

A Psychological Critique of the Refusal to Accept the Loss of the World War II (1967)

Abstract

Exasperated by the illusionary demand of West German politicians to regain the Eastern territories lost in the Second World War, the psychiatrists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich published a spirited indictment of Germans' widespread inability to accept the consequences of defeat.

Source

The Inability to Mourn

[...]

The war was lost: yet though the mountains of rubble it left behind were enormous, there is no denying that Germans did not allow this fact to penetrate their consciousness fully. Later, with the revival of German political influence and economic strength, a fantasy about the past sprang up. Put somewhat crudely, it could be said that if we in Germany were to deny the events of the Third Reich, their consequences need not be acknowledged. Instead, Germany tried to compel the victors, on the basis of the victors' own moral and political standards, to deal with the consequences of Nazi crimes as if the whole thing had been a relatively inconsequential military conflict. This interpretation of world events entitled Germans, of course, to their own "just claims"; for instance, to the lost territories beyond the Oder-Neisse line.

True, insistence on these fantasies did not bring Germany one step further in political reality; instead, the gulf between the two German states was unnecessarily widened. Nevertheless, Germans insisted on the notion of a legitimate claim that should be recognized in a peace treaty. Of course, no such a treaty has ever been envisioned. Indeed, in the history of humanity, the rule has usually been that those who aim at the complete annihilation of their enemies must reckon with similar consequences in the event of defeat; and it is easy to imagine how a victorious Nazi state would have dealt with the nations of Eastern Europe. But, even after all that has happened, Germans continue to make "legitimate" claims; claims that they would never have recognized had they themselves proved the stronger. During the nearly thirty years that have passed since the end of World War II, and particularly since Stalin's death, the consolidation of the Soviet Union as a world power has become an accomplished fact. Yet, until recently, we in Germany persisted in the expectation that a peace treaty would somehow return to us "territories temporarily under foreign administration"; i.e., a *restitutio ad integrum*.

Obviously, the Third Reich and Hitler's war were nothing but a dream!

The fact that the German attitude was based on an illusion does not justify the accusation that Germans are pursuing "revanchism": their policies had neither the power to influence world events nor to induce anyone else to join them in an attempt to regain their lost Eastern territories by force of arms. Such a notion may perhaps have been taken seriously here and there when the cold war was at its height. But, since Sputnik, any such hopes have faded. German policy was not "revanchist." It was illusory—though no less dangerous for that. Neither Germany's various governments nor its political parties, nor any of the other groups influential in its public life, have yet succeeded in impressing upon German minds a simple, straightforward, chain of events: Germany invaded the Soviet Union, inflicted endless suffering upon that country, and then lost the war. This in turn led to a shift of world political power zones, though

admittedly this shift lacks the formal sanction of international law. After the unconditional surrender in 1945, Germans should have adjusted themselves realistically to the political fact that the winner – who had won only at the cost of enormous sacrifices—would make such terms as he believed to be in his own interest. It was obvious from the outset that Russia, whether Bolshevik or Tsarist, upon winning a war would make territorial demands and vigorously seek to expand its sphere of influence. When Germany invaded Russia it accepted this calculated risk; yet Germans remain incapable of acknowledging that Russian demands were a logical consequence of the war. They behave as if the whole conflict had been some insignificant skirmish, and not an ideological crusade.

Of course, stating complex issues as baldly as this, declaring that we Germans are not prepared to accept the fact that we lost the war against Russia totally and completely, can easily lead to exaggeration. Especially since such a statement does not apply to the rational foreground of indisputable facts, in which we are confronted with an inflexible political and military colossus, but rather to the fantasies looming behind it. We are dealing here with ulterior thoughts and their far from negligible influence on our objective behavior, though such influence is never easily demonstrable.

A taboo arose then, over the years, a real, untouchable taboo: it was absolutely forbidden to recognize the present frontiers of the two German states as the factual point of departure for any realistic discussion. Behind such a taboo lurks the dream that, by some unforeseeable stroke of good fortune, Germans might yet be able to recover what was earlier gambled away through criminal hubris. It is indeed a very dangerous dream. Rather than trying to secure a reasonable form of coexistence, rather than striving to divest national frontiers of their character as barriers to free traffic—so that we in West Germany might be allowed to travel to the beaches of what was once East Prussia as freely as to the mountains of Alsace—West Germans have for over twenty years put a higher valuation on their Federal Republic's claim to being the “sole representative” of Germany. This reveals the strength of ulterior thoughts, because it is these that made the Germans throw away the possibility of any tolerable compromise in favor of the intolerable dogmatism that still prevails on both sides of the boundary between the two Germanys.

Accordingly, German assurances that they will renounce the use of force in the pursuance of their “just claims” must sound somewhat unconvincing to foreign ears. The German propensity for loving the unattainable so uncompromisingly that thereby the attainable is forfeited has been a recurrent feature of German history ever since the days of the Holy Roman Empire.

This orientation toward the unreal in German collective behavior was one of the factors that stimulated the study that follows. Since we are dealing with fantasies that are to be discovered controlling what appears superficially to be rational behavior, the task of describing them is complicated and, inevitably, our observations will often be clumsily, even perhaps hurtfully, set forth. Nevertheless, we trust that the reader—especially the German reader—will tolerate whatever distress he may feel at what we have to say and will hear us out before making up his mind.

Source of English translation: Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn. Principles of Collective Behavior*. Preface by Robert Jay Lifton. Translated by Beverly R. Placzek. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1975, pp. 4–6.

Source of original German text: Alexander und Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*. Munich, 1967, pp. 1ff.

Recommended Citation: A Psychological Critique of the Refusal to Accept the Loss of the World War II (1967), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1049>> [April 26, 2025].