Interview with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer on Compensation and Reparations (November 25, 1949)

Abstract

In an interview that chancellor Konrad Adenauer gave shortly after the founding of the Federal Republic to the editor-in-chief of the *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden*, a weekly that had been established after the war for the relatively small number of German Jews who decided to stay in, or return to, West Germany, he spoke quite openly about the massive crimes that Nazi Germany had committed in occupied Europe during World War II and against the Jewish populations of Europe in particular. In his view, these crimes, perpetrated in the name of the German people, imposed on the Federal Republic a moral obligation not only to face up these crimes, but also to make an effort at restitution and to give material support to Jewish refugees who had lost their families and all their belongings and now lived in often meagre circumstances in the countries that had taken them in. Adenauer who had himself been ousted by the Nazis as major of Cologne and had subsequently been arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo made himself a prime advocate of a West German obligation “to make good,” however inadequate it might be. He also responded to the anxieties that early amnesties of war criminals and the re-emergence of neo-Nazi and antisemitic movements had caused not only among the Jewish minority, but also among politicians and public intellectuals. While approving of the trials against those who had committed Nazi crimes, he expressed the widely held opinion that the wholesale denazification policies to which the West German population had been subjected had done a lot of damage.

Source

Question:
Certain circles repeatedly argue that the emphasis on the Christian character of the CDU includes an anti-Jewish tendency. Do you, Mr. Chancellor, wish to make a statement on this question?

Answer:
In my first government policy statement to the Bundestag, I emphasized on behalf of the government and the political forces behind it that our work will be carried by the spirit of Christian occidental culture and respect for the law and human dignity. During the Hitler regime, respect for human dignity was thoroughly destroyed. The devaluation of human beings to objects of state purposes has been one of the most frightening symptoms of that time. As Christians, we want to restore respect for the human being without regard to confessional, racial or ethnic affiliation. In the spirit of this tolerance, we see in our Jewish compatriots fellow citizens with full rights. We would like them to participate with equal rights and duties in the spiritual, political, and social rebuilding of our country. We cannot and do not wish to do so without their cooperation. Therein we see the meaning of the term “Christian” in this context.

Question:
Do you believe, Mr. Chancellor, that the measures taken against Germans after the war, e.g., the expulsion from the eastern territories, can compensate for the injustice done in the name of the German people up to 1945? This view is widely held.

Answer:
Injustice and suffering brought upon people can never be compensated for by injustice or suffering brought upon other people. The German people are willing to make reparation for the injustice perpetrated in their name by a criminal regime against the Jews to the extent that this is possible at all

after millions of lives have been irretrievably destroyed. We consider this reparation to be our duty. Far too little has been done for this reparation since 1945. The German government is determined to take the appropriate measures.

Question:
For us, reparation is not only an economic issue, but also a moral one. What does the Federal Government intend to do to advance this process of reparation?

Answer:
Moral reparation is part of our reinstatement of the rule of law. The government will be vigilant in ensuring compliance with the article of fundamental rights that prohibits discriminating against anyone because of their ancestry, race, or creed. I would like to make it absolutely clear that the desecration of Jewish places of worship and the vandalizing of Jewish cemeteries, which unfortunately have continued to occur in recent years, will be prosecuted and punished without leniency. It is the duty of the communities in particular, not only to protect Jewish places of worship, but also, where necessary, to support their rebuilding. I have already announced in my first government policy statement that we will, if necessary, make determined use of the rights that the law gives us against radical tendencies. We will prosecute antisemitic tendencies in the press or in public life to the full extent of the law if this proves necessary. We will fight all forms of antisemitism not only because it is undesirable to us in domestic and foreign policy, but because we reject it with all firmness for reasons of humanity. In applying the fundamental rights articles of the Basic Law, we are given all legal prerequisites to put this will of ours into practice and to protect the Jews against any discrimination. We will protect the Jews against any possibility of new persecution.
The government will devote its special attention to compensation for the economic damage inflicted on Jewish citizens. The existing legislation needs some improvement and supplementation in this respect.
The State of Israel is the outwardly recognizable union of Jews of all nationalities. The government intends to make available to the State of Israel goods for reconstruction worth DM 10 million, as a first direct sign that the injustice inflicted by Germans on Jews throughout the world must be redressed.
The long persecution of the Jews in Germany during the National Socialist period gave rise to a number of problems about which the government must be kept informed. A department headed by a German Jew will therefore be set up in the Federal Ministry of the Interior to deal with these problems. At the same time, the establishment of this department is intended to give the Jews living in Germany the assurance that everything is being done on the part of the government to safeguard their political rights in this state to the fullest extent.

Question:
The Jewish victims of Nazi persecution, especially the relatives of Jews killed in concentration camps, are observing with concern the tendency to grant amnesty to the political elements responsible for this extermination and to cease the prosecution of crimes against humanity. Does the government intend to take steps in this direction?

Response:
I have already stated before the Bundestag that the government is of the opinion that much harm and damage has been done by denazification, but that those truly guilty of the crimes committed during the National Socialist period and the war should be punished to the full extent of the law. There has been no change in the government's view on this. Criminals guilty of the destruction of human life do not deserve amnesty and will continue to face legal prosecution commensurate with their crimes.

Source of original German text: *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden*, 25. November 1949.

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Recommended Citation: Interview with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer on Compensation and Reparations (November 25, 1949), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-5248> [October 13, 2026].