

IN SEARCH OF A FATHER
Dealing with the Legacy of Nazi Complicity



The missing father who had died in Russia in January 1942 hovered like a phantom over my entire childhood. Since he was ordered back to the front three days before my birth in Magdeburg on August 14, 1941, and passed away in a field hospital in Roslawl five months later, I was never able to see him in person, though he remained a constant presence in my life. Try as I might, I could not resolve the contradiction between the photograph of a slender, bespectacled academic in uniform and my mother's praise for his intellectual brilliance, pedagogical charisma, and personal modesty. For my mother, a bereaved widow just over forty years of age, cultivating the memory of her deceased husband through contacts with his former pupils, colleagues, and friends was a psychological necessity, since she was unable to find a new partner. But for a small, malnourished boy the premature death proved to be quite a burden, because his absence created material impoverishment and emotional confusion: Who could ever live up to the standard of such a virtual superfather?

Only as a result of my subsequent training as a historian did I gradually realize that I shared this fate with millions of other "children of the war." Most of them were so busy trying to survive without fathers that the long-term effects

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of a fatherless childhood during or after the war have only recently become a subject of scholarly reflection.¹ Many German “half-orphans” repressed their resentment and sought to compensate for their disadvantage by dedicated study and hard work, only finding the time to reflect on the psychological costs of their success after their retirement. Especially the sons of famous perpetrators like Hans Frank, former governor general of Poland, or Will Vesper, a leading Nazi writer, reacted with visceral hatred and made their sires responsible for all their personal misfortunes.² Whether children never knew or subsequently lost their father, their retrospective encounters with their missing progenitors create a double challenge: On the one hand, it requires finding out about the unsavory actions of a parent in the Third Reich, and on the other it involves dealing with one’s own subsequent reactions to those actions.

The search for an absent father poses the general question of complicity with the Third Reich on a more personal level, undercutting both individual excuses and collective evasions. Efforts to uncover secrets from the family past are likely to reveal a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from enthusiastic support for Hitler to active resistance against Nazi atrocities, with most cases showing collaboration rather than opposition. Finding damning evidence that one’s own parents were involved makes their silences and euphemisms regarding their role in the Third Reich or the Holocaust suddenly appear in a more sinister light. Moreover, if decent people like one’s own relatives were implicated, one can no longer blame only a small number of prominent National Socialist Party (NSDAP) or Schutzstaffel (SS) members for the war or hold impersonal structures responsible for the genocide. Not surprisingly, Harald Welzer has found that many Germans are willing to condemn the Third Reich in general, while

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claiming that their “grandpa was no Nazi” in particular.³ For the half-orphaned *Kriegskinder*, this quest turns out to be more complicated yet, because a missing father cannot be interrogated and confronted.

A frank analysis of their family’s role in the Third Reich therefore confronts the war’s children with their own ambivalent feelings toward a past that will not go away. Instead of being proud of their relatives and emotionally close to them, the discovery of their troubling NS involvement creates a sense of personal betrayal and deep embarrassment. When a father is absent, there is also a feeling of abandonment that arouses resentment instead of filial love. Because of his tarnished record, the missing parent cannot serve as a positive role model, but rather becomes an example of what not to do. This leads to a generational rejection, vividly described by the journalist Wibke Bruhns in her reconstruction of the development of her father from an accomplice to a member of the resistance. Negative feelings tend to govern subsequent life decisions to a surprising degree, influencing choices through the resolve to be different.⁴ The effort by German children of the war to find their absent fathers therefore faces cognitive difficulties in understanding their parents’ actions and triggers strong emotions about their postwar consequences.

As a case in point, in search of my own father I have tried to resolve these dilemmas by close examination of an incomplete but still considerable source base. While virtually all contemporaries who might have been able to talk about their life together have passed away in the meantime, my father’s older brother wrote a detailed family memoir in the 1960s, based on his own records, which was intended as a posthumous memorial. Moreover, Konrad Jarausch co-edited two volumes of essays and published numerous articles in the pedagogical journal *Schule und Evangelium*, which he

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coedited, reflecting his political and philosophical views before and during the Third Reich. Finally, his wife, Elisabeth Charlotte Jaraus, preserved some family documents like his military passport, many photographs and some letters from before the war, as well as his correspondence from the field, which form the basis of this edition.⁵ Together with a few other archival fragments, a reading of these documents suggests some tentative answers to the question of why a decent and educated Protestant would follow Hitler and support the war until he himself, his family, and the country were swallowed up by it.

National Upbringing

Konrad Jaraus hailed from a Silesian family that had settled in Berlin around the turn of the twentieth century. Since his own father, Wilhelm Hugo, was the third son, he could not inherit the family farm in Misselwitz near Brieg. Instead he was apprenticed to a storekeeper and moved to the growing German capital in 1891 like many other young Silesians in search of opportunity. Five years later he married Anna Grenz, a petite beauty, and bought a store, dealing in colonial wares and delicatessen items, in the Nollendorfstrasse at the western edge of Schöneberg, one of the more affluent neighborhoods of Berlin. Because the couple's parents were unable to contribute much to its considerable purchase price of 2,200 Marks, they lived in modest circumstances, always worried about being able to pay the next installment of their loan. Especially during holidays, the family often returned to Silesia until the farm was sold in 1908, but only thrift and doing without could sustain a bourgeois living standard after they hired a household maid.⁶

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August Wilhelm Hugo *Konrad* was born at 6:30 a.m. on December 12, 1900, in Berlin-Schöneberg as the second son; he was named after several of his ancestors. His brother, Bruno, the elder by three years, recalled: “We brothers got along well and only rarely quarreled with each other.” The younger sibling was initially fairly lively and shared the few toys of his brother. However, the parental store did not do well and had to be sold at a loss of 400 Marks in 1902. After a lengthy search their father found a new, somewhat busier shop in the Oldenburgstrasse in the less fashionable Moabit, which he rented at first. Because of the costly move, Konrad’s third birthday was “quite meager; he only got a little bag of sweets.” After Easter 1907, he enrolled in the preparatory school of the Friedrich-Werdersche Gymnasium, one of the best classical secondary institutions in Berlin. Since to the amazement of his teachers he had already learned to read with his older brother, he was able to skip a grade, helped by special tutoring in writing during the summer. At this early age he was already an outstanding pupil: “Konrad was always valedictorian or salutatorian” of his class.⁷

When the new store became more profitable, the childhood of both brothers slowly improved in material terms. An old acquaintance quipped that both were “as well-behaved as any Berlin boys,” because they had to help out in the shop and were not supposed to make trouble. Bruno also recalled that “we boys were proud of our genuine navy suits from Kiel,” because they were like many others caught up in the Kaiser’s naval enthusiasm. For Christmas the younger got “a castle” with guardhouse and lead figures of the imperial couple, and later on an Anker stone construction set. From 1910 on, summer vacations were spent at the Baltic Sea, and later on also on the Island of Rügen, where the boys built big sand castles. Konrad improved his small allowance through

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Konrad and Bruno Jarausch in 1904

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private lessons in the homes of Jewish families as well as in the house of the painter Lovis Corinth. On March 11, 1915, he was confirmed in the Heilandskirche in Moabit, where he participated in a Bible study group. Recalling their intense conversations about religious questions, a school friend later wrote that both acquired “a world-view, which was deeply rooted in Christianity.”⁸

