

Epilogue

Schröder, Walser, Bubis, and the Ongoing German Quest for Normalcy

No country (or political regime) has a corner on complexity or inner contradictions, but some countries (and regimes) are psychologically more stressful to study than others. Germany is a stressful country to study.¹

After this study was completed, several events occurred in Germany which had an impact on the sociocultural landscape of the country. This is neither the time nor the place for an in-depth analysis of these events, but a brief survey can shed light on the prospects of the intellectual New Right. In the political sphere, it was the defeat of Helmut Kohl in the September 1998 national elections that was—at least initially—viewed by both political observers and large segments of the populace as a watershed in postwar German affairs. In the cultural sphere, it was the October 1998 speech made by Martin Walser (cf. chapter 3) and the response to it by German-Jewish spokesman Ignatz Bubis and many others that held the attention of the public for several months. The “Walser-Bubis debate” was accompanied by the continuing controversy surrounding design and erection of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin. In the spring of 1999, the “ethnic cleansing” of Kosovo and the participation of the Bundeswehr in military action against Yugoslavia stirred up memories of the 1940s. Finally, there were occurrences in Germany itself whose “normalcy,” rather than exceptionality, provided a disturbing backdrop to all of the above, i.e., violent attacks against foreigners.

When Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder was elected chancellor in 1998, it was—incredibly—the first time in the history of the Federal Republic

that a government has been voted out of power. Such ultra-stability has been attributed by some to the economic success of the (West) German model, by others to a fear of change stemming mainly from the experience of pre-1945 upheavals. (As the Italians have demonstrated, such fear is not the only possible response to the fascist era.) When Kohl's sixteen-year tenure was brought to an end, commentators were unsure of what to make of the unseating of the Christian Democrats (and their coalition partners, the increasingly neoliberal Free Democrats). One recalls that the editors of *Die selbstbewußte Nation* saw the "generation of 1968" as the root of all evil in postwar German society. For them, Helmut Kohl was a "stealth" Social Democrat who maintained a conservative facade while allowing the left to infiltrate all areas of society. Kohl's talk of an "intellectual-moral shift" was, in their view, a mere sham. Now the reins of power have been taken over by a '68er who was once a member of the Young Socialists (the youth wing of the SPD).² The (traditionally) conservative newspaper *Die Welt*, employer of Ulrich Schacht, Heimo Schwillk, and Rainer Zitelmann, did not, however, react to the election results with the publication of a jeremiad:

The 27th of September is a day of triumph for the '68 generation. With Schröder, the fighters from the extra-parliamentary opposition will occupy the highest offices of the state for the first time.

The "march through the institutions" was successful. . . . However, Schröder's election victory is a structural one, not one of the ideology of '68. That was quietly disposed of. In the place of change, though, there appeared in many cases a kind of philosophical ["weltanschauliches"] vacuum. . . . That makes the victory of the ['68] generation into something hollow. A victory without substance?³

This question became the order of the day after the new chancellor presented his government's agenda (*Regierungserklärung*) to parliament on November 10, 1998. A brief summary of this agenda would be instructive here.

Those who expected a blueprint for sweeping changes were doubtless disappointed by the words of the new chancellor. He told his audience that unemployment was Germany's "most pressing and painful problem," emphasizing that "economic productivity is the beginning of everything."⁴ Such assertions surely reminded the listeners more of Christian Democrat Ludwig Erhard (the architect of the "Wirtschaftswunder") than of Schröder's charismatic Social Democrat predecessor, Willy Brandt. This was not a critique of the system, but rather of stagnation within the system. Lamenting that the

Germans were no longer “innovative” enough, Schröder called upon his fellow countrymen to make themselves “fit for the European info-society” (“Wissengesellschaft”) by, among other things, accepting the necessary role of elites and reforming the university system. He called for a tax reform that would combine “modern pragmatism” with “a strong sense of social fairness” and at the same time spoke out against the “abuse of state services.” He also promised to fight crime and pay more attention to the rights of victims. The term coined for the agenda so described was “politics of the New Center.” In reality, this meant that the SPD was attempting to occupy the middle, pushing the CDU onto the political fringes. Given this core project, references to cultural matters in Schröder’s speech seemed to be mere window dressing.⁵ Kohl would surely not have cited Habermas’s vision of civil and cosmopolitan society, but this was not more than a passing reference. Although Schröder spoke of the election outcome as a “generational shift in the life of [the] nation” and praised his own generation (in both East and West Germany) as torchbearers of “civic virtue,” “civil courage,” and opposition to “authoritarian structures,” he emphasized that there would be no attempt to escape Germany’s “historical responsibility,” i.e., the commitment to building and broadening democracy. It is telling that the one statement in the address that had an old-fashioned social-democratic ring to it, namely the proclamation that everyone has a “moral right” to employment and training, was modified by an addendum stating that the unemployed have a “duty” to accept any opportunity for training offered them. While denying that his government wanted to perpetuate a “paternalistic” state (Bevormundungsstaat), he made it clear that personal choices would have to be subordinated to the goal of a “leaner, more efficient,” less bureaucratized government.

