The Breaking of a Taboo? The Musealisation of Adolf Hitler and the Changing Relationship Between the Former Führer and Germany

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Introduction

Since 1945, marked by phases of silence and avoidance, sceptical debate and critical confrontation, ‘normalisation’ and painful recollections of German suffering, as well as more recent ‘personalising’ or ‘trivialisation’ of the past, Germans have been struggling to come to terms with the historical burden of Hitler and the Holocaust.1 Although most Germans continue to accept collective responsibility for the past, as the ‘Erlebnisgeneration’ (those who experienced the Third Reich) pass into history, there has been a perceptible impatience with individual accountability by many of the third post-war generation who seek ‘normality’ unburdened by Hitler.2 With reunification, for example, the propensity for transferring responsibility for the past to the ‘other’ Germany diminished, presenting the opportunity for atonement and the addressing of ostensible former silences and evasions which provoked embittered debates concerning the extent and acceptance of collective culpability.3

Though remaining highly contentious, there is ample evidence of official insistence on a continued adherence to the post-war Kollektivschuldthese (collective guilt thesis) which may well have been counter-productive, prompting Germans to grow impatient with an inherited and excessive guilt

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complex. As a key component of a Western Verfassungspatriotismus (constitutional patriotism) and an official Erinnerungsarbeit (labour of remembrance), enjoying varying levels of compliance, the Kollektivschuldthese and a concomitant ‘institutionalisation of collective guilt’ have always had their detractors. Attempting to establish the cultural and historical conditions that facilitated National Socialism, culminating in the Kollektivschuldthese, American social scientists, for example, concluded during the 1940s that since Germans as a whole had uncritically accepted Hitler, they were collectively and individually responsible for past transgressions.

Concerned about a renewed ‘Schlussstrich’, or attempts to consign collective responsibility for Hitler and the Third Reich to history, since then numerous academics and members of the Bundestag have claimed young Germans in particular no longer wanted to hear about National Socialist crimes. The Berlin-based German Historical Museum’s (DHM) 2010 exhibition; ‘Hitler and the Germans. Volksgemeinschaft and Crimes’ reacted to a continued configuration of a competing Erinnerungskultur of contrition and a ‘Katharsis’ (catharsis) of ‘normalisation’, and tried to redress a re-emergent post-war intentionalist personalisation of the past that sought to offload collective responsibility onto the former Führer.

While Hitler and National Socialism are perhaps by-words for German history, films and museums in Germany have, or so the DHM claimed, avoided representations about the legacy of the man behind the Third Reich. Neither have they attempted to explain afresh how the Führer factor, or Hitler’s persona and charisma, permeated the lives of millions. Breaking

former taboos, it was only in 2004 that ‘visualisations’ of Hitler became adequately addressed, at least cinematically, through Oliver Hirschbiegel’s Berlin-based *Der Untergang* (Downfall). Shown in over 400 German cinemas, provoking considerable hostility and acclaim, *Downfall* was part of an *Erinnerungskultur* (remembrance culture) in which it is becoming acceptable among many in Germany to humanise Hitler and German suffering, simultaneously addressing and rejecting the immense legacy of the past. For years, German museums have focussed on the terrors of the Nazi regime, ranging from the camps, to the crimes of the *Wehrmacht*, to enforced labour and the Holocaust but not on Hitler *per se* in Berlin, where presenting him has always been problematic and even prohibited.

Symptomatic of this phenomenon, the former director of the museum Hans Ottomeyer, has explained how in 2004 an externally proposed exhibition, *Hitler and the National Socialist Regime*, was unanimously rejected by the DHM’s academic board for fear of fostering a *Führerkult*, attracting neo-Nazis who could exploit it as a place of pilgrimage. Given the prevalence of photographs and posters in the 2010 exhibition that were previously exploited for political purposes and the fact it is unconstitutional to disseminate Nazi propaganda or glorify Hitler, the curators were faced with a difficult balancing act between unavoidable depictions of Hitler and historical illucidation.

Displaying 600 objects and 400 photographs, the DHM’s 2010 Hitler exhibition was alleged to have been the first definitive portrayal of the Volk’s relationship with the former *Führer*, analysing why Hitler enjoyed widespread support until the very end by way of the socio-political conditions, or ‘structures’, and populist *Zeitgeist*. Beginning with

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photographs of Hitler as party agitator, commander and a montage of his skull - each of which were superimposed on images of the unemployed, jubilant masses and soldiers - visitors were also provided with eight displays covering the *Führer* myth, the Party’s origins, its acquisition of power, war of annihilation and racial mania. Endeavouring to elucidate the extent of the *Führerkult* and validity of the ephemeral but pervasive and quantifiable *Volksgemeinschaft* (a socially unified and ethnically homogenous people’s community), epitomising an *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history), the DHM exhibited a whole range of Nazi memorabilia. Personifying the alleged all-pervading *Führer* factor, objects displayed included Party playing cards, letters of adoration to Hitler, a photographic fan book and even a large tapestry, all ostensibly demonstrating how fervently the nation embraced and was bewitched by a man described by the curators as a ‘former mediocrity’.16

Despite the DHM’s alleged academic breakthroughs and assertions from some quarters that ‘taboos’ have been broken, this paper contends that Hitler was presented by the museum with greater, not less, historical reservation by conforming to the *Kollektivschuldthese.*17 Although displaying many previously unseen artifacts, by adhering to a negative and incriminatory structuralist *Sonderweg* thesis, which predicated that Germany’s economic development and political apathy predisposed the populace to Nazism, the DHM failed to foster a more *impartial* and balanced insight into the *Führer* factor.18