The First World War was “a difficult time” for the now prosperous Jaraus family. Due to strict rationing of food the turnover in the store dropped considerably, forcing father Wilhelm to work in the city office for bread supply. At the same time Bruno was drafted as a wireless operator. On October 20, 1917, Konrad passed an emergency *Abitur* examination, in which he got an “excellent” in deportment and mathematics, a “good” in religion, German, Latin, Greek, History, Physics, and Handwriting, but only a “satisfactory” in French, English, and Sport. “In his homework he displayed great industry.” His circle of friends, composed of Hans Hempel, Johannes Dietrich, Günter Roß, and Theodor Dorn, who subscribed to the *Großdeutsche Blätter* of Admiral von Throta, was patriotically inclined. Subsequent duty in the “National Auxiliary Service” delayed the beginning of Konrad’s university studies until June 1918, when the seventeen-and-a-half-year-old was drafted into the field artillery, serving in the Pomeranian city of Thorn. Since he disliked riding, taking care of horses, and the “rudeness” of his comrades, these must “have been hard weeks for him.” Only the Armistice and the November Revolution saved him from being sent to the front.⁹

When peace returned, Konrad Jaraus studied in Berlin from 1919 to 1924 except for a brief sojourn in Freiburg during the summer of 1920. Inspired by the historical novels of Felix Dahn, he majored in German literature and history,

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Soldier in World War I, fall 1918

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attending lectures by luminaries such as Dietrich Schäfer, Georg von Below, Gustav Kosinna, and Eduard Spranger. He also minored in Protestant theology, intent on exploring religious issues like “the spiritual world of the ancient Germans.”¹⁰ On February 21, 1925, he defended his doctoral dissertation on “Popular Beliefs in the Icelandic Sagas,” which his advisors, Gustav Neckel and Gustav Roethe, judged magna cum laude. His research focused on “the ensemble of ideas” that guided the actions of heathen Germanic tribes, the “last great creation of a vanishing time” before the arrival of Christianity. Since an academic career was unlikely, he passed the examination for Gymnasium teaching with an “excellent” in November 1925 and obtained an additional certificate for the teaching of religion in January 1927. His brother considered him an “exceedingly scrupulous researcher, who only drew conclusions when he had no doubt about their correctness.”¹¹

These challenging studies left little time for social contacts and occasional diversion. Since his parents financed him, “Konrad was quite modest during his time at the university; our father’s purse was to be spared as much as possible.” Therefore he was unable to travel to Iceland in order to explore the location of his dissertation, and his mother had to darn his suit. During his Freiburg semester he did hike with his brother through the Black Forest, with both subsisting on oatmeal and hot chocolate. In order to have some social life, he joined the German Christian Student Association (DCSV), led by ex-chancellor Georg Michaelis, which devoted itself to the study of the Bible and discussed national and social questions in the journal *Die Furche*. Former classmates and new acquaintances formed a friendship circle called “lethe,” after the mythological Greek river bordering on the Elysian fields. One of the newcomers to this group was

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Student in Berlin, early 1920s

the historian Franz Petri, with whom he collaborated in the Hungarian institute in Vienna during the winter semester of 1925/26. The leftist, modernist strains of Weimar culture therefore hardly made any impact on his social circle or his outlook.¹²

As with many of his peers, this education reinforced in Konrad Jarausch a Protestant-national mindset, but widened its perspective from the state to the people. His petit bourgeois childhood during the Empire fostered an unquestioning acclamation of the monarchy as well a boundless enthusiasm for the navy and for colonies. He became politically conscious at the very zenith of nationalist propaganda, which glorified the heroism of German arms with speeches, parades, and flags on the map. The ensuing defeat hit him

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all the harder because his images of the war were not demythologized through the shock of battle. “We experienced the terrible collapse of the world of our childhood and youth in 1918/19 by clinging with passionate resolve to the belief that everything must rise again more beautifully and purely.” After the breakdown of the Wilhelmian order much of his age cohort turned to the *Volk*, a myth of cultural and social community, which was supposed to reunite the fragmented country and lead Germany to new greatness. Only Konrad Jarausch’s reading of the classics and his Christianity tempered this nationalism by suggesting an alternate understanding of humanity.¹³

Protestant Pedagogy

Although the deteriorating economy slowed public hiring during the late 1920s, Konrad Jarausch eventually succeeded in gaining a position in a Prussian secondary school. He completed his practical training at the classical high school in Berlin-Friedenau between 1926 and 1927 as well as at the Arndt-Gymnasium in Dahlem during the following year. In the subsequent examination on March 14, 1928, he only received a grade of “good,” but this mark was still high enough to enable him to be appointed as *Studienassessor* on April 1. After a successful probationary term, he obtained the “strongly desired” job at a modern secondary school in Schwedt, a garrison town of about 10,000 inhabitants on the banks of the Oder River in eastern Brandenburg. His established colleagues welcomed him with open arms and he befriended the art teacher Fritz Merwart, whose post-impressionist landscapes displayed considerable talent. His relief about gaining a professional foothold during the onset

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of the Great Depression was only overshadowed by the sudden death of his supportive father in January 1929, which made it necessary to sell the family store two years later.¹⁴

Combining his scholarly interests with teaching practice, he involved himself in Protestant pedagogy so as to improve the teaching of religion in public schools. In 1929 he published his examination essay on “Teaching the Gospel of St. Mark in Eighth Grade” in the journal of the Protestant Teachers’ Association, *Schule und Evangelium*. In contrast to the existential theology of Karl Barth and the biblical criticism of Rudolf Bultmann, he sought, following the neo-Lutheran Friedrich Gogarten, “to unfold the purity of faith even in the work of the school.”¹⁵ In spite of his academic training, he joined “the criticism of the liberal image of Jesus” and understood the gospels not as “historical documents, but as testimony of faith,” that is, as “the voice of God.” For a teacher such an existential concept of faith posed the challenge “of making the words of the text speak in such a way that pupils can hear in them the message of God’s kingdom and of Christ who proclaims it.” Between the extremes of a cultural Protestantism and an emotional Pietism, he searched for a popular “pedagogy on a Reformation basis.”¹⁶ Since Magdalene von Tiling, a German National Peoples’ Party Landtag deputy, also promoted this neo-Lutheranism, he began to collaborate with her and moved back to Berlin as “research fellow” of the Protestant School Association in the fall of 1930.¹⁷

During the decline of the Weimar Republic, Konrad Jarausch kept searching for a firm ideological basis for constructing a new social order, inspired “by faith in creation.” Since he considered neither Pietist inwardness nor Lutheran social action sufficient, he wrestled with the question of “how the immense chaos of modern life can once

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Hiking with pupils in 1930

more be conquered and transformed into a sensible order.” In pedagogical practice he worried about “the dissolution of discipline” due to the cult of personality, arguing “that the relationship between teacher and pupil is governed by an eternal law, which has to be recognized and fulfilled objectively.”¹⁸ Moreover, he feared the proliferation of “isolated individuals” who “hardly have any other future today than their submersion in an enslaved fascist or communist mass.” As a Prussian to boot he rejected “unrestrained individualism” as well as Marxist collectivism in principle, but his ideas about a hierarchical, estatelike reconstruction of the state on the basis of the *Volk* remained curiously vague. Therefore he formulated his rejection of “rational democracy” more clearly than his neoconservative alternative of an organic “life-order of the people.”¹⁹

