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## Germany's Dilemma To Mark V-E Day Is to Celebrate the Loss of A Gangrenous Limb

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FOR THE WEST GERMANS, the ambivalence about May 8, 1945, began long before an obscure Wehrmacht cemetery in the small town of Bitburg became a household word in the United States. And it will not end so soon.

Nobody has described the dilemma of the German soul more eloquently than the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Theodor Heuss, who said in 1949: "The 8th of May, 1945, remains the most tragic and questionable paradox in history for each of us. And why? Because we were saved and annihilated at one and the same time."

Or, as a later president, Walter Scheel, put it on the 30th anniversary of V-E Day: "On May 8th, Hitler's dictatorship came crashing down, but so did the German Reich. And the Reich was not Hitler's creation. It was the nation-state of the Germans."

The Bitburg cemetery is but an accidental symbol of the German dilemma: How does a nation "celebrate" a catastrophe, the worst defeat in its entire history?

For today's Germans, the answer is partly a matter of passport.

If you are an East German, living under the fraternal tutelage of your Soviet masters, you have no choice but to rejoice. On May 8, you will get your day off for an extravagant national holiday that commemorates your "liberation from Hitler's fascism through the glorious Red Army."

The East German communists dispatched the trauma of defeat and surrender decades ago - with an historical sleight of hand. Official communist lore transmuted the Nazis into a kind of alien occupation force. The Fuehrer, the SS and the death factories were simply excised from the German Democratic Republic's national heritage, like so many smudged pages torn from an otherwise immaculate ledger of socialist nationhood.

Without linkage to the Nazi period, there was no responsibility. Without responsibility, there was no guilt. Unlike their West German brethren, who have disbursed billions of dollars to survivors of the Holocaust, the East Germans have never paid any restitution. In a recent ceremony at the site of the Buchenwald concentration camp near the East German city of Weimar, there were plenty of anti-American harangues but no mention of the thousands of Jews who died there.

If you are a West German, however, you will probably want to remember V-E Day, Bitburg, Bergen-Belsen and all the rest as a day to forget. May 8, 1945, was not a "splendid moment in our great history and in our small lives," to quote Churchill's famous words. It was a day of pain as well as of deliverance, because rebirth could only be had at the price of total prostration.

West Germans did not choose the easy ideological escape route taken by the East Germans, which is why they are celebrating May 8 with all the fervor of a former gangrene victim commemorating the removal of a limb.

In terms of national history, V-E Day was a day of annihilation, the day modern Germany ceased to exist as a legal and territorial entity.

Of course, it was also a day of liberation, the end of the worst and the beginning of the best political system that has ever carried the label "Germany." Four decades should be enough to demonstrate the point. The Federal Republic is a model ally and a model European; there is probably no other society in the West that has struck such a successful balance between equality and liberty, economic growth and social welfare.

And yet there is a haunting flaw. Liberation and democracy were not "made in Germany." Those blessings came on the bayonets of invading Western armies. It was not the Germans themselves who rose up to slay the Nazi beast; indeed, both nation and army fought until the last minute to prevent what they now are supposed to celebrate.

Crudely put, the problem for Germans boils down to numbers. There simply were not enough Germans who were anti-Hitler and who embraced the invaders as redeemers; but there were millions who suffered the consequences of defeat - the bombing, the retribution, the expulsion from Bohemia and the territories that are now Polish or Soviet.

These two simple facts - the number of Germans opposing Hitler was small yet the number who suffered from his acts was large - are at the heart of the German dilemma about how to look back at the past.

How, for example, are Germans to think about the 49 members of Hitler's Waffen SS buried in Bitburg? The Waffen SS was the fighting wing of the Schutzstaffel (SS), the footsoldiers who did battle alongside regular army units while the "real" SS operated the vast killing machine that slaughtered 6 million Jews. In the hierarchy of evil that was the Nazi regime, the Waffen SS troopers rank far below their elite overlords in the SS, but they were no ordinary draftees, either. Most of them were volunteers who flocked to the cause, all of them were part of the SS chain of command, and some - as recent research has shown - were directly involved in the "Final Solution."

Can there be equal time for both the victims and the henchmen of Nazism? The mind bristles at the thought. Even 40 years after the end of the nightmare, as the Germans learned this week, there is no closing the books and no squaring of the accounts.