Underlining disparities between a popular and official ‘landscape of memory’, this paper contends there was hostility to the DHM’s structuralist ‘millions of little monsters’, or the U.S. historian Daniel Goldhagen’s 1996 ‘bad Germans’ collective guilt thesis by accounting for the *Führer* factor based on the mindset of the masses.19 Addressing a key stage in

Germany’s cathartic Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coping with the past) where memory is being played out between an officially endorsed ‘Schuldkultur’ of atonement and a self-exonerating Schuldabwehr (evasion of guilt), this paper questions the extent to which prohibitions concerning how Hitler is presented have been broken.20

In order to validate these claims, and in seeking to de-mythologise a propaganda–inspired all-powerful Führerfigur and subsequent self-absolving Schuldabwehr phenomenon, the exhibition’s essence is outlined as defined by chief curator Hans-Ulrich Thamer, followed by a resume of intentionalist and structuralist accounts for Hitler and the Holocaust. Responding to an alleged historical immaturity concerning the musealisation of Hitler, ‘content analysis’ is used to evaluate a corpus of supra-regional newspapers to demonstrate how an official Kollektivschuldthese was accepted or rejected by the opinion-following or forming media and, by extension, their reading public.21 Reviewing the DHM’s claims that the exhibition broke new historical ground, the final section on ‘taboos’ considers whether prohibitions of presenting Hitler have been dispensed with by considering the prevalence of his personalised artifacts and reactions to the museum’s alleged reluctance to transgress the ethical frontiers of acceptability.22

The DHM’s Presentation of Hitler’s Power and De-Demonisation

With its photographs, images and constructed Führerkult, or mystical bond between Hitler and his followers, for chief curator Thamer a lasting legacy of Nazi propaganda was its successful dissemination of the phenomenon that Hitler’s power ultimately derived from his genius as gifted statesman, popular leader and redeemer.23 Despite the fact that Nazi propaganda did not depict reality in the sense that it was always constructed for a specific political message and audience, for Thamer it is

21‘Whenever somebody reads, or listens to, the content of a body of communication and then summarises and interprets what is there, then content analysis can be said to have taken place’, noted Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones. Burnham, Peter. et al. Research Methods in Politics. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 236-237.

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still historically viable since its reception reveals a wealth of information about the socio-political context or structures from which it originated.\footnote{Thamer, ‘Die Inszenierung’, 18.} Tracing key stages in the construction of Nazi imagery, Thamer and others were concerned that Hitler’s personalisation has trivialised historical conscience, which was why the DHM sought to de-mythologise Hitler as an all-powerful dictator and the subsequent exculpatory \textit{Selbstbild} (self-image). Instead of the much-cited Nazi assertion of one German identity, reflected in the phrase \textit{Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer}, for example, the exhibition concentrated on the historical conditions or structures of the European inter-war years of crisis.\footnote{Ibid., 17-19, 22; Erpel, Simone. ‘Hitler entdämonisiert. Die medizale Präsenz des Diktators nach 1945 in Presse und Internet.’ In \textit{Hitler und die Deutschen}. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 154; Frei, Norbert. ‘Führerbilderwechsel. Hitler und die Deutschen nach 1945.’ In \textit{Hitler und die Deutschen}. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 143-144.} This was because according to Thamer, what Nazi images and subsequent interpretations of the \textit{Führer} factor hardly ever show is that Hitler’s charismatic control had to be constantly sustained and renewed by propaganda along with ‘\textit{Tat und Beispiel}’ (action and example) rather than enforced structures of bureaucratic legality.\footnote{Weber, Max. \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie}. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 122-128; Thamer, ‘Die Inszenierung’, 19-20.}

While Hitler’s charisma was certainly a key component of his control, the DHM primarily attributed his appeal, qualities and successes to the consent, focus of adulation, sense of purpose and other desires of the masses.\footnote{Weber, \textit{Wirtschaft}, 122-128; Thamer, ‘Hitler und die Deutschen – eine vieldeutige Beziehungsgeschichte’, 162-163.} Although recognising Hitler’s extraordinary willpower and opportunism, with a mixture of ideological consent and short-sighted material interests, Thamer maintained the \textit{Führer} fully exploited the prevailing aura of ‘unprincipled blindness’ in an unchallenged spiralling path to power and penetration of society.\footnote{Thamer, Hans-Ulrich. ‘Machtübertragung und nationale Revolution.’ In \textit{Hitler und die Deutschen}. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 194.} Nazi power structures certainly ensured Hitler’s authority, contended Thamer and fellow curator Simone Erpel, but these dynamics of control were not the result of a deliberate or ‘intentionalist’ strategy, rather the consequence of Hitler’s amateurish style of rule whose resultant \textit{Führer} state, symbolised by overlapping areas of responsibility, concealed chaos.\footnote{Thamer, ‘Die Inszenierung’, 17-22; Erpel, Simone. ‘Der “Führerstaat”.’ In \textit{Hitler und die Deutschen}. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 231.}

