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Neither Denial nor Forgetfulness Will Free Us from the Past: Harmonizing Our Understanding of History Endangers Freedom

For several years now we in the Federal Republic have observed a newly awakened interest in history and in particular in our own national history. This has occurred after years of a weariness with history that caused professional historians like Alfred Heuß to lament a "loss of history" as a form of original memory in modern industrial society. The relative weariness with history of recent decades manifested itself in the displacement of history in favor of social studies in the curricula of secondary schools—despite the fact that historical research was running on all cylinders. This development was based primarily on political reasons.

In the period of almost uninterrupted economic growth that the Federal Republic has experienced since the 1950s, the view of the public is understandably mainly focused toward the future. The great social and political problems seemed to be solved, the society seemed to be on the right economic course. The contrasting image of the conditions in the GDR lent these assumptions additional impetus, or so it seemed. The prevalent opinion that social and political problems were fundamentally solvable with the methods of modern science provided the empirical social sciences a key position in the public mind.

Today, we are far removed from these optimistic expectations. It turned out that the trust in the fundamental solvability of all social problems that played such a dominant role in the public mind of those decades was not in sync with the real conditions. The oil shock; the failure of economic strategies, be they Keynesian or purely market-oriented à la Milton Friedman, to secure economic growth and full employment in the long term; the rise in the so-called third world of fundamentalist modes of thought, which for all intents and purposes nullified the optimistic modernization strategies of the 1950s—all these factors have to be mentioned here, as do recent experiences with the peaceful use of atomic energy, which once again demonstrated the limits of our ability to dominate nature and society

by rational methods. This again made us more prepared to think about the limitations of our existence. And a part of that was reflection about our historical existence, our place within historical development.

These general factors, which led worldwide not only to an interest in the antiquated but also to an existentially rooted historical consciousness, are joined by special conditions peculiar to Germany. In large parts of the German public sphere of the immediate postwar years there was a tendency to duck a history that included collective guilt and, in many cases, personal involvement. The immediate past was something that one did not talk about and that one was only willing to deal with in a limited way. Because of this, as Friedrich Tenbruck pointed out, a rupture of historical consciousness took place.

DISRUPTED COMMUNICATION

The natural communication between the generations about our own history seemed to be disrupted. The dialogue between fathers and sons and grandsons about a shared historical heritage was only partially successful. Recent history appeared to be tabooed, despite the fact that historical research and the media addressed themselves to these themes with great intensity. The research appears to have reached people who were professionally interested, and, to some extent, the politicians—but it only reached the general public in a limited way. Here the prevailing tendency was to shun the events of recent history and to exclude them from German history wherever possible.

At the same time, professional historians were engaged in critically dealing with the recent German past, partially with the openly declared intention of clearing away the ideological rubble that was preventing democratic traditions from gaining a firm foothold in the Federal Republic. This was also accompanied by the attempt to again establish a link with historical research in the Western countries.

A part of these endeavors was a step-by-step radical revision of the traditional German image of history. This began with an examination of the history of National Socialism and a fundamental stock-taking of the reasons for the fall of the Weimar Republic. It was followed by an examination of the antidemocratic and authoritarian traditions in German political thought and in German politics that led to the national catastrophe of 1933 and to the collapse of the Third Reich. In historical research these "revisionist" endeavors gradually won ground from the late 1950s on, and in the 1960s and 1970s they were even able to conquer a hegemonic position within German history. This, however, does not apply to the same degree to the penetration of this thought into the institutional system of the discipline. Here, a silent majority of more traditionally oriented historians predominated.

For a number of years now, the hegemonic position of the revisionists in

the public mind—if not within the discipline itself—has increasingly come under attack. A political shift is apparent. This was in part due to intra-disciplinary reasons: in the eagerness to get rid of the antidemocratic elements in the German tradition, the revisionists had taken their criticism too far. But this political shift also corresponded to a reawakened public need to determine the historical location of contemporary consciousness, which was no longer supposed to exhaust itself on negative criticism. According to an expression that has since become popular, the call arose for a new German national identity or at least a new identity for the citizens of the Federal Republic—an identity that would have to rest on a historical foundation.