Toward the end of the 1920s he met Elisabeth Charlotte, the older sister of his friend Franz Petri, and fell in love. The temperamental Lotte was born in Wolfenbüttel in 1901, but

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her father, a librarian at the famous Georg August Bibliothek, had died early, while her mother, a parish nurse, passed away in 1919. Her unusual intellectual ambition contrasted with the bitter poverty of her circumstances. In 1922 she finally graduated from an academic high school—an unusual accomplishment for a young woman without means. Although she had to support herself, she studied French, religion, and history in Munich, Berlin (1925–26), and Marburg. Under the direction of the Luther specialist, Karl Holl, she wrote a master's thesis “On the Influence of Pietism on German Social Life,” which was judged to be “excellent.” After a stay in Geneva to improve her French, she completed her practical training in Beuthen and Gleiwitz in Upper Silesia and started teaching in a charity Girls' High School in Leobschütz. Shared interests inspired a frequent correspondence between Lotte and Konrad, in which he sympathized with her beginner's difficulties with words like “chin up!”²⁰

After much deliberation Konrad Jarausch decided on March 19, 1931, to pose the crucial question per letter: “Have you already considered, whether we could go through life together?” Instead of passionately pleading for a joint future, he listed his scruples: “You will not have an easy time with me,” since work tended to absorb him completely. “At my side you have to count on the possibility of spending your life as the wife of a high school teacher in a small East German town.” But in spite of hinting at health concerns, he concluded on an upbeat note: “A positive answer would make me very, very glad.” Overcome with emotion, Lotte Petri immediately answered in an almost illegible scrawl: “Your letter has not surprised me, since I have also thought about the same question. Hence I want to answer clearly ‘yes’ with a happy heart.” In this decision she was aided by confidence in God's power, “which will also aid my weakness,” and by the fact

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Charlotte (Lotte) and Konrad, 1936

“that I have been used to greatest simplicity since my childhood.” Related work interests, long correspondence, and a few meetings inspired the shy intellectual and the impulsive woman to overcome their respective loneliness.²¹

In spite of their contrasting temperaments, the couple’s common convictions and shared vocation formed a solid basis for marriage. Lotte was spontaneous, emotional, and outgoing, whereas Konrad was reserved and uptight until inspired by intellectual questions. Communication between such unlike characters was not easy, but “simple mutual trust” overcame most of the differences. Since both had grown up in a Protestant milieu, Christian faith provided a firm foundation for their life together. Although both were interested in history, Lotte’s fascination with French culture led Konrad beyond his narrow German outlook. As both

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hailed from limited material circumstances, they also felt that the life of the mind was more important than amassing possessions. Due to their distant work places, they could merely meet during vacations. Only after the completion of their training and the clarification of Konrad's professional future did they take the plunge into matrimony on December 28, 1933. Their holiday wedding with close family stood under the biblical motto: "Whosoever sows sparingly, shall also reap sparingly; whosoever sows generously, shall also reap generously."²²

The dissolution of the Weimar Republic hastened the rejection of democracy because it proved unable to provide jobs for the younger generation. Konrad Jarausch's work at the Protestant School Association fell victim to a dispute between the majority who saw the journal as a neutral platform for the exchange of ideas and the minority around Gogarten and Tiling who wanted to push through a more conservative line.²³ In spite of half a dozen applications, Jarausch failed to secure a position in a Berlin high school since the revenue collapse of the Great Depression demanded a reduction of personnel. Many young unemployed teachers were "irritated and embittered," and spoke with resignation "about suicide as the door that always and perhaps alone remains open." Somewhat more fortunate than his associates, Konrad could return to his prior job in Schwedt in May 1933. Dejected, he did not believe that politics could improve the situation: "Sometimes I wonder whether something new does not have to grow out of the great community of those proletarianized by fate." He found the "ever more uninhibited agitation" of election campaigns repulsive. Like other young conservatives, he foresaw a "future right-wing dictatorship," but remained skeptical of "the Nazis' leadership."²⁴

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Hitler's seizure of power confronted Konrad Jarausch's circle of neo-Lutheran pedagogues with a fundamental dilemma: While they hoped "to use the great possibilities, which National Socialism offers for our work," they also wanted to resist all tendencies "which threaten to falsify or destroy the gospel." Privately, he explained "that joining the German Christians is impossible for me," because this NS-friendly group within Protestantism was using dishonest means and continuing Liberalism's mistakes.²⁵ But in the volume on "basic questions of pedagogical practice," which he coedited, Jarausch publicly proclaimed "the end of individualism in education," calling for a break with the secular humanism of modernity. In contrast to the republican "dissolution" of a teacher's authority, he saw Nazism as a return to a "genuine state," which might "put the individual into the *Volk*" and lead to a renewal of the church. In trying to define "the tasks and methods of a popular [*volkhafte*] education" one might "perhaps differ on details, but as a matter of principle criticism could and should be silent." Nonetheless, he refused to join the Nazi Party, since he considered "the claim of [Christian] epiphany" superior to the "ties of space, race, and people."²⁶

Although Lotte lost her job—only one part of a couple could be employed by the state—the Third Reich advanced Konrad's career because of his advocacy of a national renewal of education.²⁷ On Easter 1935 the Protestant Church appointed him as "director of the home for teacher trainees at the Monastery of Our Dear Lady in Magdeburg. As theologian and Germanist, he was supposed to provide the trainees, all of whom specialized in religion, with an "especially thorough instruction in methodology."²⁸ His own goal was to "comprehend the Reformation's understanding of the gospel in a newer and deeper way," but at the same time also

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Gymnasium teacher, 1938

“to consider the volkish renewal” in an appropriate fashion. Jarauschk felt that the training of the next generation of religion teachers was a difficult balancing act due to “the continual discussion about National Socialism, race, [General] Ludendorff, etc., in which one has to weigh every word.” The director of the Cathedral Gymnasium appreciated his “intellectual work” with the trainees, because “he had more the

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personality of a scholar than a teacher"; but he also regretted "certain inhibitions," which made reaching students more difficult. Nonetheless, Jarausch was promoted and given tenure as *Studienrat* in January 1937.²⁹

Konrad Jarausch continued to channel his scholarly ambitions into the journal *Schule und Evangelium*, which he coedited from 1931 on. This publication was supported by a small "Working Group for Scholarly Pedagogy Based on the Reformation," oriented toward Gogarten, and a larger and more didactically inclined "Association for Protestant Religious Instruction and Pedagogy."³⁰ As its de facto secretary he was in charge of planning issues, theological interpretations, and pedagogical decisions while also publishing numerous contributions of his own. Since in his letters he complained about the "devastation of the church" by the German Christians as well as the "systematic resistance against religious instruction" by the party, editorial attitudes toward the "National-Socialist revolution" remained ambivalent.³¹ On the one hand the journal pleaded for the voluntary cooperation of the church. "Then whatever is demanded of it will not be an imposition enforced from the outside, but a necessary result of its own character." On the other hand, it inveighed against the "romantic dream" of reviving a Germanic religion, which it deplored as "a special case of heathendom."³²

The spacious and well-furnished apartment of Lotte and Konrad in the Magdeburg Regierungsstrasse next to the cathedral and monastery became the center of a lively social circle. Its core was the family, brother Bruno and "the little mother" now living in Hennigsdorf, brother-in-law Franz Petri and his wife Lene in Cologne, as well as further relations such as Karl Teich's family, owners of a travertine works in Kehlheim. Next came a professional network of collaborators on the journal, like Pastor Karl Cramer from Gotha,