Except for a few unrepentant Nazis, for two decades it was generally assumed and accepted by both Germans and occupying powers alike that Hitler was an all-powerful dictator whose will was invariably translated into action and, therefore, almost solely responsible for \textit{everything}. Leading to
the gates of Auschwitz, for intentionalist historians, Hitler conceived the idea of the total physical extermination of the Jews during the 1920s and relentlessly pursued this intention on acquiring power; in short, Hitler’s bitter hatred of all Jews was held as a sufficient explanation for the Holocaust, which happened because Hitler willed it. Summarising the intentionalist approach, since Hitler made most of the decisions and controlled what went on in Germany, his personality and ideology effectively rendered Hitlerism as Nazism. The DHM’s assessment of the post-war intentionalist atmosphere was that with Hitler dead and guilty, appeasing all concerned, the blame could thus be loaded onto his uncomplaining shoulders and every ordinary German could claim innocence after an easing of de-Nazification following Eisenhower’s ‘crusade against Communism’. As a consequence of reconstruction and Allied political education initiatives which promoted both a distance to and disavowal of National Socialism, for example, the pervasive slogan ‘Hitler was to blame’ offered Germans a collective amnesty.

Dismissing Hitler’s dominant role in the Holocaust or any long-term plan for genocide, structuralist historians suggest there was no direct path to Auschwitz owing to a lack of clear objectives, coherent policies and conflicting interpretations of Hitler’s will. So while Hitler in theory was an all-powerful dictator, as various intentionalists have suggested, in practice he was not always free to act as he wished or the prime mover, since even when a decision had been taken it had to be implemented by others.

Underlining continuities with the past, according to DHM catalogue contributor Norbert Frei and curator Simone Erpel, substituting the post-war Kollektivschuldthese was an intentionalist Selbstbild which seduced the Germans more strongly than Hitler ever did, namely, that they were his first and last victims. Led astray by Goebbels’ propaganda, holding Hitler solely responsible for the war, and collectively punished through that lost war, this Selbstbild served to redirect responsibility and absolve guilt, thereby demonising the dictator and prohibiting his former positive image, claimed Erpel. With former favourable conceptions of his leadership

32Frei, ‘Führerbilderwechsel’, 143-144.
having been reversed, blaming Hitler and his regime re-directed attention to his particular seductive form of leadership, allowing Germans a certain distance from him and permission to see themselves as victims of his personal charm and magnetism.\(^{37}\)

Paradoxically, this attitude also fostered the Hitler Myth, or positive recollections of National Socialism, such as the *Autobahns* and the recreational benefits of the Strength Through Joy (KdF) organisation for millions of workers, the success of which was attributed to Hitler, who simultaneously became an irretrievable demon in the process.\(^{38}\)

Acknowledging *Der Spiegel*’s 1996 front cover depiction of Hitler with Germans for the first time, which reflected a marked empathy to a revived *Kollektivschuldthese*, the DHM also sought to highlight that the media are both addressing and avoiding the past by an unedifying entertainment, parodying Hitler.\(^{39}\) It was this intentionalist circumvention of Daniel Goldhagen’s recurring structuralist genocidal spirit thesis for which Erpel and Frei reproached the media, contending that downplaying the dictator changed Hitler’s image from a tabooed demon into a satirical figure, which adversely conditions historical conscience through trivialisation.\(^{40}\)

In his 1996 publication *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Goldhagen claimed that between 100,000-500,000 Germans were directly implicated in the ‘machinery of destruction’, thus putting collective responsibility of the past back on the public agenda by dismissing a general post-war denial of knowledge concerning the Holocaust.\(^{41}\) Presenting what was effectively a damning indictment of the whole German people, Goldhagen identified a hatred of Jews so ancient and profound that genocide barely required explanation, at the same time alleging that a widespread and particularly violent variant of anti-Semitism was the catalyst for the Holocaust.\(^{42}\)

For structuralists, who place less emphasis on the role of the individual and more on social and economic structures, since many Germans voted for Hitler, the moral responsibility for the ‘Final Solution’ extends beyond the *Führer*’s intentions to the regime’s apparatus and ultimately, therefore, to an alleged mindset of the people.\(^{43}\) According to Jewish historian Raul


Hilberg, for example, the Final Solution did not depend on Hitler’s extremism, but on the expansion of an inherent, latent and genocidal spirit that was not so much *demanded as consensual.* Reflecting less of a ‘you must’ and more of ‘you can or may’, Nazi methods of control and initiatives of violence were by no means based exclusively on coercion, contended DHM catalogue contributor Birthe Kundrus. The Party’s gradual monopolisation of power was only possible with the co-operation of what the DHM termed the *Parteirevolution von unten* (grass-roots political revolution), suggesting Hitler was controlled by events and the political system, while Nazi power structures ensured his overall authority. Summarising the exhibition’s essence, not only was there co-ordination from above, but also an enthusiastic co-operation from below, whereby Hitler’s charisma and populist aspirations, along with his image of legality as voice of the *Volk,* all sustained the mobilisation of the masses and their compliance with violence. In short, moving away from a self-exonerating *intentionalist* stance and more towards a self-accusatory *structuralist* one, for chief curator Hans-Ulrich Thamer, Hitler’s hold over the nation owed less to German sociologist Max Weber’s ‘charismatic control’ thesis and more to the structuralist social-political conditions of the day, along with the motivations and mindset of many.

