

## **The Culture of Remembrance and Coming to Terms with the Past in Post-World War II Literary Texts**

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### **Abstract**

The concepts of “culture of remembrance” and “coming to terms with the past” play a central role in Germany’s engagement with the consequences of World War II and the legacy of National Socialism. Together, they form an important basis of Germany’s postwar democratic identity and provide frameworks for public dialogue about historical events, especially guilt, responsibility, and collective memory. A culture of remembrance encompasses how a society recalls and preserves its past. It is expressed not only through memorials and museums but also through literary representations of historical experience. The purpose of remembrance and engagement with the past is to preserve historical memory, transmit it to future generations, and cultivate an awareness of human dignity and peace. After 1945, German authors confronted the crimes of National Socialism; questions of guilt and responsibility consequently became central concerns of postwar literature.

**Keywords:** culture of remembrance; responsibility; collective guilt; coming to terms with the past; National Socialism; literature of the Third Reich

### **Introduction**

The year 1945 marked a turning point in German history. Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, and was divided into four occupation zones. Millions of Germans experienced the devastation of World War II and the widespread chaos that followed the destruction of their cities; approximately 7.5 million Germans lost their lives. In literature, writers sought to define the “zero hour” as both a rupture with the past and an opportunity for a new beginning. For them, 1945 signified not only destruction and loss but also a historical transformation of Germany’s intellectual, cultural, and literary life. The effort to transform wartime experience into literature became associated with “rubble literature” and the literature of destruction. This body of writing was produced largely by young authors who had undergone similar experiences. Their works depicted ruined landscapes, physical devastation, and moral collapse while also confronting the question of guilt. How, then, did Germans address the issue of guilt after the war, and how did they respond to it? How did postwar writers in rubble literature represent guilt?

## 1. Literature at the Intersection of War, Memory, and the Postwar Period

### 1.1 Literature of the Third Reich

The term “literature of the Third Reich” is best understood through the ideological function that literature performed under National Socialism. Much of the officially sanctioned writing of the period served propagandistic purposes, helping the Nazi regime disseminate its worldview despite the continued production of literature that opposed Nazi ideology. For this reason, literature of the Third Reich is not generally regarded as an ordinary period in German literary history but as part of a catastrophic historical and cultural rupture. The war, as Germans experienced it, was not only military; it was also intellectual and cultural.

In September 1933, Ernst Fischer described the position of writers under the Third Reich: Drei Möglichkeiten: man kann in Deutschland bleiben und getarnt, aus sprachlichem Hinterhalt und künstlerischer Maskierung, den Faschismus angreifen, gewärtig, dass einem früher oder später der Mund gestopft und die Feder aus der Hand geschlagen wird. Man kann anonym für illegale Literatur im Lande und für die antifaschistische Presse im Ausland arbeiten. Man kann schließlich über die Grenze gehen und aus dem Ausland heraus zu den Deutschen sprechen.<sup>1</sup>

Writers under the Third Reich may be classified according to their attitudes toward the Nazi regime. Some addressed fascism and National Socialism in their works and consequently had their writings banned; others openly opposed the regime and were subjected to political persecution and exile, among them Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Mann, and Klaus Mann. Literature of the period developed along two principal currents: ethnonationalist literature, which served Nazi propaganda and disseminated its ideas, and the literature of “inner emigration,” whose authors withdrew from public literary life while remaining in Germany. Alongside these currents, antifascist literature challenged Nazi ideology, emphasized the writer’s responsibility to society, and made resistance to the fascist regime one of its principal aims.

Because life under Nazi rule became intolerable, many authors fled through neighboring countries or emigrated to the United States, where they used literature to expose the true character of the Third Reich. Thomas Mann sharply condemned the “blood and soil” literature that prevailed under National Socialism:

In meinen Augen sind Bücher, die von 1933 bis 1945 in Deutschland gedruckt werden konnten, weniger wertlos als wertlos und nicht gut in die Hand zu nehmen.<sup>2</sup>

Mann’s judgment applied broadly to books published in Germany between 1933 and 1945. In addition to the material devastation left by the Third Reich, the German language itself

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<sup>1</sup>. Ernst Fischer, quoted in Horst Denkler and Karl Prümm, *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1976), 429.

