

Germany's Historical Reflection on the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Period

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Abstract. Germany's reflection on the Holocaust in the early post-war period constitutes a complex historical process. This study focuses on how such reflection evolved from a passive state to proactive collective cognition, and explores the underlying social drivers and historical impacts of this evolution. This paper first traces the social background of Germany's reflection on the Holocaust in the early post-war period, and argues that the material and spiritual collapse after defeat, the implementation deviation of denazification policies, and the formation of the Cold War pattern jointly shaped the fragmented characteristics of this reflection. On this basis, this study further analyzes the divergences in reflection among academic circles, the general public and the German government, and points out that such divergences constitute the core of the reflection process. Germany's reflection on the Holocaust after World War II is a long-term process: it began as a passive response under multiple pressures, went through conflicts among different stakeholders, and ultimately achieved spiritual reconstruction driven by changes in public cognition and landmark events. This process reveals that reflection on historical crimes cannot be achieved overnight. It requires sustained interaction among social actors, and more importantly, is supported by cognitive transformation in the public sphere. Only by facing up to history and taking responsibility proactively can a nation truly achieve reconciliation and rebirth. Germany's reflection process also provides important enlightenment for countries around the world in handling remaining historical issues.

Keywords: Holocaust, Warsaw Genuflection, Memory, History

1. Introduction

The social background for Germany's reflection on the Holocaust in the early post-war era was rooted in multiple conditions. Regarding the dimension of Holocaust memory as a historical experience, it not only involves historiography but also relies on many political and ethical fields. Factors such as political situation, generational differences, and national identity, which are not entirely within the scope of history, inevitably need to be discussed [1]. After Germany's defeat in 1945, the country suffered from a dual collapse in both material and spiritual aspects. Its territory was divided and occupied, its infrastructure was severely damaged, and millions of displaced people exacerbated the crisis of survival. The "de-Nazification" policy imposed by the Allied forces aimed to eliminate the influence of Nazi ideology, but the actual implementation process showed

significant differences. A large number of grassroots Nazi members obtained pardons through special means, while the judicial system's pursuit of accountability for war crimes was insufficient, resulting in many key criminals not receiving substantive punishment. This externally imposed transformation failed to effectively transform into a self-reflection drive within Germany.

The economic crisis focused the social discussion mainly on the issue of survival needs, while the reflection on the Holocaust was severely marginalized. Ordinary German people clung to the mindset of being war victims. They often put the hardship brought by Allied air raids on par with Nazi wartime atrocities, using this mental coping method to shirk their guilt as perpetrators. Meanwhile, the fast-emerging Cold War drastically altered the political atmosphere around historical reckoning. To counter the Soviet Union, Western Allied powers chose to back West Germany's post-war rebuilding. Financial aid alongside relaxed political oversight made full reckoning over Nazi misdeeds less pressing. Under Adenauer's administration, West Germany adopted a down-to-earth foreign policy and sealed a reparations deal with Israel in 1952. Though the deal carried symbolic weight, West Germany's core goal was to earn Western allies' confidence instead of pushing for thorough shifts in public ideology. Historical soul-searching done amid such constraints turned out half-hearted and disjointed, which would later fuel long-running arguments about Germany's accountability for Nazi-era crimes.

2. Differences in reflection among academia, public, and the government

In the early post-war German society, German academics, ordinary citizens and government bodies held conflicting views about the Holocaust, and such divides deeply shaped how the country built its shared national memory. Back then, conservative historians dominated relevant academic studies. They pinned Nazi war crimes solely on Hitler's tyrannical rule and intentionally minimized regular Germans' part in these atrocities. Friedrich Meinecke was one such thinker; he described Nazism as an unexpected breakdown in the natural progress of Western civilization, an interpretation that kept critical scrutiny of Germany's whole social system off the table. It was only in the 1960s, when critical history gained traction, that ideas rooted in Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" started to challenge the old academic consensus. Still, these new critical viewpoints stayed on the sidelines and got little mainstream acceptance for many years.

Ordinary German residents built a two-sided victim-focused mindset after the war. For one thing, they kept emphasizing all the lives and belongings lost when Allied troops advanced across Germany. For another, they framed Nazi rule as an outside catastrophe forced onto the German population at large. Everyday silence helped solidify this viewpoint: regular Germans shied away from talking about concentration camp horrors and would not admit their own moral failings as onlookers. Multiple real-world cases proved the nation was unwilling to face victims' suffering. Jewish survivors often ran into open resentment when they tried to move back into their old homes, and German courts routinely ruled unfairly over lawsuits about stolen Jewish property. In industrial hubs such as Düsseldorf, working-class locals laid their financial struggles on Allied punitive measures instead of Germany's wartime guilt. Such distorted thinking stood in the way of honest, in-depth reckoning with the country's troubled past.

