Influences of Postwar German Identity

German identity is hard enough for non-Germans to understand, but for Germans to understand their own German identity may be even harder. It has taken over a century to form a collective identity that avoids the stigma of their warlike past. Germany has made many attempts to define what it means to be German. At the time of German unification, defining a singular language was part of a means to identify as German; uniting together in WWI to ultimately isolate other nations to set Germany above the rest was yet another attempt; and by the 1930's Germaness was to be defined by racial superiority. But when all these elements fail to come together and truly define what it means to be German, all Germany has left are the scarred egos of failure that emerge from the rubble of a failed war that was birthed by a failed ideology and an inability to come to terms with the past and apply the consequences to better future decisions.

The loss of WWII, lead to the complete mental and physical breakdown of the strongest collective identity ever known to Germans. Nationalism had been the collective bond amongst the Germans in the name of National Socialism. The breakdown was compounded by a lost war, change in gender roles, and Allied
occupation; and because of these elements, the landscape of German identity would change once again. Through the process of selective memory, Germans would come to terms with their past and overcome their loss of identity, however not in the way that most would prescribe.

Long has been the argument that Nazi society was divided between assertions of a “collective guilt” and differentiation between “victims” and “perpetrators.” Concentrating mainly on the suffering of the victims, and the heroism of the resisters, has as much relevance when discussing Nazi society during the time of National Socialism as it does during the reconstruction of postwar Germany. It places importance of how the memory of WWII, POW’s and occupation experiences, factored into the construction of (East and West) German national identities during the early postwar period.

By the end of WWII, German identity had come to a moral crossroads both at home and abroad. The difference in how Germans dealt with the outcome of WWII compared to that of the outcome of WWI is in itself progressive and more or less submissive for German culture. Although in some aspects mimicking the need to focus on victimization, Germans were able to collectively play the game set by Allied forces occupying Germany, both in the East and West. It may be sufficient to argue that postwar German society initially went through a feminization due to the effects of a collective memory of the occupied experience. However, the feminization that occurred in both the German states was
influenced not only by its occupier, but also historical aspects and psychological elements that present themselves during the postwar period.

In this essay I will discuss the manner in which Germans collectively and independently dealt with their past within the boundaries of the omnipresent need for survival in occupied Germany. Elizabeth Heineman outlines the effects of the occupied experience from a female perspective and its relationship to a new German identity, while Robert Moeller discusses the role of POW's, the international role of Germany, and how Germans utilized the experience of taking responsibility for their Nazi past on an international level; and the process in which Germans dealt with their past as being once again victims, and then ultimately becoming survivor. Both of these Historians’ synopses' support my argument as to how selective memory contributed to the feminization of both East and West Germany.

Some historians and even psychologists argue that Germany never truly came to terms with its Nazi past, in both the Eastern block or in the West. But, the ability for Germans to come to terms with their past has different perspectives when looking at it from a historical view vs. a psychological standpoint. From a historical perspective, although there are the similarities of victimization in post WWI that we see in post WWII, the way in which Germany dealt with the outcome of WWII as survivors, was different from the loss of WWI. The ability for West Germans to survive their victimization, in itself is coming to terms with an
abominable past. This notion of survival is a pivotal point in West German triumph in breaking through to a new identity. Remembering the end of the war and memorializing German suffering was part of the process by which West Germans came to terms with one set of pasts and created a basis on which it was possible to found the postwar order. ¹

Meanwhile the stage is set differently for East Germans to come to terms with their past, the political style of the new authorities of East Germany was interpreted by most of its citizens, on one hand, as a mere continuation of National Socialist rule, and on the other, as a punishment for German guilt.² The ability for East Germans to deal with their past in a productive means is hindered two fold. Not only are they forced to live with certain guilt, but the new government has also failed to staticfy basic needs and restore a prewar standard of living. In the East the government was seen as a puppet of the Soviet occupiers. While in the West, people were able to accept the occupiers as new allies and political friends.³

In postwar West Germany, along with the coping mechanism of universalizing the female experience of rape and the demoralization of German society through fraternization, Germans also tell stories of the end of the war that

emphasized not crimes committed by Germans onto others, but others against Germans, that were comparable to that of the crimes of Germans against Jews.⁴

As hard as it may be to swallow initially, the German response of victimization combined with the follow through of acknowledging and taking responsibility internationally, (sending reparations to support an Israeli State) allowed West Germans to put more focus on creating a future. This future included working with the Allied forces and putting less emphasis on what had gotten them there in the first place.