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teachers Irmgard Feußner from Frankfurt, Marga Walther from Breslau, and Oda Hoffmann from Pirna, who participated in the Festschrift for Magdalene von Tiling in 1937. Equally close were contacts with the Magdeburg colleagues, such as Cathedral preacher Walther Ruff and teachers Ruth Schneider and Magdalene Caspar, who met every second week at Jarauschs for discussion. Finally, there were also friendly exchanges with teacher trainees like Arnold Nüßle, especially during retreats and hiking excursions. Lotte had her hands full trying to support her husband in his dual human and intellectual tasks.³³

During the hardening of the NS dictatorship, the tension between Jarauschs “understanding of the gospel” and participation in “the common German life” increased noticeably. In his plans for teacher training, the reform of religious pedagogy and an “introduction into the Nazi view of history” still had the same priority. But when the “plight of the church” made him aware that it faced “a struggle for existence,” it became impossible to deny that Nazism posed a “threat.”³⁴ In October 1938, Jarauschs therefore warned indirectly that the church faced “the greatest danger” of a false direction, “if we let ourselves be captured by the [demand] that this worldview become ultimately as self-evident among us as its promoters want.” Instead of “revising church dogma or adapting it to today’s views in some way,” he held fast to the priority of the Christian message. Yet he also wanted to keep working for the volkish renewal of the country, if only to remain in touch with the Nazified youths in his charge. “Being utterly serious about the responsibility and obligation of our national existence” was as important to him as “again taking seriously the full gospel of the church.”³⁵

The fact that “the Christian state’ had been finally buried in Germany with the year 1933” had increasingly

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problematic consequences for pedagogical practice. During a meeting of Protestant religion teachers in the summer of 1939, Konrad Jarausch drew up a dire balance sheet, painting “the picture of a field full of rubble.” The “isolation of religious instruction within overall education” had led to an appalling marginalization; “the reduction in instructional time” to one hour per week had made regular teaching more difficult; and “the warping of the content” had carried foreign material into the curriculum. The necessary and “comprehensive debate between Christian faith and [our current] time” had therefore become “impossible.” While he continued to hope that the NS state would “put the shattered order of our national life onto a new foundation,” he demanded “that the state now also grant the church the freedom to carry out its task for the people according to God’s will.” The ideological claims and dictatorial methods of the Third Reich forced “teachers of religion into a battle,” demanding a clear position. “For here only a ‘No’ to the deification of the *Volk* is possible.”³⁶

During the last years of peace, Konrad Jarausch matured from a “quiet, shy young man” to an impressive but complicated personality. His small and slender body, which only relaxed through long walks, contained much nervous energy. Since he was willing to treat the young as human beings, his pedagogical charisma had a powerful effect on his pupils. According to a later report, he behaved quite decently toward the Jewish members of his classes.³⁷ His colleagues were impressed by his critical intelligence, national and religious idealism, and his meticulousness as a scholar. Toward himself he was uncompromising in his mental and physical demands. The result was a psychosomatic breakdown in the spring of 1938 that prompted his brother-in-law to demand: “Either you turn yourself over . . . to an experienced

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physician as soon as possible, or you must . . . give up Lotte.” The medical examination in Schallstadt at the edge of the Black Forest yielded a verdict of “complete organic health,” only his blood pressure was a bit low. “Analytical conversations” with the doctor, a few weeks of rest, and a reduction of work eventually restored his health and saved his marriage.³⁸

War Experiences

With the German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, the rising tension broke as feared and another world war began. During July, Bruno and Konrad could still hike in the Carinthian mountains and write home about climbing spectacular Alpine peaks, while their mother and Lotte took the waters in the health spa Bad Steben. But during the third week of August, air-raid protection exercises grew more frequent back in Magdeburg. Lotte expressed her concern to her mother-in-law: “Hopefully all the complications will resolve themselves without a catastrophe.” But her dark foreboding was confirmed on the 26th. “They have come for Konrad this morning.” Initially the call-up as a member of the reserves made little difference, since his unit remained in Magdeburg and his superior officer was the father of one of his pupils. After receiving his uniform, “he looked quite dashing,” and worked at first as personal aide of the company commander. “The major takes good care of me [since I am] the teacher of his sons.”³⁹ But on September 8 the war turned serious for him as well, when his reserve unit was sent to Poland. The very the next day he wrote his first postcard.

Conscious of the potential interest of later readers, he asked that his letters be preserved, following the tradition of earlier war correspondents.⁴⁰ In his descriptions of military

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events and foreign sights he wanted both to convey his experiences and make sense of his impressions. Mail was a substitute for a conversation and an attempt to maintain a psychological link to loved ones: "We draw on the things we have brought along from home and also on what we hear from there." Letters were also a method of transmitting small requests for food, clothing, or reading material as well as for expressing thanks for having received news or packages.⁴¹ Generally he wrote quite openly, disregarding military censorship that tried to keep discouraging news from undermining morale on the home front. "I have purposefully written things in a very matter-of-fact fashion, so that this letter makes it to your hands." Since he was cut off from intellectual intercourse, the need to unburden himself sometimes made him commit disturbing impressions to paper with astounding frankness. Yet other veiled allusions to atrocities or references to oral explanations indicate that he also wanted to spare his wife some of the grisly details. It is therefore impossible to tell exactly what he left out.⁴²

The actual content of this correspondence, nonetheless, indicates that Konrad Jarausch's experiences in the Wehrmacht were quite conflicting. On the one hand, even an academic could not completely escape the fascination of the adventure of war, the satisfaction over "the rapid victories over Poland and France," or the widening of political horizons through the "enormous tasks" in the conquered East. Also, military discipline, physical exertion, and "good comradeship" could be interpreted as confirmation of his manliness as well as the realization of the national community in uniform.⁴³ Yet he often felt revolted by the endless "saluting, reporting, standing at attention," the cursing and bellowing during the drilling of recruits, and the unjustified criticism by his superiors. Moreover, he found the "empty chatter"

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of pointless conversations, the “sexual affairs” of the comrades, or the alcohol-induced sociability of the company evenings difficult to bear. Only if his “duty,” a curious mixture of Christian, Prussian, and professional precepts, seemed to have a purpose by posing “educational challenges” could he wholeheartedly identify with the military routine and make the necessary sacrifices without resentment.⁴⁴

For this reason his attitude toward a potential career as an officer remained deeply ambivalent. Of course, he was happy about his promotions to corporal and to officer trainee with shiny “stripes,” because these recognized his effort and his leadership ability. But their side effect was a tighter supervision of his actions, participation in tiring courses, and surprise examinations for which he was being insufficiently prepared.⁴⁵ Since he was already forty years old, he did not always feel up to competing with younger, more robust comrades. He also lacked the martial bearing, loud voice, and “tone of command” that impressed many superiors. To be sure, he was willing to undergo further military training such as learning how to use a heavy machine gun in order to be able to lead the corresponding platoon. But when he hurt his knee in the fall of 1940 and was stricken from the list of officer trainees in April 1941, he did not put up much of a protest, although this disappointed his wife. Instead he began trying to be declared indispensable at home (*uk-Stellung*), but this effort was ultimately fruitless because it came too late.⁴⁶

Another handicap that stood in the way of a military career was Konrad Jarausch’s fragile health. His body was slim, only of average height; he was not especially athletic due to the time spent at a desk, and his only exercise was an occasional hike. “A little cough and some sniffles” posed no particular problem. But his continual complaints about his “physical tiredness,” the going to bed early, and

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the repeated need for sleep indicate problems of coping with the unfamiliar experiences, the partly frustrating and partly shocking events, which created a “psychological stress” that had physical consequences.⁴⁷ Even during peacetime his heart had been none too strong—not enough to keep him out of the military—but repeated chest pains forced him to consult army physicians. Since they could only find a slight enlargement, the doctors prescribed homeopathic remedies like valerian and rest, which indicates a psychosomatic tension rather than a direct clinical ailment.⁴⁸ Although there were some phases when he felt up to the tasks before him, the weakness of his heart and his nervous disposition did not exactly help him to meet his military challenges.