Official approaches to reckoning with this past were mostly driven by practical political needs. Kurt Schumacher, who headed West Germany's post-war Social Democratic Party, stood out among the nation's top politicians. He pushed Germany to squarely own up to Nazi atrocities and carry out rigorous historical self-examination. His policy agenda included stripping former Nazi collaborators of their official posts, continuing legal trials for war crimes and crimes against humanity, providing reparations to Holocaust survivors, and fighting against antisemitic prejudice [2]. Schumacher

advocated for the establishment of a fair and orderly new nation that could reflect on and correct its own mistakes. Additionally, Adenauer also believed that Nazism had deeply permeated German society and declared his determination to eliminate Nazism and militarism. Schumacher agreed to remove the positions of former Nazi activists, military leaders, etc., and advocated for moral and legal trials of the criminals [3]. The agreement signed by the Adenauer government in 1952 involved paying a huge amount of marks as compensation to Israel. However, this statement of repentance in diplomatic settings contrasted sharply with the actual domestic policies. The judicial system absorbed a large number of former Nazi judges, and the prosecution rate for war criminals was low; in the education sector, historical textbooks that avoided mentioning the details of the Holocaust were still used until the late 1950s.

3. Limitations of reflection

3.1. Domestic public opinion and cognitive transformation

In the early post-war period, Germany's reflection on the Holocaust exhibited profound contradictions and limitations. This reflection was internally conflicted at the official, public, and academic levels, essentially representing an unfinished path. At the official level, the West German government, through compensation agreements, paid large sums of money to Israeli and Jewish organizations, demonstrating a certain repentant attitude. However, this compensation was more a political consideration. The Adenauer government aimed to secure international acceptance and the trust of Western allies through economic compensation, in an effort to accelerate the restoration of sovereignty and integration into the Western camp. This symbolic compensation, however, cleverly masked the serious lack of judicial accountability. A large number of former Nazis, mid-level and lower-level perpetrators, did not receive the due legal trials, and they were able to reintegrate into society and even continue to hold positions in the judicial and administrative systems. This compensation-as-cleanup model led to the superficial pursuit of accountability for crimes, failing to touch upon the mechanisms of the state's violent apparatus.

Ordinary German people largely viewed themselves as war victims when looking back on the conflict in the years right after WWII. Most locals fixated on their own wartime hardships: relentless Allied bombing raids, the seizure of Germany's eastern lands, and massive forced population transfers. This dual-sided view—where Germans saw themselves both as casualties of the wider war and victims trapped under Nazi rule—took hold across popular thought and personal memory. It shifted focus away from their own complicity, stopping most people from honestly facing their part in perpetrating Nazi abuses. Day-to-day conversations were marked by quiet evasion; people chose to block out grim specifics of Nazi violence and the Holocaust, fostering an unspoken social taboo. This widespread mental coping shield kept the broader public from fully grasping or morally denouncing the regime's crimes.

Within academic circles, thinkers from the Frankfurt School stood apart with sharp critical research. Their work dug into the roots of Nazi totalitarianism, the long-running history of antisemitism, and regular Germans' shared complicity in these wrongs, yet these viewpoints got pushed to the margins for decades right after the war. Conservative historians held sway over mainstream historical research and mainstream public thought. Most of them pinned the Holocaust's blame solely on Hitler's irrational fanaticism plus a small circle of top Nazi officials; alternatively, they chalked up these atrocities to the vague catchall term "totalitarianism." Either approach severed Nazi crimes from Germany's own historical heritage and domestic social setup. This way of

interpreting history effectively lifted collective moral guilt off ordinary German society, leaving thorough critical historical scrutiny stuck outside mainstream public debate.

The reflection from the three parties profoundly demonstrated the great tension between memory and forgetting in German society in the early post-war period. On the one hand, the rapid formation of the Cold War pattern and the intensification of the confrontation between the East and the West provided West Germany with a new historical interpretation framework, with anti-communism becoming the dominant ideology, partially reducing the urgency of cleaning up Nazi history, and even providing some former Nazis with justifications for serving the anti-communist cause. On the other hand, the suppression and silence of the memory of Nazi victims laid the groundwork for disaster within German society, eventually becoming the trigger for the student movement in 1960s, with the younger generation beginning to fiercely question their parents' actions during the Nazi era and demanding a thorough reckoning of history. This fully demonstrated that the reflection in the early post-war period was far from complete, and the remaining contradictions affected the reconstruction of German national identity. The reason why Brandt's kneeling in Warsaw in 1970 sparked domestic controversy was precisely the result of incomplete early reflection.