Thomas Nipperdey made himself the spokesman of the new tendencies when he, particularly in reaction to Hans-Ulrich Wehler, demanded that the discipline of history in the Federal Republic should stop one-sidedly emphasizing the stream of events in German history that led to 1933. Instead, it should equally—if not preferably—turn to other chains of events, such as those that led to the Federal Republic. Furthermore, Michael Stürmer pointed out that it was of immediate historical importance that once again in the Federal Republic a unified understanding of history was developing that was capable of shaping a consensus. Only nations that possessed a unified, consistent understanding of their history were politically predictable for their alliance partners and thus able to be considered reliable partners. And this rule, he argued, was particularly valid for the Federal Republic.

These processes demonstrate that the shunning of recent German history has given way in the public mind to a lively interest—an interest that is so elemental that its political instrumentalization is an obvious possibility, whether in the sense of instituting a new identity under the sign of existing political and social conditions, or whether for the purpose of mobilizing or consolidating the supporters of political parties and groupings. It is no coincidence that we are now seeing an increasing tendency to use historical consciousness for political purposes.

The federal government has decided to found two new historical museums. One of these is to be located in West Berlin and devoted to the cultivation of German history from its beginnings. The other, which will be built in Bonn, is to present the history of the Federal Republic. The controversy about the museums, fought with great passion, demonstrates that fundamental questions are at play here. From these projects the government expects to strengthen the identity of the citizens of the Federal Republic. The opposition camp is concerned that this is an attempt to prescribe a one-sidedly nationalist-conservative understanding of history. The Social Democrats have long been involved in utilizing the newly awakened interest in local history and the history of everyday life to politically mobilize their followers. Apart from questions about whether this

is a sensible undertaking, it is becoming clear that historical consciousness is again being seen as a factor of great importance for the political orientation of the citizens.

In addition to this, important changes in our historical consciousness are becoming evident. They are doubtless connected to current political interests and political convictions but they also reach into deeper levels. They directly touch on our understanding of the nature of the German nation as well as on the question of the historical location of the Federal Republic in German and European history. Since 1945, three stages of development in the thought of the Federal Republic about the German question can be discerned. However, in light of the lack of clarity about what these questions mean, these stages cannot always be distinguished.

Among the leaders of opinion of West German society in the first decade after 1945, the tendencies to seek orientation in the Weimar Republic for fundamental national questions prevailed without controversy. But this meant nothing other than, in questions of the nation and of the role of the Germans in Europe and the world, linking up with the German—or more precisely, the *kleindeutsch*—national state. Thus the Federal Republic did not find it difficult to publicly celebrate—even in a ceremony in the Bundestag—the 150th birthday of Otto von Bismarck. The reunification clause of the constitution and the determination in its preamble that this constitution would remain provisional until the German nation was unified in freedom support this view. Today, however, we find it far more difficult than did the generation after 1945 to view the German Reich of 1871 as a point of orientation for our national identity. I will get back to this.

From the end of the 1950s on, a slow and cautious partial reorientation of the national consciousness of the Germans in the Federal Republic began. For the minority of Germans who were actively engaged with their own past and its mistaken developments, not only the Weimar period but also the Bismarck era and, in particular, the period of Wilhelm II lost much of the luster that they had possessed for the great majority of the older generation and that, despite the experiences of Weimar, they had never completely lost. For the newer generation the consensus of opinion was that only a thorough revision of the German understanding of history that relentlessly laid bare the authoritarian traits of the Kaiserreich and the antidemocratic mentality of the Weimar period would be capable of opening up space for a new democratic order that was not merely pragmatically accepted but rather internalized as a free consensus of its citizens. For this generation, establishing a link to the liberal and democratic traditions of the West was a fundamental moral obligation. In the area of history writing, this conviction was particularly evident in the critique of the ideology of the so-called German *Sonderweg*, or special path, between Western, allegedly materialistic, democracy and Eastern autocracy. This is a dichotomy that had been articulated in various ways in the past. The

ideology of the German *Sonderweg* had always been the backbone of the antiliberal and antidemocratic positions that had prevented a fundamental adaptation of the political order to the rapidly changing economic and social conditions that had taken place in Western Europe.