<sup>2</sup>. Thomas Mann, quoted in Jan-Geert Wolff, *Die Aufarbeitung des Kriegserlebnisses im Werk Wolfgang Borcherts* (Schleswig-Holstein: Books on Demand GmbH, 2001), 7.

had been gravely damaged and ideologically misused. Even after the war, Mann was sharply criticized for refusing to return permanently to Germany, and some regarded his decision as a betrayal of the homeland.

### 1.2 Memory and Literary Narratives of Guilt in Postwar Discourse

After Germany's collapse in 1945, writers sought an entirely new direction because it seemed impossible to continue writing in the style and language of the Third Reich. In 1960, Wolfdietrich Schnurre expressed his mistrust of a language that National Socialism had corrupted:

Es gab nur eine Wahrheit. Nicht einmal die Sprache war zu gebrauchen, die die Nazijahre unrein gemacht hatten. Sie musste erst mühsam wieder Wort für Wort abgeklopft werden [...]. Die neue Sprache, die entstand, war nicht schön; sie wirkte keuchend und kahl.<sup>3</sup>

Postwar writing was consequently marked by restraint and realism. Writers such as Heinrich Böll and Wolfgang Borchert called for a simplified language stripped of rhetorical ornament. Literature came to be regarded as a means of reconstructing German consciousness and identity, and writers assumed the responsibility of articulating the nation's conscience and devising new forms of expression. Authors who had lived through the Nazi era, including Stefan Andres, Klaus Mann, and Heinrich Mann, addressed the legacy of National Socialism intellectually and aesthetically. At the same time, younger writers sought to comprehend the experiences of war and devastation. The "zero hour" thus became the beginning of a new period marked by intellectual activity amid material destruction.

## 2. Between Remembrance and Forgetting: Literary Perspectives on World War II

Immediately after World War II, amid profound social and material hardship, literature offered one of the few grounds for hope. It was not only a mirror of the age; writers and intellectuals were also expected to act as the conscience of the nation. German authors therefore faced a twofold task: to create new modes of expression and to confront fundamental questions of German identity.

Writers became increasingly politically engaged with postwar reality. For them, 1945 represented both the collapse of an established intellectual order and a new beginning for German literature. Postwar writing was shaped by fascism and war because World War II was not merely a psychological, social, and political catastrophe associated with emptiness and despair; it was also a period of transition that generated new intellectual, cultural, and literary forms. The conditions that emerged after 1945, therefore, produced a new wave of literary creativity.

Through their work, many writers made a major contribution to postwar German literature. They described the deep psychological wounds inflicted on Germans, examined wartime and postwar conditions critically, and confronted the crimes of National Socialism with

<sup>3</sup>. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, quoted in Manfred Durzak, *Die deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart: Aspekte und Tendenzen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1977), 21.

broadly similar ethical concerns. Their primary aim was to present an unembellished image of the war and its aftermath and to translate the external catastrophe of everyday life into literary scenes.

Wolfgang Weyrauch was among the writers who sought a new form of literary creation: a socially critical literature emerging from the ruins of the past. In 1949, he introduced the term *Kahlschlag*, or “clear-cutting,” to characterize the new beginning of German literature after the end of Nazi rule. Literature was expected to follow new paths. Unspeakable suffering and the horrors of war required new approaches to both form and content. At the same time, language itself had to differ from the language of the prewar period if it was to describe the indescribable. Weyrauch stated:

Die Gegenwart lässt keine Schönschreiberei, keine kalligrafische Literatur mehr zu; die zukünftige deutsche Literatur wird eine verpflichtete Literatur sein oder nicht. Ihre Grundlagen sind: die Methode der Bestandsaufnahme und die Intention der Wahrheit.<sup>4</sup>

This literature of “clear-cutting” was characterized by plain language, a restrained style, and vivid representations of reality. The term also implied a break with inherited literary conventions and a new beginning in both language and form. An “inventory” of present conditions was therefore necessary because it arose from the writer’s personal experience. Despair, despondency, and pessimism were among the prevailing emotions of the period. Although the war had ended in defeat, its consequences remained part of everyday life. Survival required beginning again.

Postwar works addressed Germany’s recent history, particularly the persecution and murder of Jews under Nazi rule. They emphasized Adolf Hitler’s responsibility for genocidal policies grounded in racial ideology and antisemitism and examined the effects of these crimes on postwar German society. Later generations confronted the legacy of collective guilt amid competing political and literary interpretations. At the same time, rejection of Hitler intensified because of the destruction he had inflicted on Germany and the damage he had caused to its international reputation.

