

It is generally assumed that the path from heroism to hedonism is a long one. Yet the Germans covered this distance within a scant fifty years. For if it is true that thoroughness is a German virtue; it is only consistent that the Third Reich's radicalized expansion of the traditional narrative of heroism would be followed by its depoliticization and dramatic reduction after 1945. At the center of the heroic national narrative stood the sacrifice of the hero for the benefit of the community.

It symbolized the supreme value of a heroic ethos defined less by victory and success than by selfless idealism and renunciation of personal happiness. To it was opposed the desire for personal gain and the maximization of personal pleasure, which were regarded as the expression of an egotistical materialism and a contemptible and amoral disposition.

This binary opposition was already part of the political domain in the days leading up to the First World War and was used in constructing a national identity in Wilhelminian Germany. Out of the intellectual discourse about civilization and culture¹ emerged the clichéd contrast of the English "merchants" and the German "heroes."² This stereotype clearly demonstrated the scorn German "men of power" (*Machtmenschen*) had for those seeking material gain and, in turn, indirect symbolic power.

The proponents of this lofty ideal assumed pose of heroes who unselfishly placed their lives at the service of the nation. Indeed, as the debate over German war aims soon made evident, this thinking also inspired the German war effort between 1914 and 1918, most notably through direct domination strategies over expanding spheres of influence, raw material procurement, and the elimination of economic rivals.³ Nevertheless, the Germans claimed that their campaign went beyond merely finding a "place in the sun."

It was also about realizing a larger idealistic goal: namely, the greatness and glory of the nation, one opposed to the egotistical, materialist motives that they imputed to their spiritually bankrupt enemies (*Krämerseelen*).

As it became clear over the course of the Great War that the campaign would not be won quickly nor ended easily, mainly because there was no imaginable alternative to "victorious peace" (*Siegfrieden*), catastrophe ensued. A mentality of violence prevailed.⁴ In the end, 1.8 million soldiers were killed, and the war was lost.

But the disastrous defeat of 18 and the unexpected victory of the "merchants" did find an explanation, though, within the existing narrative framework of German society at the time. For it was incomprehensible that the soldiers or the generals could have failed, precisely because they had borne privation, fighting, and sacrifice. Only discord could have undermined the German "Siegfried." A traitor had stabbed him in the back.

According to this logic, one of the main causes of defeat was the civilian population had no longer been able to endure hunger and misery and by their hunger strikes helped bring about the end of the war. Furthermore, the mutinous

soldiers and revolutionaries of 18 were also guilty of having sabotaged a German victory. The wish for individual happiness and well-being, as well as care for one's own family, were seen as distracting full devotion to the Fatherland and thus were considered as treason against the nation.

This tragic fate, however, was not permitted to be the end of the story. Germany had to be resurrected from its shame and humiliation. To this end, any and all means were justified.⁶ Not long thereafter one explanation emerged that transformed the dead's apparently senseless self-sacrifice for a lost cause into an obligation for those who survived: It was their duty to give meaning to the suffering and deaths of fallen soldiers. In this way, the failure of the military leadership in the war could be concealed and turned into a threat against any individual on whom blame for the millions of war dead could later be pinned.

The values of post-1918 society did not differ very substantively from those of pre-1914 society: only in their radical nature and detachment from reality did they appear different from those they displaced. Even if the nation was beset by perpetual conflict, here was a fairly broad consensus concerning one thing: postwar society was seen as a *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) transformed by war and unified by fate. The individual counted only insofar as he contributed to the well-being of the common good.

It was this idea that helped bring about the victory of the National Socialist movement. The Third Reich was certainly tied to this understanding of the past, claiming to make good on their promise of salvation, to end class struggle, and to reestablish the international prestige of the Reich. In order to achieve these goals, the crusade had to be resumed; 1918 had only interrupted it. Only after courageous fighting and selfless sacrifice, so went the reasoning, would victory and world domination come to the Germans as a result of their racial superiority. The promises became more believable with the economic recovery following the disastrous economic crisis of the 20s and early 30s. Little attention was paid to the actual cause behind the new-found prosperity: preparation for the next war through massive rearmament.

Along with those who died in the First World War, Nazi Party martyrs from the so-called time of struggle (*Kampfzeit*) were supposed to embody the heroic ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Deed, duty, perseverance, sacrifice and service were the watchwords of this collective identity. In order to survive life's struggles, a readiness both to kill others as well as to sacrifice oneself were requisite. With victory, the promises of political and economic supremacy for the Reich were to be united with the material welfare of the Volk.

But when the weapons fell silent in 1945, Germans found themselves in a very different situation. They had to acknowledge that all of their effort and sacrifice had not brought victory and prosperity, but only resulted in hunger and destruction, physical flight and political impotence. In other words, their struggle had been fought in vain and was now devoid of meaning.

Their collective identity therefore necessitated fundamental reorientation. A totally different master narrative crystallized during the years following World

War II. It revolved around image of the powerless German victims who experienced great suffering in the wake of misrule and defeat, but still managed to build a new Germany out of the rubble.

For the “have-nots” who had to again build an existence from scratch, material values won new meaning and importance. The forty deutsche marks given to every West German on the day of the currency reform in 48 served as the pearly gates of capitalism. Insofar as West Germans quickly took on the capitalistic profit-orientation of the victors, they became “Americanized,” in other words, “civilized.”

This represented a sharp break from their previous barbarism. By the same token, the vanquished now overcame their old disdain for the “cultureless” Americans in face of the massive technical and material superiority of the U.S. occupational force. The German Economic Miracle of the of the 1950’s was apparently the trigger for the successful reorientation of West Germans from heroes to gourmands.

This essay will outline the historical course that the master narrative of heroism assumed in the construction of collective identity in Germany between 18 and 60. In so doing, it will draw connections between two contrasting leitmotifs of German national identity in this century: on the one hand, the desire for “the good life” and personal prosperity, happiness, and success; and on the other, the willingness to go without, to sacrifice, and even die for the community.

I. The Heroic Narrative After 1918

Humans attempt to order chaos by using myths and symbols. As Clifford Geertz put it, “There are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but interpretability—threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight.”⁷ The First World War and the German defeat, along with the postwar revolution, inflation, and economic crisis, forced many Germans into just such a “liminal experience.” In their case, however, the experience was bound to the bitter collapse of illusions about the political and military potency of the Reich, the loss of loved ones, physical health, and property, as well as the ruination of ethical ideals and compass.

The welter of crises spawned the creation and spread of myriad political myths and symbols that were brought into the public sphere in the 1920s by various political parties and groups.⁸ In this, the narrative of heroism, in combination with the Christian dogma of salvation, played a central role.⁹ They appeared to offer an answer to one of the most pressing existential questions at the time, namely how to make sense of the war’s dark legacy of mass death. Already in the nineteenth century as an interpretive framework had been adopted for locating the death of the soldier in the scheme of Christian sacrifice.

In most European states, sacrificing one's life "on the alter of the Fatherland" was a common trope in justifying a soldier's death.¹⁰ Here the nation served as the highest ethical value, justifying and thus demanding any sacrifice. As the refrain of a famous soldier's song by Heinrich Lersch went, "Germany must live, even if we must die."

