

# Defeat, redemption, liberation.

## May 8 1945 in German commemorative discourse

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For nine months, the Parliamentary Council had convened in Bonn, West Germany, to draw up a constitution for the Federal Republic of Germany. In May 1949, they entered the final straight. In the plenary session on 8 May, discussion amongst other matters focused on the assessment of the end of World War II. Council member Theodor Heuss, who was soon to become the first President of the Republic, noted: "Basically, this 8 May 1945 remains the most tragic and questionable paradox of history for each of us. Why? Because we were redeemed and destroyed at the same time."

A few hundred kilometres northeast, in East Berlin, the assessment of the end of the war was far less ambivalent. Here, after two years of construction, on 8 May 1949, in Treptower Park, the Soviet Memorial was inaugurated. At the centre of the extensive complex stood the twelve metre high monumental statue "The Liberator", created by sculptor Jevgenij Wutschetschitsch. It represented liberation as the quintessence of the socialist republic's antifascist identity and quickly became a mass-reproduced cultural icon of remembrance in the GDR, as well as the most popular site of public remembrance, be it official or private.

As the examples illustrate, the assessment of the end of World War II was an important component of the German national self-image in the two German States which were founded in 1949. The interpretations differed greatly, and every side was convinced to have chosen the better way to deal with the contested past. Key concepts were 'destruction', 'defeat', 'redemption' and 'liberation'.

In the GDR, anti-fascism was a state-imposed dogma fabricated in accordance to Soviet standards. According to the grand narrative, Germany had been defeated and thus liberated by the Allies under Soviet leadership. The defeat of National Socialist Germany marked the victory of Socialism and rendered possible the foundation of the first socialist state on German soil. From the debt of gratitude to the liberators grew the commitment to lasting German-Soviet friendship and a continued struggle against any kind of fascism and militarism.

In the early years of the FRG, on the other hand, public discourse on the assessment of World War II as an element of national identity was more ambiguously. There was constant negotiation as to whether the war was to be regarded as destruction, defeat, redemption or liberation. Particularly the notion of liberation became crucial in the decades to come. It is highly ambiguous and must be understood in its respective historical and political context. Liberation can bear the sound of progressiveness and enlightenment, but it can also degenerate into a simplified and whitewashed phrase of commemorative culture. And the concept is distorted or emptied when its historical realities are forgotten.

The use of the term 'destruction' in Heuss' statement mirrors the social climate in post-war Germany. It was dominated by feelings of loss, suffering, humiliation in the face of defeat and grief over the downfall of a 'great' German nation. The majority of people refused to acknowledge the true scale of German crimes. The reality of daily life promoted this attitude. It was marked by the struggle for survival. Virtually every family had to mourn losses. Many soldiers were missing or in captivity. Also there was the loss of territories, flight and expulsion from Silesia and the Sudetenland. The self-perception as victims spared Germans from considering the real victims, as Harald Jähner very aptly put it in his mental history of the post-war period. Back then, hardly anyone would have thought of talking about the end of the war as a liberation.

Precisely because the sense of defeat was so closely linked to repression or denial of guilt and self-portrayal as victims, it provided a fertile ground for nationalist resentment and revanchism. There was, of course, remembrance and commemoration of Nazi victims, but these initiatives had no central place in the German public sphere. It was not until the Sixties that this started to change. Slowly, other perspectives began to gain ground in the public discourse on the interpretation of the war.

This became evident in the context of the 20th anniversary of the end of the war in 1965, when occasional demands were raised to recognise 8 May 1945 as Liberation Day. In the political climate of the time, to refer to liberation was to attack the prevailing consensus and to call for a reappraisal of the Nazi past and the shadows it cast in the FRG. The resistance of progressive forces against the continuities of the Nazi past grew despite of a high level of resistance among the population. The Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main and other war crimes trials became contested arenas of public debate.

Such events and debates raised the level of self-critical reflection in the official commemorative discourse as well. In May 1975, Federal President Walter Scheel pointed out that Adolf Hitler had not come upon the Germans from outside like a catastrophe, but had been elected. He remarked, that it was rather the liberation of the Germans that had to come from outside, namely through military defeat.

Just because a favourable German self-image was increasingly challenged, the debates about the proper appraisal of World War II remained very controversial. Not a few called for a final line to be drawn under the past, a demand that had been raised already quite often since the late Forties. In 1985, the dispute culminated once more when American President Ronald Reagan, during a state visit to Germany, along with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, laid a wreath at the Bitburg military cemetery on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of 8 May 1945. The joint commemoration of American soldiers and soldiers of the Wehrmacht was problematic as it was. It became even more so when it turned out that the cemetery also contained burials of members of the Waffen SS. Critics saw the commemorative programme as an inept act of reconciliation politics to establish and demonstrate a new German self-confidence as an equal partner in the remembrance of the war as well as in the political arena.

Also on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker gave a commemorative speech in the German Bundestag in which he unequivocally declared 8 May 1945 to be a day of liberation: "Yet with every day something became clearer, and this must be stated on behalf of all of us today: the 8th of May was a day of liberation. It liberated all of us from the inhumanity and tyranny of the National-Socialist regime." Weizäcker's speech received great recognition nationally and internationally and was subsequently canonized as a milestone of critical engagement with the legacy of World War II in Germany. It was a fairly successful attempt to propose a 'normal-nation-identity' (Edgar Wolfrum), a positive national identity by means of reconnecting to a national past that could be considered as good. Von Weizäcker considered the era of Nationalist Socialism as an aberration in German history. He addressed the grief of the Germans for their losses, their deprivations and efforts to rebuild their country. On the other hand, he honoured the memory of those who suffered at the hands of the Germans, the dead of the Holocaust as well as those of the wars of extermination in Poland and the Soviet Union. He demanded an unequivocal acknowledgement of historical responsibility from the German public and offered the promise of healing from the past in return.

