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**ON THE ROLE OF THE “INTELLECTUAL FIRE-RAISERS”
IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF GERMAN HISTORICAL
AND POLITICAL IDENTITY FROM THE MID-1980S
TO THE TURN OF THE CENTURY**

Much has been written and spoken about Germany's political and social transformations of recent decades in the context of debates and controversies that have involved some of the best-known and most respected German intellectuals. For each such debate to be triggered, a sufficiently controversial thesis had to be presented – usually one that would challenge the social consensus. Any such “communicative event” (Niklas Luhmann)¹ leads as a rule to a number of protests or objections against the thesis being put forward. Using the concept of a “scandal” (in this case a media or political scandal) one may speak of the “scandalmonger”, one who “scandalises”. Such people in fact take on themselves the odium of public opinion, since they make statements that lie outside the bounds of political correctness, thus mobilising a group of people who feel scandalised. In almost every situation of this type there are those who try to act as intermediaries, to explain, to be the voice of reason, and sometimes end up defending the “scandalmonger”. A scandal is a kind of game, in which the protagonists, if they wish to remain in the game, must take on specific roles.² I shall illustrate this mechanism with the example of the media debates that took place between the mid-1980s and the end of the 1990s against the background of Germany's Nazi past, concentrating on the personalities who generated the controversies that lay at the heart of the debates. I also wish to draw attention to the quite significant role of conflicts and scandals in processing social irritations, the fruit of which is always a new quality, including in terms of social consciousness.

¹ Cf. O. Sill, *Literatur in der funktional differenzierten Gesellschaft. Systemtheoretische Perspektiven auf ein komplexes Phänomen*, Wiesbaden 2001, p. 50.

² Cf. S. Neuhaus, *Skandal im Sperrbezirk? Grenzen und Begrenzungen der Wirkung von Kunst und Literaturskandalen*, in: S. Neuhaus, J. Holzner (eds.), *Literatur als Skandal. Fälle – Funktionen – Folgen*, Göttingen 2007, pp. 41-52, here especially the chapter *Das Skandal-Spiel*, pp. 46-51.

NOLTE AND THE "HISTORIANS' DEBATE"

In the mid-1980s a dual-faceted change took place in the perception of Germany's Nazi past. On the one hand, in a German society which, from the time of the post-war Nuremberg trials up to the Auschwitz trials and the trial of Eichmann in the 1960s, had gained an ever greater awareness of the enormity of the Nazis' crimes, a generational change took place which would bring with it "a relaxed historical consciousness that did not acknowledge taboo subjects."³ The chief spokesman of the new moral evaluation seemed to be the German President Richard von Weizsäcker, who on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War referred to the eighth of May as a "day of liberation."⁴ On the other hand, in the spirit of the so-called moral renewal and restorative climate of Helmut Kohl's government, in May 1985 a visit was made by Ronald Reagan to a cemetery in Bitburg where many Waffen-SS troops are buried. Reflecting this somewhat ambiguous context of change, 1986 saw the beginning of the so-called historians' debate, in which the main protagonist was the historian Ernst Nolte (b. 1923). Nolte is seen as representing the intellectuals who, for the remainder of the century, would play an important role in the transformation of German identity; as a kind of *enfant terrible*, or else an "intellectual fire-raiser" (*geistiger Brandstifter*), a term applied several years later, after neo-Nazis set fire to a synagogue in Lübeck in 1994, to Nolte and those like him by the long-term chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis.⁵ In the later reception of the debates a certain mental shortcut came to dominate, as if those words of Bubis had been directed against Botho Strauß.⁶ Bubis in fact used them in the context of an argument about Strauß, although he fairly soon withdrew them and made an explicit semantic distinction. He reserved the description "intellectual fire-raisers" for the extreme right-wing politicians of the time (Gerhardt Michael Frey, Franz Schönhuber, Günter Deckert), while applying the label "intellectual precursors" to certain representatives of the non-mainstream right-wing press (Rainer Zittelmann). In the case of writers like Strauß and Enzensberger he merely warned against changes in the intellectual climate.⁷

³ J. Jabłkowska, L. Żyliński, *Rozrachunek z narodowosocjalistyczną przeszłością a tożsamość niemiecka*, in: idem (eds.), *O kondycji Niemiec. Tożsamość niemiecka w debatach intelektualistów po 1945 roku*, Poznań 2008, pp. 7-49 (here: 24).

⁴ "The 8th of May is a day of liberation. It freed us from the National Socialist system of violence that despised human dignity." R. v. Weizsäcker, *8 maja 1945 – czterdzieści lat później*, in: J. Jabłkowska, J. Żyliński (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 325-336 (here: 326). Cf. E. Rathgeb, *Die engagierte Nation. Deutsche Debatten 1945–2005*, Munich/Vienna 2005, pp. 327-330.