To reassure his wife and friends he emphasized in many letters the increasing success of his coping strategies during military service. For instance, he described how well he was protected against rain and snow, how much soldiers had to eat, what opportunities the troops had for relaxation, and how well they all got along with one another. Moreover, he consistently downplayed his smaller ailments. In a positive light he portrayed his human encounters with superiors, comrades, or inferiors, whenever they allowed a genuine exchange of ideas. In the same vein he often reported his romantic impressions of nature, which seem to have served as a kind of neutral ground, connecting him with his loved ones at home and allowing a temporary escape from negative experiences into a peaceful counterworld. Finally, he tried through countless conversations, historical reading, and efforts to learn some Polish and Russian to decipher his visual impressions in order to understand the political subtext of the war. Over time he apparently got better at dealing with the permanent boredom as well as the strenuous physical demands.⁴⁹

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In order “to keep his sanity,” Konrad Jarausch tenaciously attempted to maintain his intellectual life in spite of the trying circumstances. His favorite source of information was the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which contained “a considerable amount of interesting news” in spite of NS “press coordination,” whereas the “endless radio noise” with its saccharine kitsch preyed on his nerves.⁵⁰ Reading Greek classics like Plato or Aristotle in the original was another way to overcome his “spiritual loneliness,” because he believed that their “thought forms the foundation of all scientific and personal knowledge in the West.”⁵¹ Less challenging was the perusal of masterpieces of German literature like “old man Goethe,” whose aesthetics he considered “fundamentally unchristian,” or of European authors like Shakespeare.⁵² At the same time he also read the works of some volkish writers such as Edwin Dwinger or Hans Grimm and commented thoughtfully on the historical novels of Hanna Stephan, who was a family friend.⁵³ Finally, he also asked for books about Poland, like *The Peasants* by Władysław Reymont, and for histories of Russia, in order to ground his impressions analytically.⁵⁴

For the same reason he continued to contribute scholarly and pedagogical texts to his professional journal, now renamed as *Unterweisung und Glaube*. “I am thinking how I can help *Frau* von Tiling in her difficult task of maintaining publication through the war.” This endeavor involved working through the writings of leading theologians like Friedrich Gogarten, who was close to the Third Reich, or reading “the nice essay” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a member of the resistance.⁵⁵ At the same time he tried to write his own articles and reviews, like a long disquisition on “John the Baptist,” for which he needed his wife to check on factual information.⁵⁶ He also corresponded busily with editors and contributors, even if he could not participate in their decisions from afar.

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The “decline” of interest in religious teaching reduced the importance of the journal, so that the already shrunken edition was suspended in May 1941. Disappointed, he fumed: “It does not leave me indifferent when I see how my comrades are even now flooded with illustrated magazines or shallow novels.”⁵⁷

Another refuge was his deep, personal faith in Christ, which brought him a sense of comfort and inner peace. The effort to find a community of believers made him attend Sunday services whenever possible, but when a military sermon too strongly equated “soldiership and Christianity” he became distressed.⁵⁸ In contrast, the daily reading of the Bible according to the plan of Hans Asmussen, “which distributes the scriptures over an entire year,” was an unending source of consolation. “This morning I read a good deal in the Bible and took much pleasure in it.”⁵⁹ He solved the increasing tension between the “modern world view” of National Socialism and the traditional Christian faith by arguing that the former “is merely right within narrow limits” and that a personal encounter with Christ would yield “those impulses that are hints of a deeper, inner understanding of the world.” His existential conception of faith derived from that “disquiet of the heart” that expects a personal “answer of God.” By “trusting that the Lord will help and lead us further,” he could feel secure and accept his own uncertain fate.⁶⁰

The shrinking resonance of the Protestant Church therefore concerned him greatly. After the initial victories he had still hoped that religious instruction might “stand at the center of the common reality of our life in *Volk* and *Reich*,” but would nonetheless be “focused on the gospel.” But with alarm he noted a growing disdain of religion by the “younger Nazi generation,” which made derogatory remarks about the “priests” and refused to participate in services.

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“The news of the cancellation of religious instruction has moved me much,” because this measure also endangered his own professional future.⁶¹ Due to the destruction “of an enormous amount of religious custom” by the war, he expected only “a small band” of believers to survive, “gathering in a simple private room in order to hear the gospel and to pray for the church *and the world*.” Since he continued to oppose opportunist “adaptation” as well as Christian complacency, he hoped, “After the end [of the war] the field will be open for a radical concentration of the church on its religious task.” Hence he sought to prepare this institutional reduction to the core of faith through conversations with comrades in spiritual need.⁶²

Critical Turn

As a Prussian patriot, Konrad Jarausch supported the war in principle because he shared many of its national goals. In order to liberate ethnic Germans who had been separated by the Treaty of Versailles and to gain “living space” in the East, he accepted “the necessity that *this* Polish state had to be smashed.”⁶³ Stating that “the dream of Empire is also our dream,” he believed that Germany had a civilizing mission in Eastern Europe and should create an order beyond its own nation-state, for which the current war was supposed to lay the foundation. “Will to fight, love and death are our life,” he intoned melodramatically. But unlike many Nazis, he thought in historical categories of the Holy Roman Empire because “the eastward expansion could still be understood in connection with a continentally limited, traditionally grounded idea of the Reich.” Hence he was skeptical of more far-reaching fantasies of world power and viewed the attack

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on Norway as a caesura: “Now Germany is starting the struggle for world domination.” Uneasy about this revival of imperialism, he mused about “the strange historical conditioning of National Socialism in terms of its foreign policy.”⁶⁴

Konrad Jarausch’s attitude toward the vanquished foes shared many prejudices of the *Bildungsbürgertum* toward the neighbors in the East. Based on a historical narrative of *Ostkolonisation* and Christianization by force, as well as the adoption of Magdeburg law, urban trade, and rural settlement by invitation, this outlook assumed a German superiority, entitled to spread the blessings of *Kultur* to the Slavic people. While describing the “eternal East,” he contrasted German morality, order, and cleanliness with the “pitifully retarded” character of Polish towns, emphasized the “misery of Polish peasants” and the monotony of the landscape.⁶⁵ In his portrayal of Jews he reinforced widespread stereotypes of the *Ostjuden*, by mentioning the “miserable seediness” of the ghettos in cities like Łódź as well as their “poverty and squalor.”⁶⁶ Similarly his observations of the Soviet Union showed a combative anticommunism that sharply criticized the social costs of Bolshevik modernization, Stalinist crimes, and repression of religion. While some of these impressions were based on actual observation, they were interpreted in a cultural matrix that justified German domination.⁶⁷

The letters nonetheless depart from conventional enemy images by showing an increasing curiosity about and compassion for the inhabitants of the conquered territories. German preconceptions were tempered by a fascination with the inscrutable “otherness” of the East that stimulated efforts to understand strange settlement patterns, foreign customs, and even different politics. In occupied Poland, Jarausch was quite interested in the strength of the Catholic Church and attempted to decipher the Slavic mentality by

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studying the language and reading its history. In reporting on Jewish ghettos he was impressed by some “single, small faces with burning expressions of intelligence” and condemned the arson of a synagogue while referring cryptically to the consequences of their expulsion: “It is self-evident that this [process] does not take place without victims.” In commenting on his Russian impressions, he at the same time betrayed much sympathy for the boundless suffering of the people and the melancholy grandeur of the landscape.⁶⁸ For all its initial blinders, the correspondence also demonstrates a critical intelligence that attempted to transcend received stereotypes.

