

Maximilian Kolbe Foundation, 2nd European Workshop 2011

Reflections on dealing with a past burdened by violence against the background of experiences made in Germany

Preliminary remark:

With the term “past burdened by violence” we refer to National Socialism (under all aspects), as it is considered to be the central experience of violence in Germany (even though the pacific theatre of war must not be overlooked when contemplating World War II).

Then it would have to be discussed in how far this central experience of violence does have a European significance or represents the potential to “contribute to the foundation of Europe” even though ex negativo.

1. The language

If we use the term a past “burdened by violence” or more generally a “burdened” past in our everyday language, we mostly refer to the time of National Socialism, which is also often called “Nazi era”, “NS-era”, “dark years” or “33-45”. Sometimes also paraphrases or euphemisms are used. To me this language seems to be characteristic, as it sums up and refers to events at the same time:

- it sums up, as it wants to describe everything that comprises World War II, the Holocaust and other kinds of persecution and oppression as well as the political rule of a dictatorship,
- it refers to events, because it has become a language that is increasingly spoken from a distance.

There are less and less people belonging to the so-called experience generation and the language we can hear today is spoken by people from the second, third or even fourth post-war generation. So the approach to the events of the past has become an indirect instead of a direct one.

The personal history of those belonging to the experience-generation is dominated by persecution, emigration and destruction, and the experience of war at the front lines. The experiences of the civilian population are dominated by loss, especially after bombardments of the cities. Finally there are experiences that are often summed up with the terms flight and expulsion, but in fact persons and regions were affected in different ways and degrees. It can be observed that people usually identify with the victims, the role of the perpetrators is viewed from a distance, in more abstract ways. Society sees the role of the victims as a positive one, even though this can no longer be justified by personal experience. ¹

It has to be borne in mind that the distinction of persons involved into perpetrators and victims is a categorization taken from penal law, which seemingly allows definite attributions. The question is whether this is morally adequate, in particular whether this is a sufficient explanation with regard to conflict management and perspectives of reconciliation. From an historical point of view, it would be appropriate to speak of different actors of whom each one

¹ For a very detailed analysis of this phenomenon of „feeling like a victim“, see Jureit/Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer – Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*; Stuttgart 2010.

is differently involved in an event. And – with regard to conflict analysis – even “helpers” and “onlookers” should be integrated. In dealing with National Socialism, it has to be taken into account that the events which happened 60 or 70 years ago are not only very distant from the present, but also signify a generational distance with a changing knowledge, interpretation and importance of events and persons.

In this context, the social function and historical role of the so-called contemporary witnesses has to be questioned. For many people they are authentic, they attest to history, because they were actually there. However, it has to be noted, that contemporary witnesses are only witnesses of “their own” time, i.e. of a particular piece of time under review, and are only one historic source among others. But this aspect is particularly important for the culture of remembrance and reconciliation work because many encounters, initiatives and projects depend on the personal contact with the contemporary witnesses as persons still alive or as persons who survived.

In the German public, the term “contemporary witness” does not only refer to the victims of National Socialism. Today, an increasing number of younger people who were children during the NS-era want to speak about their experiences, or persons who in 1989/1990 saw or took an active part in the changes in the former GDR appear as contemporary witnesses. All this points to a process with the following structures:

The “experience-generation” (=1) is followed by a “generation coming to terms with the past” (=2) and for the next generation remembrance becomes history. This is also of relevance for the aspects mentioned in the next paragraph.

2. 2 states – 2 societies – 4 eras – 4 discourses:

The partition of Germany and the creation of two states with different political, economic and social systems and their affiliation to two different military alliances of opposed super powers results in discourses with differing perceptions and descriptions of history.

In the Federal Republic of Germany (= West) dealing with the NS-era started somewhat hesitantly, judicial sanctioning of crimes took place until about 1949 under the responsibility of the allied tribunals and then was passed on to the (West)German jurisdiction. Only with the start of investigations into and trials on offences committed in the largest concentration camps Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka it is possible to speak of a more comprehensive preoccupation with the past. Although the persons sentenced represented only a small section and a rather coincidental selection, the educational value and impact of these processes on society were considerable. The historic output in the end was larger than the legal one.... This process of reappraisal (not “coping with”!) is accompanied by a wealth of research and narrative literature. Movies such as “Holocaust”, “Schindler’s List” and “Shoa” become mega media events, followed by Holocaust comedies like “Train of life” or “Life is beautiful”. The movie “And along come tourists” reflects dealing with remembrance and history in an other way.....

Former GDR, by contrast, right from the beginning aimed at creating an anti-Fascist consensus, which explained history not only with Marxism-Leninism, but which justified it by instrumentalising the experience of resistance and persecution especially suffered by the political left, mainly of communist tradition. The dealing with NS-perpetrators in jurisdiction was accordingly, just like works of art, architecture and the design of memorial sites as instruments to form the national identity. Other than in the West, a heroic narrative dominated

here and the contemporary witness often did not only provide information but spread a deeper political message.