⁵ I. Bubis, M. Lehming, „Schönhuber ist ein Fälscher.“ *Der Vorsitzende des Zentralrates der Juden verzichtet auf eine Klage*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 2 April 1994, p. 5.

⁶ Cf. e.g. J. Jabłkowska, J. Żyliński, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁷ I. Bubis, "Wegbereiter wie Nolte" *Ignatz Bubis erläutert seine Intellektuellen-Schelte*, *Der Spiegel* 1994, no. 16, p. 170.

Let us return to Nolte, however. What was it that this historian, highly regarded in the 1960s⁸ wrote or said to become the subject of such great controversy and debate? In his text *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will* (“The Past that Will Not Pass”), intended to be read in 1986 during the traditional panel discussions known as the *Römerberggespräche* held in Frankfurt (although in the end the lecture was cancelled), he put forward the thesis that the Holocaust had been a response to the genocide committed by the Bolsheviks, who (in his view) had enjoyed large-scale Jewish support. The controversial thesis might be expressed in the sentence: he who speaks of Auschwitz must also think in subtext about the Gulag. Both one and the other are to some extent simplifications, since Nolte constructed fairly complex historical dependences in which he tried to show that Hitler and his supporters were aware of the murderous methods of the Soviets, and in some sense the genocide of the Jews committed by the Nazis (which, it should be noted, Nolte did not dispute) should be seen as a form of confrontation with the cruelty of communism:

[...] the following question must seem permissible, even unavoidable: Did the National Socialists or Hitler perhaps commit an “Asiatic” deed merely because they and their ilk considered themselves to be potential victims of an “Asiatic” deed? Was the Gulag Archipelago not primary to Auschwitz? Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the “racial murder” of National Socialism? [...] Did Auschwitz in its root causes not originate in a past that would not pass?⁹

Even without the mental shortcut, this thesis – expressed so emphatically and with a series of rhetorical questions – seems outrageous: the racial genocide of the Jews committed by supporters of Hitler is to be justified by the fact of the genocide committed by the Bolsheviks on the kulaks, the bourgeoisie and other class enemies. Nolte’s views cannot, however, be reduced solely to the fact of historical relativisation. Although he did not question the exceptional status (*Singularität*) of the Holocaust as the only genocide of its kind, he was a proponent of historicisation, of viewing the genocide within “a wider context, namely the context of those qualitative ruptures in European history that began with the Industrial Revolution.”¹⁰ This wider context is partly reflected by the title of Nolte’s 1987 book *Der europäische*

⁸ Chiefly due to the work *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche* (1963) he was also admired by Marxist-leaning historians and student rebels of the “68 generation”. Only later did he radicalise his position, becoming more and more isolated. Cf. W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć: Współczesne spory w Niemczech o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii, polityce i tożsamości (1989–2001)*, Kraków 2001, in chapter 13 the section *Ernst Nolte: Człowiek i dzieło*, pp. 418–426 (here: 420).

⁹ Ernst Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered”, in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, translated by James Knowlton and Truett Cates, Atlantic Heights, NJ, 1993, pp. 18–23. (Originally published in German as *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will: Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht mehr gehalten werden konnte*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 6 June 1986.)

¹⁰ E. Nolte, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus (“The European Civil War 1917–1945: National Socialism and Bolshevism”). The correspondence is only partial, since the Industrial Revolution took place in the mid-18th century, but even when the three decades between the watersheds of 1917 and 1945 are considered, Auschwitz is made to appear slightly less exceptional. Nolte’s theses triggered a huge debate among academics; his main opponents included the sociologist Jürgen Habermas and the historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler. There were also historians who declined to distance themselves from Nolte or else supported him (Klaus Hildebrand, Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber). The ancient historian Christian Meier entered the debate slightly later in the spirit of mediation between the opposing factions.¹¹

From the time of the “historians’ debate” onwards Nolte tended to place himself on the edges of public life, in the borderlands between Germany’s far right and the conservative wing of the Christian democrat parties (CDU/CSU).¹² What changes must have taken place in Germany over 15 years, given that by 2000 Ernst Nolte had not sunk into oblivion, but even received a prize from the *Deutschland-Stiftung* foundation? That fact itself is no surprise, since the organisation represents extreme conservative views, but what is somewhat shocking is that his commendation was delivered by Horst Möller, director of the renowned *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Institute of Contemporary History) in Munich. This represented a kind of rehabilitation of Nolte.¹³ To demonstrate the changes that had taken place in German political and historical identity, a much longer disquisition is necessary. It can be presented somewhat more succinctly by considering, by way of examples, the positions of several German (or German-speaking) writers who, as a result of the evolution of their views, became scandalmongers on the same scale as Nolte, and were often ranged alongside Nolte in press and media commentary.