The cognitive transformation in the public domain is the core of historical memory reconstruction. The continuous interaction between the media, intellectuals, and the public constitutes the driving force for cognitive change, promoting the new interpretation of historical events in public discourse [4]. Taking post-war West Germany as an example, there was generally a state of silence in society, with most citizens avoiding discussions of Nazi history. This state was gradually broken down in the late 1950s. Media began to publish testimonies from survivors of concentration camps. The renowned philosopher, Adorno, a representative figure of the Frankfurt School, had always called on the state and the public to overcome the past, acknowledge the trauma, and incorporate historical reflection into public society. In the political sphere, although Adenauer, Schumacher, and Haus' political discourses reflected the inconsistent words of the national leaders on reflecting on the Nazi issue, based on interests and practical considerations, its political role became prominent, and ultimately, a unanimous discourse and statement were reached in public opinion [3]. Young demonstrators in the 1968 student rallies held placards condemning the lingering legacy of Nazism, which laid open widening gaps between generations in how they viewed the nation's troubled past. To grasp shifts in public historical outlook, we need to examine how shared social memory takes shape and evolves through open public discussion. The public sphere offers ordinary citizens a venue to swap opinions and reach mutual agreement; ongoing open debates within this space fuel shifts in popular thought. Habermas's writings on the public sphere help unpack such communicative dynamics, highlighting how reasoned discussion shapes shared public viewpoints.

People's changing views of history develop chiefly via two avenues: mainstream media and formal schooling. Journalists steer public understanding of the past through deliberate news coverage. They simplify tangled historical happenings into readable stories for ordinary readers to talk over, which gradually shifts mainstream public attitudes. Schools pass down core values to young people; textbooks lay the groundwork for students' historical knowledge and ethical standards. Media and schooling work side by side to build a society's shared collective memory. Postwar revisions to Germany's history curriculum serve as a tangible illustration of how school policies reshape popular historical outlooks.

Public debates reshape how ordinary people view history, which in turn creates solid conditions for nationwide historical reckoning. Once formerly taboo topics — such as wartime moral guilt, victims' sufferings and systemic unfairness — get openly discussed and widely accepted in public

space, most citizens come to agree on why the nation must confront its troubled past and which painful chapters deserve close review [5]. Such shared public understanding enables national authorities to issue formal apologies and design victim compensation schemes. Without shifts in popular sentiment laying this groundwork, any top-down mandatory reflection would end up as hollow formalities unsupported by ordinary people's real feelings. Public opinion's gradual shift is thus indispensable to genuine societal self-examination.

When widely accepted historical accounts shift, different social groups rethink who they are and where they stand in history. Such shifts bring ongoing debate, friction and clashes across public discourse. Exchanges taking place in open public spaces directly mold shared community memory and reshape how different communities define themselves [6].

At the outbreak of World War II, most ordinary German residents saw themselves chiefly as wartime victims and refused to confront their country's complicity as Nazi wrongdoers. As proof of Nazi atrocities surfaced publicly, survivor accounts spread far and wide alongside sharp critiques from academics, which brought about a drastic shift in mainstream public views. This shift pushed various social cohorts to revisit their real historical stances. Young Germans bore a heavy moral weight from their parents' unwillingness to talk about the past. They began to cast serious doubt on the historical versions handed down by the older generation and searched for a fresh self-definition rooted in remorse. Their collective frustration toward inherited national identities spilled out publicly and pushed the whole nation to face up to its historical crimes. Intellectuals guided this shift in public thinking: they kept dismantling outdated historical fallacies and sparked sustained, candid debates about national guilt.

This change in group identity resulting from cognitive transformation provided the internal impetus for later historical reflection. Acknowledging historical guilt gradually became a social moral norm and value orientation. Group identity requires institutionalizing and normalizing historical reflection, which prompts the state to adopt a more proactive attitude, such as establishing legislation to punish those who deny the Holocaust, strengthening the education of Nazi crimes in history textbooks, establishing memorial sites, and compensating the victims. At the social level, civic groups also actively take action, monitoring historical revisionist remarks, and ensuring that historical truths are not forgotten or distorted. Therefore, the reconstruction of social identity is a step in promoting historical reflection from public discussion to practice.