It was no coincidence that in that period the national idea became discredited. It was becoming increasingly clear that an excess of a hybrid nationalism had caused the series of political catastrophes that began with the First World War and ended with the dictatorship of National Socialism and its gigantic war of destruction, which, in the end, also brought about the end of the German nation.

In the beginning of the 1960s Karl Jaspers had made himself the spokesman of such opinions. He explained that the national idea was outmoded. In the present international historical situation, he argued, a moral mission of leadership falls to the German people. They can fulfill this imperative by making a symbolic act and departing forever from the national idea. In fact, in many circles at that time national orientation, which was no longer present in the younger generation, was displaced by the idea of a united Europe.

Even though the official language relating to reunification continued to be used unchanged in this period—in part under the influence of the cold war—the ground was gradually prepared for the insight that a solution to the German question could only come, if at all, within a European framework—in other words, only as part of a fundamental restructuring of the conditions in East-Central Europe, which for their part would presume the collapse of the Soviet Empire, a premise unthinkable at the time. Many politicians of that period, among them Konrad Adenauer himself, time and time again used the words *nation* and *national*, but usually only in a cautious manner. When important matters were at hand, nationalist rhetoric was always sacrificed for political realities, and at times even for partisan rationale, as was again recently demonstrated in relation to Adenauer's reaction to the Soviet note of 1952 on reunification.

In any case, in the 1950s and 1960s it would have occurred to no one to demand the reawakening of a German national consciousness, much less a German national history museum with the purpose of strengthening the national identity of the Germans. On the contrary, people were still concerned with getting rid of the remnants of old nationalist and German-national traditions. Rather, economic and political integration into the West was on the agenda—without ever doubting that the Germans of the Federal Republic were members of a German nation that was, however, never thought of as a territorial or concretely political unity. The embittered dispute about the German defense contribution to a European army and then the establishment of an independent West German army ended up in a deadlock. These turned out to be rearguard actions of a national German idea that was no longer perceived as real.

From the middle of the 1970s, a fundamental change in these matters became evident. True, the politics of Western integration were no longer controversial, except possibly for the extreme Left and the extreme Right of the political spectrum. The question of reunification, too, and with it the binding force of the national idea, lost much of its previously explosive power in the aftermath of the *Ostverträge* [the German treaties with the Soviet Union and other Eastern European nations]. With the end of the cold war the inner cohesiveness of the political and social system of the Federal Republic lost much of the glue that held it together. The student movement of the years after 1968 signaled that the pragmatic political consensus in the Federal Republic, based upon growing prosperity and the negative example of the Communist dictatorship in the GDR, had become fragile.

THE CALL FOR IDENTITY

The conflict generated by the student movement that pitted the older generation against the younger generation on the question of what moral stance to take toward increasing material prosperity and toward the political order gave impetus to the demand that steps be taken against the severe loss of historical consciousness evident in the younger generation. Step by step, the politics behind the status of the subject history were turned around in the public schools—although not in a short time.

It was of far more fundamental importance that the call for a new national identity, one that could be established on a historical foundation, became increasingly louder. This corresponded to a general trend in the public mind that was more than just the result of political opportunism, although this, too, most likely played a role. The astonishing success of a whole series of large historical exhibits speaks for itself. One of these, the Prussia exhibit, is especially important, for a state that had been declared *persona non grata* was helped to a new—if largely critical—status. Related to this is the fact that German histories were again in demand, as were books about great personalities in German history—even if they were not written in prose accessible to the general public.

This development can only be termed positive, no matter from which ideological or political standpoint it is viewed. But related to this there was also a partial deviance from historical positions that in many cases had been developed by West German historians of the middle generation in close cooperation with Western researchers. It began when the group of historians that had endeavored to use the methods of social history to develop a new interpretation of recent German history was accused of taking the German past too strongly to task. It was undisputed for this generation that historical research was to orient itself toward the fundamental values of a democratic society and that history was to be written in the light of these—openly declared—values. But just this was challenged by referring to the traditional historical opinion that, as Leopold

von Ranke put it, "every epoch has its own direct access to God" and must thus be understood as a result of its own preconditions.