AFTER GERMAN REUNIFICATION

A factor that without doubt aided the development of the German historical and political identity was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the national reunification that followed shortly after. The rapidity of this process is evidenced by the fact that in 1990 the opponents of reunification included none other than the future Nobel Prize

¹¹ Cf. J. Jabłkowska, L. Żyliński, *op. cit.*, pp. 25ff. The same authors draw attention to the extensive bibliography (1203 titles) relating to the historians’ debate. *Ibidem*, p. 24, here: note 55. Cf. also M. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, London 1990; K. Große Kracht, *Die zankende Zunft. Historische Kontroversen in Deutschland nach 1945*, Göttingen 2005, chapter 4: *Der Historikerstreit. Grabenkampf in der Geschichtskultur*, pp. 91-114.

¹² Cf. W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, p. 410.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 408; on Möller’s motivations cf. also *ibidem*, pp. 451-453.

winner Günter Grass. It is interesting that, for Grass and many other intellectuals taking part in the various German debates on the subject of reunification, Auschwitz served as a point of reference.

Megalomania, saturated with complexes, seduced the Germans into not realising the option to become a cultural society in a federal state, but instead forcefully imposing the unified state as Empire. This was an early pre-requisite for Auschwitz. [...] One who today thinks about Germany and seeks answers to the German question must immediately think about Auschwitz.¹⁴

Unity nonetheless became fact, and writers and intellectuals were compelled to seek a place and identity in the new German state. In 1993 the weekly *Der Spiegel* published a series of symptomatic essays by well-known and prizewinning German writers. These were *Ausblicke auf den Bürgerkrieg* (“Views of the Civil War”) by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* (“The Swelling Goat Song”) by Botho Strauß, and *Deutsche Sorgen* (“German Worries”) by Martin Walser. These essays bore an entirely new intellectual quality, and appeared to indicate an evolution on the part of writers who had until then generally resided in the liberal-left mainstream. It is therefore interesting to consider the personalities of these writers and the transformations in their attitudes.

ENZENSBERGER, STRAUSS AND... HANDKE

It was Enzensberger, a radical who found fame with his revolutionary poetry (*Die verteidigung der Wölfe*, 1957) and anti-capitalist documentary theatre (*Das Verhör von Cabana*, 1970), who in the 1960s created the aesthetic and ideological foundations for the students’ revolt: he co-edited the magazine *Kursbuch* (1965–1975), appealed for Germans to be made “politically literate”¹⁵ and supported the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition (APO) and the legendary *Kommune 1*. In the second half of the 1970s he began to drift towards the *Neue Sensibilität*, symbolically breaking with the ideas of the ‘68 generation in his 1978 verse epic *Der Untergang der Titanic* (“The Sinking of the Titanic”). At the start of the 1990s, with the growing spread of violence (including from the far right), he diagnosed civil war and became, in some sense, an apologist for the violence, a proponent of Germany’s first putting its own backyard in order: “Before we fall into the arms of the feuding Bosnians, we must ensure that the civil war dries up in our own country.”¹⁶ His negative perception of democracy, in which he sees a lack of clear political differences between left and

¹⁴ G. Grass, *Kurze Rede eines vaterlandslosen Gesellen* [A short speech of a stateless journeyman], 1990, <http://www.zeit.de/1990/07/guenter-grass/seite-3>

¹⁵ H.M. Enzensberger, *Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend*, *Kursbuch* 1968, no. 15, pp. 187-197 (here: 197).

¹⁶ Idem, *Ausblicke auf den Bürgerkrieg*, *Der Spiegel* 1993, no. 25, pp. 170-175 (here: 175).

right, while at the same time predicting dangers to come, is characteristic rather of right-wing, conservative thinking.¹⁷

Botho Strauß followed a similar path. The renowned dramatist and prose writer, whose intellectual development seemed to grow out of the spirit of defiance of the late 1960s, was also associated from the mid-1970s with the *Neue Sensibilität* literary movement. At the start of the 1990s, however, he came to be seen – and to a much greater degree than Enzensberger – as an adherent of the right, even the extreme right. This can be attributed to his 1993 essay *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* (“The Swelling Goat Song”), a dense text that operates on multiple levels, using refined metaphors, while also containing theses that are politically quite controversial. It speaks of the complete breakdown of the authority (model) of the liberal-left intellectual, the intellectual shallowness of the left, the need for a switch to right-wing values such as patriotism, Church and faith, and the destructive impact of the media on the human condition.¹⁸ Strauß, referring to the national identity, made use (on an entirely different plane, that of aesthetics) of the category of tragedy, already alluded to in the essay’s title: “he-goat’s song” is the etymological Greek meaning of *tragedy*. Strauß saw the tragedy of Germany’s history in its inability to free itself from the Nazi past; but controversially, he imparted to this view of history a sacral (tragic) dimension.