As a counter-speech against the demands for a final line, which were quite vocal at the time, this was a critical contribution intended to challenge the German public. From today's perspective, however, a closer look reveals blind spots, selective perceptions and shifts in Weizäcker's rhetoric, which are symptomatic for the consensus of German collective memory of World War II that was formed at that time and is partially still valid today.

Amongst those problematic notions is the distinction between the National Socialist Regime and the Germans, which suggested that fascism was something external and alien to the German people, and only Adolf Hitler and a small clique had driven them into dictatorship and war. The desire to attribute concrete guilt to just a few and thus limit it has great persistence even in progressive debates about World War II in Germany until today. This may contribute to the tendency of many in Germany to see the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine solely as 'Putin's war'. A fatal misjudgement that ignores the guilt of hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers who commit horrible war crimes and fight an illegitimate war. Besides that, it neglects the political responsibility of all Russians.

Another problematic factor was the reluctance of addressing the fact that the Germans were a nation of perpetrators. Institutions of public memory, both private and state-funded, were preoccupation organizing a dignified memory of victims. As important this was politically and morally, it had a negative side effect, when since the 1980s, the nation of perpetrators increasingly started to identify with the victims instead of engaging in coming to terms with perpetration.

The clear focus was on the Holocaust. Other victim groups, including Soviet prisoners of war, forced labourers, but also Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, euthanasia victims, so-called 'asocials' and 'professional criminals' gained recognition only later.

The Soviet victims, both civilian and military, were absolutely underrepresented in West German remembrance culture for a long time and received political acknowledgment shamefully late. This has only changed since the 1980s, with significant impulses coming from civil society. In the process, the completely false equation of the Soviet with the Russian, which was widespread among the population, was strongly promoted politically. Feelings of guilt were projected onto Russia alone, historical responsibility was felt only towards Russia, despite the historical facts of warfare. As Russia gave World War II a much higher political priority than other successor states of the USSR, who made fewer claims towards Germany, this false view remained unchallenged for a long time. For some years now, the tide has been changing and the controversies surrounding the Soviet legacy have become increasingly contentious. The large-scale Russian invasion has brought enormous impetus to efforts to decolonise the memory of World War II as well. They have to be continued. It remains to be seen how two major projects in commemorative culture currently being planned in Germany will develop under these conditions: the documentation centre "World War II and German Occupation in Europe" in Berlin, and the expansion of the memorial for the Stalag 326 POW camp in Stukenbrock-Senne.

Meanwhile, while Russia legitimises its hegemonic claims toward Ukraine with reference to the Soviet past, many people in Germany still struggle to acknowledge that Soviet does not equal Russian and a Red Army soldier from Odesa is Ukrainian.

When assessing the notion of liberation in recent decades until today, one can establish, that the flaws of the ideologically established concept of liberation in the GDR were already recognized by contemporary critics. They assumed that it was precisely state-imposed anti-fascism that prevented a real confrontation with the National Socialist past in the GDR. Today, this argument is also used to in the explanation of the strong radical right-wing tendencies in the eastern federal states of unified Germany.

The evolvement of a distorted notion of liberation in the FRG can in a nutshell be illustrated by looking back at Theodor Heuss' 1949 speech, where he had spoken of redemption. This theologically-metphysically charged concept suggested that on 8 May 1945 the Germans had been miraculously rescued from a great catastrophe, leaving their guilt and responsibility unsaid. This concealing of unpleasant truths by religious metaphors was to make a great career in the discourse on the Nazi past in Germany: the grace of a new beginning or of late birth are two of the most prominent examples.

Liberation is the secular sister of redemption. In the course of its usage in the German debates on World War II, the term has lost much of its critical potential. A selective notion of liberation has become established, which, like the German culture of remembrance as a whole, is rather victim-centred and demilitarised. Images of the liberation of concentration camps have become

particularly influential in collective memory. The focus is less on combat and more on the aftermath of the fighting. The fact that liberation was the result of a determined military allied fight against German aggression faded into the background. This is despite the fact that military defeats such as in the Battle of Stalingrad did indeed occupy a prominent place in the collective memory of Germans, particularly in the FRG.

The close correlation of liberation and pacifism was also promoted in the peace movements as well as in the Cold War as beyond.

As a result, the majority of Germans internalised a civilian, pacifist idea of liberation, which also became consensus in the reunified FRG. Thereby, the Soviet imprint on collective memory as a cultural heritage became marginalized. Berlin was liberated by the soldiers of the Red Army. In the GDR, they were still regularly commemorated at official ceremonies. Today, the majority of the population is no longer aware that the Treptow Park complex is not just a memorial, but a huge war grave site where tens of thousands of these liberators of Berlin are buried.

For the evaluation of the current war, the concept of liberation, which is abstracted from the historical military circumstances, plays a particularly disastrous role. While Ukraine fights for its survival and desperately depends on Western partners to arm it, large sections of the German public stubbornly cling to their pacifist ideals and refuse to acknowledge that the freedom they enjoy was fought for by others in World War II. Some do this out of naivety or ideological narrow-mindedness, others with perfidious political calculation. Any German who wants to live up to his or her historical responsibility in these days must oppose these distortions of pacifism.