In contrast to the optimism of the Nazified younger generation, he judged the course of the war without illusions since he respected the fighting power of Germany’s enemies. Early on he warned that “the Polish victory probably dropped into our lap too quickly” and counseled moderation “so that our people do not suffocate from winning.” The stalled decision in the West seemed to him like “an attack on our nerves.”⁶⁹ Although the “French armistice” raised hopes of peace, the British air raids on Berlin worried him once again. To the attack on the Soviet Union he reacted by issuing emergency instructions to his wife and expressing concern to his brother-in-law: “But we should be allowed to be concerned about the military and political tasks that rise before us even higher. One shouldn’t blame the private if he is at first disappointed to hear that the war will last longer.” On the declaration of war on the United States he commented clairvoyantly that “now it is really impossible to see the end. I fear that even the fantastic initial successes of the Japanese will have the effect of showing the Americans how seriously they are threatened and thereby only make the situation worse.”⁷⁰

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Hampered by his pronounced sense of duty, he only gradually developed those moral scruples about the legitimacy of the German attack that might have been expected from an acute observer steeped in the classics. Of course, he did not remain unmoved by the extent of the destruction of the cities, the cruelty of the conduct of war, and the suffering of the refugees or the wounded.⁷¹ His impressions of Łódź were especially shocking: “We shall not soon forget what we have seen there. How poor and squalid is the external appearance of these people.” The misery of the Jewish quarter was particularly upsetting. “Three Jews have been hanged in a public square of Łódź—I don’t know why.”⁷² Equally troubling for him was the fundamentally mistaken policy of the Nazi leadership toward the East: “We live at the expense of these peoples and are sucking them dry completely. What should we expect, other than bitterness and an abiding desire to overthrow this foreign rule?” Because he disagreed with these methods, he began to question the purpose of the war: “I don’t understand how we can expect anything good to come from these circumstances.”⁷³

The “untold misery” of the Russian campaign in the fall of 1941 reinforced Konrad Jarausch’s doubts about the justice of the war. Since he was responsible for feeding POWs in receiving camp 203, he experienced firsthand the consequences of an insufficient food supply for hundreds of thousands of prisoners from the initial battles. “When they come to be fed, grown stiff from the cold—it has been about minus ten, yesterday minus fifteen degrees Celsius during the day—they stumble, collapse, and die at our feet. Today another case of cannibalism was discovered. At that, the corpses, carried naked to the grave, are emaciated like a late gothic figure of Christ, frozen stiff.” Even when the number of POWs in the camp was reduced to a mere two thousand,

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“every day twenty-five of them die. In the big camps farther west, which hold tens of thousands, there are correspondingly hundreds.” Accelerated through the October crisis, this mass death of POWs, which violated the Geneva Convention, shocked him to the core. “If one did not hear on the other hand from the Russians time and again how they had suffered under Bolshevism, one might despair of the sense of the entire thing. Into this situation one is now thrown without being able to do anything but a bit of duty.”⁷⁴

The “great dying in the camps” finally awakened his feeling of Christian responsibility. To begin with, it made the elementary significance of the story of the feeding of the ten thousand come alive: “Feeding the hungry really is one of the miracles that God alone can do. When men cry because a comrade who was supposed to share the meager soup with them has disappeared, one understands that fulfillment in the kingdom-come must also overcome this need.” Moreover, wanting to help without being able to do so was a psychic stress that he could bear only through metaphysical mystification and artistic reference to the Isenheim Altarpiece. “I must always think of Grünewald’s body of Christ and cling to the belief that our dying is related to the death of Jesus in a manner that is incomprehensible to us.” For a committed Christian this inhumanity to man could be justified neither morally nor politically. “According to everything I have witnessed, I cannot see an enemy in the broad strata of millions of Russian people. They are for the greatest part the unfortunate victims of a crazy policy, whose roots reach, however, deep into the Russian past.”⁷⁵

The enormity of the “suffering and death” inspired Konrad Jarausch to make active, but inadequate, efforts to practice Christian charity. In order to “avert some of the calamity,” he tried incessantly “to make available at least the

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most essential food for the people.” On the one hand it was necessary to enlarge the inadequate supplies. “About what they are supposed to receive, there is a continual struggle with the inspectors and pursers who must bring in the supplies—under the greatest of difficulties.” On the other hand he had to make sure that available food was distributed equitably. “On some days I had to feed sixteen to eighteen thousand men as much as that was possible at all. We were only five Germans in the administration and kitchen plus eight sentries. You can imagine that one had to bludgeon and shoot. During those times heading a kitchen had nothing to do with civilian procedures. One bludgeons and shoots so as to create order around the kitchen. One looks after the sick so that they don’t starve. One plays judge if supplies are stolen, etc.” The effort to help the weak and wounded demanded a daily struggle: “My right hand is swollen from the blows I distribute.”⁷⁶

Recognition of a common humanity finally led him to feel solidarity with the POWs in general and establish emotional ties with specific individuals. “The best aspect was that we came together with some mature and intelligent Russians in common work” to ease the suffering. His effort to learn the language triggered intensive conversations, enabling him “to hear and see some aspects of the enormous domain of the Soviets.” For instance, an opera singer from Moscow sang “Russian folk-songs” as well as “revolutionary tunes,” and at his request, “liturgical anthems which the Russians had not heard for a long time,” in order to “give him a few hours of relaxation after the excessive duty.” In the midst of the horror these were “two hours of most genuine human solidarity, after we had gotten acquainted through other work and knew what we had to think of each other.” Another time, he received “a nice likeness that a Moscow painter has drawn of me with

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charcoal and color pencil.”⁷⁷ Such expressions of gratitude for his personal exertion on behalf of the POWs created bonds between individuals that transcended all enemy images.