The experience of mass annihilation on the battlefields of the First World War led to a partial break with traditional images of death.¹¹ During and especially after the war, great artistic and literary energy was spent trying to find a new interpretive representation of it.¹² Out of these efforts came a new symbolic figure that appeared in virtually every nation involved in the war: "the unknown soldier" interned in national monuments such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, Westminster Abbey in London, and the Altar of the Fatherland in Rome.¹³ This symbolic figure was supposed to help ensure that the death of the individual would not be submerged by the mass dying that characterized a war of attrition, but that one's individual fate would acquire meaning from the service one performed for the nation.

In Germany, however, a central memorial commemorating the devotion did not exist. The symbolic figure of "the unknown soldier" was rejected as "un-German," since it reflected "merely the political and spiritual attitude of our former opponents."¹⁴ Instead, "the good comrade" from a famous soldier's song by Ludwig Uhland now assumed this function:

A rough translation is:

I had a comrade,
a better one you'd never find.
The drum called us to battle.
He walked at my side
together in lock step.

A bullet came flying.
Is it for me or is it for him?
It was he that was ripped away.
He lies at my feet,
as if he were a part of me.

Still tries to reach out his hand to me,
just as I load.
Can't give you my hand.
Remain in eternal life
My good comrade.

"The good comrade" had proven his idealism by dying instead of (and in a way "for the benefit of") his mate. Thus, he became a model image for a postwar society in which devotion and fulfillment of duty, obedience and service-not one's own interests-were to become the basis of communal life.¹⁵

It was young noncommissioned officers at the front who were mostly responsible for disseminating this interpretation of the war experience. After the war men such as Ernst Junger, Werner Beumelburg, and Franz Schauwecker sought literary and social recognition by stylizing themselves as the very embodiment of the “heroic officer at the front.”¹⁶

In their view, battle ‘had created “a new kind of human being, a man in whom the most elevated of all manly qualities were dominant.”¹⁷ The message these novelistic war memories glorified the trench experience as a model for postwar society. By orienting society on the pattern of interpersonal relationships in war, all social conflicts were supposedly overcome and the people made ready for the next war.

Amid the fallout of defeat and the numerous crises that plagued the postwar years, the meaning of mass death and painful wartime experiences was hardly perceptible. Yet the ideal of the self-sacrificing hero was not abandoned; instead, its significance was projected into the future. First, the meaning of sacrifice still had to be redeemed. “The war became a moral challenge: coming to terms with it was described [by those involved in it] as a well-earned new sensibility to primal life forces, whose lived intensity offered a powerful salve against the threat of death.”¹⁸

In parallel to such an idealistic notion of personal benefit, a comparable moral regeneration of the Fatherland as an effect of war was expected. Within the context of the mythologized war experience, every soldier’ death was understood not as a powerless and involuntary victimization but rather as a willing self-sacrifice. Even in defeat, the fallen had demonstrated their loyalty. The futility of their mission only bespoke their idealism, whose measure was less heroic deeds than character and conviction.

The crisis of meaning reinforced the value of the willingness to sacrifice as a virtue in and of itself, even if the question of “to what end?” remained largely unaddressed. Alone the values of bravery and a readiness to sacrifice were supposed to save the Reich and protect it from foreign enemies.²⁰ From this perspective, the fallen advanced as the elite of the nation. They symbolized the internal integrity of the Reich and kept society from further degenerating into a dissolute and fractious present. The idea of dying for the nation transformed their plural lives into a singular form of existence based on service and devotion to others (*Proexistenz*).²¹

Transferring this Christian model of sacrifice to a decidedly secular context surely altered the horizon of salvation. It was not a gift of the dead, but a duty of the survivors. Accordingly, most inscriptions on German war monuments invoked this obligation of the living to the dead.²² Remembrance of the dead was supposed to elicit a willingness to sacrifice among the living. Living a life in their spirit filled with the same dedication would guarantee the resurrection of the despairing and downtrodden Fatherland.²³

This notion of a meaningful death in war shaped the mentality of not only veterans after the Great War. The application of the Christian concept of sacrifice

to those who fell on the battlefield was by no means an exclusive affair of so-called volkish, nationalist groups. On the contrary, it suffused the new myth of “the front experience” that dominated perceptions of the war some ten years after its conclusion. A quotation from the conservative literary critic Friedrich Sieburg in 32 attests to this, inasmuch as his experience at the front is read as a ritual act in keeping with the scheme of Christian Holy Communion:

This was the hour of the great battle. With sunken eyelids, as one might regard the body of the Lord, we formed the living chain and felt the fraternal blood of all coursing through us For a second, we felt like a body We, we were the creators of this unity [of the nation], and it did not scare us in the least that we were so alone as sacrificial victims on the altar

In complete innocence and purity, the nation rose out of our hearts as in the first days of creation For we knew and know that only he sees the nation who is prepared to sacrifice. We have shown Germany how to sacrifice And our silence points up above, in the same way the smoke of a sacrifice rises above, for which God is well pleased.²⁴

Just as the Wars of Liberation of the nineteenth century had already been understood as a national Easter, so was the First World War often interpreted as a profane communion and revelation. Walter Flex’s *Der Wanderer zwischen heiden Welten* or Julius Zerner’s *Kriegsmesse 1914* are good examples. Death on the battlefield was bestowed with the aura of a sacred act. The sacrificial death of the nation’s best was a reenactment of ‘Christ’s Passion, as suffering was supposed to lead to resurrection.

2. The Cult Surrounding the Nazi Party Martyrs

Leading National Socialists, as witnesses to and participants in this cult of the dead, had observed at the end of the 20s how unconscious psychical associations could be converted into strategies for political action. The cult surrounding dead party members who had been killed by police or political opponents in street fighting drew heavily upon the heroic narrative that gave sense to soldierly death. From very early on Hitler and other party spokesmen claimed to represent the interests of the fallen and to fulfill their legacy by continuing the fight until victory was achieved.

The so-called blood witnesses of the movement were proof of the righteousness of their cause, and they exhibited the radical resolution and unqualified devotion with which the National Socialists pursued their goals.²⁵ To the extent that it adopted violence as a means of solving national political conflicts, the party consciously and deliberately put itself in the soldierly tradition of being prepared to kill and die. It conferred upon the struggle for political power the attributes of a life-and-death struggle.

Their own dead provided National Socialism with an auspicious opportunity. On ‘the one hand, it helped the party draw connections with the socially accepted notion of the idealistic self-sacrifice of soldiers; on the other hand, it enabled the Nazis to distinguish themselves from other groups across the nationalist party spectrum-few of which had any martyrs- and in turn help consolidate their own identity. Just as remembering the fallen in the Great War brought surviving veterans closer together, so too did the party martyrs facilitate tighter cohesiveness among members.

Legends and myths about these dead party members from “the movement’s time of struggle” had been floating around from the beginning. The most famous example was the Berlin Sturmabteilung (SA) leader Horst Wessel, who was systematically built up as a young heroic savior by his Gauleiter, Joseph Goebbels. Horst Wessel was born in 1907 as the eldest son of a minister in Bielefeld. His father took part in the First World War and afterward was active in a Berlin city parish.

