

## Reminding

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Event to May 8th, 1945 on 5-9-5 in the Munich University  
sponsored by the WarChildhood Project "Kriegskindheit.eu"

We were struck by a real high tide of reminding prior to May 8th, 2005. Special at this is the fact that the German victims of war, flight and expulsion are in the focus of the public attention and medial reports for the first time. There arises the scared question immediately on that: Do we stand at the beginning of an epoch in which the sorrow of the Germans is set off against the crimes which they have caused others?

This question occupies me as one who is contributing himself steering attention on this group of persons affected by his professional work<sup>1</sup>. Do we promote, do I wonder, by this new form at the end a chauvinistic culture of reminding which pushes forward to steal away from historical responsibility?

Dealing with that question, it is my thesis that reminding the traumata of the Germans is a necessary step on the way to a memory culture which does more and more accept the complexity and folding of the different facets of the NS catastrophe.

The holocaust turned out gradually in the public discourse in the eighties. The frightening facts started to dig into consciousness and resulted in an increasing recognition of the historical guilt particularly in connection with the murders of Jews and other minorities. But this process of becoming conscious concerns only one side of a very complex past.

The one-sided attention for the victims of the national socialism at most of the Germans laid the basis of a self understanding which polarizes between perpetrators and victims. It resulted in one's finding himself as a German on the side of the perpetrators inevitably. While the long withhold sympathy was finally shown for the victims publicly now, the sorrow suffered by the perpetrators and followers remained largely unnoticed. With the exception of the exile associations this applies to policy just like to the media and even to the research. Destiny like exile, refugee and being bombed didn't happen out there.

Beyond the public discourse, more or less obviously many Germans got by this polarizing mastering of the past on the wrong side: By solidarization not wanted at all by the victims and by offensive declarations of fault and atonement; or else by the transfigurations of their family history when perpetrators were declared seduced and followers victims. Moreover, the polarization produced suppressed resentments which in the racist excesses after the unification of Germany found an alarming expression.

For my understanding this type of mastering the past did not lead on over a more or less conscientious one troubled around sincerity out of sympathy with the victims because it was not grounded in the personally suffered sorrow; in the contrary, this was even more isolated. Behind this there appears an unreflected idea further which grants only the victims injuries and traumatisation. It stands in contradiction to the unsaid but correct per-

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<sup>1</sup> The author is head of the research project *Kriegskindheit.eu* [vd [www.warchildhood.net](http://www.warchildhood.net)]

ception of many Germans being traumatised themselves by the catastrophe for which they found themselves now rightly in the share of responsibility.

The traumata of the Germans have a completely different quality than the sufferings of the ones who turned victims of the NS terror. The difference which makes them incomparable, is based on the dimension of the cruelties and crimes planned systematically and on their authorship. The traumata of the Germans are caused by them themselves.

If one keeps this not revocable difference in mind, one can face the question of what the traumata of the Germans are. Of course they consist primary in the immediate war influences, for what the concepts aerial war, flight and expulsion, front war and captivity, are only global metaphors. However, they also consist in the delayed perception of one's own being perpetrator or follower of an inhumane system for which there is no mastering in view in the face of its incredible crimes. It seems to me indispensable for the processing of the past to recognize that the perpetrators and followers also have suffered emotional and moral injuries by what they did which cannot heal. We need in this respect grant the perpetrators and followers to be traumatised too.

The historical responsibility for horror and crimes and the suffering of the Germans do not exclude themselves. Perpetrators and followers of the national socialism became and are traumatized. The perception and appreciation of this contradiction is the crucial chance of the new memory wave, of the hundreds of individual reports and documentations about individual destinies in which the Germans get visible also as traumatised and injured persons for the first time now. There is a public recognition of the injuries suffered from which is inherent to this wave of published memories. Without that the wounds cannot heal. Without people and a social room in which the sorrow suffered from is contained and finds its place it cannot be mourned for. It will get stuck in bitterness and hidden resentments. It will prevent a deeper understanding of harm which was caused to others and for which one feels in responsibility. Without the recognition of the injuries of one's own a true processing of the past never will be able and no deeper access to what one has done to others will emerge.

On the background of this, the task and the aim of the new memory work become obvious. It is far more than a one-dimensional process which works off sorrow only of one's own. This new reminding can help to get to break simplifying positions open and bring the complexity of the personal and common traumata into consciousness. It can help the fact to get to recognition that millions of Germans who were perpetrators and followers of a criminal political system also were traumatised by their own aberration and its consequences.

The new reminding can break through the effect of unhealed wounds of that time. Superficial sympathy for the victims, which does not respect the sorrow of one's own, leads, however, to empty formulae and rituals which arise more out of a feeling of obligation than out of dismay. Then the task of working off the sufferings is transmitted unconsciously to the generations following.

A remembering that recognizes the complexity and contradictory of the past also contributes to defuse suppressed resentments so that the explosive does not oppose the liberal life-forms which we have won back with effort one day.

This way reminding helps to recognize of which tasks we have to be aware in view of our past as individuals and as a state in this world.