The crimes of the Nazis are so enormous that it is not possible to compensate for them with moral shame or other bourgeois sentiments. They place Germans in a state of shock and leave them there under *tremendum*. Regardless of what Germans do with their trembling and wailing, a guilt that transcends all human measure simply cannot be ‘worked off’ by one or two generations. It is a matter of fate in the sacred meaning of the word, and not simply of a taboo comparable to that which serves to protect certain forms of interpersonal intercourse or of the personal sphere.¹⁹

What was most controversial, however, was that the then increasingly widespread actions of far-right extremists in Germany (attacks on refugees’ homes in Rostock, Mölln, Hoyerswerda and Solingen) were reduced by Strauß to the pre-modernist, archaic rituals described by René Girard in his anthropological analyses of the symbolic figure of the “scapegoat”.²⁰ In the context of this discourse it is significant that

¹⁷ Democracy is portrayed here as a “slush” or “purée”. Cf. the analysis in: G. Sautter, *Politische Entropie. Denken zwischen Mauerfall und dem 11. September 2001* (Botho Strauß, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Martin Walser, Peter Sloterdijk), Paderborn 2002, pp. 105-150 (here: 108ff).

¹⁸ B. Strauß, *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13681004.html>

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 490ff. An interesting dialogue on the admissibility of such interpretations occurred after the debate itself had ended. The affirmative view, focusing on a profound (and quite persuasive) aesthetic analysis, was put forward by Bernhard Greiner. Cf. B. Greiner, *Wiedergeburd des Tragischen aus der Aktivierung des Chors. Botho Strauß’ Experiment “Anschwellender Bocksgesang”*, Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft 1996, vol. 40, pp. 362-378. Thomas Anz responded critically, referring to ethical and historical arguments. Cf. T. Anz, *Sinn für Verhängnis und Opfer? Zum Tragödienverständnis in Botho Strauß “Anschwellender Bocksgesang”*, Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft 1996, vol. 40, pp. 379-387.

one of the first to protest against the potentially scandalous and not fully understood theses of Strauß was the aforementioned Ignatz Bubis, who saw him as having an intellectual affinity with Nolte and the politicians of the far right. An even greater odium was placed on Strauß, who while he had absolutely no political ambitions, allowed his infamous essay to be included in the 1994 anthology *Die selbstbewußte Nation* (“The Self-Aware Nation”), perceived as an intellectual forum for the New Right.²¹ From then on his image as a right-wing radical was established for good, and everything more that he wrote (even if unconnected with politics) was seen through the lens of that one controversial text.

While speaking of Strauß, mention should also be made of the Austrian writer Peter Handke, who is sometimes described as the *alter ego* or literary twin of Strauß.²² Handke, who in 1996 published a controversial defence of the Serbs in his essay “Winter Journey”²³ the start of a whole series of texts and political engagement on behalf of Serbia, also came to be regarded for many years as an *enfant terrible* of German-language literature. It should be noted that the criticism of Handke did not concern only the fact that, in speaking up for the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, he was lending support to the party considered guilty of the greatest crimes in the former Yugoslavia, but also that he seemed to have become some kind of adherent of nationalist, and hence also Nazi, ideology. Although the problem considered in his opinion pieces was superficially a non-German one, the voices raised against Handke were provoked by a reflex defence of taboo areas such as the Holocaust and Auschwitz, and the author himself was sometimes ranged alongside Nolte. An instance of this can be found in an intellectually daring construction by the editor of *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Wolfram Schütte:

But Handke’s hypocrisy of total scepticism should be sufficiently well-known to the ‘son of a German’ as a routine of denial typical of a generation of opportunists, if not culprits, whose terminal moraine is named Ernst Nolte.²⁴

Schütte alludes here to Handke’s family background – his mother was Slovenian, his father and stepfather both German. Handke’s engagement on behalf of Yugoslavia and Serbia is sometimes explained in terms of a self-reflective construction

²¹ Cf. W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, in the chapter on Nolte, the section ‘*Nowa Prawica*’ – *wzlot i upadek idei*, pp. 427-441.

²² Cf. H. Dittberner, *Die Inthronisation der Väterwelt. Zu Botho Strauß und Peter Handke*, Text+Kritik. Zeitschrift für Literatur 1998, no. 81, pp. 3-9 (here: 9).

²³ The full title was longer; cf. P. Handke, *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996.