As a youth, Wessel was a member of the Bismarck League, a paramilitary youth group associated with the German National People’s Party (DNVP). After completing his schooling at a humanistic *Gymnasium*, he began studying law in Berlin in 1926 and became a member of a student fencing association. Soon he and his younger brother Werner joined the SA. Because of his apparent talent as an organizer and speaker, Wessel made his career among the “brownshirts” and quickly rose to the rank of Sturmführer. In the middle of 1929, however, his plans changed radically on account of a romantic involvement that assumed much of his time. He interrupted his studies, earned money as an unskilled laborer, left his parents’ middle-class home, and moved into a furnished room in a working-class neighborhood with his girlfriend.

His involvement in the SA also fell off at this time. Nevertheless, Wessel remained well known within communist working-class circles as a formidable member of the SA. With the death of his brother in December 1929, Wessel fell into a deep psychological crisis. Three weeks later an assassination attempt was made on his life, the background of which has never been sufficiently clarified. On January 14, 1930, a pimp and former boyfriend of his lover shot Wessel. His landlady, whose husband was a member of the leftist Rot-Frontkämpferbund, had denounced him, which lent his shooting a political dimension. Five weeks after the attack, Wessel died of his wounds at the young age of twenty-two.²⁶

Goebbels stylized Wessel’s obituary along the lines of an abridged version of the life of Jesus and giving it the knowing title “To the Very End.” Quotations from the Bible pepper the piece, so that its “literary basis” could hardly escape the notice of any reader:

A German mother gave birth to him in pain. She raised him in worry and misery ... Out of a child came a young boy, and he soon matured into a man He goes as a prophet in the desert And he reaps only hatred as his thanks, only persecution as his recognition He must bear the sins and failings of a guilty generation. He knows why, and takes it upon himself

silently. He is ready to the end He leaves his mother and parents' home, lives among those who revile and spit at him

Outside in a proletarian neighborhood ... he ekes out a young, meager existence. A Christian socialist! One who beckons through deeds: "Come to me, I will save you!" ... Something godlike is in him, so that he can be and do nothing other. One must become an example and sacrifice himself! ... You find him again among a horde of street workers. There he stands in the middle of these giants of labor , .. and implores: Believe in me! They were not able to, they did not want to. He had to end his journey. One late evening, they forced their way into his attic room and shot him with perfidious lead in his ardent head

Five weeks he lay in agony and at death's door ... He did not complain And then, finally, tired and in agonizing pain, he gave up his spirit. They carried him to his grave Those whom he wanted to save threw stones at the dead body He drank from the chalice of pains until the very end. He did not let go of it, but took it willingly and full of devotion. This suffering I drink for the Fatherland! Raise him on high, the dead one, and show him to all.

And call out, call out: Ecce homo! Never tire of pointing him out! Carry him wherever you go and wherever you stand, over your heads, and when asked who this dead man was, then give only this answer: Germany! Another Germany is rising. A young one, a new one! We carry it already in us and over us. The dead man who is with us raises his tired hand and points into the faint distance: Forward over the graves! At the end lies Germany!²⁷

The myth of the National Socialist hero, as was popularized by the example of Horst Wessel, tells of the "resurrection and return" of the hero, but his basic message refers less to his fate than to his redeeming function for the community.¹⁸ Wessel's death, too, was interpreted as a victory. To it was ascribed the function of stirring the German people: "Germany awake!" Just like the Nazi Party's original sixteen martyrs from the failed 23 putsch, so too Wessel and his fated brethren were not supposed to have died for the benefit of the party, but "for Germany." Likewise, the National Socialist "movement" described itself as the executor of the will of the entire German people.

New fighters were to be won over to the cause by means of the mythic elevation of death, following in the footsteps of the movement's original hero. In Wessel's case, his song served as an instrument of inspiration. Through his example a community, would be created between the dead hero and his admirers, as Goebbels himself contended in his "vision" at the gravesite of the party hero: "In ten years, children in schools, workers in factories, soldiers in the field will sing his song I see in my mind columns marching, endlessly, endlessly. A humiliated people is rising and on the move. An awakening Germany demands its right: freedom and bread! "³⁰

Through the narrative motif of the righteous sufferer, the party hoped to redeem the brutality and criminal violence of the SA. What is more, the heroic victim served in practice as an effective means for recruiting new fighters, who were supposed to step in as avengers of the dead hero.³¹ The myth served as an appeal to the violent potential of supporters and supplied them with the necessary moral justification as well as much-needed revolutionary fervor, unscrupulousness and willingness to sacrifice.

However, the “Christian socialist” Horst Wessel embodied only one aspect of the National Socialist hero, the heroic fighter and heroic victim. The Janus-faced image presented yet another visage: this one -carried the very attributes of Adolf Hitler and represented the figure of the leader and victor.³² After the Nazi seizure of power, this new image soon outshone the fallen party members, whereby the cult of the hero was gradually transformed into a Fuhrer cult.

The more unbearable the experience of suffering and impotence, the stronger the wish for radical change becomes and more acute the longing for fulfillment and happiness. Under these circumstances grows the desire to realize this dream of power through violence.³³ National Socialist parlance called this transformation “revolution” at the social level, “conversion” to Nazi ideology at the personal level. According to the doctrine of the party leader and his followers, every individual was obliged to help bring about these changes at the risk of his own life. The breakthrough from suffering to happiness had to be possible, for the desire was so urgent.

The preferred means were determined not by moral norms, but by the very force of suffering itself. An eloquent testimony to this was the writer Rudolf Binding’s “Creed” (1933): “Germany—this Germany—was born from a raging longing, from an inner obsession, from the bloodiest throes. To want Germany: at any price, at the price of any danger. Any plaint pales before this.”³⁴

The modern sense of one’s own nothingness was intensified by a pervasive feeling of loss of national meaning in the wake of the First World War defeat. This was to be compensated by something unusually monumental. ³⁵ The more grandly the goal was conceived, the less inhibited people became about the means. Put differently: The hero, who has prepared himself for sacrificial death, now acquired the right to kill others on the grounds that it served the absolute goal. Heinrich Himmler’s famous motto for the Schutzstaffel (SS) should also be seen in this light:

“Be ruthless with ourselves and others, kill and be killed” (*Hart sein gegen uns und andere, den Tod zu geben und zu nehmen*).

