herr…?”

August: “Mašek! My foreman!”
Koslowski: “I don’t understand you. All these Czech! A Czech foreman in a German mill? Why?”
August: “Because he’s been working here the longest”

Koslowski: “A Czech turbine!”
August: “Yes! So what? Which nationality is electricity?”

Koslowski: “Another Czech?”
August: “Hora is the best bookkeeper I ever had. And two times two is also four in Czech”

August: “Do you see him (Hans)?”
Jana “Leave him alone, or do you want him to make a fool of you?”
August: “I’m already his laughing stock. A few months ago, he came to me and wanted money for the uniform. I told him that I didn’t want him to wear those rags and now look at him!”

Hans: “You always said keeping your word is a matter of honour in the Habermann family”
August: “That only counts for those who’ve earned the honour of Habermanns. That madman with the moustache didn’t earn it”

This is not to say that August’s anti-Nazism automatically turns him into a convinced resistance fighter. Indeed, he does not support partisans’ activities and becomes angry when those endanger him and his people. He protects the community without using guns, distributing anti-German leaflets nor committing acts of sabotage against the Reich authorities.

August also embodies the Volksdeutsche love for their Heimat—in a very different manner from the Nazi cult towards the Vaterland—, being tradition a clear manifestation of this sentiment:

August: “From Ritter. The best jeweler in Prague”
Jana “Did you inherit that [the necklace] too? Just like the dress?”
August: “Yes, it’s already in the fourth generation. And our daughter will wear it in the fifth”

Karel: “The Sudetes were overrun. The Czech will defend their fatherland”
August: “Their fatherland? With my wood? They’re completely crazy now!”
Karel: “August. It’s your fatherland too”
August: Please! The fatherland – that belongs to those who don’t have anything else. I don’t need the fatherland (Vaterland). I have my homeland (Heimat).”

August: “Around here, we use water power to make electricity!”
Koslowski: “What’s the water wheel for?”
August: “It’s supposed to remind us of the older days. What’s a mill without a water wheel? It’s important to us to keep our traditions alive.”

Karel: “You must escape. I’m begging you”
August: “This mill is already 110 years old. Did you know that?”
Karel: “Hey, are you even listening?”
August: “Yes, I am. But you’re not listening to me. 110 year. Four generations of Habermanns were raised here, have lived here…”
Karel: “August!”
August: “…died here and now rest in the cemetery at the church […] I’m not going anywhere. This is my home.”

It can be seen that any suggestion to leave the Heimat is unacceptable for August, no matter what happens. At the end, this decision—also strongly motivated by the loss of his wife and daughter—cost him his life.

August is not a saint, though. He could not forgive his young brother for having willingly listed in the Wehrmacht; he did not even want to visit him at Eliska’s cabin while recovering and hiding. Perhaps, not having recognized Mašek as his half-brother nor giving him his corresponding place in the family—despite secretly keeping his word of protecting and providing for him—could be August’s most questionable sin. Nevertheless, these deeds pale in comparison with what was shown by other villagers.

August was barely capable of saving the life of ten locals from the retaliation imposed by Koslowski due to the assassination of two German soldiers. The opportunistic, shabby silence of Eliska and Hartl—who coveted Habermann’s wealth—about August’s efforts and the trap
laid by the *Sturmbannführer* to make appear the miller as responsible for the executions were decisive in sealing his fate at the hands of the villagers, no matter what he had done for them before.

Meanness and pettiness among the villagers are shown as outcomes derived from the Nazi occupation. At least two kinds of people regarding the way to express these behaviours can be distinguished. On the one hand, those short-sighed, short-term individuals who seek what they can grasp when the moment comes. Mašek and Eliska belong to this group. The son is governed by stupidity and cowardice. The mother becomes disloyal and treacherous at the last minute despite that August has surrendered his fortune to Koslowski. On the other hand, there are those long-term planning, calculating, more intelligent persons who are more successful in maintaining their own positions and ensuring what they have unscrupulously taken from others. Mayor Hartl and Vaclav Pospichal personify this group. Both are keen on collaborating with the Nazis and betray anyone if that brings benefits to them. Playing both sides, their decisions and deeds are always conditioned by their long-sighted considerations on the changing circumstances of the war and who rules the region.

Hans is another character who deserves some analysis. August’s younger brother, listless and sullen at first, is excited when the German troops enter Eglau. After enlisting willingly in the Hitler Youth and taking the oath of allegiance to the Führer, he does not waste time to join the *Wehrmacht* to fight in the Eastern Front. Being wounded, he is transported by train to Bayreuth. On the way, there is a brief stop at the Eglau railway station. By chance, Jana and Martha (Karel’s wife) bump into him while taking care of other injured soldiers. They force him out of the train and he is taken to Habermann’s home first, and then hidden in Eliska’s hut.