²⁴ W. Schütte, *Die Poetisierung des Ressentiments und ihr politischer Preis. Peter Handkes Winterreise nach Serbien als Strategiepapier einer Offenbarung gelesen*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17 February 1996, reprinted in: T. Zülch (ed.), *Die Angst des Dichters vor der Wirklichkeit. 16 Antworten auf Peter Handkes Winterreise nach Serbien*, Göttingen 1996, pp. 81-87 (here: 85).

of identity as an expression of sympathy for his mother's background (the Slavic element) and against his German fathers. The scepticism towards the voices that condemned Serbia – here no doubt with reference to the concept of the “sceptical generation” coined by sociologist Helmut Schelsky to describe the wartime generation – is defined here as an unwillingness on Handke's part to see a certain analogy: between the Serbian nationalism that was viewed as the cause of the wars and crimes in the Balkans in the 1990s, and the Nazism that produced the Second World War and all of the crimes of that period. Here the figure of Nolte is introduced, and Handke is theoretically ranged alongside the aforementioned “intellectual fire-raisers”.

WALSER

Martin Walser is a writer who for many years was a firm adherent of left-wing ideas, such as opposition to intervention in Vietnam, support for the APO and the student movement, and trade union activism.²⁵ From the end of the 1970s, however, a significant change in his views became apparent, which eventually led to his articulation of his dream of German reunification, as early as 1988.²⁶ Another significant step was the *Der Spiegel* essay of 1993 titled *Deutsche Sorgen* (“German Worries”), in which the author, similarly to Strauß in his analysis (“Might the children that we have neglected become our enemies?”)²⁷, discerned the roots of far-right radicalism “in the negative policy towards national values that has been pursued for decades.”²⁸

I believe that the development of extreme right-wing groups is a response to the neglect of the national question by all of us. Those cultivating national tendencies have always been refused any legitimacy, by dint of understandable, though somewhat schematic, reference to the Nazi period. Is it not the case that through this distasteful exclusion the right-wing tendencies have become more radical? At every turn we have excluded them from all discourse. And now, coming out against us is a pitiful, gabbling immaturity, devoid of reason and expressible only by explosions and chanting. But these are our children.²⁹

²⁵ Cf. J. Jabłkowska, *Skandale und Debatten. Martin Walsers politisches Engagement zwischen links und rechts*, in: J. Jabłkowska, M. Półrola (eds.), *Engagement – Debatten – Skandale. Deutschsprachige Autoren als Zeitgenossen*, Łódź 2002, pp. 423–433 (here: 424ff); W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, here chapter 6: *Ostatnia wielka bitwa. Konflikt między pisarzem Martinem Walserem a przewodniczącym Rady Żydów w Niemczech Ignatzem Bubisem (1998–1999)*, pp. 251–279 (here: 253).

²⁶ This refers to Walser's speech titled “To Speak of Germany”, in which he quite provocatively “linked the issue of the two German states with a question on the right to individual remembrance in the period of Nazism, the right to memories of happy childhood in the years 1933–1945.” See J. Jabłkowska, L. Żyliński, *op. cit.*, p. 30, and M. Walser, *Über Deutschland reden*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1988.

²⁷ B. Strauß, *Anschwellender Bocksgesang*, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13681004.html>

²⁸ J. Jabłkowska, L. Żyliński, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁹ M. Walser, *Deutsche Sorgen*, in: *Der Spiegel* 1993, no. 26, p. 40, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13683475.html>

The apogee of Walser’s evolution, and at the same time an unparalleled scandal, was his speech given on his receipt of the German Booksellers’ Peace Prize, his famed *Sonntagsrede*, in 1998.³⁰ The speech seemed chiefly to be a lament over the burden of “a past that will not pass”. In some sense that was indeed the case. But Walser did not aim (as Nolte did) to demonstrate a causal link between the Gulag and Auschwitz. Nor did he wish to propose that it was time to stop talking about Auschwitz and the German crimes of World War II. However, in line with Luhmann’s principle of “reduction of complexity.”³¹ both of these theses could be accommodated in the critical voices of those who interpreted Walser’s speech, particularly since the point of reference was indeed Auschwitz, although the message contained in the speech was much more complex.

Nobody who wishes to be taken seriously will deny the existence of Auschwitz; no normal person doubts the cruelty of Auschwitz; but when that past is shown to me by the media day after day, something within me starts to defend itself against such a presentation of our shame. Instead of being grateful for it, I begin to turn my eyes away.³²

The problem, then, is the treatment of the German crimes as an instrument (“the instrumental utilisation of our shame for current goals”³³) by institutions and the media. Walser, a master of words, is concerned by the reduction of the German memory to something routine, to the repetition of certain incantations at various occasions, to the use of Auschwitz as a slogan for current political goals.