Secondary virtues such as a feeling of duty, toughness, loyalty, obedience, absolute dedication, honesty, decency, and bravery, which were publicly recognized as primarily soldierly virtues, belonged to this new ethic.³⁶ They were pressed into the service of a higher value, “Germany.” It was only seemingly a secular national goal; in reality it was extraordinarily diffuse and always possessed religious qualities.³⁷

Out of this developed an extremely problematic hierarchy of values. “Secondary virtues of this kind have an instrumental character. Only a rational final objective turns them into actual virtues. If this end remains absent or indeterminate, then there is no rational ends-means relationship. The result is that the larger purposes, which are supposed to govern the practical world, are then sought within the virtues themselves.”³⁸

Within this heroic ethos, value was dependent upon and manifest through the successful realization of those secondary virtues, which were only originally supposed to serve it. “Germany” as a goal thus existed chiefly as an idea; only once the will to sacrifice, loyalty, submission, and fulfillment of duty were all performed on a mass scale would the larger value emerge to which they were all directed. This is why a devout “bearing” (*Haltung*) played a more important role than the substance of faith itself. In the words of Goebbels, “It is not all that important what we believe in; only that we believe.”³⁹ Or as Ernst Junger put it in 21:

Death is the highest accomplishment for a belief. It is creed, deed, fulfillment, faith, love, hope, and goal. It is perfection and completion as such in an imperfect world. Thus, the content is nothing and conviction everything. One may die obsessed with a fatal error, yet he has achieved greatnessDelusion and the world are one, and whoever dies for folly, still remains a hero.⁴⁰ (See Holmes).

The value of “bearing” as a principle feature of National Socialist heroism played a central role in its ethos; occasionally it was called “the spirit of the SA” (*SA-Geist*) and replaced the nineteenth-century nationalist term “spirit of the people” (*Volksgeist*).⁴¹ A more specific sense of the content of this bearing could be seen in the heroic dramas of the time; it was about the defiantly heroic attitude in a hopeless and tragic situation which best enabled the “idea” to break through and take form. In other words, it was a kind of martyrdom.⁴²

The heroic myth thus presented its ethos with the help of symbolic figures, their actions and modes of behavior. The hero embodied a catalogue of virtues. At the top stood the qualities of loyalty, purity, and the willingness to sacrifice. For the National Socialists, the loyalty of the hero to the bitter end constituted a service to the Fuhrer and the people. It was a sign of his idealism and a mythic surrogate for the perceived threat of a full dissolution of traditional social relations.⁴³

Thus all social relations were reduced to a hierarchically structured loyalty, without any attention paid to the complex structures of a modern social network. Unconditional loyalty was supposed to provide and maintain the unity of the Reich and the nation. The longing, for this was especially pronounced given the cleavages that accompanied Germany’s febrile urbanization and industrialization.

Political salvation; it was hoped, would come from heroes willing to make sacrifices. Redemption could only be reached through an idealism that stood

opposed to the prevailing vices of materialism and the desire for personal gain. The Third Reich cast itself as the final expression of this hoped-for salvation.⁴⁴

The construction of the Nazi myth of heroism must also be seen in relation to the emergence of numerous “inflation saints” and prophets of crisis during the 1920s.⁴⁵ This politico-religious revival movement blossomed between the end of World War I and the hyperinflation of 1923, only to reappear with the beginning of the world economic crisis of 1929. Its cycles make clear the connection between material misery and ethical crisis, between the experience of suffering and the search for a compensatory heroic narrative.

The “barefoot prophets” of the Weimar Republic preached salvation through renewal and offered themselves not only as sacrifices for society, but also as political leaders. “The social gesture of sympathy [Mitleidsgeste] turns into the heroic pose of the social revolutionary and can rise to the level of a Caesarist cult of supermen [*Übermenschenkult*].”⁴⁶ Adolf Hitler was just one of many of these new messianic leader figures at the time.

“Those contemporaries in the throes of anxiety did not seek their salvation in rational behavior and economic considerations, but rather partly took ... refuge in the social myth of the messianic leaders. These were not swindlers, for they actually believed that their arrival would make everything anew. This inflated self-confidence, in turn, provided supporters with a foothold and prop, while also amplifying their readiness to suffer and sacrifice.”⁴⁷

The belief in a politico-religious transformation of humanity and society appeared to be the solution to the crisis. “The general message of the crisis years lay in the will of the ‘strong,’ of the heroes, a message in which public institutions no longer sufficed as the providers of order and meaning.”⁴⁸

Hitler had tried to separate himself from the myriad inflation saints and warned his followers about the “volkish Johns” who continually sought contact with him and the Nazi Party.⁴⁹ Common to all of them was above all the “cult of the redeeming heroic leader personality.”⁵⁰ The self-humiliation and the willing proletarianization of the “Christian socialist” that figured in Goebbels’s variant of the heroic myth about Horst Wessel now reemerged in the asceticism of the inflation saints.

By choosing poverty and sharing property, they firmly placed themselves within the legacy of Jesus and crusaded against those “new money” profiteers of the war and the inflation. In this way, they proved to those threatened by downward mobility and material loss that they would make a virtue of necessity.

The impoverishment and degradation suffered would be re-narrativized as a prerequisite for spiritual reformation.⁵¹ The particular allure of the National Socialist message of salvation lay in its understanding of sacrifice. Hitler demanded much more of his followers than simply asceticism and inner reform. He offered the opportunity to brawl with political opponents as well as torment defenseless Jewish citizens. Here a vent was opened for pent-up aggressions, compensating for the experiences of impotence and downward mobility suffered

in everyday life, while simultaneously offering a powerful sense of moral superiority.

This aspect of National Socialism rested on an ambivalence that inhered in the German concept of sacrifice; The German term *Opfer* does not differentiate between “sacrifice” as a cultural ritual and “victim” as the passive sufferer of an injury or loss. The term *Opfer* thus designates both the ritual as well as its object. In sacrifice, doing, and suffering, offering and receiving flow into one another.⁵²

The level of meaning behind ritual sacrifice thus plays a special role. The victim of a battle may be on the losing side; yet according to the ritualistic understanding of sacrifice, his status as a victim is an honor. To be worthy of sacrifice is proof of his impeccable and even immaculate quality. In a violent struggle, moreover, the victim is at first glance in the morally integral position.

Whoever is prepared to sacrifice himself is then no longer seen as a perpetrator and receives a quasi-automatic absolution for that which he has done to others before his own death. Since every victim in a struggle or in a ritual requires an active subject who victimizes him, this necessity excuses the subject from the responsibility of his action. For what the perpetrator does must take place: without him there can be no fruitful redemption.

In the National Socialist myth of the hero, both positions-sacrificer and victim-merged with one another. In fact, the Nazi hero was honored less for his deeds, which in the early years were basically acts of violence, than for his having suffered a sacrificial death. Nonetheless, the dead victims called on those who survived to become victimizers/perpetrators. The Nazi heroic myths contended that the dead were not victims in the sense of losers, but instead were heroes and future victors.

The murderous aggression of brawling SA troops was represented as pure idealism for a good cause. The Nazi movement’s brutality and lack of scruples formed one part of its attraction. Its brutality was effectively intimidating and repulsive, yet because of its physical strength it was also fascinating and admirable for many. To belong to a group that thus qualified as future victors might well be the morally weaker position, but the prospect of escaping victimhood could help overcome the reluctance to use violence.

3. Triumph and Death of the Hero

The promises of the National Socialist myth of the hero focused on an expectant new era. Circumstances of need, persecution, and oppression—as those who experienced the “time of struggle” subjectively perceived it—were supposed to be made bearable by the prospect of eventual victory in all struggles. The future triumph served as the justification for one’s own sacrifices in the Nazi struggle as well as for the losses of their opponents. Alternatively, those sacrifices already made were supposed to lay the foundations for the party’s claim to power: “Twelve years of struggle and courageous sacrifice lay

behind us. By this achievement alone, we already have earned the right to lead the Reich.”⁵³

Once, however, Adolf Hitler became chancellor on January 30, 1933, this story of sacrifice and victory had to be modified. It had to be made concrete by linking religious hopes of salvation with concrete power relations. By equating a Hitler chancellorship with the arrival of the savior and the resurrection of the people, the Nazi Party had whetted expectations that it was neither willing nor able to fulfill.