No one was moved to describe the bearer of these sober tidings as a charismatic figure (“A visionary he’s not.”⁶; “This chancellor will not become a philosopher for red-green visions.”⁷). The would-be visionaries, namely those of the extreme right, were the real losers of the election — or were they? In his programmatic speech, Schröder made a point of emphasizing that the German people had “clearly rejected extreme-right and xenophobic tendencies” at the ballot box. They should be proud of this, he said. A brief glance at the election results does provide a basis for this pride: Taken together, the three main right-wing parties (Republikaner, DVU, NPD) received only 3.3 percent of the vote. The Republikaner garnered 0.1 percent less than in 1994. The collective figure was still far below the 5 percent required for representation in parlia-

ment, but it was higher than in the previous election. More significant were the regional results of the far right, especially in Berlin and the former East Germany (in percentages)⁸:

| | 1994 | 1998 |
|---------------|------|------|
| Berlin | 1.9 | 4.9 |
| Saxony | 1.4 | 5.7 |
| Saxony-Anhalt | 1.0 | 4.1 |
| Brandenburg | 1.1 | 5.2 |
| Thüringen | 1.4 | 4.5 |

These results suggest that the attraction of nationalistic rhetoric and (informal) “ethnic cleansing” in the eastern states should not be dismissed out of hand. This impression was strengthened in March 1999 when the Office for the Protection of the Constitution issued its report for 1998. Although the number of violent incidents involving right-wing extremists dropped by 5.7 percent vis-à-vis 1997, the number of persons considered part of the “scene” grew from 48,400 to 53,600. The number of those considered violent also rose from 7,600 to 8,200.⁹ One can quibble about the figures or question — as many have — the criteria utilized by the Office, but the trend is a clear one.

Probably the most disturbing aspect of this trend—at least to this observer—is the growing readiness to use violence against foreigners. More than half of the violent incidents involved attacks on foreigners, and half of these occurred in the former GDR, where youth employment was a major factor, according to Interior Minister Otto Schily.¹⁰ One can by now speak of an endless series:¹¹ Just weeks before this epilogue was written, Ghanian writer Amma Darko was taunted by about ten youths, who then used beer bottles to emphasize their racial epithets. This occurred on the Baltic-coast island of Rügen.¹² In the same week, three foreign students were insulted and attacked in nearby Greifswald (the word “nigger” was used, although the injured student was from Syria), and two African students were injured in Köthen (where Bach composed his Brandenburg Concertos).¹³ Such atrocities led Schily and Justice Minister Herta Däubler-Gmelin to call for an “Alliance Against Xenophobia” (“Bündnis gegen Fremdenhaß”).¹⁴ Although it is impossible to determine which of the many incidents of the past few years were the most despicable, the death in February 1999 of Algerian asylum seeker Farid Guendoul in Guben, a city on the Polish border, was perhaps the most shocking to broad segments of the German populace. Guendoul bled to death while flee-

ing from over a dozen violent youths associated with the extreme right. Even the tabloid *Bildzeitung* spoke of an “incomprehensible battue” (Treibjagd).¹⁵ There was bitter irony in the fact that the societal elites in both Guben and the Polish city of Gubin, across the Neiße river, have long been planning a merging of the two towns in the framework of European unification. (One asks oneself whether the elites or the youthful extremists are isolated from society.) Guben also has more social workers than the typical East German municipality.¹⁶ Shocked citizens took part in memorial services, but politicians attempted to make political capital out of the affair. The party chairman of the Brandenburg CDU, Jörg Schönbohm, accused the reigning SPD of hoping for right-wing electoral successes as a way to weaken the CDU. (He said this on the day of a march organized by concerned citizens in Guben.)¹⁷ Two days later, the Brandenburg minister for economic affairs, Burkhard Dreher (SPD), warned of the economic ramifications of xenophobia: “Although investors have not spoken to me directly about this topic up until now, I know that xenophobia and right-wing radicalism are a hindrance of the highest order for investments.” He added that all citizens of Brandenburg should know that by advocating xenophobia, they were “sawing off the branch that they are sitting on.”¹⁸ There is doubtless no little truth in this statement, but one must question the ethical principles of a politician who chooses to speak of such things during a period of trauma and mourning. Any public official primarily concerned with his country’s image abroad rather than with the serious social problems that affect that image is sending out all the wrong signals. On another level, one must ask to what extent the attitudes exhibited by Schönbohm and Dreher in this particular case are representative of the German political class as a whole. Renowned psychotherapist Hans-Joachim Maaz, upset about the stigmatizing of his fellow East Germans, has recently put forward the hypothesis that, although special circumstances in the former GDR tend to exacerbate antisocial behavior, what is happening in Guben and elsewhere is not unrelated to German society in the West as well:

[T]he data [concerning] growing violence in the new federal states give us some indications about conditions in all of Germany, and they could warn us about the danger that threatens when the prosperity that has become a given for most of the citizens of the old Federal Republic becomes less and less certain.¹⁹

One need not accept Maaz’s generalizations about the East Germans’ “readiness to conform and subjugate [themselves]” and the West German “domination and doer [“Macher”] mentality” to consider the import of the above statement.

In the weeks before the 1998 election, the venerable German discourse about the relationship between thinking and acting, intellectuals and politicians, surfaced yet again. In late August, Berlin witnessed a meeting of minds, the tenth in a series of brainstorming sessions about almost anything under the sun (this one was entitled “10. Ideentreff—Eurovisionen”). Among the organizers of the event were the political artist Klaus Staeck and sociologist Oskar Negt. The point of the exercise was to formulate a manifesto that would provide “a political perspective for a cultural and social Europe.”²⁰ This turn of phrase sounds as strange in English as it does in German: What Europe would not be “cultural” and “social”? The actual intent was to defend the (postwar) European project of social justice and a unique (i.e., non-American) culture. One could not help but reminisce about the—in the meantime highly mythologized—alliance between critical intellectuals and Willy Brandt in the 1960s. In comparison to those days, when the views of writers like Günter Grass were taken seriously (or at least given a requisite hearing), the Kohl era had seemed to be a sort of black hole that swallowed up any incipient dialogue between the pensive and the pragmatic.²¹ Ironically, Grass did not come to Berlin this time. If he had been a one-man grassroots movement in 1965, now he chose to appear on a mere four occasions for the SPD, all of them in the East. He was still upset about Social Democrat support for restrictions on the influx of asylum seekers and for broadened surveillance powers for the police.