Auschwitz is not suited to become a threatening routine, an always available means of intimidation, a moral cudgel, or merely a compulsory exercise.³⁴

While Walser’s speech was generally well received, it found a prominent critic in the chairman of the Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, and the ensuing argument went down in history as the Walser–Bubis debate. As with Strauß, Bubis described Walser as an “intellectual fire-raiser”³⁵ and maintained his accusations consistently over a long period, in interviews and speeches. One of these was given on 9 November 1998, the 60th anniversary of the Kristallnacht, at a Berlin synagogue in the presence of President Roman Herzog and the newly elected Chancellor Gerhard Schröder:

³⁰ The text is in fact titled *Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede* (“Experiences during the Composition of a Sunday Speech”). See http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/1998_walser.pdf, pp. 9–14.

³¹ G. Skąpska, *Niklas Luhmann i teoria systemów społecznych. Wstęp do wydania polskiego*, in: N. Luhmann, *Systemy społeczne. Zarys teorii ogólnej*, translated by M. Kaczmarczyk, 2nd edition (corr.), Krakow 2012, pp. vii–xviii (here: xiv).

³² M. Walser, *Erfahrungen...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 542.

³⁵ After W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, p. 258. Regarding the concept of “intellectual fire-raising” itself, cf. G. Wiegel, J. Klotz (eds.), *Geistige Brandstiftung: Die neue Sprache der Berliner Republik*, Berlin 2001; idem (ed.), *Geistige Brandstiftung?: Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte*, Cologne 1999.

This shame was there, and will not disappear by wanting to forget, and it is “intellectual arson” if anyone sees in it an instrumentalisation of Auschwitz for present purposes. Those are the kinds of assertions that usually come from right-wing party leaders. Society has got used to having such statements and assertions come from the right-wing camp. But if someone who belongs to the intellectual elite of the republic makes such a claim, it carries a very different weight. [...] We cannot dispense with showing films about the shame just so that Mr Walser and others can remain undisturbed in their sense of self and find peace of mind, and so that the impression of instrumentalisation does not arise.³⁶

Both Walser and Bubis found supporters both on the left and on the right. Emotional arguments were heard from all sides. Opinion among the political and intellectual elites was divided. Supporters of Walser included Rudolf Augstein (a journalist with liberal-leftist views, long-time publisher of *Der Spiegel*), Michael Wolffsohn (a historian with Jewish roots and generally conservative views), and the writer Reiner Kunze. On the side of Bubis stood Jan Philip Reemtsma and the *Die Zeit* writers Jan Ross and Robert Leicht.³⁷ The dispute was joined by the social democratic mayor of Hamburg Klaus von Dohnanyi, respected for his part in the German–Jewish dialogue, who defended Walser, thus leading to a response from Bubis and further escalation of the dispute.³⁸ The debate, before it finally went quiet, produced a large number of polemic publications, which in turn led to the production of numerous analyses and collections of documents³⁹ – its resonance was thus enormous.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE MAINSTREAM

The Walser–Bubis debate was one of the last great disputes conducted against the background of Nazi history in which a part was played by intellectuals from the generation that remembered the Second World War first hand. Perhaps it was the impact of the witnesses of history on social memory and consciousness that had ensured – at least in the political mainstream – a consistent respect for taboo areas such as Auschwitz and the Holocaust. In spite of the break initiated by Walser, that consensus endured until the end of the 1990s. A culture of remembrance was developed, exemplified by the annual commemorations of the Kristallnacht⁴⁰ as well as other undertakings (not always free of controversy), such as an exhibition devoted to the crimes of the Wehrmacht (1995–2000) and the building of a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust (approved by the Bundestag in 1999, and completed in 2005). In the 1990s,

³⁶ I. Bubis, *Speech Commemorating the Night of the Pogrom of November 9, 1938*, http://german-historydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3427

³⁷ Cf. W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, pp. 262ff.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 264–267.

³⁹ Cf. also F. Schirmacher (ed.), *Walser – Bubis – Debatte. Eine Dokumentation*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999; P. Buras, K. Wójcicki (eds.), *Spór o niemiecką pamięć. Debata Walser–Bubis*, Warsaw 1999.

⁴⁰ Cf. J. Jabłkowska, L. Żyliński, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

politically incorrect ideas – besides those few debates described above, which thanks to the “fire-raisers” came to the attention of wider public opinion – were also discussed in the circles of the New Right (associated unjustly with Strauß) [see note 21]. The New Right itself, at least politically, was a project that was not embodied in any institution. In an intellectual sense, however, its ideas penetrated to other parties.⁴¹ Significant changes began to take place when the new Social Democrat–Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder came to power in 1998. Those politicians spoke more and more often of German “national interests”⁴² and it was that coalition which was faced with the necessity of using Bundeswehr troops outside national borders, in Kosovo. With that fact are associated transformations in the German culture of remembrance. People began to speak not only of German guilt (primarily in the context of the Holocaust), but also of Germans as a community of victims (in the context of the Russians’ expulsion of the German population from the eastern lands).