The fruits of victory neither satisfied all followers, nor was it Hitler’s intention to actually carry out the announced revolution. The need to justify the experiences of death also receded significantly along with the casualties within party ranks. The heroic myth in the Third Reich thus was confronted with tasks different from those during the “time of struggle,” when it had served primarily to recruit, integrate, justify, and motivate fighters. Now, however, it was necessary to create other versions more oriented toward the needs and prerequisites of the entire population.⁵⁴

The Third Reich saw itself as the fulfillment of German history. It represented the idea of an endpoint, after which there would be no further development. The Nazi leadership thought the establishment of their “eternal,” “thousand-year” rule was a sign of announcing this “happy end” to the country’s historical development. After the politically unstable circumstances of the postwar period, this image was attractive to a broad spectrum of the population who longed for orientation and security. Still, from these new desires for quiet and order emerged a new dilemma for the new leaders if they were to retain “struggle” as a life principle.

The solution to this problem appeared in a form for which the foundation had already been built well before 1933. The naming of Hitler as chancellor, so the story had it, was only the beginning of a development, whose end would be a new Reich and a new Human Being. Until then, there remained one other path, a path of more sacrifices and privations. For up to now, only the enemy inside Germany had been defeated. The struggle against foreign powers that had been interrupted in 1918 had yet to be brought to a victorious end.⁵⁵

Overcoming the internal conflict of the nation thus only represented a necessary precondition for its invincibility against external powers. By the same token, this meant that “national elevation” (*nationale Erhebung*) had not yet brought about the complete transformation of a new way of life. On the contrary the qualitative jump was only to be accomplished through redoubled national effort and devotion. Within the Third Reich it was to be reached through creation of a “racially pure” national community; beyond German borders this new national campaign anticipated a major international confrontation aimed at overturning the defeat of 1918.

After 1933 the Nazi cult of heroes concentrated more and more upon the Fuhrer as much as the surviving victor-heroes, while many sacrificial heroes were now relegated to the background.

A rough translation is:

**One goes and becomes the hero.
And others follow his lead
Marching with him through the fields
United under the same star
Follow him to Eternity worry not of suffering and death
Since his word is their time
His deeds are their bread
One goes and becomes the hero
master and slave of his people
As he holds his flag up high
Vows and curses become law
And he speaks into the time
brazen like a god ordered
And from him suffering runs away
And in him death does die.**

The present tense and direct diction of this text registers the timelessness of a hierarchical structure based upon the unconditional subjugation of all under the will of singular heroes, whose religious attributes as redeemers were capable of mitigating misery and even overcoming death.

Even if this heroic mission-so exalted that the history of humanity was believed to lay in the hands of the German race-saddled Germans with heavy demands, Hitler was not blind to the fact that such forced asceticism needed some material fulfillment in the here and now, or at least the prospect of some worldly prosperity and happiness.

In order to secure mass support the regime understood that one task could not be deferred until the beginning of war, namely the improvement of Germany's dire economy. However much rearmament and the Reich's Four-Year Plan served as the mainspring of economic revival, there were other initiatives which effectively broadened the perception of economic takeoff.

One of these propaganda instruments was the construction of the Autobahns. Even today this project is remembered as one of Hitler's most positive achievements, not least because it radically curtailed the number of unemployed.⁵⁷ It has often been presumed that the importance of the Autobahn lay in its military potential for wartime mass mobilization.

A closer look at its network, however, makes clear that its supposed strategic military importance played at best a subordinate role in the project.⁵⁸ Its

objective was above all of aesthetic: it was designed for domestic tourism. For the privileged automobile owner the highways were supposed to make accessible the natural beauty of German town and country.⁵⁹

The layout of the freestone-formed Autobahn bridges and the Heimatschutz-style filling stations, together with its radial conception of roads leading out of the cities into the countryside, was intended to cultivate comfort and satisfy yearnings for luxurious experiences. The highway construction project was of course complemented by the regime's promise to deliver new automobiles-the famed Volkswagen-to the working masses.⁶⁰

In this sense, the Third Reich successfully marketed the Autobahn project as evidence of the regime's can-do productivity and technical progress. Although only 4 to 5 percent of the unemployed actually benefited from the program, to say nothing of the fact that three quarters of the project's financing was siphoned off from unemployment insurance contributions, the project became an abiding symbol of economic vitality and dynamism.⁶¹

Mobility, which citizens were promised in the name of the Autobahn, effectively replaced the freedom that had been taken away in the political sphere. This image of the Autobahn as an emblem of progress, dynamism, freedom, and prosperity still predominates, rendering these motorways all but immune to criticism.⁶²

4· The Crisis of the Hero

During the prewar years there, was a collective identification with the official cult of heroes. Large sections of the populace subscribed to the heroic narrative in a positive manner. It could clearly be used to raise people's sense of self-worth and to furnish convincing explanations for the past. This was especially important given that the national self-image and the need for self-affirmation were at odds. Thus the acceptance of war was inseparable from the notion of war as the very incarnation of heroic struggle.

Yet this consent was mostly confined to war as an idea, an abstract principle, a mere hazy possibility. For the majority of Germans the heroic ethos of struggle was only appealing insofar as there were no actual bloody victims and it remained at the level of a vague "readiness to sacrifice oneself."

It was effective so long as it was expressed through contributions to the Winter Assistance Program, "Family Soup Sundays," and daily rationing and performance of duties. Besides, the massive rearmament program had brought with it economic benefits (full employment, economic revival) and social progress, which effectively undermined resistance against the menace of war.

Despite the regime's long and careful war preparations (for example, universal conscription and increased military build-up), future war casualties on the German side had to be calculated and justified. The Nazi cult of heroes of the 30s must therefore be seen in tandem with the regime's preparation for war.

Already in the prewar years there emerged—especially among future soldiers—a positive popular attitude toward aggression, struggle, and violent death.

For example, the celebration of the “blood witnesses from the time of struggle” and those who had fallen for the Fatherland during the Great War was not only intended to invoke past experiences, but always pointed toward future war sacrifices. Since the “people’s will to military preparedness” (Wehrwille) could not be simply produced by means of crude, aggressive propaganda, the elaborate rites and symbols of the hero cult assumed the role of disseminating this new heroic ethos without explicitly naming any concrete goals of aggression.

63

Already by the beginning of the conflict the lack of war enthusiasm among civilians and soldiers alike made it plain that an unconditional acceptance of the heroic ethos was hardly commonplace. Only the successes of the German army, particularly the quick victory over France, spurred a more positive attitude toward the war.⁶⁴ On the whole Germans regarded the war as more of a “fate,” even if they exhibited a remarkable loyalty and willingness to obey and work hard for the Nazi state.

