

SUSANNE KARSTEDT
Keele University, UK

The Life Course of Collective Memories: Persistency and Change in West Germany between 1950 and 1970

Abstract: This paper uses (West) Germany as an exemplary case to analyse the formation of collective memories over a period of more than two decades after 1945. It traces the formation of collective memories in the German public through a decade of collective amnesia, followed by a period of regaining collective memories. It argues that the formation of collective memories is embedded in social and normative change, and identifies three causal factors that were responsible for the oscillation between amnesia and memory: the absence of victims in the imminent post-war period, that promoted the ‘myth of innocence’ (Fulbrook 1999); a series of major trials that started in the 1960s; and young elites who acknowledged moral and legal guilt and supported the trials, reconciliation and compensation. Data from public opinion polls covering the period from 1950–1970 are presented.

Keywords: collective memory; collective amnesia; post-war Germany; transitional justice; war crimes; crimes against humanity.

Collective Memories: Persistency and Change¹

When we speak of collective memories, we more often think of their endurance and persistency, implying in one way or the other that there is a stable edifice of joint memories collected over a long period of time and shared by a group, a generation, a nation or even a group of nations who were suffering from a similar fate. However, what we know about collective memories in Europe, Latin America and perhaps particularly Germany indicates that the opposite might actually be a more correct description of collective memories as well as the processes in which they emerge. They seem to be generated and shaped by thorough societal change. Indeed, often a decisive break with the past and regime change are the preconditions for ending the silence that has surrounded the most atrocious facts and has muted victims and their families, and for a body of collective memories coming to light and being established around these events.

True, it is hard to dispute facts over a long period of time. Evidence can be retrieved from official documents and archives, or from the gripping tales of those who suffered;

¹ A different version of parts of this paper has been published in a contribution “The Nuremberg Tribunal and German Society: International Justice and Local Judgment in Post-conflict Reconstruction” to David Blumenthal and Timothy McCormack (2007), (eds), *The Legacy of Nuremberg: Civilising Influence or Institutionalised Vengeance?* London: Brill.

memories can be revisited in museums, memorials and in encounters with victims. The stock of memory in a society is built as much by these kinds of processes and objects as it is the sum of individual memories that are living in conversations. Individual memories in themselves contribute to, but do not create *the collective* memory of decisive events and moments in individual life as well as in the life of a group or society. In the long run the stock of individual memory decreases, and what persists and remains are the remnants and artefacts of individual lives. Consequently, as prominent as oral transmission and tradition, a certain perspective on life shared with a group of others or a mentality resulting from specific experiences might be in the first instance, they naturally play a decreasing role in the formation of the *longue durée* of collective memories.

In addition, the groups whose memories are prominent in shaping what becomes the collective stock of memory will change over time. Those who were the first to define what will be remembered and in which ways, might in the end be superseded by those who only later recuperated the chance to make their voices heard. Those who had been defeated in the first instance might finally end up giving collective memories the defining and distinctive shape which they assume for the next generations. The stock of collective memory is subject to continuous change, however, it is specifically *moral and normative changes* that transform the groups that define collective memories, and bring facts to the ever changing light. Moral and normative change adds specific interpretations of new and well-known facts to the stock of collective memory or designates them for obliviousness. In fact rather than collective memories are durable they seem to be highly volatile. It seems that collective memories have a limited shelf life and change throughout their life course.

Moreover, collective memory and collective amnesia are closely linked, and they are alternating and oscillating throughout history. These processes of alternation and oscillation between remembrance and amnesia are to be observed all over the world as memories of an immoral past and atrocious acts are recovered and restored—starting in post-war Europe since 1945, in Latin America since the late 1980ies, in Spain, South Africa, Australia and most recently in Asia. Importantly, the oscillation between remembrance and amnesia also represents an alternation between victims' and perpetrators' voices and their domination in the process. Whatever perpetrators remember privately and individually, they will try to keep a low profile, retreat into particular groups supporting their perspective, and will generally be more interested in a policy of forgetting, if not forgiving. Perpetrators are “naturally” silent. Mary Fulbrook (1999) therefore speaks of the “myth of innocence” that took hold of public opinion in Germany during the 1950ies, though differently in East and West Germany. In the second half of the 20th century remembrance and amnesia alternated in Germany as well as in Europe. Whilst collective amnesia was a defining feature of the later post-war years and the 1950s, in Germany and all over Europe, since the early 1960s collective memories were slowly and painfully retrieved in a new engagement with the past. Since then, they have been consistently recovered in a process in which criminal trials that were conducted locally and nationally, had a most prominent role. In Germany, these trials contributed to wiping out the “myth of innocence,” at least