The war for Kosovo in the spring of 1999 and the criminal policies of Milošević played a huge role in changing the attitude of the German left towards the subject of the expulsion of Germans after 1945 and the victims of those expulsions. It appeared that the social democratic left, which since the debate over Brandt’s ‘eastern policy’ at the start of the 1970s had increasingly ignored the displaced community [...] was only now coming to understand (once again) the undeniable tragedy of those people.⁴³

Another issue that began to take on symbolic status was the Allied carpet bombing of German cities towards the end of the Second World War, raised first by the writer and scholar Winfried Georg Sebald, and later by the historian Jörg Friedrich.⁴⁴ It was the combination of all of these circumstances that made possible the award of the aforementioned prize to Nolte in 2010. In defending the award (for voices had been raised in opposition) Hans Maier, German political scientist and former Bavarian culture minister, asked: “But why is today’s apprehensive German society not able to tolerate alongside each other such figures as Habermas and Nolte, Botho Strauß and Günter Grass, Handke and Enzensberger?”⁴⁵ Analysing this question, we see that it juxtaposes “fire-raisers” such as Nolte, Strauß, Handke and

⁴¹ Cf. W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, in the chapter on Nolte, a section on the decline of the idea of the “New Right”, p. 435.

⁴² *Ibidem*. Cf. also *ibidem*, in the chapter on the Walser–Bubis debate, analysis of the political climate that accompanied the change of government, in the subchapter *Kuliszy, czyli Republika berlińska*, pp. 272–276.

⁴³ W. Pięciak, *Dyskusje historyczne i ich rola w pamięci zbiorowej i stosunkach polsko-niemieckich*, in: A. Wolff-Powęska, D. Bingen (eds.), *Polacy-Niemcy. Sąsiedztwo z dystansu*, Poznań 2004, pp. 377–410 (here: 384).

⁴⁴ Sebald gave a series of open lectures on aerial warfare and literature (*Luftkrieg und Literatur*) at Zurich University in 1997. Cf. W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur. Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch*, Munich/Vienna 1999. Cf. also H. Orłowski, *Przemoc – tabu – trauma ofiar. Wokół najnowszej opowieści Günтера Grassa*, Poznań 2002 (*Zeszyty Instytutu Zachodniego* 2002, no. 30), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Quoted after W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, p. 409.

Enzensberger with those viewed as remaining on the side of the old, “good” (liberal-left) German intellectual tradition, namely Habermas and Grass. Habermas once argued against Nolte in the matter of the perception of Auschwitz (“Unfortunately, a firmly rooted belief in universalist constitutional principles was able to develop in the cultural society of the Germans only after, and because of, Auschwitz”⁴⁶), while Grass had, in opposing reunification, used Auschwitz as a warning (“One who today thinks about Germany and seeks answers to the German question must immediately think about Auschwitz”⁴⁷). The case of Grass would appear to be not at all a counterpoint to Strauß; he is rather paradigmatic if we consider the evolution of the average German intellectual following reunification. Later in the decade – one might use the phrase “last but not least” – that evolution overtook the once left-leaning Grass. In his best-selling novel *Crabwalk (Im Krebsgang)*, 2002), a national epic of sorts, he described the tragedy of the expelled – several thousand civilians being evacuated from Pomerania and East Prussia at the end of the war, who died as a result of the sinking by the Russians of the ship *Gustloff*. This novel is also in some sense an examination of the conscience of the left, which by the same token seemed to be making up for its inadequate recognition of the tragedy of the German victims of the war and of the expelled. Moreover, Grass’s novel, whose plot stretches from the wartime past to the present, presents a diagnosis of right-wing extremism very similar to those given almost a decade earlier by Botho Strauß and Martin Walser. The reason for the violence of right-wing extremists is claimed to be the denial of a patriotic upbringing.⁴⁸ It may be said that Grass in 2002 could allow himself statements of this type without much risk, since the national consciousness had already been changed by other “fire-raisers”. In the next decade, however, Grass went much further; one may recall his admission to having served in the Waffen-SS, made in his 2006 memoir *Peeling the Onion (Beim Häuten der Zwiebel)* and received as a scandal, and the criticism of Israeli policy contained in his 2012 poem “What Must Be Said” (*Was gesagt werden muss*), which was seen as anti-Semitic. The criticism addressed to Grass would no doubt have earned the approval of Ignatz Bubis, who had died in 1999, and who would certainly have numbered the Nobel Prize winner among his “intellectual fire-raisers”. However, the fact that Grass broke from other intellectuals with Jewish roots, including Henryk M. Broder, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, etc.⁴⁹ does not mean that he

⁴⁶ J. Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*, <http://www.zeit.de/1986/29/eine-art-schadensabwicklung>, p. 5.