However, from a psychological perspective, the normal process in dealing with culpability would start with acknowledging an error made. The next stage is reacting, by being mad at either oneself or something else, then feeling guilty or ignorant; then try and right the wrong both internally and outwardly; and finally learning a future lesson. Although, psychologists Alexander and Margarate Mitscherlich saw in self congratulatory accounts of postwar prosperity and economic recovery as a clear indication of West Germans’ inability to mourn their complicity in National Socialism,⁵ that in creating a future was their way to avoid the past.⁶ Meanwhile, the same thing could be said about the East Germans. East Germans were made to feel guilty for their past by their occupiers politically

and culturally. East Germans mourned the only past relevant to them, while still living it. Dorothee Wiering writes of this postwar experience for some East German families as: “the women of an apartment building gathered together and reenacted their memories of hiding in basements during the bombing attacks, with the anxiety as well as cozy community shared together”. Making no mention of a collective guilt or culpability for that part of their past. The only clear past is what they were continuing to live as victims. And very much like the West Germans, in the East, creating a future was their way of dealing with the past.

East and West Germans, though one smoother than the other, were able to come to terms with their past, just not in the way that would be typically prescribed. The steps described are not always black and white. In some cases, there are several grey areas, like with guilt. Most believe that one MUST feel guilt in order to truly deal with culpability and this is what I believe the Mitscherlich’s think West Germans should have done. But guilt does not serve a purpose for the culprit, only the accuser. West Germans, bypassed the feeling of guilt by utilizing selective memory; and into rebuilding and surviving. This was the only logical thing the West Germans could do. Had the Germans outwardly felt guilty for their complicity in National Socialism it would have hindered their progress socio-culturally, nationally, and internationally. They would have only reverted to the mentality they had after WWI when the Allied forces tried to force guilt upon them.
The same sentiment could be used to describe the injustice of universalizing both the female experience of rape and fraternization into a figuratively German experience and the comparison of crimes committed upon the Germans after the war to that of the crimes committed against the Jews. The way in which the West Germans dealt with their past had to change and it had to be on their terms. The Allied forces after WWI forced guilt on the Germans and it back fired. Having a feeling of guilt does not give one power, in fact, it takes power away from, and it only serves a purpose to the observer. Already limping along, West Germany was in no place to relinquish what little power she had. West Germany had to be the victim inwardly to become empowered to rise above their scarred egos, loss, and new reality, which is what is ultimately the goal in dealing with culpability. Whereas, East Germans were unable to completely deal with their past on their own terms, due to the infliction of guilt by its occupier, and because the government was not supporting independence as it was in the West, but to be assimilated into a communist state. Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich opinions seem to only be founded on justifying the means and not the end.

The reason for accelerated development in German identity beyond the postwar society of West Germany compared to that of the East is not only influenced by the historical, psychological, or political disposition of dealing with the past. But, is influenced by how Germans deal with the present issues of their postwar experience and the feminized outcome. In the West, German identity
was influenced by a compounded reaction to the rape of German women by the occupying soldiers. The female experience of occupied West Germany was influential to the development of West German identity because of the lack of male responsiveness to what was happening and because of this lack of male responsiveness, women resorted to no longer being victims but survivors. They empowered themselves and resorted to fraternizing with the soldiers to do what was necessary to survive and provide for the family. Although male society looked down upon this behavior and called it the demoralization of German culture, it was through this behavior that helped abridge personal relations with the occupying governments; that would in turn be responsible for the accelerated departure from being a post war society.

The feminization of East Germany was that of a different element. As the development of West German government and identity were influenced by the female experience, the East was not influenced by women, per se, but the change in gender roles were. Men coming home from the war found it harder to start a new life and reestablish familial and societal roles. Because of this men were given special opportunities in a new socialist administration, within the education system, and even a new army. In the GDR of the 1950’s, women, including mothers of small children, were more and more, drawn to the labor force. They were present more in the public than in the domestic sphere. Women working in the East were a sign of social progress, while it was seen as

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scandalous in the West, a threat of the very values of the social order.\textsuperscript{8} But this powerful role of women as worker and mother resulted in the male’s loss of status within the familiar sphere.

Germans used selective memory to overcome a lost war, scarred egos, and the outcome of their own doing. Neither East or West Germans came out to the rest of the world and asked for forgiveness for the atrocities they were a part of, regardless of their roles as victim or perpetrator, nor did they outwardly deny what had happened. The Germans did not come home after the war to a utopic welcoming with dinner neatly on the table and life as usual. Everything they knew was turned upside down. They had to go on their own experiences not the experiences of others to pull themselves together. Some may argue that because they did not succumb to guilt, Germans never dealt with their past. But that is clearly untrue. Not only did they deal with their past, they are continuing to deal with their past. This is evident by what they have accomplished since and how they have accomplished it.