3.2. The Warsaw petition and its historical reflections

After the end of World War II, the European continent was devastated by the war, leaving behind deep war traumas and complex international relations conflicts. The historical event of the "Kneel in Warsaw" that shocked the world emerged under such circumstances. During World War II, Nazi Germany launched a blitzkrieg against Poland, completely destroying Poland's state power and social system. They not only occupied the entire territory of Poland, plundered resources at will, and massacred civilians, but also established a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw and committed the most horrific massacre. At the same time, they brutally suppressed the resistance uprising of the people of Warsaw, causing Poland to suffer the pain of losing its country and the deaths of millions of people, making it one of the countries most severely persecuted by Nazi Germany in World War II. The long-term atrocities have accumulated an irreconcilable hatred and profound historical trauma among the two ethnic groups of Germany and Poland, laying the groundwork for the antagonistic and rigid state of relations between the two countries after the war. After World War II, West Germany bore the heavy burden of war crimes and remained under the scrutiny and questioning of the international community. Due to the fear of Germany's potential resurgence and recurrence of

war, European countries maintained a high level of vigilance and caution towards West Germany. The relationship between Germany and Poland was in a long-term frozen and confrontational state. The issue of historical guilt became a core obstacle hindering Germany's integration into Europe and its realization of regional peace and development. As the post-war reconstruction progressed, West Germany embarked on a comprehensive social transformation and de-Nazification reform. The country carried out a top-down process of stripping away the extreme ideologies left by the Nazis, eliminating the remnants of militarism in society, and officially began to confront war crimes and actively admit historical mistakes. The then West German Chancellor Brandt himself was a staunch anti-Nazi fighter. During the war, he had long been in exile overseas and persisted in the anti-fascist struggle, never participating in any of the Nazi's aggressive actions. This special personal experience and political stance enabled him to represent the new generation of post-war Germany, who rejected extremism and pursued reflection and peace, and laid a solid ideological and political foundation for the Warsaw Kneel Down incident.

At a historical juncture when the German-Polish relations had been frozen for many years and historical contradictions were difficult to reconcile, a new government came to power in West Germany. Under the leadership of the Social Democratic politician Willy Brandt, the new government proposed a new political strategy, namely the so-called "New Eastern Policy" [7]. On December 7, 1970, West German Chancellor Brandt began his official visit to Poland. This diplomatic visit became a crucial opportunity to reverse the relationship between Germany and Poland and to reshape Germany's historical image. During the visit, Brandt went to the monument of the Warsaw Jewish Resistance Uprising and, in accordance with diplomatic etiquette, laid a wreath for the innocent people and the uprising martyrs who were brutally killed by the Nazis during World War II. The scene was attended by journalists from various countries and officials from both Germany and Poland. The entire event received worldwide attention. In the solemn and solemn atmosphere of the memorial, everyone thought it was just a routine diplomatic memorial ceremony. No one expected the subsequent historic scene. After laying the wreath, without any pre-planned arrangements or team arrangements, out of deep remorse and repentance, Brandt spontaneously knelt on both knees and stood silently in front of the monument. This sudden action was not a deliberately designed diplomatic performance. Instead, it was a heartfelt confession made by a representative of Germany, towards the Polish nation that suffered from the Nazi regime's racial massacre and all the victims of World War II, for the heinous crimes committed by Nazi Germany. The silent kneeling lasted for several minutes, transcending the limitations of personal identity. Modern Germany, in the name of the state, took on the historical responsibility left by the Nazis and officially bowed and confessed for the collective historical mistakes of the entire nation. This shocking confession broke the decades-long confrontation between Germany and Poland after the war, greatly alleviated the Polish people's resistance and hatred towards Germany, and created excellent conditions for the diplomatic thaw between the two countries. After this visit, the two sides of Germany and Poland officially signed the "Warsaw Treaty". West Germany voluntarily recognized the legality of the border along the Oder-Nisse River. By taking practical actions to abandon territorial disputes and demonstrating a commitment to peace, it not only completely restored the bilateral relationship between Germany and Poland but also promoted the post-war reconciliation process in Europe, laying an important foundation for long-term peace and stability in Europe.

The historical reflections of most defeated countries often have a strong utilitarian and passive nature, mostly being passive admissions made under the pressure of international public opinion, diplomatic sanctions, and development restrictions. Their essence is to be a compromise measure to

escape international predicaments, and they do not truly face historical mistakes from the depths of the nation's heart. The emergence of the Warsaw Bow marked that Germany had completely broken free from the limitation of passive admission. Since then, Germany no longer evades, conceals, or glorifies the aggressive crimes of the Nazis, but actively accepts this heavy past and incorporates the crimes of racial massacre, aggression expansion, etc. into the collective memory. Brandt's bowing symbolized Germany's shift from simple defeat admission to self-reflection at the civilized level, making the entire nation deeply realize the disasters brought by extremism and militarism. This internalized historical memory gradually permeated all aspects of German education and culture, promoting Germany to continuously eliminate the remnants of Nazi ideology, abandon extreme nationalism, and complete the reshaping of national spirit, helping Germany to grow into a rational modern civilized country.