Hans’ recovery is aching and hard. Seeing combat in the East, becoming crippled and a deserter are a tough blow to him. His former Nazi beliefs are not as intense as before. A radical turn comes when he witnesses the shooting and death of the two German soldier at the hands of Mašek and Karel. He now realizes that something broke inside of him. He seems to be conscious of his loss of empathy for the violent decease of other human beings, causing him a profound pain. He is not a deserter from the *Wehrmacht* and the Nazi cause anymore: he is a deserter from himself and his own humanity. When he realizes this fact, his actual recuperation occurs.
Chapter 4. Final Balance as Conclusion

Referring to the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia and its impacts today, Juraj Herz, the director of *Habermann* and a Holocaust survivor, said that “if we want to understand the present, we have to know what happened in the past.”\(^{101}\) Certainly, his intention was to offer and disseminate a representation of this painful past, telling a story that can help understand what led to the expulsion of a large number of the inhabitants from a small town by their neighbors. Was Herz successful in this effort?

As stated before, the iconography of the Holocaust can be found in two different forms: *evocation*—the expulsion of German inhabitants from Eglau—and *juxtaposition*—the pair of parallel trains transporting wounded German soldiers and Jewish children, and the departure of the train carrying Jana and other expellees after she shows her Star of David. Although the depiction of the expellees at Eglau railway station fits closely with the real expulsions that took place in Czechoslovakia in 1945 and 1946, the juxtaposition scenes do not seem to obey any historical referent, conferring them rather a role of “enhancers” of the German suffering.

In this sense, *Habermann* brings into play a modified version of an old discursive strategy used by the rhetoric of victimization during the fifties in West Germany: the equalization between German and Jewish suffering.\(^{102}\) Not denying that all manifestations of German suffering—flight and expulsions, massive bombings, rape, POW decimation—are major tragedies worthwhile to study, remember and commemorate, it is equally important not to disregard that a mechanical ‘Holocaustization’ might obscure differences and specific causalities that distinguish both events from each other, leading to false symmetries.\(^{103}\)

Thus, it is clearly not the same to be a young soldier wounded in combat and transported by train from the Eastern Front to a German city to recover from his injuries—undoubtedly a sort of luxury given the grim circumstances of 1944 for the German war effort—than being a Jewish child crammed with others under horrible conditions into a freight train to an almost certain death. Neither is the same to be a German expellee forced to board a rail with little more than the clothes on his/her back to an uncertain future—however tough it might be—and to be

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\(^{102}\) Moeller, War Stories, 32-34. In this case, the perpetrators were the Czechs, not the Soviets.

\(^{103}\) The term is taken from Niven, “Reactive Memory”, 65.
a Jewish deportee transported in a more or less similar fashion to a concentration/extermination
camp. The expulsions were a policy aimed to get rid of an ethnic group from different regions
of East-Central Europe by means of deportation, not extermination. The Holocaust was the
result of a lethal state policy aimed to systematically annihilate the European Jewry. In general,
the surviving expellees had the chance of a fresh start and the opportunity to rebuild their lives
after the war. The Jews living in occupied Europe would not have had the slightest opportunity
to survive had the Germans won the war.

On the other hand, additional pertinent historical facts studied by the historiography have
also brought up: the existing tensions among Czechs and Sudeten Germans during the inter-war
period manifested in various ways, exacerbated by the 1929 crash, the rise of Nazism in
Germany after 1933 and the subsequent massive support of the latter to Hitler’s annexionist
claims, one of the most powerful reasons to carry out the expulsions years later.

Nevertheless, in Habermann virtually no explicit reference reflecting such tensions
before the arrival of the Nazis occured; only appear incidentally through a conversation around
a radio announcement. When the Third Reich authorities, headed by Koslowski, are set in place,
the contempt toward Czechs is open. Discrepancies about nationality issues among locals are
ephemeral. Under German rule, all the chauvinist bigotry comes from the outside? Nazis, not
from the villagers, at least until the expulsion. Partisan activities of sabotage and propaganda
are directed against the (outside) German administration, not the (local) Sudeten Germans. In
spite of the enthusiasm manifested by most of the latter for the annexion and the voluntary
enlistment of young conscripts, the film does not show any engagement in atrocities, either
directly or in cooperation with the German forces. The responsibility for the execution of the
villagers lies entirely on Koslowski. The only incident where Sudeten Germans are involved
was the aggression of a small group of locals against August and Karel for speaking in Czech.