**Media Reactions**

Along with political scientists and historians, participants in past debates surrounding identity and memory also included journalists and writers, self-consciously setting the terms of popular discourse both in popular dailies and weeklies such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Zeit, Der Spiegel* and *Stern.* Playing a significant role within past and contemporary controversial issues, these so-called ‘*Meinungsführer*’ (formulators of opinion) personify a German tradition of intellectual journalism where public

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45 Kundrus, ‘*Der Holocaust*’, 134.
46 Thamer, ‘*Machtübertragung*’, 194; Thamer, ‘*Die Inszenierung*’, 17-22; Erpel, ‘*Der Führerstaat*’, 231.
opinion often equals published opinion, but is not necessarily official. Further to the findings of my PhD, for instance, which demonstrated key dissonances between official and popular conceptions of memory and identity since 1990, evidence suggested a continuing resentment from some quarters towards the DHM’s endorsement of a ‘bundesrepublikanische Schuld kultur’ (official culture of shame). This was manifest in changes to ethnic conceptions of citizenship, the Green Cards immigration debate, claims xenophobia was mainly confined to the former GDR, the 1996 anti-Wehrmacht exhibition, official defamation of Second World War fighter ace Werner Mölders and German suffering as depicted in Jörg Friedrich’s 2002 book The Fire.

Developments since reunification not only suggested there was widespread anxiety and resentment towards immigration and asylum, but also attempts to dispense with an inherited guilt complex - a result of excessive official demands for ongoing atonement and an institutionalised identity based around Auschwitz. Contesting concerns that Auschwitz should remain an inescapable and unique symbol of German guilt and identity, and insisting on continued public contrition, the former SPD Mayor of Hamburg, Klaus von Dohnanyi, declared ‘nothing defines German identity both at home and abroad so profoundly as the Holocaust’. During a 1999 Bundestag debate concerning a memorial to the Holocaust in Berlin, for example, politicians from across the political spectrum were unanimous in their assertions that Hitler and the Holocaust should remain an indispensable part of collective guilt, remembrance and national consciousness.

While official sites of memory, such as the government-sponsored DHM, may reflect a political system and private experience, reminiscent of the debates during the 1990s concerning the extent to which guilt should continue to inform German identity, recent reactions to the exhibition evoked a ‘Zerknirschungs mentalität’ (mentality of remorseful rumination). Depicting hitherto undisplayed items, such as the Führer’s fan mail and the Heilbroner rote Album documenting Nazi victory parades, all tracing the


51 Barnard, The Past.


54 Plenarprotokoll, 4097-4099, 4100-4112, 4146.

essence of Hitler’s power back to the people rather than Party structures, curator Simone Erpel claimed the DHM was the first to examine the basis of the Führer factor.\textsuperscript{56} Although the Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung (HAZ) acknowledged that the exhibition addressed how Hitler maintained his hold over the people, it criticised the curators’ alleged timidity. For HAZ and others, the DHM failed to explain why so many Germans continued to be fascinated with the Führer.\textsuperscript{57} Irrespective of the many commendable facets of the exhibition, Burkhard Ewert of the Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung, along with Claudia Lepping of the Stuttgarter Nachrichten, went further, alleging that this was not an exhibition about Hitler since the museum did not engage with the actual relationship between the Führer and the masses.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite attracting high praise for the interesting, varied and meticulously compiled catalogue, with its excessive preoccupation on circumstantial and commercialised objects of evidence, for Ewert and others, the DHM lost something of the ‘esprit’ of good historical exhibitions by conforming to structuralist academic trends.\textsuperscript{59} Omitting Hitler’s personalised objects and shunning intentionalist accounts, the museum’s alleged objective structural reflexions, which aimed to de-personalise the past and the ostensible self-conciliatory and obsessive Popfigur phenomenon, produced a very different musealisation of memory to that promoted by the Bundestag.\textsuperscript{60} For Simon Benne, Lepping and Der Spiegel, who contended that Hitler has become more of a political, moral and aesthetic obstacle to be carefully negotiated, the exhibition approached Hitler’s musealisation with far too much historical reserve.\textsuperscript{61} Der Spiegel complained that since the general public could not be trusted on the grounds of their latent predisposition to Nazi propaganda, everything was avoided that could possibly be construed as a heroisation of Hitler, or a justification of the post-war trend that an ignorant and largely innocent people were led astray, complained Der Spiegel.\textsuperscript{62}

In line with the DHM’s mistrust of the masses, curator Hans-Ulrich Thamer noted the reduction of Hitler’s memorabilia to objects of virtually secondary significance by obliquely presenting items, such as a chest of drawers and a glorified oil painting of the Volksgemeinschaft, in order to

\textsuperscript{56}Thamer, ‘Machtübergang’, 198-199; Thamer, ‘Hitler und die NSDAP’, 189-191; ‘Faszination Führer’.


\textsuperscript{58}Benne, ‘Berliner Ausstellung’, 7; Benne, ‘Nerv der Zeit’; Lepping, ‘Kinder’.

\textsuperscript{59}Ewert, ‘Millionen’, 28.


\textsuperscript{61}Benne, ‘Berliner Ausstellung’, 7; Lepping, ‘Kinder’.

\textsuperscript{62}Hornig and Sontheimer, “Führer” im Kleinformat.”
diminish Hitler’s ostensible potentiality of power and attraction. Alluding to the *Kollektivschuldthese*, curator Simone Erpel contended that the people’s adulation was all pervading, accounting for the people’s fascination with the former *Führer* by means of structural conditions, such as resentment in defeat, hostility to the Weimar Republic and post-war Germany’s *Krisengesellschaft* (society in crisis).