The accusation “This is your fault” encapsulated the collective judgment directed at the German people. It implied that Germans had failed to resist when Nazi crimes were committed. Many had contributed to the war effort; others had remained silent and tolerated the regime’s actions. On this basis, the German people as a whole were condemned.

Guilt dominated German literature during the first postwar years. Literary attention later expanded to include flight from the past, homecoming, the loss of homeland, and satirical or ironic treatments of the Nazi past. Writers also addressed Nazi crimes, concentration-camp experiences, and wartime events in an effort to understand the catastrophe produced by the two world wars. Younger authors, born between 1919 and 1927, often regarded themselves as

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<sup>4</sup>. Wolfgang Weyrauch, quoted in Hans Gerd Rötzer, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (Bamberg: Bückners Verlag, 1992).

victims of deception and coercion into military service. They rejected the idea of collective guilt while criticizing those who had embraced Nazi ideology or remained silent in the face of its crimes.

This younger cohort became known as the “comrades” because shared wartime experiences fostered a strong sense of fellowship. War, the loss of youth, and the continuing struggle with guilt became central concerns of their literary work. Writers such as Wolfdietrich Schnurre, Heinrich Böll, and Wolfgang Borchert believed that German history should serve as a source of instruction rather than as a permanent burden. They opposed holding later generations collectively responsible for their parents' actions and called for liberation from an inherited sense of collective guilt.

Schnurre was among the German authors who explicitly acknowledged guilt. He served as a soldier for six and a half years, and this experience was a principal reason for his sustained engagement with war, both at the beginning of his literary career and in his later thematic choices. His sense of guilt became a decisive impulse for writing. It arose from the fact that he had survived when others had not—a condition he carried in memory throughout his life and one that Karl Jaspers described as “metaphysical guilt,” closely associated with survivor guilt.

Through writing, Schnurre's generation sought to draw lessons from the past and to protect the world and future generations from a repetition of war. In a 1986 interview, Schnurre described guilt as the driving force behind his work:

Mein Schuldgefühl, meine Neurosen, die jeder von uns hat, sind der Antrieb für mein Schreiben. Ich schreibe aus Schuldgefühl, sonst würde ich gar nicht schreiben wollen.<sup>5</sup>

In 1958, he similarly stated:

Schuldig sind wir alle, da liegt der Unterschied nicht. Was wir aus unserem Schuldgefühl machen, wie wir uns damit einrichten—darauf kommt's an.<sup>6</sup>

Schnurre understood himself to be guilty and regarded this consciousness as both a source of literary creativity and an inner force that he attempted to express through writing. His assertion that “we are all guilty” engages with the concept of collective guilt advanced by the Allies, according to which responsibility extended to the German people as a whole.

The postwar writer Wolfgang Weyrauch likewise acknowledged his guilt. His personal participation in the war provided the autobiographical background to his writing. After returning to his devastated homeland, he wrote the poem “The German,” in which he accepted responsibility for the destruction:

Die Stadt ist tot, und ich bin schuld daran,  
Wir alle haben Schuld. Du, Nebenmann,

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<sup>5</sup>. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, quoted in Iris Bauer, *“Ein schuldloses Leben gibt es nicht”: Das Thema “Schuld” im Werk von Wolfdietrich Schnurre* (Paderborn: Igel-Verlag Wissenschaft, 1996), 6.

<sup>6</sup>. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, quoted in Gustav Zürcher, *Trümmerlyrik 1945–1950* (Kronberg: Scriptor Verlag, 1977), 103.

Du tötest die Straße und das Haus,  
 Du, Nachbar, brennst Bett und Zimmer aus,  
 Wir haben zerbrochen, ich und du—  
 Auch du: Warum willst du es nicht mehr wissen?  
 Wir alle haben Schuld, dass sie zerrissen,  
 Zermartert wurden, denn wir sahen zu.<sup>7</sup>

In this poem, Weyrauch accuses himself because he feels responsible for the destruction of his homeland. At the same time, he directs the accusation toward all Germans. The title “The German” refers to every German and explicitly exempts no one. Even those who remained silent are implicated by their silence. The pronoun “we” encompasses “I,” “you,” and “he”: all Germans share responsibility.