In the same context the thesis of the German *Sonderweg* came under attack as a historically unjustifiable separation of the Germans from the overall European development. This was warranted to the degree that the paradigm of the German *Sonderweg* inappropriately idealized the actual political and social developments in the Western European nations. But the polemic against the so-called *Sonderweg* thesis, which referred to comparable phenomena or processes in other European nations, was aimed at shaking up the normative force of this model and in this way more or less weakening the criticism of the German development that came from the viewpoint of a democratic society. There are many *Sonderwege*, as the formula would have it, and the German *Sonderweg* was only one of these. And the German version was by and large no better and no worse than that of other peoples.

A bitter dispute about the role of Adolf Hitler within the National-Socialist system of rule developed under similar points of view. The central function of the führer in all decisive questions, and in particular in the policy of annihilating the Jews, was frequently emphasized in order to use the concept of fascism to block the political argumentation of the Marxist left. This was coupled with an attempt to limit the responsibility of the German nation for the terrible events during the National Socialist era—which were governed by a strategy aimed at resurrecting a German or a West German consciousness. Recently Ernst Nolte succinctly—and perhaps unintentionally—gave expression to the tendencies of the neohistorical direction within West German history writing, this being a reaction to the revisionist positions of the past decades. He gave a commentary in *Die Zeit* the subtitle "Against Negative Nationalism in Interpreting History."

The reaction to the history writing of the past decades, inasmuch as it was in the main concerned with a critical appraisal of German national history, is the product of political motivation. In fact, in the past few years, Ernst Nolte has spoken with concern about the fact that a radical critical debate about the German past could also generate critical potentials that could turn against the political order of the Federal Republic. Thus in recent years Nolte has distanced himself from the use of a comprehensive concept of fascism—despite the fact that he himself had initially brought this concept into circulation. The reason is that since the end of the 1960s the New Left had used the concept of fascism for a Marxist critique of Western societies. It is doubtless also a good assumption that Nolte's recent endeavors to interpret the National-Socialist policy of annihilating the Jews from a comparative and universalist perspective, and in this way to reduce its singularity, stems from the need to oppose a similarly one-sided political exploitation of the Holocaust.

Of course the protest against Nolte is not aimed at Nolte's attempt to

compare the crimes of National Socialism with other cases of genocide, such as the extermination of the Armenian population in Turkey during the First World War or, to an even greater degree, the so-called Gulag Archipelago, that is, the Bolshevik policy of annihilating certain social groups, or the "great purge" of the 1930s. It was his attempt to portray Nazi crimes as a direct reaction to an alleged or real threat by the Bolsheviks' "Asiatic" policy of annihilation that engendered protest from so many sides. This is an explanatory strategy that—intended or not—will be seen as a justification of National-Socialist crimes by all those who are still under the influence of the extreme anti-Soviet propaganda of National Socialism.

In a recently published reply to these protests, Ernst Nolte withdrew this argument to the degree that he now only speaks of Hitler's purely psychological conception of the threat, not of a real causal relationship between the Gulag Archipelago and the policy of destroying the Jews. But this clarification is not sufficient. It is inappropriate to try to justify or otherwise reduce the immorality of the National-Socialist policy of terror by referring to comparable processes in the realm of Bolshevism—precisely because National Socialism was able to untruthfully style itself for German society as a savior delivering the Germans from Bolshevism.

Recently revived attempts to connect the misdevelopment of recent German history—in comparison to Western European peoples or to the United States—to Germany's so-called central location in Europe must also be understood in this context. This is an explanatory model that has neo-Rankean origins and clearly has antiliberal tendencies. It is well known that numerous historians, particularly of the neo-Rankean school, have attempted to justify the relative backwardness of the German constitution in the nineteenth century by suggesting that the Reich was threatened by rival powers. This threat, it is suggested, forced the Reich to organize as an authoritarian state based on power. Max Weber responded to this by pointing out the superiority of Western nations in crisis situations. The experience of the past half-century has confirmed this totally.