in the public sphere, though it still seems to be alive in the transmission of memories within families at the end of the century (Welzer et al 2002).² Germany's own formation of its collective memory is more closely linked to and has more in common with respective processes all over Europe than could have been assumed for the perpetrators' nation at a first glance.

I will describe three processes that decisively shaped and changed the *moral and normative climate* and collective memories in German society. I use (West) Germany as an exemplary case as we can trace back the formation of its collective memories over more than half a century after a transition, and given the singularity of the crimes committed by Germans until 1945, the formation of collective memories is also well documented. However, we will find these characteristic processes as well in Eastern Europe, Latin America and South Africa: the presence respectively absence of victims and perpetrators, or the balance between them; the role of major trials; and the impact of elites in the formation of moral evaluations of the past. Besides these, specifically the shadow cast on collective memories by the war remains a decisive force in their formation during the first and imminent post-war decade.

The analysis is mainly based on survey data covering the period from the 1950s–70s in Western Germany, the then Federal Republic of Germany.³ This analysis therefore represents the mood and feelings of the West German public on these issues, not the writings of national or international intellectual elites. These certainly have a role in shaping collective memories, but it is decisive how their judgements are received 'on the ground'. The data were collected from published and archival reports of the major West German public opinion and market research institutes (Allensbach, DIVO, Emnid). Topics include the general assessment of the Nazi regime and its proponents, the Nuremberg, Eichmann and Auschwitz trials, as well as knowledge and opinion about the Holocaust (see also Reuband and Johnson 2005; Silbermann and Stoffers 2000).

1950–1960: Collective Amnesia and the Absence of Victims

Looking back at Europe's post-war history, the European experience emerges as an amazing success story. None of the contemporaries who had witnessed the end of World War II, and seen the sheer scale of European calamity would have dared to predict that only a decade later Western European economies were thriving, and a union amongst the former enemies had been forged in the Western parts of the continent. If anything else, this unique European experience demonstrates that peace and reconciliation *are* possible, even after the most horrific atrocities and injustices, and even after two wars—often seen as a single thirty-years-war—that had cost the lives of millions of its citizens within the lifetime of one generation, leaving nearly no family unaffected. It was also part of this experience that peace and reconciliation

² The war crime trials in France during the late 1980s and early 1990s had a similar impact with regard to the Vichy government.

³ For an analysis of the post-1989 transition in the former GDR see Karstedt (1998).

could be achieved within a comparably short time span of the life of the people, including both the generation that had directly experienced the wars and atrocities as perpetrators or victims, as well as the generation of their children. Europe's history during the last five decades of the 20th century instils optimism for the chances of reconciliation, and the capability of individuals, communities and peoples to come to terms with their past and to re-build their future.

It is an eye-catching fact that the foundations for reconciliation were laid in a period of collective amnesia that had taken hold of all of Europe, and on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Tony Judt (2005: 61) therefore argues that immediate post-war collective amnesia actually was a precondition for this recovery: "without ... collective amnesia Europe's astonishing post-war recovery would not have been possible." Collective amnesia allows victims as well as perpetrators and all those whose past does not easily fit into either of these categories to forge new identities, to leave the past behind and re-shape their memories, thus making reconciliation and immediate peace-building an easier task. In fact, as Judt shows, after brief outbursts of violence most nations, governments and populations wanted to put the past behind (Judt 2005: chap 2).