In the end, however, this reflected only a partial adaptation of the heroic ethos. In the few years before the outbreak of war it was impossible to remake the whole German Volk as a heroic elite. Amid the emergency conditions of war the majority of Germans were hardly enamored with the virtues of war; indeed, the affirmative heroic qualities (enthusiasm, purposeful action, brinkmanship, to say nothing of lust for war and killing) were confined to a small minority. Yet it was precisely this disparity that enabled the SS to construct its image as an indispensable wartime elite within the Nazi state.

Early on, the war possessed a rather pleasant side for many civilians and soldiers alike. The quick military victories brought the systematic exploitation of newly occupied countries, which was officially welcomed as a vital means of provisioning the war-rationed Fatherland and thus raising the standard of living for all Germans. Fearing the recurrence of the hunger strike of the First World War, the state was very keen on keeping the new home front satisfied this time. This was all the more critical given that the war might require long-term rationing and everyday privation.

On the fighting front, soldiers were often rewarded with the plunder of foreign lands as material compensation for their suffering and service. For example, the extreme undervaluation of the French franc due to Germany’s fixed rate of exchange made French consumer goods remarkably cheap, of which German soldiers took quick advantage. Soldiers were inundated with wish lists for French products from those back home, many of which were delivered through military parcels or by the soldiers themselves during their military leave.⁶⁵

As long as the lightning victories were able to provide German soldiers free and virtually unthreatening visits to various European cities and landscapes, as long as they could impress their “girls” with French stockings and champagne,

Belgian lace and pate, as well as Dutch cheese, heroism was an easy attitude.⁶⁶ Over time, however, personal sacrifice was increasingly demanded and the prospects of subsequent material booty began to dwindle, with the result that the selfish will to survive began to crowd out other concerns.

No doubt this affected the front soldiers less so, whose existence in a strict command-and-obey system left little choice or time to think about these alternatives. Yet the situation was different elsewhere. For instance, the Eastern front never offered any real possibility of material compensation, at least in terms of consumer goods or touristic leisure time. What plundering did take place there by the Wehrmacht was part-and parcel of the larger annihilation strategy against the Soviet people.⁶⁷

Hitler had calculated that he would have to force greatness upon the German people. But in order to pursue his unwavering plans for world dominion, he had to take his country into total war, a war in which the outcome could only be total victory or utter defeat. As long as the prospects of an imminent German victory looked plausible, the mythical stature of the rulers only grew. Many individual participants and civilians helped build the myth, since it enabled many people to put their own actions and suffering in a collective and comprehensive context.

But as the possibility of military defeat loomed on the horizon, the heroic myth soon began to lose its pull and persuasive power. What now became clear to many was that clinging to such a mode of explanation ultimately meant assenting to one's own destruction. Of course this had always been the myth's logical conclusion, but it had been suppressed from consciousness for a long time. Thus the death of heroes was always linked to the death of others. The defeat at Stalingrad in 43 was the turning point, for it made plain that Hitler was serious in demanding from his people unlimited sacrifice. ⁶⁸

Whether consciously or not, most soldiers and civilians recognized that the heroic myth ultimately did not make sense. What good would come from the sacrifice of soldiers at the front? To whose benefit was the destruction of women and children, if the country's own leadership (Hitler's "scorched earth" command) so utterly denied the people's very existence? Yet the heroic myth of self-sacrifice for the common weal was now taken to absurd extremes, and was done so through threat of punishment and without linking such sacrifice to any higher value.

As a larger framework for interpreting actions and experiences, the myth lost its appeal; it could no longer justify the experience of mass death. The paradigm of the heroic single death was insufficient in the face of a continual and collective life-threatening situation. The absolute imperative of collective sacrifice stood in opposition to the more pragmatic wishes of the people to survive. But it was not the annihilation of other peoples or minorities that prompted the Germans to recoil from the inhumane and reprehensible actions that this Nazi image of heroism implied and necessitated; instead, it came out only once German lives were threatened.

Hitler and Goebbels believed in and identified with this heroic ideal until the very end. They pursued the suicidal consequences of this guiding heroic image with the conviction that their own lives as Fuhrer-heroes would bestow greatness upon their heroic sacrificial deaths and would live forever in eternal memory for generations to come. The Fuhrer and his propaganda minister had themselves experienced the seductive power of the call to sacrifice; it fulfilled the commonplace yearning for devotion.

Until the end of their lives they were convinced that the connective tissue of the Volk was precisely its will to sacrifice. What they failed to understand, however, was that this will to sacrifice oneself was inseparable from the hope for some sort of practical payoff or at least immaterial benefit. When these things fell from sight, so too did the attractiveness of sacrifice.

The myth began to pale in power as the logical consequence of the self-annihilation revealed itself. By that time the Germans had immunized themselves from being impressed by the “heroic death” of the Fuhrer. His “sacrifice” was hardly enough to inspire loyalty “until the very end”; so much so that many began to see themselves as Hitler’s main victims.⁶⁹ They were deeply disappointed with the Nazi regime and angry about the way in which the government had unjustly led them into a catastrophic situation.⁷

Many shielded any guilt by claiming that they only had done what the government had demanded in the name of war victory. In effect they argued in such a way as to dispel any notion of a second stab-in-the-back legend about the betrayal of the home front.

As opposed to the First World War, so they reasoned, the home front fought to the bitter end. Even so, its logical conclusion was rarely addressed: that one’s own loyalty and obedience to this regime was perhaps mistaken, and that resistance and sabotage, refusal and desertion would have been the more moral and responsible course of action.

The insufferable fact that the crimes of the Nazi regime had been possible only through the “heroism” of everyday Germans effectively led to a split interpretation of responsibility.⁷¹ This certainly presented problems for the postwar era, since the Nazi heroic ideal (especially the sacrificial element) remained partly intact. Out of the Nazi era image of the victim-hero grew a new self-perception. By the end of the 40s many Germans saw themselves as victims of the occupying forces. Their political occupation, looting, and raping left an indelible mark on West German consciousness, while the similar practices of the German Wehrmacht at the beginning of the war were summarily forgotten.

More, they felt themselves victims of the newly liberated forced laborers and prisoners of war, whose plundering was not seen as a reaction to their violent displacement, incarceration, and long exploitation at the hands of the Nazis. “With lightning quickness a new attitude emerged about war and National Socialist rule: everything was viewed from the perspective of defeat, historical consequences were reversed, cause and effect inverted. After the defeat the one-

time victor now saw itself as always having been the loser. By surprise attack the Germans usurped the role of victim. “ 72

In sum, the attractive power of the heroic narrative can be explained so: it helped create clear lines demarcating internal and external, one's own group and designated foreigners. It necessitated a conflictual situation with a clearly defined enemy. Yet in fact it only worked with the help of material incentives.

Without the economic boom of the 30s, its binding power would surely have been much less. This is best confirmed by the fact that contemporaries to this day always cite the economic achievements of the regime (the end of unemployment, the construction of the Autobahn, and so on) as the pretext for their loyalty to Hitler. Just how weak the heroic myth had become for the wartime populace was clearly evidenced once the war came to Germany.