It is in the same context that Klaus Hildebrand recently took up the thesis according to which the First World War resulted primarily from the breakdown of the so-called balance of power rather than primarily from the aggressive tendencies as they had developed in the period of high imperialism, particularly in the German Reich, but also in other European great powers and in other, second-rank powers. Thus there is no longer any mention here of the prominent responsibility of German policy for the outbreak of the First World War.

THE FRONT LINE OF CRITICISM

One can be of various opinions about the relative justification of such arguments. They all contain, as do most historical interpretations, a grain

of truth without necessarily being true. But there can hardly be a doubt about the thrust of such arguments in the current intellectual climate. They are aimed at pushing the front line of criticism of Germany's recent past far enough back that the general public can once again establish a less guilt-laden identification with its own national past. This is by no means an attempt to insinuate that this process must always be associated with a conscious political agenda—although this is doubtless the case with Michael Stürmer's argument in favor of founding a new German understanding of history that is at least capable of building a consensus (we have already alluded to this).

It would doubtless not be incorrect to assume that since taboos have been removed from recent German history, the broad public has evinced a certain reluctance to see its own history portrayed primarily in a critical, distanced way. There is a new need for historical assurance and a positive experience of identification with one's own historical tradition.

This recently found expression in the predominantly positive evaluation of the personality of Frederick the Great on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of his death. The same can be said for Martin Luther or Otto von Bismarck, and to a lesser degree for Leopold von Ranke—personalities that had already, in the Wilhelmenian period, been elevated to the level of icons for German national consciousness.

The question remains, however, whether it is a good idea to exploit this tendency in a neoconservative sense, as Michael Stürmer recently demanded when he wrote that "in a country without history" the person who "determines the content of memory, coins concepts, and interprets the past" will win the future. It seems to us that history, and particularly our own national history, is not at our disposal in such an arbitrary way as these statements presume. Insurmountable hurdles stand in the way of efforts to find a path back to a harmonious German history—particularly where this entails ignoring events of which we as a nation have to be ashamed. It would only be possible to jump over these hurdles by accepting a loss of the principle of intellectual honesty. I would like to name a few of the hurdles, although I cannot illuminate in detail the problems connected with them.

THE REALITY OF DIVISION

First there is the problem of which actual citizens should assume the recently much-invoked national identity of the Germans. The reality of the division of Germany poses the question whether an—alleged or real—German national consciousness refers primarily to the citizens of the Federal Republic or to the citizens of both German states or even to everyone that could in a general sense be counted as members of the German *Kulturnation* [nation defined by shared cultural values].

This is a problem that cannot be easily solved, one for which fewer and

fewer satisfactory answers have been provided from the traditional reference to legal and constitutional traditions—in other words, in reference to the legal succession of the Federal Republic from the German Reich of 1871—assuming that the borders of 1933 are meant. There is little doubt that the historical model of the German Reich shaped by Bismarck has lost much of its attractiveness for political orientation. It cannot be assumed to be a valid norm for a historical or political national consciousness for the younger generation. It is important here that the fateful events that are connected to the history and the prehistory of National Socialism in Germany have become a barrier between the recent history of Germans in the Federal Republic and the rest of German history. It is also important here that the history of the Federal Republic can with some justification be seen as successful and doubtless gives us reason to look back with pride.

It would be simple if we could be satisfied with beginning our own national history with a zero hour set in 1945 or with the reestablishment of a German state in the western zones of Germany, or even with the two states. But this is quite simply not possible. The long-term continuities of our history, the good as well as the bad—cannot be simply eradicated. Their historical force continues to have an influence, no matter how we feel about it. Not only that: We would also be conducting the business of those East German ideologues who wish nothing more than the development of two German national states of distinctly different character—with the additional aspect that the GDR is attempting to claim for itself the positive elements of the German national tradition and of the so-called German cultural heritage.