Historically, the collaboration of Volksdeutsche with the Nazis in East-Central Europe
is a well-known fact. A few cases will be briefly mentioned hereunder. Many of them were
recruited by different military and police branches—among them Order Police
(Ordnungspolizei or Orpo), Trawniki, and Selbstschutz units—that participated in mass killings
of Jews and other civilians in Poland and other occupied territories.104 On the other hand, the

104 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battallion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*
responsibility for several of the repressive measures in the Czech lands rested to a large extent on the shoulders of two Sudeten Germans strongly tied to the Nazi military and administrative apparatus: Konrad Henlein—the former leader of the Sudeten German Party and, after the annexation, gauleiter of the Reichsgau Sudetenland—and Karl Hermann Frank—who served as Police Leader, Deputy Protector, and Minister of State.105

After the annexation of the Sudetenland on 1 October 1938 and the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia on 16 March 1939, the Nazi regime ruled with an iron fist. There were strong repressive actions in the Sudetenland, including the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Czechs, the persecution of Jews and the imprisonment of Social Democrats and Communists. In the Protectorate several universities were closed, resistance movements were crushed and a systematic campaign to eliminate the Czech intelligentsia started. One of the most brutal episodes during the German occupation was the total destruction of Lidice y Ležáky, the near-total extermination of their inhabitants and the execution of 1288 Czech hostages in reprisal by the attack and subsequent death of Reinhard Heydrich, Reichsprotektor and one of the top Nazi figures, on 27 May 1942. Although such measures fed an increasing hatred against the Germans, Third Reich policies towards the Czech lands never were as lethal and destructive as in Poland or Yugoslavia. The industrial infrastructure in these territories—especially its highly-regarded armament production—was a very precious asset for the German war effort. In addition to this, the obedience shown by most of the population led generally the occupying power to use more the carrot approach than the stick.106

Turning to the Sudeten Germans, it is clear that there were empathetic members of this community—as well as individuals from other ethnic groups of occupied Europe—willing to help others, even risking their lives. Without a shred of doubt, August embodies these persons. This character intended to show that not all Volkdeutsche were Nazis, nor were seduced by an inflammatory rhetoric of racism and exclusion. He is the good German proving that it is possible to show acts of humanity under a repressive regime without resorting to violence. August is the fellow countryman of Oskar Schindler who, instead of protecting Jews, was committed to the safety and well-being of the people of his town, regardless of their ethnicity. Good Germans

also existed among the ordinary people, as it is shown by Peter Schneider in his work *Und wenn wir nur eine Stunde gewinnen* (And If Were to Win but One Hour).  

August also represents the post-Hitlerian German, even if he did not survive the war. He is the projection of the mindset of the present into a character from the Nazi period, embodying the ideals of current Western democracy: pragmatism, humanitarianism, equity, and repudiation of tyranny, arbitrariness and racism. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that similar historical figures were the exception rather than the rule. Their anti-chauvinist, cosmopolitan, and inclusive vision was a rarity in a time and space where exclusive ethnic, national and ideological criteria were key standards to determine social position and survival. As has already been seen, indifference and collaboration were much more common in occupied Europe and a source of shame that heroic narratives managed to hide for many decades.

For its part, *Habermann* is a space for transgenerational, national and transnational reconciliation. Exemplifying the love for traditions, August recalls on the importance of keeping them alive because they are an invaluable legacy of German identity and culture for the coming generations, whether from expellee families or not. This is an essential tribute to the expellees’ memory. Likewise, the film deserves credit for the recognition about the role of Czech commoners in the expulsions. While it is true that this people underwent humiliation, suffering and loss during the Nazi rule, certainly evident acts of cruelty and injustice were committed against Sudeten Germans motivated not only by ‘fair’ revenge, but by mere opportunism. It is an acknowledgement of liability that strip anti-Nazi resistance movements from that halo of noble, human heroism with which are frequently bestowed by national mythologies and depicted in several audiovisual representations of the Second World War.

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107 Michel, “Heroes and Taboos”, 58-64.
108 In this regard, a remarkable indicator is the tiny number of persons declared by the Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations —those who put their life at risk to help Jews in the occupied Europe—. Until 1 January 2017, only 26513 individuals have been vested with this honor. It is not very likely that this figure will increase considerably in the coming years. More information on this subject can be consulted in “The Righteous among the Nations”, Yad Vashem online, Internet, 25 Mar. 2018. Available: [https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous.html](https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous.html)
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