Through such contacts Konrad Jarausch became infected with typhoid fever and suffered as well “the silent dying from exhaustion and disease” in January 1942. During the Christmas celebration with the Russian cooks he had still pointed out that the Son of God “ultimately became a prisoner himself” and that “we Germans do not feel any hatred toward the Russian people.” When cases of typhoid fever appeared in the camp, he asked his friend, Werner Haß, not to disquiet his wife with the news: “And of course nobody can protect himself from an occasional louse” crawling on his body and transmitting the disease.⁷⁸ On January 11 he fell ill and two days later wrote a few farewell lines to his wife: “I warmly and gratefully feel all the cordial love” that spoke from her letters. “May God bless our wishes for the future. Everything lies in his hands.” When he was transferred five days later to the field hospital in Roslawl, he was already so dazed that he was no longer conscious of the severity of his illness. Because his Wehrmacht doctors had no antibiotics, “the progressive general weakness of the heart” led, on January 27, to a “gradual slipping over into a painless release.”⁷⁹

The stunned survivors attempted to imbue this senseless death with a higher purpose. The commander of his POW camp, Major von Stietenron, resorted to tried clichés of “his true faith in God” and “his utter certainty of a final victory of greater Germany,” but added as a compliment that he had been an “exemplary comrade and capable soldier.” The director of the Cathedral Gymnasium found a more personal tone, mentioning that his sense of military duty had prevented a release to the home front and emphasizing that his “pedagogical calling” had kept him from pursuing

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an academic career. In a similar vein pastor Oskar Ziegner mused “how terribly hard this life has ended” in consequence of its desire “to fulfill itself through renunciation and selfless service, relinquishing any external glory.” His colleagues and pupils were “shocked” by the loss and praised the deceased’s exceptional character: “If there is such a thing as Christian heroism, then we have seen it in this case.” Finally, his wife sought consolation in the conviction: “I think that Konrad has found a consummation, which we ought not to tarnish with our complaints.”⁸⁰

Memory Cult

The end of the Second World War made it difficult for our family to mourn for Konrad Jarausch, because traditional nationalist and Christian practices were either impossible or obsolete. With his makeshift grave located in central Russia, cemetery rituals of placing flowers were not feasible, while organized efforts by the *Kriegsgräberfürsorge* remained ineffective since the Soviet Union was not particularly interested in preserving dispersed German graveyards. Moreover, the entire political framework of military, government, and state had collapsed, thereby dissolving those public organizations that had cultivated a heroic memory of the war dead after World War I. At the same time, his former workplace in Magdeburg lay in Communist East Germany, and the colleagues who worked with him on the journal were dispersed, mostly in the West, destroying the institutional and personal supports for maintaining an affirmative memory. Finally, the shattering defeat and the revelation of German crimes undercut the conventional meaning of death in war, making blood sacrifice seem tragically misplaced. These

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circumstances conspired to privatize pain, leaving the survivors to grieve as best as they could.⁸¹

For Lotte Jarausch, a forty-one-year-old woman who had foregone her own career, the loss of her husband was a drastic shock, which could only partly be compensated by accepting widowhood. During the Third Reich this was a socially acceptable role, heroized as a woman's necessary sacrifice for the fatherland, but defeat and division robbed it of any transpersonal meaning. Dealing with impoverishment and downward mobility left little time for mourning, because her meager pension was insufficient to preserve her status, and even that was jeopardized by the defeat. Therefore she had to reenter the teaching profession, which turned out to be difficult, since she had not completed her training. She began in a rural one-room school in Lower Bavaria, continued in a private girl's high school in Upper Franconia, and eventually obtained a permanent position in a public girl's high school in the Rhenish city of Krefeld in 1950. With 1.6 eligible women to every available male, the chances of finding another partner, especially of the same social class and education, were slim. Hence, she had to invent her own strategies to remember Konrad as consolation for coping with adversity.⁸²

For me, growing up fatherless held different challenges because I had no living recollection, and unlike with POWs there was no chance that he would one day return and put things right. Due to the bombing of the Magdeburg apartment and our frequent postwar moves, only a few physical remains, such as his fine leather briefcase, the Nazi family book, or his military identification card, survived. My father therefore had only a virtual presence in photographs, family stories, and references to his unusual personality that were comforting in an abstract way but provided little help with

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concrete concerns. Instead of offering protection to a small child, being a role model for a growing boy, or acting as disciplinarian for a rebellious adolescent, there was merely a void. My two substitute fathers were complicated in their own ways, because my mother's brother, Franz Petri, was an opinionated and demanding historian, while my father's brother, Bruno Jarausch, was a nurturing and forgiving trade school teacher.⁸³ Without a father but with a working mother, I grew up like thousands of others as a "latchkey child," which made my mother and me unusually dependent upon each other.

To keep the memory of my father alive, my mother focused primarily on preserving his written oeuvre. For this reason she made strenuous efforts to keep his two coedited books, all the issues of his journal, other reprints, and also his extensive library, insofar as it could be dug out from under the Magdeburg rubble and shipped to the West. At the same time she retained some of their prewar letters to each other and his entire wartime correspondence, even collecting some pieces from other correspondents. Encouraged by some of my father's former colleagues she began excerpting his wartime letters during the early 1950s. During a vacation at the North Sea, she asked Pastor Nast of Hallig Hooge to create a typewritten transcript of her selections. This more-emotional-than-scholarly effort came to naught, because the religious publishers that were approached refused to print the manuscript. By the mid-1950s the public was no longer interested in yet another set of tragic war experiences, since concerns had shifted from neoconservative attempts to gather the *Volk* to reeducation efforts at constructing a viable democracy.⁸⁴

Another somewhat more successful way to cultivate recollections of my father was personal networking by visiting members of his circle during the 1950s. My mother therefore alternated Christmas holidays with visits to her brother's and

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his brother's families. The former was complicated, as her sister-in-law, Lene, suspected her of substituting me as an intellectually more promising child for their own adopted son, while the latter proved easier, since Trude had no children of her own and was therefore willing to spoil me. Not surprisingly, all my godmothers were close associates of my father. There was, for instance, the forbidding Magdalene von Tiling in Berlin, still radiating an aura of Old Prussia; the warm-hearted and half-blind Bible teacher Magdalene Caspar in Magdeburg; and the professional high school teacher Ruth Schneider in Wuppertal. Finally, my mother dragged me to various friends and acquaintances of my father, like the Berlin Gymnasium director Johannes Dietrich or the widow of my father's star pupil, Ursula Nüßle, in Kiel.⁸⁵ This inordinate amount of travel was an effort to bring my father back to life through contact with those who had been closest to him.

A final method of honoring my father's memory was to groom me as his successor. Already giving me the same first name during wartime suggests that I was intended to carry on, should he not return from the front. Magdalene von Tiling's printed dedication of one of her postwar books to his memory goes in the same direction, because she added a handwritten note on the flyleaf encouraging me to follow in his footsteps. Also, the choice of education in a classical neohumanist Gymnasium with nine years of Latin, six years of Greek, and two years of Hebrew on top of English and French indicates my mother's hopes that I would study theology and become a clergyman. This was not quite as onerous as it might sound, because she also sent me to the Protestant scouts, the Christliche Pfadfinderschaft, where I enjoyed camping, bicycle tours, and kayaking trips. But even in the elitism of this group there were remnants of the earlier Youth Movement style that were not exactly democratic in spirit.