The chautauqua about “European visions” brought together celebrities like actor Ben Kingsley, film director Constantin Costa-Gavras, writer Elie Wiesel, philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, Michael Naumann (later to become Schröder’s cultural minister; listed here as “publisher from Berlin”), and former French cultural minister Jack Lang, who, in an subsequent interview, said something that no German intellectual would have dared to say at the time:

Society has changed. Germany cannot let itself be eternally enslaved by the memory of the Hitler dictatorship. The new Berlin no longer has anything to do with the Berlin of the “Third Reich.” I have also already heard that people reject [the idea of] a federal cultural minister, because it reminds them of Goebbels. One is still giving power to Goebbels and Hitler fifty years after their iniquitous deeds.²²

A German version of this lament was to appear not long after the election. Before turning to it, however, it should be pointed out that Gerhard Schröder, although not a dominating figure at the Berlin conference, did make a

statement of some relevance for the present study. After characterizing the Kohl era as “one and a half decades of silence between politics and culture,” he proclaimed: “Now we want European high culture.”²³ Although it remains unclear just what this might mean (perhaps Pavarotti singing the role of Siegfried at Covent Garden?), one possible subtext could be the hope that Europe could maintain its identity by shoring up the cultural elite as a bulwark against the increasingly ubiquitous mass culture emanating from America.

On October 11, 1998, Martin Walser, a card-carrying member of that elite (albeit one who enjoys extended sojourns in America²⁴), delivered an address that spoke to the long-suppressed sentiments of a substantial segment of the German populace. The occasion was the awarding of the 1998 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. This prestigious honor, presented to persons who have made an outstanding contribution to promoting the idea of peace, had previously been given to such well-known figures as Albert Schweitzer, Ernst Bloch, Max Frisch, Astrid Lindgren, Yehudi Menuhin, and Václav Havel. In 1997, the winner was Turkish novelist and civil rights activist Yasar Kemal. Kemal was introduced by Günter Grass, who provoked many by using the occasion to criticize the German government’s policies toward asylum seekers. The *laudatio* for Walser was delivered by none other than Frank Schirrmacher,²⁵ who had done his best to discredit the leftist literary intelligentsia in the “Literature Debate” of the early 1990s (see chapter 3). In contrast to the immediate postreunification controversy, the purpose was not to destroy the reputation of writers—like Christa Wolf—with a certain political bent, but rather to elevate one author to the status of a model worthy of emulation. Schirrmacher constructs the image of an eccentric who does not fit into everyday reality, but who nonetheless “sees clearer than others things left over, things left undone, legacies (Hinterlassenschaften).”²⁶ This special vision is made possible by contemplation untainted by any ideology, since Walser—“this great utopia skeptic”—believes in only one utopia, namely narration. The point of all this is to mold the author’s entire career into a logical progression culminating in a project of remembering the German past in a highly personal manner. This is not meant to be ahistorical or antihistorical, however. According to Schirrmacher, it is “easy to detest and morally condemn National Socialism” but much more difficult to grasp how “misfortune and crime can rise up all around a person without him noticing it.” Ironically, the first part of this statement is wishful thinking (i.e., quite utopian). The second

part refers to Walser's 1998 novel *Ein springender Brunnen* (A gushing fountain),²⁷ in which an attempt is made to rescue a German childhood from the supposedly all-encompassing context of the Nazi period (Walser was six years old when Hitler took power). When Schirmacher tells us that Walser's politics "stand on poetic feet," we have returned to the perspective of the Romantic Novalis. The problem with this portrait, which is meant to be laudatory, is that it has less to do with Walser's life and career than with the way in which the honoree, who was seventy-one at the time of the ceremony, might now want to (re-)interpret what has come before. As a young(er) man, he challenged the legitimacy of the Christian Democratic government of Konrad Adenauer, followed the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials very closely, and protested against the Vietnam War. As mentioned in chapter 3, he even flirted with orthodox communism for a time. It is clear that Schirmacher would like to use Walser's reputation and stylized biography as a tool to recast the role of literature in reunified Germany. Although his notion that the gift of seeing can only be realized through a literary mind devoid of ideological and political concerns is highly problematic in the German context, he does direct us toward the core of Walser's acceptance speech. Speaking of *A Gushing Fountain*, Schirmacher points out the "great paradox" of the author's generation: "to have been objectively innocent, possibly even happy, and simultaneously, thanks to the birth certificate, part of a whole that has become guilty."

When Walser went to the podium in the Frankfurt Paulskirche—where Germany's first democratic constitution was drafted—he began by telling his audience that it was not easy to decide what kind of speech to deliver. Those who congratulated him when the prize was announced seemed to expect a "critical" speech, something that Walser had already done,²⁸ a "critical sermon" based on the "bad news" ("unguten Meldungen") of the given day. Such sermons usually give the media something to chew on for "two, or even two and a half days." This time, he wanted to "say only nice things, i.e., things that feel good, stimulating things, things appropriate for a peace prize." But how would he be able to justify such a speech? One way would be to confess his weaknesses, especially one of relatively recent vintage:

I seal myself off from evils in whose elimination I cannot participate. I have several refuges ("Fluchtwinkel") into which my glance immediately flees when the [TV] screen²⁹ shows me the world as an unbearable place. I consider my reaction to be appropriate. I should not have to be able to bear something unbearable. I am also experienced in thinking the other way ("Wegdenken"). Without

looking the other way and thinking the other way, I would not get through the day, let alone the night. I am also not of the opinion that everything has to be atoned for. I could not live in a world where everything had to be atoned for.