Reminiscent of this German post-war structuralist Western historiography, which claimed a traditional but now reformed elite was ruling on behalf of the masses that could not as yet be trusted, Thamer claimed: ‘Recent research has revealed that the Third Reich’s war-time society was significantly more sinister than previously thought.’ Though historians are divided between those who claim it was a ‘pseudo-ideology’ or constitutive of reality, essential to understanding society during the Third Reich, Thamer argued that Hitler’s charisma, control and destructive ethos cannot be explained without reference to the relationship between the *Führer*, *Volk* and the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Moreover, alluding to the complicity of the *Kriegsgeneration* (war generation) and negating their claims of ignorance, Thamer also noted that while the world of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was separate from that of the camps, the latter’s fences were clearly visible, thereby ensuring that Nazi terror against racial enemies and minorities was witnessed by the public. Upholding this stance of indifference rather than claims of ignorance, DHM catalogue contributor Birthe Kundrus claimed that in contrast to past discussions, current debates no longer revolve around whether the Germans were aware of the Holocaust, but rather how they dealt with it.

Indicative of the school of thought that perceives the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a reflection of reality as opposed to mere ideology, and alluding to collective guilt, Kundrus contended that the Third Reich was not simply a society, but a tangible, specific, well-supported, albeit Nazi-induced social order and community. The DHM contended that not only did Hitler present himself as a man of the people, fulfilling the nation’s yearning for a hero, but also as the living incarnation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* – the widespread active or passive participation in which facilitated his rise to power and control, the destruction of democracy, along with war and genocide.

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63 Ibid.
64 ‘Faszination Führer’.
70 Thamer, ‘Die Inszenierung’, 19-22; Thamer, Hans-Ulrich. ‘Führerherrschaft und Vernichtungskrieg.’ In *Hitler und die Deutschen*. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 243; Thamer,
Consequently, for the DHM the rise of Hitler becomes less determined by the mobilisation and totalitarian techniques of the Party and more due to the widespread willing co-operation and consent to National Socialist ideology.  

So, was Hitler a monster who seduced adoring millions, or was it more the case that millions of little monsters willingly did his bidding, reflected Burkhard Ewert of the Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung?  

Inherent within the exhibition’s title: ‘Hitler and the Germans. Volksgemeinschaft and Crimes’, for Ewert and others, it was clear the DHM upheld the latter theory, ‘blindly’ following the alleged historical consensus since 1945. In some ways, such intentionalist reactions to the DHM’s structuralist stance accounting for the Führer factor reflected the much-debated question of whether German history has determined the German character or whether character has determined history.  

Though hotly contested, some structuralist academics responding to the question, was the Third Reich inevitable?, believe Hitler was the natural product of Germany’s political evolution, cultural and intellectual heritage along with its national character. In other words, did the people succumb to Hitler because anti-democratic social and intellectual foundations had been retained, as the DHM implied, or because they had become part of modern western society?

Resurrecting the Kollektivschuldthese, as the DHM implied, Goldhagen suggested that the Holocaust was facilitated by the active complicity of many in the population, since within German culture there had developed a particularly violent variant of an eliminatory anti-Semitism. Accusing the DHM of deliberately avoiding dealing with Hitler on the grounds his personalisation could lead to a repetition of the past, the Stuttgarter Nachrichten asked: ‘Was the DHM really expecting another Hitler?’, thereby alluding to its allegedly unwarranted reservations and a Schuldkultur from certain visitors. This echoed TAZ’s 2004 critique of those who feared the return of the Führer factor. After 1945, for example, for many Germans

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4 Ibid., 28.
Hitler became the ideal scapegoat for their past transgressions in the form of an ‘Alleinschuldige’ (sole responsibility) which fostered the impression that they were the manipulated victims of the Führer factor. Challenging this trend and demanding a direct confrontation with the Third Reich in order to ascertain the Kriegsgeneration’s complicity, their children (the 1968 generation), sought to identify the socio-economic and political factors or structures that had facilitated National Socialism, thus avoiding the mistakes of the past.\textsuperscript{78}

Not everyone in Germany was happy with the media’s move away from a Kollektivschuldhese via a demonising or personalising of Hitler, insisting that since fewer people are left alive who were misled by him, Germans ought to be perpetually reminded of past mistakes. While recognising the exhibition could become a place of pilgrimage for neo-Nazis, the Stuttgarter Nachrichten’s Claudia Lepping and the Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung resented the DHM’s adherence to a Kollektivschuldhese, dismissing the possibility of another Hitler on the basis of a well-established culture of contrition and inconducive conditions.\textsuperscript{79} Disputing the DHM’s allusions that the Germans have not learned from their past and its unjustified fears that elucidating the real reasons for the Führer factor would breathe new life into Hitler, Lepping also claimed that these hackneyed and irritating structuralist accounts for Hitler’s success have plagued the Germans for long enough.\textsuperscript{80}