5. Where Have All the Heroes Gone ...

“The collapse of National Socialism created ... the deepest fissure in the twentieth-century history of victim myths.”⁷³ This is not so surprising, if one recalls how much sacrifice was demanded of Germans both during and after the war. Apart from Nazi experience, from which many Germans felt disappointed, abused, and betrayed, the postwar period was characterized by an astounding disinclination against collective identities of any kind. Chief among them was the absence of collective West German victim and heroic narratives.

Many who believed in the Fuhrer were faced in 1945 with the task of trying to understand their own suffering and the loss of belonging. Yet they had to do so without recourse to any interpretative structure from the state. The main question was: Could war sacrifices retain any signification in the aftermath of utter defeat? The self-destructing effect of the heroic myth was in part manifested in people's inability to integrate their war experiences in their lives after 1945.⁷⁴

Since their concrete experiences were without sense in and of themselves, the meaning of these events was usually passed over or bound to overarching institutions, such as the National Socialist system. In order to transform the “mass of unforgettable war experiences ... into a comprehensible framework,” postwar society lacked any real public structures of meaning that might have given expression to either positive or negative sentiments. Postwar West Germans thus felt themselves in a strange limbo, not least because the “fascist world of meaning no longer existed for the vast majority of people.”⁷⁵

Nevertheless, some elements of the old heroic myth were reused for interpreting the recent past. For example, the model of the inevitable victory of heroes enjoyed a place in East Germany's Socialist Unity Party ideology: “In the German Democratic Republic, National Socialism was reworked as a distinctive historico-philosophical theodicy. It was seen as a great evil, but in the end—despite its intentions—it helped to serve the good cause of bringing about the victory of socialism in East Germany.

The brutal party slogan 'We come after Hitler' did little to question the meaning of history; instead, it ordered all events according to a 'dialectical' scheme," which resulted in "the broken heroization" of socialist realism.⁷⁶ The 1933 defeat of the working class was thus reinterpreted as a victory: "All's well that ends well" (*Ende gut-alles gut*). Like the National Socialists in 1933, the communists after 1945 devoted considerable energies to reconstructing a myth that imitated the "delayed victory" (*Parusieverzogerung*) of early Christianity so as to explain its coexistence with capitalism.

And it was one in which sacrifice was placed in the foreground, even if this necessitated some ideological retooling. As one observer put it: "Marx's understanding of the liberation of the working class has in principle already taken place-yet the next phase of the struggle demands even higher sacrifice."⁷⁷

In East Germany new heroes replaced old ones. The victors of war and history, the triumphal soldiers of the Red Army and the exiled or imprisoned communists now assumed center stage. They afforded new socialist citizens with a salutary identity, while at the same time whitewashing them from the brown stains of the past.

Whoever was prepared to help build East Germany's socialist society was given a new historical myth, one that buried the real past under the rubble of forgetting. The antifascist consensus only perpetuated the aggressive friend-enemy dichotomy from the past; the Nazi concept of "national community" was simply dressed in red robes.⁷⁸

In West Germany the heroic narrative's notion of victimhood persisted, even if the idea of active sacrifice was lost and reduced to the image of the passive, guiltless victim. Likewise, the concept of "death for the Fatherland" had to be reinterpreted. Horace's old couplet of "Dulce et decorum est/pro patria mori" [sweet and fitting it is/to die for one's country] no longer held sway, as historian Hermann Heimpel noted in 1955.

A decade after the war he observed that most West Germans did not define themselves according to sacrifice and personal renunciation; in fact, they very much wished to live long and well. Modern Germans, so he argued, were a new "species, that accepts death but no longer wants to die."⁷⁹

Absent was the ideal of the sacrifice-loving and war-lusting heroes of old. A good example rested in the West German political holiday of June 17. On this occasion West Germans were encouraged to pay homage to the Cold War martyrs who died during the East German worker uprising of June 16-17, 1953. Yet there was little show of public solidarity with such heroes; indeed, most West Germans used the opportunity to enjoy a day trip in the countryside.

Not "Unity in Freedom" (*Einheit in Freiheit*) was the focus of their concerns, but rather "Unity in Leisure" (*Einheit in Freizeit*).⁸⁰ So uninterested was the West German public in the larger meaning of the holiday that it eventually became an annual ritual for politicians and journalists to complain about the

dangerously apolitical attitudes of West Germany's "pleasure-seeking" populace.⁸¹

A collective and binding association with the Second World War carried little power anymore. Nor was there any society-wide support after 45 for private attempts to come to terms with the past. Wartime suffering and its effects had to be handled individually in the private sphere.⁸² Here the values of postwar society radically diverged from those of Germany's prewar society: individual work and achievement determined one's social status, whose end was mostly the enjoyment of personal prosperity and leisure. The claims of community on singular individuals were shunted as much as possible.⁸³ Self-assurance no longer derived from military confrontations with neighbors, but rather from economic competition and pride in "German quality work" (deutsche Wertarbeit).

Democracy and the market economy were the twin postwar forces that West Germans after 45 needed to integrate into their collective identity. Both were based upon the free choice of individuals. Yet there was an important contrast, nonetheless. While democracy was at least oriented toward a sense of community, market economics raised individual profit-seeking into a virtue in and of itself. But it was not only the intrinsic contradiction between civic and consumer virtues that bothered many West Germans; it was also the postwar period's stark contrast to the values and experiences of past epochs.

Because of its emphasis upon war preparation, the Nazi economy was an all-encompassing planned economy. Consumer goods for private households were strictly rationed during the war; ration cards for food and clothing were commonplace, a practice that of course continued through the first postwar years as well. No less important was that citizens had no real political choices during the Third Reich. Such an experience dramatically shaped the mentality of the war survivors.

After the successive experiences of political fragmentation and quasi-civil war during the Weimar Republic, followed by twelve years of political abstinence under Nazi domination and in turn widespread disillusionment accompanying the collapse of the regime, the post-45 generation was deeply apathetic toward political questions.⁸⁴ For many the negative image of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was transferred to the postwar political parties as well, while democracy itself was commonly viewed as an unwanted foreign system imposed by the victors who largely evoked suspicion and skepticism.⁸⁵

Even so, a crass friend-or-foe attitude did remain as the residue of old political ideologies. With the intensification of the Cold War, the perceived enemy shifted from the Allies to the enemy in the East. Anticommunism ironically confirmed the view that (West) Germans had fought on the right side all along during the war. Hence they could participate in the victory.

Which is to say that the old confrontation with communism was now carried on by other means. No doubt the political rivalry of both blocs found its most decisive symbolic manifestation in the economic arena. Consumerism thereby represented the second element of the Cold War mentality. In keeping

with their apolitical attitude, West Germans generally experienced the new liberty as primarily consumer choice and freedom from communism; conversely, the free choice between different democratic parties figured much less prominently.

This mentality gave rise to a range of new values that broke from Nazi era ideology: status-seeking replaced the much-touted equality of “Volk’ comrades” (*Volksgenossen*); the profit motive supplanted social justice for and solidarity toward weak “special comrades” of the same race (*Artgenossen*); and the quest for material prosperity drowned out the dream of national greatness. And just as these “hedonistic” values crowded out the old heroic ideology, so too grew the wish for political relaxation.