At the same time, the kneeling in Warsaw completely overturned Germany's century-old national historical narrative and completed the reconstruction of mainstream values. During the Nazi era, Germany's mainstream narrative was entangled by racial superiority theory and national expansionism, packaging the aggressive war as a path to national rejuvenation, inciting extreme national emotions, and ultimately leading to a worldwide disaster. In the early stage after the defeat in World War II, German society was once plunged into historical confusion, and some groups attempted to portray Germany as a victim of the war. This distorted historical narrative made it difficult for Germany to receive genuine acceptance and respect from the international community. After the Warsaw Bow, repentance, reflection, and upholding peace officially became the mainstream historical narrative of Germany. The country used various methods such as basic education, public commemorative activities, and social opinion guidance to make respecting history and reflecting on mistakes become the consensus of all citizens.

Looking at the world as a whole, many countries have always chosen to avoid responsibility for their own aggressive history, deliberately covering up national faults, ultimately resulting in the inability to heal historical wounds and the continuous intensification of ethnic conflicts. However, the historical spirit carried by the Warsaw Bow has verified a core truth to the world: True national dignity and national rise have never relied on covering up history and whitewashing faults, but have originated from the civilized confidence to confront evil and take responsibility. Only by deeply reflecting on historical faults can true hatred and estrangement between nations be resolved, and genuine understanding and respect from the victimized nations and the international community be won. Only by constructing a correct historical narrative can we break out of the cycle of history and achieve long-term development of the nation and the peaceful progress of human society.

4. Conclusion

After the end of World War II, Germany's self-reflection on war crimes went through a long process. Immediately after the war ended, most scholars believed that West Germany's memory was "a form of collective suppression, focusing on rebuilding Germany that had been destroyed by the war rather than examining history" [8]. Under the constraints of international trials and public opinion, Germany could only passively accept the fact of defeat and bear the responsibility for aggression. There was a widespread mentality of avoiding history and resisting accountability within the country. As society evolved, social thoughts gradually changed, and the official sector was the first to adjust its historical stance, publicly acknowledging the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis, and the public also began to confront the dark past of their own country. The state successively introduced strict laws to severely crack down on the remnants of the Nazi regime and extreme right-wing ideology, and incorporated World War II history into national education. Generations of people

began to establish a correct historical perception and eventually constructed an official-led, generationally-continued reflection system, with the attitude of reflection changing from passive to active self-examination.

Germany's decades-long choice of persisting in reflecting on the history of the war has provided valuable historical inspirations for all countries to handle historical legacy issues and maintain peace and stability. Deliberately covering up or falsify the historical facts of aggression will only continuously intensify ethnic conflicts, while facing historical crimes openly is the fundamental prerequisite for resolving historical grievances. A complete history education can alert future generations to remember the suffering of the war and curb the revival of extremist ideas at the root. With a repentant attitude and communication and reconciliation with the victim countries, it can not only reshape the national moral image but also promote the joint coexistence of regional countries. This study focuses on the core research perspective of the "Kiss of Warsaw" and is also the innovation that distinguishes this article from conventional discussions. Brandt's historic Warsaw Kneel goes far beyond a routine diplomatic apology and marks a turning point for Germany's reckoning with its Nazi past. This gesture tore down decades-long historical divides separating postwar West Germany from nations ravaged by the Third Reich, offering solemn, heartfelt remorse to wartime victims and persecuted ethnic communities. It helped erase the world's deep-rooted unfavorable impression of Germany and cleared the path for the country's readmission into European nations as a state ready to atone for its crimes. Domestically, the act pushed Germany's soul-searching to mature, freeing the country from the heavy weight of its troubled history. Known widely as the Warsaw Genuflection, this moment holds singular historical importance and has set a lasting benchmark for how other nations confront their own wartime misdeeds. Its far-reaching legacy makes clear one key truth: a country can never truly rebuild itself by brushing its dark history aside; genuine national renewal comes from formally codifying historical accountability and handing this sense of duty down through successive generations. Only by facing its painful past head-on can a country win global respect and rebuild its moral standing. This powerful example also leaves vital historical insights, guiding humanity to navigate large-scale catastrophes and conflicts moving forward.

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