In retrospect, the situation could be described as a principle of mirror-image exclusion: what mattered in the West did not matter in the East and vice versa, also with regard to a certain hierarchization of the respective victims.

After the political changes in 1989/1990, a new dimension of a “burdened past” followed: In addition to the preoccupation with National Socialism there is a reappraisal of the former GDR with its different periods (founding phase, soviet Stalinist model, system crises and building of the Wall, policy of détente; break down of the system, etc). What is remarkable here is the early safeguarding of sources (e.g. federal commissioner for the Stasi archives – an office which did not exist in the West in this form), but equally remarkable is the insignificant legal processing. Noticeable, however, is the comparison of the systems, which is expressed when talking about the “two dictatorships”, i.e. GDR and the National Socialist regime are compared and sometimes perceived as equal, depending on the degree in which the individual was affected and involved, especially concerning the perspective and identity of the system’s victims.² Therefore, there exist 4 perspectives in the German public: The Western or Eastern view on the NS regime and the Eastern or Western view on the GDR.

3. Culture of remembrance

The somewhat complicated term “culture of remembrance” embraces all expressions and forms to show traditions of history and above all to make them visible for the public. This especially refers to memorials and days of remembrance (8 May, 10 September, 27 January and others). In Germany these include a larger number of memorial sites at former concentration camps as well as numerous regional institutions founded as a result of the “movement in history” between 1980 and 1990. After 1990, more institutions were added in East Germany. These museums of contemporary history at historical places can be summed up with the term “political memorials”. (It is impossible to name them all here).³

Meanwhile there is a broad acceptance in society as shows the widespread approval of projects such as “Stumbling blocks” and many other not only official commemoration ceremonies. In addition, there is a growing awareness of the view of migrants on the history of their country of origin as well as on the German history, i.e. of their host country. The reception of history in migrant societies still represents a major challenge and time and again causes discussion about “national identities”.

With the transition from the second to the third generation, this feature of the culture of remembrance will possibly become less important or undergo a change of paradigms. The question increasingly heard is: What remains? What is the future of remembrance?⁴ These questions are not yet answered. The present society of Germany only has agreed that remembrance is indispensable. This is to say that any denial, curtailment or suppression of historic knowledge is considered politically and morally unacceptable, while historical political debates time and again will have to be started anew.

² See also U.Ackermann in : Internationale Politik, 2006

³ For an up-to-date list see: <http://www.gedenkstaetten-uebersicht.de/WebObjects/ITF.woa/wa/europa>

⁴ Repeatedly by V.Knigge in *Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 25-26, 2010 or in the cultural theoretical considerations of H.Welzer on memory and transmission.

4. Remembrance, religious and civil-religious language or: what kind of spirituality do we share with others?

Considerations on the cultural element leads us to the question: what part has the Church in this? This is not the place to deal with recent church history or the issue of Church and National Socialism. However this is the place to reflect on the significance of the Church's acting in public in this context. The first thing to note is that – as already mentioned under point 2 – even the Churches in both states did go different ways, above all as only in the West was it possible to take an own part. Some things can be compared to what has been mentioned above: so we have many remembrance days in connection with the canonization of members of the churches (Delp, Stein, Kolbe, Leisner, Jägerstätter and Bonhoeffer), church institutions are named after them (Lichtenberg), and at some memorial sites there are church rooms (e.g. Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Esterwegen). Further efforts are made by the steps to reconciliation by pax christi, for example, and the foundation of the Maximilian Kolbe Werk. This reappraisal of the own part in the “mobilized war society”⁵ happened hesitantly and only under the pressure of the social debate, but it has made – even though a late – a contribution to self-enlightenment.

I would also like to mention the following observation: in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany one can surely talk of an increasingly secularized country in the sense of a decline of church practice and of members (at least compared to the former situation of the popular church...). On the other hand it can be observed that “remembrance” has become such a highly charged topos that some historians already speak of a “remembrance scheme” or a “remembrance mania” as they fear an excess of it. Yet, “the culture of remembrance” still enjoys broad acceptance – perhaps because of a need of identification, affiliation or the hope for community. Strictly speaking, “remembrance” originally is a clearly religious topos, the ability to generalize a “core competence” of religion. So for us Churches, this could not necessarily only open up problems or losses, but also starting points, chances or learning areas for dealing with a past burdened by violence. These, however, still have to be discussed, especially the question as to what extent believers and non-believers can share a spiritual attitude of remembrance.

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⁵ For instance Hummel / Kösters in their debate on Church and forced labour, cf. also publications of the „Kommission für Zeitgeschichte“, 2008