Across Europe the immediate post-war situation had characteristically facilitated the ensuing collective amnesia. It particularly provided a framework in which the genocide of the European Jews could be cast as a war crime, and not as a crime *sui generis* (see Olick 2005). It was not until more than two decades later that the Holocaust was named as such and perceived as a separate crime of an unimaginable scale. The Nuremberg Trials set up as a Military Tribunal actually contributed to these perceptions. Even those who had been convicted of genocide defined their offences as war crimes, and they could count on the sympathetic understanding of the public and social institutions, including both churches, the Protestant-Lutheran and the Catholic church in Germany (Karstedt 2008). In communist East Germany as well as in other parts of Europe the resistance movements against fascism could claim for themselves and many others the "myth of innocence" and non-involvement.

However, one of the reasons behind these overt characteristics of the post-war situation was the near-complete absence of voices of and for the victims of war crimes and the Holocaust. It was the significant absence of victims of the atrocities that made it possible that the genocide was covered up as a series of war crimes, committed by soldiers as devoted to their cause as those in other armies, which consequently promoted the myth of innocence amongst the majority of Germans. Of the 600,000 Jews who had lived in Germany before Hitler came to power, 25,000 survived within Germany, in hiding, concentration camps and by marrying non-Jews. Most of the 200,000 Jewish displaced persons, who were in Germany between 1945 and 1952, either tried to get home or emigrated to Israel after the state was created in 1948. By 1950, only 20,000 Jews remained in Germany, the majority from Eastern Europe. Their voices were (mostly) not heard in the international and national tribunals that dealt with the aftermath of war and genocide starting in the immediate post-war period after 1945. They very rarely appeared as witnesses in the courts or gave evidence in another

way. Transitional justice in the aftermath of WWII focussed nearly exclusively on the perpetrators.

The legal procedures of transitional justice in Europe after WWII were all—and there is no exception to any of the range of different procedures—designed with the objective “to stay the hand of vengeance,” as Justice Jackson as Chief Prosecutor in the Nuremberg Trials had declared. Given the unimaginable atrocities, an explosion of vengeance was by no ways a remote possibility at this time. “Staying the hand of vengeance” implied that even if the victims had to be restrained and held at bay, or were not present at all, these trials had in some ways to achieve at least a kind of *symbolic justice for all victims*. Consequently, the prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity could follow an agenda that completely ignored any needs or demands from victims. The Nuremberg Military Tribunal targeted the highest leadership echelon of the Nazi-regime, and the follow-up trials were designed to deal with the lower levels of the bureaucracy. Together these trials as well as others testify to the unambiguous offender-orientation of post-war justice in Germany. Even if one concedes pressing legal practicalities, the complete absence of victims or even representatives who could speak on their behalf at the IMT does not seem to be a necessary consequence of the huge problems the prosecution encountered. The presence of victims, it seems, was seen more as a problem for the orderly conduct of the trials, if not as a danger. However, staying the hand of vengeance turned out to be a counter-productive legal ideology and doctrine in several respects.

As a consequence, the Nuremberg Tribunal and many other trials and procedures only gave voice to the perpetrators. Even most of the very small numbers of witnesses were deeply implicated as perpetrators and awaited their own trials either in Germany or other countries. Further to this, the audience addressed by the Nuremberg Tribunal nearly exclusively comprised of the people of the perpetrators, and a victim audience was non-existent. As “audience” of the Nuremberg Trial the Germans were as perpetrators “by themselves.” In that way, the trials mirrored the daily life of post-war Germans, who neither had much experience of talking and listening to victims nor were they confronted with them. It took nearly 20 years until the German public would be forced to listen to the voices of victims in their own country, in the Auschwitz Trial from 1963–1966, again during the 1970ies and later in the Majdanek Trial. Both these and the Eichmann Trial in Israel in 1961 can be deemed as a watershed experience for the German public.