In order to enjoy its newly felt affluence, the state was not supposed to spend much taxpayer income on defense and security; instead, it should do everything in its power to leave its borders open and to encourage travel, traffic, and the unhindered stream of consumer goods. It was only fitting that West Germans later recalled the 1948 currency reform as the real turning point of West German history.⁸⁶ For them this was the event-not the 1945 cease-fire-that effectively brought the war to a close. Little wonder that the deutsche mark served as the country’s unofficial state symbol. ⁸⁷

With time the pursuit of personal prosperity and the repulsion against the state’s claim on its citizens-especially notable in the mid-1950’s rearmament debate-was enshrined as a new German virtue. It all but replaced the old virtues of heroic asceticism and devotion to the common good. That is, the collapse of the Third Reich and the ensuing national division rendered obsolete the once-supreme value of heroic sacrifice.

In the heroic narrative the year 1948 afforded a kind of caesura. The end of the political purge and “atonement measures” (*Sühnemassnahmen*) was supposed to mark the end of the Allies’ direct occupation, and of their former position in dictating their norms and values. This phase represented a new beginning, which also included a new understanding of the past’.⁸⁸ In West Germany this meant that the heroes of war disappeared with the Nazis.

Only war victims remained. The effects of war suffering were foregrounded instead of its causes. Otherwise, as it was argued, old wounds would give rise to new conflicts.⁸⁹ Consider for example the fact that war victims of the former enemies were honored in the early postwar years. This came about as a result of moral pressure from prisoners of war and concentration camp survivors along with their organizations, which dovetailed with the wishes of the occupying forces and the more general desire to elevate the country’s international reputation.

After 1949 these victims were remembered together with German victims. The foreign war victims thus functioned as a moral cloak under which different elements of German people’s suffering (which included civilians killed by bombs and refugees, fallen Wehrmacht soldiers, and even casualties of various Nazi organizations) were lumped together.⁹⁰ The collective identification of West Germans as essentially war victims often led to a more or less secret empathy

with condemned Nazi perpetrators and war criminals, with whom they felt much more affinity than with their countless victims.⁹¹

Apparently, the old Nazi classification of peoples according to segregated categories of the elect community and “national enemies” (*Volksfremde*) persisted after 1945. Although the Allies only punished individual guilt, the Germans defended themselves passionately against the supposed assignation of collective guilt.⁹² In such a defense they were well practiced, especially since the denial of war guilt after the First World War had been the one binding element of German society during the Weimar Republic.

After 1949 West Germans rejected the mantle as perpetrators, opting instead for the role of outside observers. Dividing the dead between perpetrators and victims must be stopped, so went the argument, since in death and suffering all are equal.⁹³ This of course had as much to do with the judgments upon the living as upon the dead. In the early 1950s the concerted campaign to free the “war condemned” (*Kriegsverurteilten*) was treated as a matter of national honor.⁹⁴ With it implicitly went the desire to defend the honor of dead soldiers without acknowledging their actions.

This was especially the case regarding surviving Wehrmacht members.⁹⁵ It was all part of a larger postwar existential crisis of orientation that pivoted upon the question of how to make sense of one’s own actions, suffering and uncertainty in face of defeat, political transformation and judicial condemnation.

Since National Socialism was not supposed to be remembered, it was unclear how to place the war in memory.⁹⁶ Fleeing responsibility for heinous crimes and a war of annihilation made it impossible to come to terms with experiences of suffering, violence, and mass death. The new political and economic beginning was used like a new name and identity bought at the expense of total amnesia. In the minds of many West Germans, it was pardonable to have been a Nazi as long as one now abandoned these convictions.⁹⁷

With time such an attitude became the basis for a new anti-totalitarian consensus and helped ease the postwar transition. The reason for the widespread rejection of war was that both world wars were seen as having brought no tangible benefits. In light of the newly celebrated values of a postwar work and achievement society, war only represented destruction and the antithesis of these values. Yet it was also possible to compare the reconstruction achievements of the 50s with the successes of the 30s.

In the 1950s, the pre-39 “Economic Miracle” was particularly esteemed as the Third Reich’s most positive achievement, even if its connection with war was largely ignored. In the early postwar years values like honor and Fatherland still played an important role. Only gradually were they replaced by personal freedom and prosperity. The Third Reich’s “Heroes Commemoration Day” was re-named as the National Day of Mourning, while the fallen soldiers of the Second World War were honored for having defended the homeland. According to the new logic, they died in the name of freedom from Bolshevism. But their legacy was not at all a celebration of martial attributes. Precisely because the war was emptied of any

larger meaning, the fallen served to admonish the survivors about the need for peace.

If we compare both postwar eras, it is plain that the legacy of each world war was treated quite differently. While the First World War provided an extraordinary source of signification in the interwar years for reinterpreting the relationship between German past and present, the Second World War afforded little corresponding narrative power and historical orientation for postwar Germans; in fact, its ability to furnish a compelling interpretative framework had already begun to collapse by the end of the war. By taking the Nazi ideology of heroic self-sacrifice for the community to its logical extreme, the war in turn exposed its absurd and suicidal dimension.

For a long time the guiding image behind German national mythology had been the tragic hero, who may have lost the struggle on the ground but in the end won the moral victory. It registered an ever-recurrent theme of German history that “heroism, that unwavering devotion to the Fatherland to which all Germans are obliged, invariably leads to defeat and death.”⁹⁸

In Germany sacrifice without victory long acted as a “model of idealism and conscience.” Even in moments of great success Germans were saddled with the memory of earlier generations, whose “loyalty and unquestioning faith steeled their hope in Germany’s victory amid defeat and death.”

The Nibelungen legend, which was often invoked during both world-wars as an inspirational symbol of identification, perfectly captured this fatalism. It certainly played a role in helping maintain support for Hitler’s grandiose gamble, not least because people’s feeling of impending defeat found a ready and age-old mythical model. (Only through showing its self-destructive potential did the heroic myth lead to enlightenment.) In any case, German peculiarities of the “victim syndrome” and the “lust for submission” (*Unterwerfungslust*) can be seen as historical phenomena.

In itself peace stepped a postwar doctrinaire devotion to personal prosperity and material success, which have been subsequently hailed as the most important object lesson (*Lernerfolg*) for Germans from their whole twentieth-century experience.

Not to say that this dramatic transition from a violent will to sacrifice to the pursuit of prosperity was made so smoothly. Before 1945 there were certainly elements of hedonism, and some traces of sacrifice still persisted after 1945. On the one hand, the combat heroes took great pleasure in living the good life in France during the Nazi occupation; on the other, the labor of rebuilding Germany—including the image of the famed “rubble women” along with resistance against Hitler—served as key heroic episodes in the formation of the postwar’s welfare state and “affluent society.”

Yet the charismatic heroic narrative had already collapsed. By the 1960s it was overrun by the obsession with personal gain within West Germany’s

SABINE BEHRENBECK:

The Transformation of Sacrifice: German Identity Between Heroic Narrative and Economic Success

burgeoning capitalist “achievement society,” one that East Germans unthinkingly wished for and seized when the opportunity eventually arose.