Heinrich Böll’s experiences during World War II formed the basis of his literary vision. Collapse and the consequences of war remained central concerns in his work, which explored individual suffering and the problem of guilt through characters who embodied these experiences. In his novel *Where Were You, Adam?*, Böll portrays the daily lives of ordinary soldiers. He presents war as an absurd undertaking carried out by individuals but endured by entire societies. He emphasizes the despair, moral decline, and continuing suffering imposed on soldiers during and after the conflict.

Böll presents Feinhals as a representative of the German soldier who entered the war under compulsion rather than by choice. The character embodies a fundamental contradiction: he is implicated through his participation in the war and its crimes, yet he is also portrayed as a victim of coercion. Through Feinhals, Böll examines guilt and individual responsibility under the conditions of war and National Socialism. The predicament of ordinary soldiers is expressed in the following lines:

Man hat uns in den Krieg gejagt,  
 Soldaten werden nicht gefragt,  
 Sie müssen alles schaffen!  
 Alles fürs Vaterland!<sup>8</sup>

Böll rejects the attribution of undifferentiated guilt to an entire people and regards collective condemnation as unjustified. He also notes that Allied actions caused the deaths of innocent civilians. His protagonists therefore appear more often as victims than as perpetrators, and his writing emphasizes that wars may be initiated by individuals even though their consequences extend across society. Rather than generalizing responsibility, Böll calls for an examination of the causes and contexts of guilt. At the same time, he stresses the importance of preserving historical memory and drawing lessons from it to prevent the recurrence of catastrophe.

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<sup>7</sup>. Wolfgang Weyrauch, quoted in Bauer, “*Ein schuldloses Leben gibt es nicht*,” 110.

<sup>8</sup>. Quoted in Bauer, “*Ein schuldloses Leben gibt es nicht*,” 110.

Wolfgang Borchert was among the writers most profoundly affected by World War II. He experienced a deep sense of isolation and regarded his literary work as a direct product of the war and its consequences. His writing reflects the suffering of a generation that felt betrayed and was unable to forget the horrors of war. It is therefore marked by pessimism and bitterness, yet it also preserves a fragile hope for a new beginning and a better future.

Borchert's play *The Man Outside* portrays the experiences of young soldiers returning from war. Rather than depicting battles or the Nazi regime directly, the play focuses on responsibility and guilt. Its protagonist, Beckmann, is a victim whose life has been destroyed by the front, captivity, and the loss of his family. At the same time, he is burdened by guilt because he holds himself responsible for the deaths of eleven soldiers. The play thus dramatizes the psychological and moral conflict experienced by returning soldiers after the war.

Beckmann's admission that he is a murderer does not arise primarily from killing enemies or serving in Hitler's army. Instead, it expresses his profound moral guilt toward the comrades who died under his command. He recognizes that he is not only a victim of war but also the bearer of an ethical responsibility that weighs heavily upon him. His wife's betrayal and his parents' suicide further deprive his life of meaning and repeatedly drive him toward thoughts of suicide. Yet he cannot escape either his memories or his guilt. He therefore confronts the colonel who placed the soldiers under his command and attempts to shift the burden back to the officer he considers truly responsible. Through this confrontation, the play explores guilt and innocence, shared responsibility, and the struggle to come to terms with the past. Beckmann remains tormented by the memory of the eleven soldiers who haunt his conscience, whereas the colonel continues to live comfortably with his family without acknowledging responsibility. The contrast exposes the divide between those who bear the psychological burden of war and those who evade accountability for it.

### 3. Conclusion

Individuals wage wars, but their consequences are collective. The same distinction applies to guilt and innocence: an entire people can never be wholly guilty or wholly innocent. What matters most is the preservation of memory and the willingness to draw lessons from history. No individual or nation reaches a state of final moral perfection; societies must instead develop the strength to confront such events and prevent their recurrence.

As long as scholars continue to debate responsibility for the outbreak of World War II and for the crimes committed under the Third Reich, the concepts of German collective responsibility, individual guilt, and personal accountability will remain psychologically and historically contested. Did Hitler and his "gang" alone bear full responsibility and guilt? Or did the historical roots of National Socialism—of the "evil," as Heinrich Mann called it—lie in the Wilhelmine Empire?

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