Conversely, the Magdeburger Volkstimme seemed more in accord with the DHM’s structuralist presentation of the past. It uncritically highlighted that one of the key myths exploded by historian and exhibition catalogue contributor, Othmar Plöckinger, was that Mein Kampf was little read by Germans during Hitler’s tenure.\textsuperscript{81} Summarising the book’s historical impact and academic validity within heated post-war discussions, Plöckinger concluded that while it is debatable whether Mein Kampf was “the book of the Germans”, more recent resumes testify to its incontrovertible and unremitting status as “the book of German history”.\textsuperscript{82} For the Magdeburger Volkstimme, it was the conditions and consequences of Hitler’s rise and rule, his promises to the people, along with their blind faith in and adoration of him, which led to their general involvement in atrocities.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{79}Ewert, ‘Millionen’, 28.
\textsuperscript{80}Lepping, ‘Kinder’.
\textsuperscript{81}Schneider, ‘Vom Wechselverhältnis’.
\textsuperscript{82}Exceeding all the publishers’ expectations, Mein Kampf sold 900,000 copies in 1933. Plöckinger, Othmar. “Hitlers “Mein Kampf”. Von der “Abrechnung” zum “Buch der Deutschen”. In Hitler und die Deutschen. Thamer and Erpel, eds., 50, 55-56; Schneider, ‘Vom Wechselverhältnis’.
\textsuperscript{83}Schneider, ‘Vom Wechselverhältnis’.
was growing public support or at least acceptance, and this sympathy and compliance enabled the Nazi double strategy of seduction and violence.\(^{84}\)

Further indicative of the DHM’s self-accusatory structuralist stance, which insisted that the Volksgemeinschaft was integral to Hitlerism, the curators sought to contextualise genocide and a general nationalisation of violence by showing how, not if, the Volksgemeinschaft radicalised society.\(^{85}\) Thamer and catalogue contributor Michael Wildt claimed the Volksgemeinschaft’s promotion and its integrative function conveyed the fears, hopes and denunciations of the day, though it was not constitutive of social reality since it excluded certain societal strata. Just as it sought to overcome divisions of class, politics and religion by encouraging greater social co-operation, its adherents also sought social scapegoats, sustaining the violence and extremism against undesirables.\(^{86}\) Promising a socially unified and ethnically homogenous people’s community which would create a new national identity based around race and struggle, the Volksgemeinschaft also envisaged making Germany great again by destroying the hated Versailles Treaty and ridding the country of its internal enemies.\(^{87}\)

DHM contributor, Birthe Kundrus, contended there was at least a partial knowledge amongst the population of the Holocaust, implying collective culpability, even though active public participation in systematic genocide was limited to a few individuals.\(^{88}\) For Kundrus and Wildt, ensuring the Volk’s ethnic future, together with the prospect of individual enrichment and Selbstermächtigung (self-empowerment), lay behind the general acceptance of the expulsion and exploitation of Poles and Ukrainians, along with violence against the Jews up to and beyond 1939.\(^{89}\) Addressing Die Zeit’s question of the extent to which Germany had been radicalised into a Volksgemeinschaft, Wildt claimed that despite not constituting reality since it excluded formerly accepted and integrated strata of German society, it certainly encouraged widespread and accepted barbaric behaviour. In order to emphasise the generational criminality within the Volksgemeinschaft, particularly striking photographs were displayed depicting local reactions to the anti-Semitic street processions in which women, children and

\(^{84}\)Thamer, ‘Machtübertragung’, 194.


\(^{87}\)Kalitschke, ‘Der Münsteraner’; Fulbrook, A Concise History, 178, 182.

\(^{88}\)Kundrus, ‘Der Holocaust’, 131.

adolescents abused ‘guilty’ Jews paraded before them by the Party faithful before the 1935 Nuremberg Laws. \(^90\)

Resenting this alleged general complicity alluded to by Kundrus, Wildt and Thamer, protests also came from HAZ and Der Spiegel at the DHM’s failure to sufficiently highlight resistance to the regime. Nowhere was any mention made, for example, of Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff’s 1943 assassination attempt on Hitler in Berlin, complained Der Spiegel. \(^91\)

Although accepting Hans Mommsen’s theory that the Holocaust was a radicalised process of cumulative violence, indicative of the ongoing allocation of responsibility, Kundrus claimed a schoolteacher who witnessed Jewish persecution personified the Volksgemeinschaft’s ephemeral reality and attitudes of the day. \(^92\)

Unhappy that her distressed pupils had to witness the arrival of a train-load of emaciated Jews near Auschwitz, the teacher recorded in her diary: ‘Was it really necessary that those little children had to see such an awful process of public exclusion?’ \(^93\)

Shortly afterwards, however, she expressed her irritation that the Jews had not saved themselves by using their obvious wealth. \(^94\)

Conversely, symbolic of a manifestation of the ‘good German’, a former Wehrmacht officer Wilm Hosenfeld resolved to rescue Jews whenever possible. Despite being a former admirer of Hitler, he was disillusioned with the NSDAP on the basis of war-crimes. Was this an exception to the so-called ‘bad German’ phenomenon? \(^95\)

Almost certainly, contended Kundrus, because while figures are always difficult to establish, the number of ‘Rettter’, or ‘good Germans’, were clearly a minority. \(^96\)

Moreover, while the teacher’s troubled statement revealed an irritation with a huge breach of moral norms, for Kundrus it conveyed an acceptance of legitimised murder as a means of a reversed accountability which claimed that the Jews themselves were also to blame for their fate. In short, irrespective of the fact that many did not deal directly in mass murder, it was undoubtedly tolerated by the majority. \(^97\)

Not only traditional elites, but also the majority of the population joyfully welcomed the regime or came to terms with it, succumbing relatively quickly to its promises of a united egalitarian society, national revival and