There is however little evidence, neither from post-war Europe nor from the more recent historical experience of transitional justice that victims actually took or take revenge.⁴ There were very few cases of individual revenge and incidents of collective outburst of violence against the perpetrators, and none of these actually resulted in more widespread disorder and conflict that might have impeded post-war recovery in the slightest way. There were conflicts, and in Germany the major trials were obviously contested events, but there is no known incident of an imminent danger to

⁴ Anthropologist Jared Diamond (2008) in a recent article makes a case for acknowledging vengeance in criminal justice, which he partially bases on the story of a relative, whose family was murdered during the Holocaust, and who always regretted that he had not taken revenge.

the restoration of order and peace. In hindsight, the vindictiveness of victims seems to have been hugely overrated, and fears of their revenge not justified at all. Their partially intended and forced absence had a particularly detrimental impact on the minds of the perpetrators and long-term consequences as it had a significant role in the formation of collective amnesia that took hold of Europe and Germany in the decade after WWII.

The fact that the perpetrators were by themselves shaped the way in which they received the moral and legal messages of the Nuremberg Trial. Its staging provided the opportunity for the perpetrators to perceive of themselves as victims and thus to adopt a victim role. Surveys conducted at that time testify to the widely held opinion that the Germans had been misled by the Nazi leadership and been left in misery (Karstedt 1998). In a paradoxical way the main impact of the Nuremberg Tribunal on contemporaries was not to offer a venue for the victims to symbolically revenge themselves, but instead to provide the possibility for the nation of the perpetrators vicariously to take revenge on their leadership through the victorious Allies.

In Germany and all over Europe obliviousness and collective amnesia took hold in the post-war period until the 1960s. Europeans were content to forget—though not necessarily to forgive. Collective amnesia was tightly linked to collective and blanket amnesties during this decade. Obviously, the people of the perpetrators as well as their governments had most to gain from collective amnesia. The first chancellor of the newly founded Federal Republic, Konrad Adenauer had this to say in his first official address to the German parliament in 1949: “The government of the Federal Republic, in the belief that many have *subjectively atoned for a guilt that was not heavy*, is determined where it appears acceptable to do so to put the past behind us” (Judit 2005: 61). This set the stage for two decades of amnesties (see Perels 1999).

Amnesties had already been granted by the Allies, each in their zone of occupation. Immediately after the creation of the two German states in 1949, politicians from the left to the right promoted amnesties. In addition, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer publicly asked for a halt of further scrutinising the past of high-ranking officials and civil servants. This encouraged groups of former elite Nazi-officials to lobby for a blanket amnesty and general pardon, which was never granted due to the adamant opposition of the Americans. Amnesties comprising a wide range of groups including individuals deeply implicated in genocide and war crimes were granted and introduced under the cover of other laws throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They were handed to those who had undergone denazification procedures, and they also ensured indemnity for violence and killings at the very end of the war. As late as in the 1960s, legal provisions amounting to “covert amnesties” for atrocities were slipped in under the cover of other laws. “Overt amnesties” were more or less completed by the mid-1950s, in Germany as well as in other European countries.

As a result of these policies many of those who had in fact been convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity, often receiving the death penalty or life imprisonment had their sentences converted and were released after serving only a small fraction of their sentences. They slipped back into civil life as if nothing had happened, and could participate in the post-war economic boom. Their sentences

and ensuing imprisonment were seen by the German population as a consequence of war, and not as a result of justice. Thus, they could re-enter society as soldiers of a defeated army, their time served in prison was seen as internment like the detention of prisoners of war, and no expectations of remorse, guilt or shame were directed towards them. The early history of collective memory is defined by war crime, and not by the crime of genocide and the Holocaust (Olick 2005). This mentality is particularly evident in activities of the Lutheran Church supporting the release of these offenders and helping them to reintegrate, even by offering positions in faith schools and the church administration to men who evidently had killed thousands of innocent people (Karstedt 2008). Notably, collective amnesia could be broken by the rare presence of a victim, as in the case of a woman doctor who had been sentenced for atrocious experiments on concentration camp inmates, had been granted early release and had restarted as general practitioner. In a purely by chance encounter she was recognised by one of her victims in the 1950s, and afterwards forced to resign from the medical profession, though any attempts of resuming prosecution failed (*ibid.*).