These words were interpreted by many as a license for repression, as a kind of absolution for the Germans, who have had to look at horrible images—specifically those from Auschwitz—over and over since 1945. Such positions have been taken on numerous occasions by the right-wing intellectuals discussed above. Had Walser suddenly decided to join them? Was his long-time advocacy of reunification, a position that had caused him to be ostracized from some segments of the intellectual community, a Trojan horse concealing reactionary sentiments? This statement, along with others in the speech, was clearly provocative, and it had the—surely unintended—effect of rendering some listeners incapable of keeping an open mind until the end (a phenomenon all too prevalent in critical discourse in postwar Germany).

Most of Walser's speech revolves around the tension between the conscience of the individual and the societal rituals that speak—with varying degrees of success—to that conscience. Every German of Walser's generation has experienced decades of public penance for the crimes of the Nazis, but not all Germans have internalized the message or even paid attention. Some, mainly on the fringes of the right wing, have vigorously denied the necessity of such public *mea culpa* declarations. (The official antifascism of the East German state was quite another matter.) Walser himself has not only been conscious of the dilemma of postfascist Germans seeking a “normal” identity, he has pondered the question at great length and written about it.³⁰ If he now admits that he is compelled to “look the other way,” this comes after a long period of self-examination in search of his “share” (cf. Schirrmacher's title) in the horror that was Auschwitz.³¹ Many Germans (especially, in Walser's view, representatives of the media and the intellectual left), simply cannot accept the fact that an individual could be absolutely overwhelmed by the shadows of the Holocaust. Some of these people, he intimates, attempt to join the ranks of the victims by taking on the mantle of the indefatigable antifascist.³² Walser himself makes his stance perfectly clear: “I have never considered it possible to leave the side of the accused (Beschuldigten).” This is not the position of someone acting as an advocate for repression or forgetting. The message is not problematic, but the choice of venue was perhaps inappropriate: The author was mapping out a very personal journey in a very public space.

Walser was doubtless aware of this dilemma, but he was also upset that he, as a German, had to weigh every word carefully. (Already in 1994, he had delivered a public address in which he railed against “new German taboos” and the evils of “political correctness.”³³) Something in him rebelled against a half-century of self-censorship, and his soul was “thirsty for freedom,” as he put it. The result was a rhetorical tightrope act. One sentence in particular demonstrates the perils involved in such an exercise:

No one who can be taken seriously denies Auschwitz; no one still in full possession of his faculties splits hairs regarding the horror of Auschwitz; when in the media, however, this past is held up to me every day, I notice that something inside me resists this continuous presentation of our shame.

This resistance is then connected to the belief that this shame is being “instrumentalized” for some current ends. (Walser added that these ends are “always good ones, honorable ones,” but this was generally ignored.) The general impression is that the postwar Germans have been assigned a special status on the periphery of the inner circle of civilized nations. Walser spoke of the “suspicion” that arises whenever anyone asserts that his countrymen now comprise “a completely normal people, a completely ordinary society.” In the period after the Frankfurt speech, he was to reiterate his conviction that the Germans have done enough to demonstrate their transformation into a normal democratic nation. On the political plane, Chancellor Schröder was echoing these sentiments, creating an unusual harmony between culture and power.³⁴

Although one of Walser’s main aims in Frankfurt was to celebrate the emancipatory power of literature and literary language, this was practically ignored in the ensuing debate. The critics focused mainly on two aspects. In defending the sanctity of personal conscience, Walser criticized the planned Holocaust memorial³⁵ as a “paving over of the center of the capital with a nightmare as big as a soccer field,” a “monumentalization of [our] shame.” This would send the message that the interaction between Germans and Jews had to end in Auschwitz (in other words, that Goldhagen was right).³⁶ In addition, he utilized an entire series of epithets to characterize the abuse of Auschwitz for purely political purposes: “routine of threats,” “means of intimidation,” “moral cudgel,” “ritual exercise.” Such phrases were not unknown in the Federal Republic, but they had hitherto been used solely by the extreme right outside the public sphere in which most Germans were involved. Walser apparently believed that his impeccable credentials as a progressive intellec-

tual who had dissected not only the fascist mentality, but also the problems of West German society, would shield him from accusations of retrogression and facilitate an open discussion of future prospects. This was a fatal misestimation of the temper of the times.

The major response to Walser's speech was mounted by Ignatz Bubis (1927–1999), a Holocaust survivor and chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Judging from videotapes of the Frankfurt event, he and his wife were the only members of the audience to refrain from applauding at the end of the speech. If Walser had hoped for an intellectual discussion about the nature of German identity in the new millennium, his hopes were dashed when Bubis became his main respondent. This very public figure was not an intellectual, but rather a businessman, politician (as a member of the FDP), Jewish activist, and voice of the survivors. One would expect a "gut reaction" to Walser's ponderings and provocations, and that is exactly what happened. To lend his critique the weight of history and symbolism, Bubis chose to express it on November 9 at a memorial service for the sixtieth anniversary of the "Kristallnacht." This was actually Bubis's second intervention into cultural affairs: He was the driving force behind the protest that stopped the performance of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* (Garbage, the city, and death) in 1985. In his autobiography, he stated that the "fundamental question" at the time was "whether one can, in the mid-1980s in Germany, allow an anti-Jewish play to be performed, one that hurts the feelings of the survivors in an extreme manner."³⁷ In 1998, Bubis did not prevent Walser from speaking (he of course had not seen the text beforehand), but he attempted to discredit the speaker after the fact.