⁴⁷ See note 14.

⁴⁸ Cf. A. Denka, *Vom “Bocksgesang” (1993) zum “Krebsgang” (2002). Das Tragische im inszenierten Erinnerungsraum (bei B. Strauß, P. Handke und G. Grass)*, in: P. Zimniak, C. Gansel (eds.), *Das “Prinzip Erinnerung” in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Göttingen 2010, pp. 241-263 (here: 261-263).

⁴⁹ M. Reich-Ranicki, *Es ist ein ekelhaftes Gedicht. Ein Gespräch mit Marcel Reich-Ranicki, aus erzwungenem Anlass*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 April 2012, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton>

was converted to the views of the “fire-raisers” – but rather that many of the views that would at one time have been seen as fire-raising are today accommodated to a much greater degree within the German mainstream.

CONCLUSIONS

When we consider the role played by the controversial intellectuals and writers mentioned here in transforming historical and national identity in Germany, we may refer to the mechanism of social conflicts as described by certain sociologists. In the words of Niklas Luhmann: *Konflikte testen Ablehnungspotentiale* (“conflicts test the potential for rejection”).⁵⁰ In other words: *Widersprüche erfüllen eine Warn- und Alarmfunktion, indem sie eine Unangemessenheit der Strukturen signalisieren* (“Objections perform a warning and alarm function, in that they signal the inadequacy of structures”).⁵¹ Every “no” that expresses an objection can give rise to conflict. Because in modern society, unlike in archaic societies or those subject to marked stratification, there exists a tolerance of conflicts, it may be that systems are forced to modify their structures in order to survive. Luhmann makes the fundamental assumption that systems protect primarily their own autopoiesis – their ability to self-reproduce.⁵² In every scandal, including political scandals, there are those who scandalise and there are those who cry “scandal”. The situation was similar in the case of the “intellectual fire-raisers” – the scandal-making intellectuals such as Nolte, Enzensberger, Strauß, Handke, Walser and Grass (though acknowledging the complexity of those figures and the differences between them). They merely took on a certain role in a game which also involved other protagonists, those who articulated the conflict-provoking “no”. All this was overlaid by the role of the media, which performed their function in each of the described “communicative events”⁵³ after all, they live by the constant “production and processing of irritations” (*Erzeugung und Bearbeitung von Irritation*).⁵⁴ However, irritations that have been processed cease to irritate. Every conflict will eventually die down. Nonetheless, the collective memory of scandals and media events remains. The label of “intellectual fire-raisers” adhered to certain German intellectuals for a longer time, more or less justly (certainly not

leton/debatten/das-israel-gedicht-von-grass/marcel-reich-ranicki-ueber-grass-es-ist-ein-ekelhaftes-gedicht-11710933.html (accessed 1 August 2014); H.M. Broder, *Günter Grass, der ewige Antisemit*, *Die Welt*, 4 April 2012, http://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/kultur/article106154111/Guenter-Grass-der-ewige-Antisemit.html (accessed 1 August 2014).

⁵⁰ N. Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2nd edition, Frankfurt a.M. 1999 (1997), vol. 1, p. 466.

⁵¹ C. Baraldi, G. Corsi, E. Esposito, *GLU: Glossar zu Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997, p. 99.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ Cf. O. Sill, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵⁴ N. Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 2nd edition, Opladen 1996 (1995), p. 174.

entirely more justly to Strauß than to Walser), but above all society itself over a period of more than a decade underwent a significant evolution, as a result of which very similar, analogous, views, formerly considered politically incorrect, became acceptable. This is how one may perceive the transformation of the German historical and national identity. The state of affairs at the start of the 21st century, where German political commentators have begun to speak explicitly of a national interest, while articulating equally explicitly the thesis that the Germans as a nation were also victims of the war, and where Bundeswehr troops have been deployed outside Germany's borders, to the former Yugoslavia and to Afghanistan, represents an entirely new quality. Germany's history has not passed, but it has found a new semantics. It is profitable to consider that semantics also through the lens of the conflicts provoked by the "intellectual fire-raisers" from the mid-1980s up to the end of the 1990s and later.

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s certain significant changes of the political and national German identity can be observed. They became conspicuous after the reunification of Germany and even more pronounced at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Starting with the debate of historians on the controversial claims of Ernst Nolte, there emerged in the public discourse views presented by various other intellectuals and writers which testify to their conversion from liberal-leftist positions to rightist and national ones. Often this transition had the form of a scandal in the media (Luhmann) making it possible to deal with social irritations and at the same time to propagate new opinions.