\(^93\) Kundrus, ‘Der Holocaust’, 130.
\(^94\) Ibid.
\(^95\) Agar, Unsere Zeit fordert; Jaspers, Die Schuldfrage; Kundrus, ‘Der Holocaust’, 130.
\(^97\) Kundrus, ‘Der Holocaust’, 130.
prosperity. DHM curator Simone Erpel noted that trust in the Führer’s promises ensured that Hitler could count on mass support, even amongst those initially mistrustful of the regime – particularly the workforce whose integration within the German Labour Front (DAF) and KdF, following the Führer-allegiance principle, testified to a thorough Gleichschaltung (coordination). Under the DHM’s sub-section Verheißungen (promises), for instance, offering consumer welfare, leisure and ultimately a more affluent society, mass-consumerism was one of Hitler’s key inducements, epitomised by a whole series of modern, affordable and well-received Volksprodukte (people’s products). A double-edged sword, on the one hand, the DAF and KdF ensured social conformity and control and on the other organised welfare and leisure - the widespread acceptance of which suggested a general tolerance of exclusion, terror and persecution. Through nationalist emotionalisation and economic enticements, but also with coercion and control, Hitler mobilised a huge desire for re-birth and achievement, along with unprecedented energies of destruction which culminated in the extermination of all democratic institutions and values.

Taking issue with this self-excusatory structuralist stance, Benne, Lepping and Esteban Engel dismissed Erpel’s critique of this all-pervading yet trivialised Hitler ‘obsession’ on the grounds that such debates were no fixation, but rather the prerequisites ensuring the continuation of Hitler’s (and not the people’s) demonisation and guilt. Symptomatic of this adherence to an intentionalist self-absolving Schuldabwehr, there were times, noted Simon Benne of HAZ and Lepping of the Stuttgarter Nachrichten, when the DHM preferred to analyse anonymous structures rather than deal with Hitler himself, along with an explicit avoidance of the maxim that individuals shape history. Evidently in accordance with this Schuldabwehr, Bonn museum curator Jürgen Reiche ruminated that historical phases often experience a sudden renaissance which one consciously or passively encourages. Moreover, down-playing intentionalist stances by over-emphasising objective and antiquated structural phrases, such as No mandate, No Hitler, along with dismissing the Führer as a demonic figure or even a figure of fun, runs the risk of

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100 Ibid., 211; Erpel, ‘Hitler entdämonisiert’, 156.
102 Erpel, ‘Hitler entdämonisiert’, 156; Benne, ‘Nerv der Zeit’.
103 Engel, ‘Hitler und die Deutschen’; Lepping, ‘Kinder’.
losing the very essence of Hitler’s subjective appeal and fascination, claimed Lepping.  

Taboos?

While discussing the legacy of the Führer has never been prohibited, exemplified by museums in Nuremberg and The Berghof dedicated to his life and times, suggestions for a DHM exhibition on Hitler had to be abandoned in the light of strong academic opposition during 2004. Apparently, personalising or depicting Hitler in isolation has always been contentious - or rather avoided - in the capital. There were widespread academic fears that such an exhibition could be misconceived as promoting or condoning a ‘fascination with evil’ amongst the public, encouraging neo-Nazis to come and pay tribute to Hitler. Following protests in Berlin transcending the boundaries of political correctness by an ostensible exaggeration of the effects of Nazi propaganda, Zugzwang’s group of modern artists’ media history exhibition of the Führer’s photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, scheduled for the DHM in 1995, also had to be cancelled.

First impressions of the DHM’s 2010 Hitler exhibition indicated past prohibitions have been dispensed with, by way of the inclusion of at least one of Hitler’s personal artifacts in the form of his desk. Avoiding charges of glorifying Hitler which can lead to criminal prosecution in Germany, co-curator Klaus-Jürgen Sembach evaded the problem by depicting busts of the Führer in miniature, thereby rendering adulating poses from right-wing extremists difficult. ‘Showing such artifacts in such a way would transgress the frontiers of acceptability,’ explained chief curator Hans-Ulrich Thamer.

However, a closer examination of the DHM’s ostensible academic and artistic breakthroughs concerning Hitler revealed an inadequate and highly contested musealisation of memory and, for some, nothing new. Indicative of the ‘misleading’ perception that the DHM was the first to dispel former prohibitions concerning Hitler’s widespread appeal was the Nürnberger

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105 Lepping, ‘Kinder’; Benne, ‘Nerv der Zeit’.
110 Hornig and Sontheimer, “Führer” im Kleinformat”.

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Nachrichten’s revelation that no-one had previously dared to deal with questions of *may*, *can* or *should* one show Hitler artifacts.\textsuperscript{111}

While the DHM’s exhibition *was* instrumental in broaching new approaches to the theme by depicting hitherto unforeseen images, nevertheless, there were widespread allegations of continuing taboos concerning the presentation of Hitler’s personal artifacts and a lack of consensus regarding their historical and moral viability. Symptomatic of such discrepancies were various reactions to the DHM’s avoidance of his personalised objects: ‘Whenever there are suggestions about exhibiting Hitler’s artifacts, they are always accompanied by academic reservations and petulance,’ complained Ewert.\textsuperscript{112} Such resentment was also evident in *Der Spiegel*’s lamentations over the very naming of the exhibition, declaring: ‘As if there were not enough taboos already about the past, during 2004 the DHM even had to relinquish its proposed singular naming of the exhibition “Hitler” in the face of fierce academic opposition from both left and right.’\textsuperscript{113}