Already on the day after Walser's speech, Bubis had accused the author of "mental arson" (*geistige Brandstiftung*) and compared him with right-wing politicians like Gerhard Frey of the DVU and Franz Schönhuber, the former leader of the Republikaner.³⁸ On November 9, he revisited this accusation and amplified it. Martin Walser was not mentioned until the thirteenth paragraph. In the first twelve, one finds a catalogue of horrors: a description of the 1938 pogrom and thoughts on the nature of anti-Semitism in Germany and elsewhere, the Nazi racial laws, the Wannsee Conference, contemporary German racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, revisionist historians, the 1995 newspaper advertisements about Germany's 1945 capitulation (see chapter 2) and even the Fassbinder play referred to above. The next link in this gruesome chain, as it were, is Walser:

The most recent attempt to repress history or to extinguish memory was undertaken by Martin Walser in his gratulatory speech [“Dankesrede”] on the occasion of the awarding of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to him on October 11 of this year.³⁹

This is guilt by association of the most primitive kind. If Walser was upset when former friends and colleagues shunned him for advocating reunification and “expelled” him from the community of leftists, how must he have felt when Bubis portrayed him as an enemy of democracy, even humanity? It was little consolation that the accuser blatantly misinterpreted some statements, including a passage from Walser’s 1978 text “Our Auschwitz.” This is not to say that all parts of the Frankfurt speech were perfectly clear (the passage about his attitude toward xenophobic violence is especially vague, as is the nature of the “instrumentalization” of the Holocaust), and Bubis recognized that Walser’s highly personal meditation could be taken as a model for others, something that ran contrary to the speaker’s intention but was not explicitly excluded, either. In this regard, Walser displayed the kind of naiveté characteristic of Strauß and Handke: One can certainly stand on “poetic feet,” as Schirmmacher put it, but one cannot expect to be answered in a poetic manner when speaking about politics. This “blind spot” is one of the few commonalities held by the three authors.

Bubis proved to be naive himself, or at least it seemed to be so. Toward the end of his speech, he emphasized that “he alone” was responsible for what was being said, not “all Jews,” just as “only Walser” was responsible for his speech, not “all Germans.” Even over fifty years after the collapse of the Third Reich, it is simply not possible for a German Jew—a prominent one, at that—to speak as an individual. This was especially true for Bubis, although he had been the prototype of the assimilated Jew for most of the postwar period.⁴⁰ His desire to be a German citizen of the Jewish faith, as he called himself, was much like that of Victor Klemperer, whom Walser admires as a model of the cultured German Jew. When Bubis stated that “we [i.e., the Germans, both Jewish and non-Jewish] have to confront history,” he pointed to Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, and Bismarck as examples of the positive side of that (German) history. This is not the world of contemporary reunified Germany, but rather the sphere of the pre-1933 *Bildungsbürgertum*, which now almost disappeared. Walser also feels at home in this sphere, so his confrontation with Bubis was sadly ironic.⁴¹ Bubis was, and Walser is also patriotic in an old-fashioned manner, something that many Germans are not. The differ-

ence lay in personal agendas: Walser hopes for a *future* Germany whose citizens will not feel stigmatized because of their origin, whereas Bubis strove to preserve the memory of *past* horrors in a time when none of the survivors are alive. Unfortunately, two aspects of the Kristallnacht speech made dialogue almost impossible. Firstly, Walser was accused of being part of a growing trend of “intellectual nationalism” tainted by “subliminal anti-Semitism.” (Bubis had made similar accusations with respect to Strauß and Enzensberger a few years earlier.⁴²) This would place Walser in the midst of the contributors to *Die selbstbewußte Nation*, where he does not belong. Secondly, the final paragraph of Bubis’s speech was delivered in the tone of an Old Testament prophet: “We owe it to the victims of the Shoah not to forget them! Whoever forgets these victims kills them once again!” How could anyone respond to such an admonition? And how could Walser pursue a rapprochement with someone who had presented him to the German people—and the world—as an arsonist and potential murderer?

In the weeks after Bubis’s speech, hundreds of articles were published about the affair in German newspapers, and television interviews were also conducted. The controversy dominated the cultural scene for the last quarter of 1998, which was of course also the first quarter-year of the Schröder government. A detailed analysis of the positions taken by Jewish and non-Jewish Germans, by intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens will be undertaken in a future publication.⁴³ In this context, it must suffice to describe the role of Klaus von Dohnanyi, a prominent Social Democrat and son of an antifascist executed by the Nazis, the attempted mediation by former federal president Richard von Weizsäcker, and the face-to-face discussion between Walser and Bubis in late 1998.

Dohnanyi published an essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* five days after Bubis had castigated Walser on November 9. He chose the title “Eine Friedensrede” (A peace speech), emphasizing his view that Walser had indeed earned his prize and made a speech worthy of it. Although he reproduced, almost ritualistically, the idea of German crimes and German guilt, he also did something unheard of in postwar Germany: He openly criticized the main spokesperson for the Jewish community while defending Walser. In addition, he left no doubt that Germany was still anything but a “normal” country. After asserting that Bubis did not understand Walser, he added that perhaps such understanding was an impossibility, since “Walser’s speech was the lament of a German—a non-Jewish German,

though—about the much too frequent attempts by others to gain advantages from our conscience. To abuse it, yes, to manipulate it.”⁴⁴ This sounds as vague as Walser, but specifics are supplied, above all in the person of U.S. Senator D’Amato, who is portrayed as trying to better his reelection chances by pandering to those who demand compensation from the German government and German firms. Other examples are given, e.g., German schoolchildren being insulted as Nazis in Holland, caricatures of Helmut Kohl as a new Hitler in British tabloids, and knee-jerk negative reactions when German politicians make proposals regarding the Balkan crisis. What is intriguing is that Dohnanyi does not believe that such things can be changed: “Germany is stigmatized, and we Germans carry this mark of Cain. Thus nothing molds German consciousness more profoundly than knowing this and experiencing it.” He is convinced that nothing determines Germany identity more than “our common descent from this shameful time” (i.e., the Third Reich). This is actually quite different from the position of a Walser, who, while denying no responsibility or shame, strives to help future generations extract themselves from this conundrum. As writer Peter Schneider has put it:

We shouldn’t let our children grow up with only images of mass murderers in their minds. . . . We have no “normal history,” no argument there. But where would we end up if the first thing that we teach our children is this: You are not normal, you do not belong to a normal people. We would surely breed monsters.⁴⁵

Dohnanyi hopes for no more than an increased sensitivity on the part of Jews when they deal with Germans, an acknowledgment of the latter’s emotional wounds. Unfortunately, his own emotions got the better of him, and he made a statement that will probably be remembered long after the controversy has faded from memory:

[T]he Jewish citizens in Germany of course should also ask themselves if they would have behaved much more courageously than most of the other Germans if, after 1933, “only” the disabled, the homosexuals, or the Romanies had been dragged away to death camps. Everyone should attempt to answer this question honestly for himself.⁴⁶

In reality, most Germans did not resist fascism, and most Jews did not become antifascist partisans. Such utterances thus serve no purpose other than to open up old wounds and inflict new ones.

Dohnanyi and Bubis exchanged open letters in subsequent issues of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Despite mutual accusations and insinuations—

Bubis, for example, termed the hypothetical situation cited above “malicious” (bösaartig)⁴⁷ — they did meet and resolve their differences. Walser and Bubis did not sit down for an open-ended debate until December 13. Walser had felt rather beleaguered in the weeks after his speech: His public appearances were disturbed by demonstrators, Elie Wiesel had asked him to tell his readers that the preservation of memory was part of a dignified life (something that Walser would never dispute),⁴⁸ and even the Israeli ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, had called upon him to supply the clarification that would free his speech from the accusation of anti-Semitism.⁴⁹ (In a “normal” country, a foreign diplomat would not have become involved in a domestic cultural row.) Richard von Weizsäcker had defended the integrity of all three “highly respected personalities” (i.e., Walser, Bubis, and Dohnanyi) and expressed the fear that, among other things, “concerned questions” were being asked abroad.⁵⁰ Through all this, Walser had remained obstinate, demanding that Bubis retract the characterization “mental arson” before a meeting could be arranged. When the encounter did occur in Frankfurt, the two septuagenarian adversaries were joined by Frank Schirrmacher and Salomon Korn, an architect and member of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* published the entire transcript of the long (almost four hours) discussion on the next day.⁵¹

The headline that the newspaper chose to place above the transcript — “We need a new language of remembrance” — was an allusion to a speech made by federal president Roman Herzog on November 9, in which he attempted to reconcile the positions of Walser and Bubis without mentioning them by name. Herzog called for a “vital form of remembrance” that would express not only sadness regarding past sufferings but also the necessity of maintaining “democracy, freedom, and human dignity” for future generations.⁵² He agreed with Bubis when he emphasized the necessity of remembering the victims of the Holocaust, but he was closer to Walser when he warned that constant reiteration of the message could be counterproductive. He also rejected — again, without providing the source — Goldhagen’s term “eliminator [German] anti-Semitism,” as Walser had done in Frankfurt. Did this rhetorical effort facilitate détente between the writer and his critic?

The answer to this question is “yes and no,” or as the Germans would say, “jein.” The photographs printed along with the transcript lend graphic expression to the course of the discussion. More than once, Bubis is shown pointing his index finger at Walser, who reacts by “defending” himself with

an open hand. This constellation can be attributed to the fact that Bubis utilized not only political arguments, but also the weight of his biography, something that Walser could not do. In his long opening statement, Bubis not only criticized “mental arson” and talk of “instrumentalization,” but also offered personal narration about the Holocaust, including his father’s death in Treblinka and the discovery of information about the murder of other family members in the archives at Yad Vashem. Given this mixing of the personal and the political, Walser was left with three choices: He could simply refuse to listen, but this was not a viable option, since he is not a right-wing Holocaust denier. Alternatively, he could apologize for any grief that he might have caused; this would probably also have ended the discussion. Finally, he could mount a defense based on the premise that Bubis had misinterpreted what he said in Frankfurt. This is the path that he chose.

To accomplish this, Walser had to amplify what he had said before. With regard to “instrumentalization” of the Holocaust, he now provided three concrete examples: 1) “The division [of Germany seen as] rational because of Auschwitz.” 2) “The practice of reunification will lead to a new Auschwitz.” 3) Literary critics condemning a novel “because Auschwitz does not appear in it.” The last point refers to criticism of the 1998 novel *A Gushing Fountain*, which led the German best-seller lists for a long period after its publication. What he did not speak of was the question of compensation for Holocaust victims and forced laborers—in contrast to Dohnanyi. He was thus able to portray his concerns as that of a patriot who believed that his countrymen had a right to be reunited,⁵³ and an author whose pride had been wounded when political criteria were applied to a work of fiction. Bubis had nothing to do with these issues, so here Walser was speaking to the nation, not to his individual adversary. On the question of “looking away” from the horrible images of the Holocaust, the one that disturbed Bubis the most, Walser reformulated his earlier statement:

I have looked away at least twenty times when scenes from the concentration camps are shown on television. Why? Because I cannot endure them. In this case, it is physically and psychologically impossible for me to look. I concluded from this that these scenes perhaps—as far as I am concerned—appear too often. However, I did not recommend to anyone that they have to feel as I do about it.