In both German states these constellations have led, for different reasons, to attempts to establish connections to elements of the traditions of German statehood and German national culture, which after 1945 had been shoved aside. Examples would be the rediscovery of Prussia and the at least partial rehabilitation of Frederick the Great and traditional Prussian virtues. But the dilemma that erected a permanent barrier between the present and the history of the Germans in the Kaiserreich and preceding centuries cannot be disposed of; it can only be ameliorated.

For this reason voices have recently been heard demanding that we should draw a final line under these things and that we should not constantly be called upon to deal with them. In the political arena, the act of conciliation in Bitburg was supposed to be a kind of line drawn under that segment of German history. But it turned out that, at least in terms of intellectual honesty, that cannot be done and that no matter what we do, other peoples will not be willing to accept such an act from us. In his famous speech of May 8 last year, the president said important and valid things about this. It is still a fact that we cannot escape the burden of the past by personal forgetfulness or by a late birth.

BITTER TRUTHS

It is equally true that historical reinterpretations will not reduce this burden. Andreas Hillgruber recently attempted to accord a relative historical justification to the *Wehrmacht* campaign in the East and the desperate resistance of the army in the East after the summer of 1944. He argued that the goal was to prevent the German civilian population from falling into the hands of the Red Army. However, the chief reason, he argued, was that the defense of German cities in the East had become tantamount to defending Western civilization. In light of the Allied war goals, which, independent of Stalin's final plans, envisioned breaking up Prussia and destroying the defensive position of a strong, Prussian-led central European state that could serve as a bulwark against Bolshevism, the continuation of the war in the East was justified from the viewpoint of those involved. It was, as Hillgruber's argument would have it, also justified even from today's standpoint, despite the fact that prolonging the war in the East meant that the gigantic murder machinery of the Holocaust would be allowed to continue to run. All this, the essay argued, was justified as long as the fronts held. Hillgruber's essay is extremely problematic when viewed from the perspective of a democratically constituted community that orients itself toward Western moral and political standards.

There is no getting around the bitter truth that the defeat of National Socialist Germany was not only in the interest of the peoples who were bulldozed by Hitler's war and of the peoples who were selected by his henchmen for annihilation or oppression and exploitation—it was also in the interest of the Germans. Accordingly, parts of the gigantic scenery of the Second World War were, at least as far as we were concerned, totally senseless, even self-destructive. We cannot escape this bitter truth by assigning partial responsibility to other partners who took part in the war.

These unavoidable truths also cast a long shadow on our relationship with the German history of earlier epochs—which we of course cannot, as has been correctly noted, reduce to the prehistory of the "German catastrophe" of 1933–1945. This, however, means that we can only practice German history in a critical way. The first commandment here will have to be to understand the history of the German nation in a European, even in a world context—and not, as has been done so often in the past, in opposition to other peoples.

In the period of the Reformation these other peoples were—particularly in the field of religion—the corrupt Italians. Then, from the late eighteenth century on, France; then "perfidious Albion." This happened because the history of the Germans, as a nation in the middle of a Europe that for centuries formed the cultural, political, and religious bridge between East and West, between North and South, has been tightly interwoven with the history of Europe—or, as Leopold von Ranke put it, with

the Roman-Germanic nation. This was already the case for the early phase of the German nation in the late period of Carolingian France and has really never been different. The Germans had to pay for the hegemonic role they played in medieval Europe and their modest position in the Holy Roman Empire with a comparatively late development as a nation. This development also left a third of the ethnic-cultural Germans outside the national borders. The shaping influence of the German Reich—a semiconstitutional state with strong authoritarian traits—on the German national consciousness was extraordinary. However, it showed deep inner fracture lines and accentuated ways of life and values that have largely become estranged from us. Only in the economic-social sector is there still much that connects us with that period; there is little in the area of political culture.