The general mood of collective amnesia that had taken over is reflected in opinion polls from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.⁵ In 1952, those who thought that it was unjust to keep the Nuremberg defendants (Dönitz, Schirach, Hess, Speer) in prison, were outnumbering those who thought it justified in all cases (Noelle and Neumann 1956: 202). However, a year earlier in 1951, when asked what they deemed the biggest mistake of the allied forces in Germany during the occupation, only a minority of nine per cent named the trials against war criminals, whilst another fourteen per cent named the ‘defamation and unjustified accusations against the Germans’, obviously referring to the procedures of denazification (*ibid.*: 140). In sum, it seems that a quarter of the German population openly rejected any kind of recognition and prosecution of the crimes that had been committed. In 1953, the majority (78 per cent) felt that they were not even ‘morally implicated’ in the genocide of the Jewish population of Europe, which was a much less strong accusation than that of “collective guilt” (Emnid 1949). In the same year, fifty-five per cent thought that German soldiers could not be blamed for any wrongdoing in the war (Noelle and Neumann 1956: 137). In 1954, about two thirds thought that the number of victims in the Holocaust, for which the survey question had provided an estimate of about five million, was either a little bit or strongly exaggerated, and only a third deemed it correct or too small (Emnid 1954).

In the mid-1950s the message taken away from the Nuremberg Tribunal had materialised in a collective consciousness that attributed solely to Hitler and his inner circle all responsibilities for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Nonetheless, in 1960, public opinion was opposed to giving high office to committed Nazis, and to those who had been highly implicated in preparing the Holocaust or in collaborating

⁵ It is often argued that the results are biased by social desirability. However, as these polls do show, the climate was more supportive of rejecting legal and moral guilt for the Holocaust. The fact that from 1950 onwards reported public opinion changed in line with a general and Europe-wide tendency does not lend itself to the conclusion that actually there was no change, only less social desirability. Similarly, the swing in public opinion in the 1960s back to attitudes more supportive of criminal prosecution is also in line with decisive events and a general change in the political and cultural environment.

with the Gestapo (Noelle and Neumann 1965: 223–224). When in a 1958 poll the public was asked whether war criminals should still be prosecuted and punished, just a majority of fifty-four per cent opted for punishment in contrast to thirty-four per cent who were in favour of closing the books on the past (*ibid.*: 221). It seems that the message of the Nuremberg Trial still could outweigh the “myth of innocence” (Fulbrook 1999) in some respects. In addition, Adenauer’s prospective policy of restitution and re-compensation with Israel and the Jewish population could count on though not unqualified support by a majority: in 1949, twenty per cent found the claims fully and forty-five per cent partially justified (Emnid 1949).

Recovering Collective Memories: The Return of Victims into the Lives of the Perpetrators

At the beginning of the 1960s, a process of regaining collective memories started that has not yet come to an end. The process was driven by three important trials that thoroughly and forever changed the way Germans could look back at their past: the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, the 1963–66 Auschwitz trial, and the 1975–81 Majdanek trial both in Germany. The impact and significance of the trials was mostly owed to the fact that they made the victims visible and their voices heard, which decisively differed from the immediate post-war transitional justice procedures.

As Hagan and Kutnjak Ivkovic (Kutnjak Ivkovic and Hagan 2006) showed for the former Yugoslavia, it is of utmost importance for the formation of collective memories where trials of transitional justice take place or better—where they should take place. This was a particular issue for the Eichmann Trial, and public opinion in Germany was clearly divided. At about one third of the Germans demanded an international tribunal, not differing from most other countries like the US, the UK and Switzerland. However, whilst the majority in these countries supported the trial in Israel, this was not the case in Germany (West): Twenty-five per cent of the Germans preferred a trial in Germany (Emnid 1961). Another poll (Schmidt and Becker 1967: 113) shows that this preference for Germany as the venue of the trial had two very different reasons splitting the public nearly evenly. Fifty-four percent believed that this would demonstrate that Germany was willing to punish the perpetrators, whilst forty-five percent argued that a venue in Germany would make it less easy to exploit the trial for “anti-German propaganda.” Indeed, German public opinion did not welcome the fact that the trial reminded the world of the “horrors of national socialist concentration camps,” while a majority in the other countries assigned high importance to such a revival of memories (Emnid 1961). The Germans found the final confrontation with the victims’ voices hard to bear. Fifty-three percent preferred that all was forgotten, and fifty-one percent feared that Eichmann would symbolise Germany in the future and hurt its reputation—a clearly justified fear. Nonetheless, a majority (72 per cent) were in favour of prosecution and punishment, and also of severe sentences, either the death penalty or lifelong imprisonment (Noelle and Neumann 1965: 227, 228, 225).

The Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt from 1963–66 was *the ‘key event’* (historian Wolfgang Benz, *Die Zeit* 2005) and watershed experience for German society. It illuminated the horror of the death camps and the Holocaust in all graphic detail, the victims had a real presence in Germany for the first time, and media coverage was extensive. It became a defining moment for the identity of the younger generation, who were not directly involved, and it allegedly shaped the students’ movement in Germany. The presence of victims in Germany was the first of two decisive differences that set the Auschwitz trial apart from all previous trials; the other one was constituted by the fact that the defendants were not members of an elite group who had orchestrated the Holocaust mainly from their desks, or had overseen and/or been directly involved in mass killings in the Eastern theatre of war. The defendants in the Auschwitz trial were mass murderers of a very low rank, and none of them had been a soldier, or acted as a solider. This fundamentally withdrew any foundation for the “myth of innocence.”

However, contemporary polls do not fully support the significance later attributed to the trial (see also Silbermann and Stoffers 2000). Six months into the trial, only sixty percent of the German public had heard of it, in contrast to ninety percent who had heard of the Eichmann Trial (DIVO 1964). Nonetheless, the population was aware of the atrocities brought to justice. Just a majority (53 per cent) supported the trial and found it ‘right’; amongst these, one third named the recovery of truth as their main reason, two thirds supported the trial because “those responsible for the mass murder in Auschwitz should be adjudicated and punished.” However, forty per cent were against the trial because “after so many years these things should not be brought up again” (*ibid.*: 8). In comparison, only fifteen per cent had supported this view in the Eichmann Trial three years earlier (*ibid.*: 12).

Shifting the Normative Climate and Regaining Collective Memories: The Role of Elites

As the most recent research on the former Yugoslavia (Hagan and Kutnjak Ivkovic 2006) and South Africa (Theissen 2009, forthcoming) show, public opinion on the past and on transitional justice clearly reflects enormous divisions between social groups. These are quasi-natural cleavages that run along the lines of conflict, between victims and perpetrators, and those who are “defended” and those who are “defeated” in the end (Hagan and Kutnjak Ivkovic 2006). The absence of victims had eradicated these cleavages in post-war Germany, and made it decisively different from the situation in post-apartheid South Africa or post-conflict Yugoslavia. However, there are also important commonalities in the formation of collective memories that are shared by these highly diverse cultures and countries more than half a century apart. Polls from these more recent incidents coincide with those from Germany several decades earlier in that the younger age groups, the better educated and the elites are much more responsive to the moral

challenges of transitional justice and to the collective memories that transitional justice uncovers, disseminates and preserves. This in fact is indicative of general characteristics of the formation of collective memories in transitional justice.

It is important to note that even during the period of collective amnesia between 1950 and 1960 the better educated and those in higher positions or in the professions were generally more supportive of prosecuting war criminals as well as of reconciliation and restitution, if only with Israel. These groups were significantly more inclined to accept a kind of moral guilt for the Holocaust; they more often gave a correct number of Holocaust victims; they were more supportive of re-compensation to individuals and nations, and they were opposed to different treatment of citizens “of different race” (Emnid 1949: 8–10; Emnid 1954: 6). This tendency became consistently stronger in the following decade. It somehow defies the notion that the elites of the young West German democracy were still fully adhering to Nazi ideology. Rather, it points to the importance of emerging and new elites in the process of doing justice to the past, promoting reconciliation, and shaping collective memories. It is therefore only partially true that the 1950s were a period of collective amnesia. The message of post-war transitional justice had been mainly accepted by the elites to come, and they transmitted it to the decades to follow. It was mostly the future young elites who emerged as important in the formation of collective memories in post-war Germany, and they seem to be equally important in post-apartheid South Africa and in Yugoslavia.