As anyone familiar with the German media knows, if Walser looked away only twenty times, he was in all likelihood *exposed* to these images hundreds of times. In fact, he said that he was “incensed” to hear himself portrayed as

someone calling for a termination (“Schlußstrich”) of dialogue about the Holocaust, since he had engaged in this dialogue for a long time—much longer than the survivor Bubis, he added. The latter reacted to this insult by asserting that he could not have “continued to live” if he had studied the Holocaust in the postwar years. Later on, Walser cited an insult launched earlier by Bubis (“If his [i.e., Walser’s] forebears had kept the Jews from being killed, he would have his [peace of mind].”), but in general a civil tone prevailed.⁵⁴

Even after several hours of give and take, one major point of contention remained, and it was one of some significance with respect to the future activities of German right-wing intellectuals. Bubis maintained doggedly that Walser’s public remarks had “opened a gate for others,” whereas the author countered that it was “high time . . . that this gate was opened.” What was behind this metaphor? The Jewish leader was shocked that a respected figure from the democratic cultural community would express doubts about the necessity for routine, ritual ceremonies commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. For decades, everyone—with the exception of the extreme right—had upheld this taboo. Walser has believed for some time that the radical fringes actually prosper when the representatives of democracy shy away from dealing with delicate matters like patriotism, national identity, and the weight of the past. He also has taken the position—as he did once again in his discussion with Bubis—that National Socialism is by now no more than an “apparition” (Spuk).⁵⁵ To him, the social problems in Germany are the same as those in France, Italy, the U.S. and other countries. Only in the German case, however, do the media connect them to Nazism. Such a “connection” can lead to self-hatred (as described in *Die selbstbewußte Nation*), denial of national identity in favor of an abstract cosmopolitanism, or aggressive nationalism. Any and all of these could, in Walser’s view, prevent Germany from becoming a nation like any other, forcing the country to remain “a convict let out on parole.” To him, the chance of one’s remarks being misused by the forces of reaction is less of a danger than the stagnation of public discourse in the face of myriad prohibitions.

German reactions to the Kosovo crisis demonstrate that the public sphere is now much more multidimensional than it once was, and that it is no longer easy to determine an individual’s position based on his or her association with a certain camp. Before 1989, the intellectual left and the peace movement were generally opposed to any armed conflict⁵⁶ and any use of the

German military. The intellectual right tended to praise the Bundeswehr without calling for its use in a real conflict. This began to change in the Gulf War, when long-time leftists like Wolf Biermann and Hans Magnus Enzensberger came out in favor of Operation Desert Storm. In the present conflict with Milosevic, strange alliances have been formed. In 1999, it was the Social Democrats and Greens who were committed to the NATO bombing, and the once reigning Christian Democrats who were skeptical. (The rightist DVU saw the Germans as puppets of the Americans.) The Greens came to close to a split at their special party congress in May 1999, but in the end, Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer gained the support he needed to continue in office.⁵⁷ No consensus has emerged from the intellectual community. Biermann wrote a poem in support of the bombing,⁵⁸ and Enzensberger criticized the peace movement: "I was never a pacifist, because I owe my existence to the victors of the Second World War."⁵⁹ Grass sided with NATO but also criticized Western support for the breakup of Yugoslavia.⁶⁰ *Der Spiegel*, which published statements by a number of writers, summed up the situation as follows:

The Cold Warrior Alfred Dregger [a veteran CDU politician] united with ex-RAF [Red Army Faction] *guerrillero* Horst Mahler, Pastor Schorlemmer [of the former GDR human rights movement], and Gregor Gysi [chair of the post-communist PDS] for an immediate stop to the bombing; Erhard Eppler [from the SPD left wing] and Bärbel Bohley, once representatives of the West and East German peace movement, [are] for the bombing. . . . Ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt, advocate of NATO rearming, rejects the military action, as does the leftist investigative author Günter Wallraff.⁶¹

The Viennese daily *Der Standard* drew up a kind of scorecard of proponents (including Grass, Enzensberger, and Bubis), doubters (including Walser, Christa Wolf, Christoph Hein, and Elfriede Jelinek) and opponents (including Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Peter Handke).⁶²

The *Spiegel* article cited above contains a rather apodictic proclamation announcing the death of the critical intellectual who appeared on the scene during the so-called Dreyfus affair in France a century ago. If this were true, high culture would be a hermetic exercise accessible to only a few. Martin Walser may concur that intellectuals have no monopoly on conscience, but he continues to offer comments—some would say sermons⁶³—on the state of the world, albeit in literary language. Peter Handke also seems determined to cling to the once-acknowledged role of the writer as truthsayer and prophet.⁶⁴ Unlike Botho Strauß, who has stayed away from public scrutiny in

the past few years, Handke has sought out opportunities for confrontation, bringing the (or rather, one) voice of high culture to the marketplace of ideas. This demonstrates that temperament is no insignificant factor in the activities of intellectuals (literary or otherwise): Whereas Strauß has—at least for the moment—reacted to sharp public criticism by returning to the role of the “pure” author, Handke still feels the need to take on the Western media and Western cultural hegemony.