Viewed from that kind of long-term perspective, it seems to us to be an open question whether the German Reich founded by Bismarck could offer us the indispensable standard of political organization for the Germans. Or isn't a plurality of German states in the middle of Europe the European norm—if there is such a thing in history? It appears in many aspects that with the establishment of two German states on the soil of the old German Reich and with the rise of an independent Austria, German history has returned to the era before 1867, that is, to the existence of several German states within one German nation in the center of Europe. This of course does not mean that the German question has been laid to rest. It means that in the improbable and scarcely imaginable case that the deadlocked fronts of the superpowers should again be set in motion, a federative solution would be more probable than a so-called reunification in the sense that the GDR would simply be annexed by the FRG as was envisioned in the 1950s and 1960s.

The history of the German nation is not only more tightly interwoven with the history of other European peoples than that of many other neighbors, it is also to a strong degree a history with a controversial nature. There has always been a lack of national and political unity. Germany has often been fragmented into various groups with often quite independent cultural traditions. This is just as peculiar to German history as is the religious division of the nation since the Reformation or the extraordinary diversity of political forms, with a great number of regional centers of political power existing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

It may be said that many of the national characteristics of the Germans go back to just this situation. However, they are also the reason for many of the great German cultural accomplishments. Max Weber noted with a certain regret that it was not in the center of the Reich that great cultural achievements were produced. Friedrich Nietzsche spoke much more bitterly when he said that the foundation of the German Reich went hand in hand with the extirpation of the German intellect. Nietzsche was

doubtless exaggerating. But in retrospect a certain justification cannot be denied them. Critically dealing with one's own national history thus in no way means rejecting specific achievements of German culture.

A DECISIVE ORIENTATION TOWARD THE WEST

Furthermore, we should be conscious of an additional condition. The decisive westward orientation of German policy and the political-social consciousness of the 1950s and 1960s that accompanied the founding of the Federal Republic and its consolidation as a state went hand in hand with the Germans opting for a reorientation of their historical-political consciousness. They consciously turned away from part of the German historical tradition—not by repressing it, but by opting for political models such as were available to us in Western Europe and the United States.

The reason for this was not to shake the burden of history from our shoulders. Rather, the Germans decided to take a more constructive path in the future, a path that would not again lead to insoluble conflicts with our western and eastern neighbors. We have every reason to hold steady on this course. Knowing what historical burden we as a people have to bear is at the same time one of the foundations of freely recognizing and accepting the liberal political order of the Federal Republic as the basis of our social order. If this fact were to be forgotten, it would mean the undermining of the consensus that exists today and binds all important social groups to the notion that this order is worthy of being maintained.

In the years after 1945, the establishment of a liberal order based on freedom was only possible by breaking with important elements of the German tradition and by voluntarily accepting Western European models. It is true that the fathers of the constitution were able to link up with the democratic constitution of Weimar. But this document, too, is the result of appropriating Western constitutional positions whose validity for the German situation had until then been rejected—despite a long liberal and democratic tradition in Germany itself. Viewed this way, the prehistory of the Federal Republic has in an important way not only a German but also a European character. Without the symbiosis of Western and German political traditions as was achieved after 1945, the growth and solid rootedness of these traditions would not have been possible.

In the Weimar period the attempt to achieve the symbiosis of German and Western European thought that Ernst Troeltsch had so passionately supported failed—with destructive consequences. This symbiosis meant a link-up with the intellectual and political traditions of the West—which were supplemented by the addition of many elements from German history. One should not place this synthesis in danger for short-term political goals.

Political decisions since 1947 have meant opting for Western thought—and that cannot be placed in question without risking grave consequences, a fact that should particularly be recognized by those who are part of the

political succession of Konrad Adenauer. This by no means suggests a complete break with the German past—especially because German history has always been a European history to a greater degree than has the history of other nations.

Instead of giving in to the prevailing need for harmonizing our understanding of history, we should remain conscious of the plurality of the political, cultural, and religious creations in Germany. This corresponds to the fact that today, too, German history is interpreted from a variety of political viewpoints. One should not try to change that. Losing the principle of free competition of differing views of history would be tantamount to losing freedom. It would endanger the very liberal order of the Federal Republic that is supposed to be “strengthened” by revivifying a so-called German understanding of history.

Source: Frankfurter Rundschau, December 1, 1986