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Finally, my uncle, Franz Petri, involved me in long discussions and gave me books like Gerhard Ritter's Goerdeler biography in order to create a sense of national responsibility.⁸⁶

The growing discrepancy between such expectations and my desire to find my own way led me to a severe identity crisis during adolescence. Instead of volkish authors my friends and I were reading Albert Camus or Ernest Hemingway and making experimental existentialist films. Instead of worrying about German division, we were devouring the first paperbacks on NS genocide and wanted to shed our troubled past by becoming Europeans. Instead of deferring to our elders, we held them responsible for war and defeat and were determined not to repeat their political mistakes. During my last Gymnasium years, I struggled painfully with my Christian belief until I broke with family expectations, abandoned my leadership position in the scouts, and came down on the side of democratic modernity. When my rebelliousness was punished during the Abitur examination, I decided to get out, gave up my place in the select Leibniz Kolleg at Tübingen University, and embarked to the United States on the steamer *Berlin*. In Laramie, Wyoming, about as far from home as I could get, I finally breathed more freely, pursued American studies, and developed a more critical relationship to my German heritage.⁸⁷

Although my case was perhaps more acute than others, it was part of a broader generational process of rejecting the national legacy. The sociologist Helmut Schelsky called the teenagers of the 1950s the "skeptical generation," indicating that they were unwilling to follow their discredited fathers, while being wary of ideological commitments. Many *Kriegskinder* were in search of new values and authority figures, some admiring the egalitarian Soviet experiment and impressed by Bertolt Brecht, others more interested in

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American personal freedom or in humanitarians like Albert Schweitzer. Ultimately, this quest led many intellectuals to switch allegiances away from their own tarnished parents to the victims of Nazi crimes, the Jews, Poles, and others who had suffered from their hands. No doubt, this was a necessary concomitant of the liberalization of political culture that made it possible to accept the recivilized Germans back into the international community.⁸⁸ But the personal price was a rupture of memory that contributed to the generational revolt of 1968 and produced an inability to empathize with their forebears. Instead of admiring my father, I came to see him as part of the problem.

This break with tradition was necessary but insufficient since it produced an unstable memory regime. By countering some of the nostalgic portrayals of the Third Reich, still handed down privately within families, this generational shift helped broaden support for the critical interpretation of the Nazi dictatorship that the victorious allies, democratic politicians, and leading intellectuals had promoted since 1945. But its advocates often lacked patience with the errors of their parents and failed to appreciate their difficult circumstances, since in the arrogance of youth they misunderstood how much their rejection was still driven by their personal past. In my case, it was transatlantic distance from the *querelles allemandes* that made it possible to develop a more balanced attitude that combined criticism with sympathy. In the case of my classmates it was growing maturity that blurred the sharp edge of condemnation and increased understanding. Only in searching for their own past did many of the *Kriegskinder* begin to reencounter their parents with greater empathy.⁸⁹ The timing and interpretation of this edition of letters written by my father are themselves products of this gradual reconsideration.

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Troubled Legacy

How is the “intellectual-spiritual legacy” of such a “life of Christian-German conviction” to be judged by later generations? The key irritant is its complicity with Nazism, typical of wide circles of the Protestant middle class. Even when confronted with “untold misery,” Konrad Jarausch clung to his synthesis of *Volk* and faith. “For me one of the strongest experiences of the war has been that in the face of so much hunger, neglect, illness, and death I did not have to renounce anything, which I have lived as German and Christian.” Even so, he felt a moral abyss opening under him: “Now to the future. We need an education of European scope in all intellectual respects: languages, history, geography. But what will provide a humane foundation for it?”⁹⁰ The enormity of the suffering thrust the crucial question upon him of which values would allow a better order to be constructed. His answer was, “penetrating the riddle of being human ever more deeply in light of the gospel, until in living and teaching Jesus Christ shows himself as the path, which leads right through *our* world and *our* time to God.” But precisely this faith’s support of duty to the nation and lack of understanding for human rights ensnared honorable people like Jarausch into complicity with Nazi crimes.⁹¹

As a member of a security division made up of older reserves, my father witnessed key aspects of the Holocaust, because most of the ethnic cleansing and mass killing took place in the hinterland. “The SS is cleaning up terribly,” he hinted in October 1941. “Everything Bolshevik is being ruthlessly eradicated whenever it falls into our hands. Ditto the Jewish element.” These references show that even those soldiers who did not directly participate knew of the implementation of the “commissar order” and of the “Holocaust

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by bullets” that murdered about 600,000 Jews in Wehrmacht territory during 1941.⁹² However, in the “quiet dying” of the POWs their guards were more personally implicated, though some like my father attempted “to obtain the most necessary provisions for the prisoners.” Typical of the nationalist racism of younger soldiers, one quartermaster answered his objections cynically: “Those positions just require tough characters who don’t care if a few hundred POWs die.” The guard units were unquestionably responsible for the starvation of unprotected, freezing soldiers and civilians. And they did nothing to prevent the even more horrible fate of the Jews. “In that case it is really most merciful if they are led into the woods and bumped off, as the technical term has it. But the whole thing is already more murder than war.”⁹³

The utter brutality of the ideological war of annihilation ultimately compelled my father to distance himself from the Nazi project of racial hegemony. He had never been enthusiastic about the NS *weltanschauung*, since he considered the ideologue Alfred Rosenberg “much more confused and muddled” than the philosopher G.F.W. Hegel. Similarly, he warned against blind obedience to Hitler’s messianic claims because the Germans would only be able to make sacrifices for the war “if their belief in the Führer and his insights remains temporal and limited.”⁹⁴ Also, he was appalled by the repression of the church and the spiritual emptiness of the Nazified officer trainees: “Among the younger ones a different attitude prevails, intolerance in every respect toward the church and the Jews.” Decisive for breaking with the Nazis was, however, the experience of inhumanity during the mass dying of POWs. “In some weeks we have had hundreds of deaths in our camps. But especially here I have learned again that neither forced contrition nor honest ethical remorse stand at the center of our faith, but solely unfathomable

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mercy, which outshines all suffering and guilt.”⁹⁵ Where this return to Christian humanism would have led him we cannot know due to his premature death.

The lasting message of this life cut short is therefore the imperative to overcome enemy stereotyping through renewed humanism, based on Christian responsibility. To be sure, Konrad Jarausch was also politically concerned that German crimes, “when the Jew is eliminated,” might once again come to haunt their perpetrators: “I often worry about the thought that all these peoples whom we had to hurt and humble deeply, might at some time band together for revenge.” But more decisive for him was the realization of a shared humanity that transcended the ideological hostility against communist Russia. “These people are, after all, human beings like us. Therefore contact with them feels good and awakens sensations and feelings that always return to you [Lotte] and the child.” In the midst of the hell of Dulag 203 he realized shortly before his death: “Genuine humanity between peoples and races is necessary if a better world is to arise from the excess of blood and destruction.” This hard-won insight that people across all differences share a basic human dignity, which needs to be respected whatever the circumstances, remains an important lesson for later generations.⁹⁶

The effort to come to terms with this troubled legacy that inspired my becoming a historian could not lead to an uncritical heroization but only to a critical appreciation. My father’s letters radiate a love for his unseen son that still touches me deeply. “Thus we want to gather this Christmas Eve in gratitude for what God has given to us with this child. That outshines everything else.”⁹⁷ Nonetheless, I could not really follow my mother’s wish to continue his national-Protestant work, but had to find my own way of confronting the aberrations of his generation from

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a transnational-democratic perspective. Because he might have known better and acted differently due to his faith, his cooperation with the Nazi regime, support of the war, and complicity in war crimes remain abhorrent to me. But a closer study of his life has also taught me respect for his effort to retain humanity under extreme circumstances and his attempt to break with nationalist prejudices through acts of charity. Instead of well-meant wholesale condemnation, I believe that only a renewed attempt at a dialogue with such problematic forebears can liberate later generations from the shadows of their dead.⁹⁸