By now, the moral issues surrounding the 40th anniversary have been hopelessly muddled by the intrusion of politics. And the politics of Bitburg have overshadowed the moral debate in West Germany.

Ever since the Western allies excluded the Germans from the 40th anniversary of the Normandy landings last year, the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl has lived in dread of this year's V-E Day festivities.

But Kohl's opposition, the Social Democrats, have their own problems with ambivalence. It is poignant testimony to the plight of the German psyche that the Social Democrats have relentlessly attacked the chancellor for his "gaffes" and "blunders" without openly demanding that Bitburg be canceled. Within the SPD, the debate has been raging for months, and no wonder.

On the one hand, the Social Democrats are the party of the victims. Thousands of them were murdered in Nazi concentration camps for no other reason than their political convictions. For those who were still alive, May 8, 1945, was literally a day of liberation and death defied.

On the other hand, they are also Germans, and hence are leery of celebrating their nation's downfall with gestures that might reaffirm the ancient theme of "collective guilt," now and forever. Willy Brandt, the former chancellor and current chairman of the SPD, has opposed a joint Reagan-Kohl appearance at a concentration camp, and months ago, he went public with the formula: "For the sake of the new generation, May 8 should not tempt us into misleading the people that every one of them is a culprit."

The Social Democrats are not oblivious to politics. They resent the media extravaganza of V-E week as a boon to Kohl's political fortunes. Anti-Reagan and passionately opposed to "Star Wars" and Euromissiles, they fear an "anticommunist spectacle" that will undercut their campaign for detente and arms control. While they have debated the moral issues more earnestly than the ruling Christian Democrats, they have essentially proclaimed a plague on both houses - on Reagan as well as Kohl.

Members of the small Green Party, which rallies around peace and environmental issues and which proudly proclaims its "antifascist" credentials, will boycott the official ceremonies in favor of their own demonstrations - which, no doubt, will have a strong anti-American flavor.

In the political trenches, meanwhile, Bitburg has members of both of West Germany's two major parties slinging mud.

Christian Democratic parliamentary whip Alfred Dregger provoked a storm when he wrote a letter to Sen. Howard M. Metzenbaum (D- Ohio) protesting efforts to call off Reagan's visit to Bitburg. Germans, he wrote, had been "subjugated" for 12 years by Hitler's "brown dictatorship." Most of the German fallen, including his own brother, were "decent young men," wrote Dregger.

At that, Social Democratic Party general secretary Peter Glotz accused Dregger of trying to deal with the past by suppressing Germans' real role in it. "Until now I did not believe that we would encounter another West German politician who would so thoughtlessly proclaim the fable of a minority of (Nazi) deceivers and a large majority of decent Germans," said Glotz. "It is shocking how you (Dregger) reject all the knowledge we so painfully gained in the 40 years since Hitler's death."

Whether right or left, the German soul does not rest easy when it comes to celebrating defeat-as-liberation. And so there is a natural tendency, common to all nations that must grapple with old wounds, to focus not on the past but on the aftermath.

On the right, there is the instinctive habit of constructing shaky moral "equations" by tallying up the wrongs of both sides. "Every European can be happy about Hitler's defeat," says Dregger. "But the war's end and the division of Germany brought about the expulsion (from former German territories) of almost 14 million Germans. You cannot celebrate such a catastrophe."

Conservative historian Golo Mann doesn't even want to tally the pluses and minuses. He would rather stop the debate about the war altogether. "It is better to look (for edification) in the very distant and hence inoffensive past ... than to reopen old wounds and fight about guilt and innocence, about good and evil deeds committed 50 years ago."

On the left, redemption for the past is sought in a new German mission - in the politics of peace. According to Brandt, V-E Day '85 ought to focus on the lackluster record of the superpowers in matters of arms control, with Germans urging both sides to live up to the lofty promises of the Geneva arms negotiations.

And what do "average" Germans think? According to a recent opinion poll, 54 percent no longer want the media to regurgitate the Nazi past. Yet the polling data contain an interesting surprise. Among the very young - the 18-to 25-year-olds - six out of 10 want to hear more about what V-E Day undid.

Could it be that the young are willing, at last, to face what their parents and grandparents would rather forget? Perhaps. But it is more likely that the new interest of the third generation indicates little else but curiosity about a past that is no longer haunting, but merely exotic.

Josef Joffe, who recently returned to Germany after two years of writing and teaching in Washington, will soon become foreign editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich.

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