It was mentioned in chapter 3 that Handke planned to publish a book about Kosovo as the third volume in his series about the Balkans. For now, he has written an essay describing his experiences in Serbia in early and late April.⁶⁵ In February 1999, Handke had said, in an interview with Serbian television conducted in Rambouillet, that “no people in Europe have suffered as much in this century as the Serbs have been suffering for [the past] eight years.”⁶⁶ In March, he wrote to the magazine *Focus* and explained that he had misspoken: He had meant to say that “[t]he people who . . . have suffered (at the hands of the Germans, the Austrians, the Catholic Ustasha-Croats) the most in Europe in this century (after the Jews), for me, is the Serbs.”⁶⁷ When the NATO bombing campaign began, Handke wrote an open letter to the world that was published in the Belgrade daily *Politika* on March 26. The most quoted passage from that letter is as follows: “Mars is attacking, and since the 24th of March Serbia, Montenegro, (the Bosnian) Republic Srpska, and Yugoslavia are the fatherland for all those who have not become Martians and green butchers.”⁶⁸ At the beginning of April, the writer traveled to Belgrade, where he was inducted into the order of “Serbian Knights” for his courage in the face of the “bestial and brutal NATO aggression.”⁶⁹ After his return home, he announced that he would leave the Catholic Church and return the money awarded as part of his 1973 Büchner Prize.

At this writing, the picture of what happened in the province of Kosovo is still incomplete. Of interest here is Handke’s ongoing campaign against the Western media and the scorn that he has been heaping on the principles of the Enlightenment,⁷⁰ since this smacks of the “special path” discussed above. Evidence of this can be found in two interviews that he granted in May 1999. In the first, he characterized the “anti-Serbians” as “just as evil and unbearable as the anti-Semites in their worst time.”⁷¹ Since he went on to say that “since Hitler, nothing so catastrophically dirty has happened [as has happened here],” one must state that Handke has been engaging in exactly the kind of “instrumentalization” that Walser criticized in Frankfurt.

For him, it is not today's "right-wing radicals" who are the living offspring of Nazism ("to me, they're stillborn, dangerous only like ptomaine"), but rather the generation of 1968 and the leaders it has produced: "The American filthy swine, the English gymnast, all these criminal types." Their German counterparts, i.e., Schröder and Fischer, represent for Handke "eternally horrifying Germany." (By means of a sleight of hand, Austria is exonerated, since it does not allow NATO bombers to fly over its territory.) In the second interview, Handke went much farther. He asserted that NATO has achieved "a new Auschwitz. . . . Back then it was gas valves; today it's computer killers from a height of 5,000 meters."⁷² This statement was outrageous enough, but more was to come. The interviewer mentioned that Daniel Goldhagen would like to "reeducate" the Serbs,⁷³ a proposal that has been criticized by many observers. Handke went beyond mere criticism when he called the Jew Goldhagen, son of a Holocaust survivor, a "Pimpf"—i.e., a member of the Hitler Youth.⁷⁴ Walser's (and Dohnanyi's) manner of dealing with Ignatz Bubis might be described as abrasive and at times insensitive, but Handke's epithet was so unconscionable that it may severely damage the prospects of any intellectual "special path" or volkish revival for the foreseeable future. Psychohistorians will no doubt want to analyze Handke's mélange of a nostalgic yearning for the premodern past and the use of modern demagogic rhetoric.⁷⁵

Lest Handke's influence on coming intellectual and literary trends be overemphasized, it should be pointed out that two other factors will be extremely significant. One is the fate of the Berlin Holocaust memorial. After endless discussions and multiple proposals for design and redesign, including those put forth by cultural minister Michael Naumann, a decision was finally made on June 25, 1999. The Bundestag voted 314 to 209 in favor of a modified version by U.S. architect Peter Eisenman, consisting of 2,700 grave-stone-like slabs and a documentation center.⁷⁶ Now that this "monumental" version has been chosen, only time will tell if such an edifice is destined to become a rendezvous for xenophobic skinheads and their "autonomous" opponents. Were that to happen, it could be a major irritant in the body politic of the Berlin Republic. Secondly, the reaction of the populace to the new citizenship law—a limited version of the *ius soli* finally passed by the Bundestag and Bundesrat in May 1999 after months of heated debate⁷⁷—will be monitored carefully by the extreme right. The CDU/CSU had collected five million signatures against the original plan of the Schröder government, and the SPD-led

state government of Hesse was defeated in the state elections of February 1999 when the Christian Democrats made opposition to dual citizenship the main issue in the campaign. Bavaria is considering an appeal to the Federal Constitutional Court. If the watered-down legislation (which only permits lifelong dual citizenship in special cases) were declared unconstitutional, or if the new legal status did not lead to real integration and assimilation in the long term, there would be no lack of fertile ground for those who would strive to (re-)plant the ideas of the Conservative Revolution and of ethnic homogeneity. Could such ideas really take root? Recent trends make this unlikely, but for all the wrong reasons: In the course of the Walser-Bubis debate, almost no one from the younger generation chose to enter the fray. Female voices were also noticeably silent (one notable exception was novelist Monika Maron). The media often portrayed the entire affair as one last standoff between two elderly men attempting to prolong the postwar period, but few opined as to what might follow. On another front, there seems to be mounting evidence that right-wing youth are oblivious to any ideas at all (cf. Enzensberger!). According to the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution, most reactionary young people are under twenty, and they seem to think that being a rightist is “cool.” These people apparently are also attracted to the new strategy of groups like the NPD, which no longer deny the Holocaust but glorify it. This has given the movement a “totally new character.”⁷⁸ After presenting these findings, the President of the Thuringian Office made a recommendation that deserves to be heeded: “[German] society will have to grapple with this [phenomenon] much more vigorously than before.” It is only through such grappling that Walser’s “parolee” will ever be truly free.