The actual impact of the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials on the collective consciousness and identity of the Germans can be gauged from the age, education and social status of those, who supported the trials and who opposed closing the books on the past. These were the younger, urban, well educated individuals, civil servants and professionals (Eichmann trial: Schmidt and Becker 1967: 128; Auschwitz trial: DIVO 1964: 11). In 1961, the proportion of those who accepted “some kind” of moral guilt for the “annihilation of the Jews” was highest amongst those with highest educational levels (Noelle and Neumann 1965: 229). However, business and industry leaders were mostly opposed to the Auschwitz trial, and they had reasons to be so. For the first time the full extent of the involvement of industry and business in the genocide of the Jews was revealed, and the German business community stood accused of supporting and profiting from the Holocaust. Like during the 1950s, attitudes in support of the trials of perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity were most frequent among contemporary and future elites of Germany (*ibid*). In both the Eichmann and Auschwitz trial the impact of a new generation was obvious. The youngest age groups were deeply impressed and in many ways were shaped by both trials. Support for the prosecution and punishment of Nazi perpetrators amongst these future elites was decisive since they were going to shape public opinion in Germany for the next decades. There can be little doubt that this process was driven by the adoption of more liberal attitudes among these age groups.

The Future of Collective Memory

The social change that produces collective memories and rescues them from collective amnesia, as well as the social forces that turn collective amnesia into collective memory and presumably vice versa, both need to shift the moral and normative climate in a society. This extends far beyond the thorough changes brought about by the transition itself, and reaches into the decades to come. In Germany as well as in many other countries in post-war Europe the presence of victims and the perspectives of young and future elites were both decisive in regaining collective memories of the past. Not to a small extent, the presence of victims and the change of elite perspectives were brought about by a series of major trials that started more than 15 years after the end of the war, and have lasted for several decades until today.

Recently, a strong movement for “bottom-up” transitional justice instead of “top-down” and formal procedures has emerged (McEvoy and McGregor 2008). Proponents argue that grass roots organisations of collecting and sharing memories, and healing and reconciliation circles are if not superior then preferable to the remoteness and formality of international and national transitional justice. The data presented here do not fully support such claims. They testify to the importance of elites in moral and normative change. Given the fact that a similar role can be assigned to elites in transitional settings where conflicts and cleavages between victims and perpetrators are highly visible and present, the role of elites seems to be important in the presence as well as in the absence of victims. It is hardly imaginable, how Germans could have retrieved their collective memories without new elites taking up the cause.

Elites clearly and still have an impact on the formation of public opinion, in the media and policy making. However, does this reach down to the lowest level, where collective memories are formed, and importantly transmitted between generations? Recent research by Welzer and his colleagues (2002) testifies to the ongoing importance of casting the Holocaust as war crimes in discourses within families of ordinary Germans, both in the former West and East. War memories are glorified in the intergenerational exchange of memories—now affecting the perhaps less fraught relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren—and any hints to atrocities are faded out from these accounts. Where they are clearly visible and cannot be eliminated from memory, they are often justified. After a period of intense recuperation of collective memory, of recovering the truth as fact and moral narrative, a turn towards a period of collective amnesia cannot be excluded.

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Biographical Note: Susanne Karstedt is Professor of Criminology at Keele University, United Kingdom. She has researched and published widely on transitional justice; emotions, crime and justice; and democracy, crime and justice. Her cross-cultural and cross-national research focuses on violence, corruption, state violence and punitiveness.

Address: School of Sociology and Criminology, Keele University, Keele Staffordshire ST5 5BG, United Kingdom; e-mail: s.karstedt@keele.ac.uk