By dismissing the intentionalist historical relevance of personal artifacts on the grounds that Hitler’s appeal can only be understood within the criminal context and quantifiable reality of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, collective guilt was clearly apparent for DHM tour guide Anyangbe-Portele and her colleagues.\textsuperscript{114} In contrast, reflecting intentionalist perceptions of the past, some visitors objected that too much about the *Führer* had been omitted: ‘Too little about Hitler was addressed and none of his personal possessions were shown’, explained Lepping.\textsuperscript{115} Amongst the 600 objects still off limits, for example, were Hitler’s alleged skull fragments, his dinner jacket or *anything* that could have been touched by the former *Führer* - even the sound of his voice was conspicuously missing.\textsuperscript{116} Subscribing to an ostensible selective and prescribed historical discourse of the past, the *Münsterländische Volkszeitung* reported that while there were objects which the DHM wanted but could not have, there were also those which they *could* have had but declined.\textsuperscript{117} Further indicative of this self-exonerating intentionalism were claims that even if such items *had* been shown, they would have revealed little about Hitler and even less concerning the alleged attitudes of his millions of lesser monsters.\textsuperscript{118}

Conclusion

In conclusion, revealed in reactions to the DHM’s apparent ‘structuralist’ Sonderweg, or, more accurately, what intentionalist political scientist Karl Dietrich Bracher derided as a ‘Sonderbewußtsein’ (special consciousness), the impact of a failed Austrian artist on one of the world’s most culturally gifted countries shows no sign of abating.119

Aside from allusions to the rather incriminatory Sonderweg, the former director of the DHM, Hans Ottomeyer, insisted that the question of why so many Germans were ready to relinquish democracy and condone legalised violence really belongs to the future, since currently there are no clear explanations.120 Defending the exhibition’s essence, since the Third Reich’s history remains open to question, Erpel argued that it is evident that Germany still finds coming to terms with its past very difficult, which was why the exhibition allowed visitors to draw their own conclusions concerning how Hitler and past crimes were possible.121

However, evidence from comparing former Volksgemeinschaft publications with more recent ones suggested that contributors within the DHM’s catalogue continued to highlight structural over intentionalist factors, such as Hitler’s ideology emphasising the generational cohort and, by extension, collective responsibility.122 By implying the Volksgemeinschaft was a tangible, albeit transitory, manifestation of reality reflected in National Socialism’s mass support, as opposed to a ‘pseudo ideology’ based merely on image, the DHM appeared to endorse structuralist claims that intellectual populist foundations facilitating totalitarianism had been retained.123 As the exhibition made clear, the Führer factor primarily relied on the support or consent of millions and in spite of doubts concerning active public participation in the Volksgemeinschaft, by adhering to the Sonderweg thesis, it was evident the DHM still subscribed to the Kollektivschuldthese. Underlining disparities between an official and popular Erinnerungskultur, reactions indicated a reluctance to accept the DHM’s millions of little monsters or ‘bad Germans’ theory, the omission of Hitler’s artifacts on the grounds of a revived Führerkult and negation of an ostensible self-exonerating, ‘good German’ phenomenon.

So were fears of another Führerkult justified or should more of his artifacts have been incorporated? On the one hand, since fewer people are

120 Ottomeyer, ‘Vorwort’, 13-14; Eatwell, Fascism, xxi; Riedel, ‘Der Diktator’, 12.
121 Riedel, ‘Der Diktator’, 12; Erpel, ‘Hitler und kein Ende’, 280.
alive who welcomed and were led astray by Hitler, perhaps Germans should be eternally reminded of their past transgressions, thereby justifying their concerns to negate a fascination with evil amongst the public. On the other, given that the expected wave of neo-Nazis failed to materialise, along with various allusions that Germany has been plagued by past inhibitions for long enough, perhaps a deeper investigation is needed into the origins of Hitler’s charisma. Indicative of this Selbstbildspannung (conflicting self-image) and disputed historical discourse was a musealisation of memory being played out between a Schuldkultur of atonement and self-exonerating Schuldabwehr.

Yet perhaps this very lack of consensus justifies the inclusion of Hitler memorabilia since the establishment of points of similarity and difference affords a more comprehensive and greater understanding of Germany’s current Erinnerungskultur. If one accepts some of the media’s claims that Germans are now able to cope with their past, it is unreasonable to exclude Hitler’s artifacts – particularly since the passing of the Kriegsgeneration offers a more impartial and balanced opportunity to discover the basis of the Führer factor.

Moreover, stepping outside the furore that this theme invariably invokes, historians are supposed to be objective analysts, not subjective moralists, and in this respect they should perhaps regard Hitler with the same historical detachment as they would Caesar or Napoleon. As some have inferred, it is not historians’ role to say what ought to have happened but what was done and why, since no panel of experts should dictate the difficult choice between an objective and emotive historical model, and therefore, the elusive truth, as they attempted to do when they dismissed the DHM’s 2004 proposed exhibition.

Admittedly, striking a balance between the DHM’s objective historical elucidation and a subjective Geschichtsgefühl (sense of history) is also problematic, particularly as the inclusion of artifacts may be exploited for propaganda or mere effect. On the other hand, approaches which move away from interpretations tailored to fit the preconceptions of Germany’s victors offer a more realistic musealisation of memory since subjective artifacts expound complex events by turning them into text, whose reception provides a useful insight into past and current Zeitgeists.

So have any taboos been broken? While the DHM failed to break new historical ground by adhering to a structuralist historical consensus, its depiction of some of its unparalleled collection of artifacts heralded a change in the musealisation of Hitler’s memory. However, although a

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societal history of the Third Reich has become more elucidated, given the ongoing need for Germans to experience their past with less historical reservation and the unwarranted but perhaps understandable fears of a resurgent Führerkult, in some ways, the Führer factor is still taboo.

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