**The Role Ex-Nazis Played in Early West Germany**

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After World War II, West Germany rapidly made the transition from murderous dictatorship to model democracy. Or did it? New documents reveal just how many officials from the Nazi regime found new jobs in Bonn. A surprising number were chosen for senior government positions.

Ten days before Christmas, the German Interior Ministry acquitted itself of an embarrassing duty. It published a list of all former members of the German government with a Nazi past.

The Left Party's parliamentary group had forced the government to come clean about Germany's past by submitting a parliamentary inquiry. Bundestag document 17/8134 officially announced, for the first time, something which had been treated as a taboo in the halls of government for decades: A total of 25 cabinet ministers, one president and one chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany -- as postwar Germany is officially known -- had been members of Nazi organizations.

The document revealed that Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) who governed Germany from 1966 to 1969, had been a member of the Nazi Party ever since Adolf Hitler seized power. According to the Interior Ministry list, German President Walter Scheel, a member of the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP) who was in office from 1974 to 1979, had been a Nazi Party member "from 1941 or 1942."

The list names ministers of all political stripes and from a wide range of social backgrounds. Some, like leftist Social Democratic Party (SPD) mastermind Erhard Eppler (Minister of Economic Cooperation), did not become Nazi Party members until the end (at 17, in Eppler's case). Others, like conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) agitator Richard Jaeger (Minister of Justice), had been part of Hitler's paramilitary organization, the SA (since 1933, in Jaeger's case). Even FDP luminary Hans-Dietrich Genscher (first interior minister and later foreign minister), who denies to this day that he knowingly joined the Nazi Party, is listed as a Nazi Party member.

According to the government list, former SPD Finance Minister Karl Schiller was in the SA, while his fellow cabinet minister Horst Ehmke was a Nazi Party member, as were ("presumably," the list notes) former SPD Labor Minister Herbert Ehrenberg and Hans Leussink, a former education minister with no party affiliation. On the conservative side, the report names several former Nazi Party members, including former CDU Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder and former CDU Minister for Displaced Persons Theodor Oberländer, as well as former CSU Post and Communication Minister Richard Stücklen and former CSU Interior Minister Friedrich Zimmermann.

**Germany's Dark Past**

None of this information is new. It isn't just since the 1968 student revolts that critical citizens, intellectuals and the media have broadcast new details on the contemporary relevance of Germany's dark past. For years, the notion that partisans of the Nazi regimes were able to manipulate their way into the top levels of government in the young federal republic, and that former Nazi Party members set the tone in a country governed by the postwar constitution in the 1950s and 60s has been a subject for historians.

But six decades after the Nuremberg Trials against the leaders of the Nazi regime, a new attempt -- the first official one, at that -- to come to terms with postwar Germany's Nazi past is now underway. Now everything has to come out. Throughout the former West Germany, investigations are digging deep, extending all the way down to the foundations, seeking to answer a fundamental question: Just how brown -- the color most associated with the Nazis -- were the first years of postwar West Germany?

The government's 85-page response to the Left Party's inquiry about old Nazis in the halls of power is nothing more than an interim summary of research being undertaken in the archives of many ministries and federal agencies. As part of the effort, historians are reviewing enormous stacks of personnel files on behalf of the government.

No one has ever dug this deeply. The highly controversial study on Nazi involvement at the Foreign Ministry, marketed last year as a bestseller, was only the beginning. Historians are now studying old files at the Finance Ministry, in the judiciary and the Economics Ministry and, in particular, in the police and intelligence services. How many Nazis took part in the rebuilding of the government after World War II? How much influence did the surviving supporters of the Nazi dictatorship have on the establishment and operation of Germany's first functioning democracy?

Officials at the Interior Ministry, the source of the most recent government document, have issued an EU-wide call for assistance in addressing Germany's Nazi past. Historians from the western city of Bochum are now poring over old files from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) which stretch for about 500 meters (1,640 feet) to determine how many of the Nazi dictatorship's helpers hid under the coattails of the domestic intelligence service in the early years of the Federal Republic -- and how this could have happened.

**An Enormous Confession**

Was the protection of the young, optimistic constitution in the hands of former National Socialists? It is as if the government were determined to finally shed all of its oppressive secrets.

It's an enormous confession. The discussion revolves around an entire generation of civil servants, all "public employees," according to the German government's most recent report to the Left Party, "who were at least 17 at the time of the collapse of the Nazi dictatorship, and no more than 70 at the time of constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany." The people in question would have been born between 1879 and 1928.

Whether it will ever be possible to separate the good from the bad seems questionable at the very least. About a million people from the generation in question worked for the government in the early years of the republic. But according to the report, only about 200,000 personnel files from this period still exist.

Nevertheless, Berlin historian Michael Wildt expects "substantial new information" to emerge from the file rooms of government agencies. Wildt is convinced that it will become clear that all government institutions, provided they existed at the time, were involved "in the mass crimes of the Nazis." And the institutions that were newly formed under the postwar constitution, namely the police and the intelligence services, were largely staffed with civil servants from the old, criminal organizations. Ministries and government agencies have "covered up, denied and repressed" their dark history, says Wildt.

Covered up, denied and repressed. It's a charge that doesn't just apply to politicians and public servants, at least not in the early years of the republic. Senior members of the media, including at SPIEGEL, proved to be unwilling or incapable of sounding the alarm. This isn't surprising, given the numbers of ex-Nazis who had forced their way into editorial offices.

**Blood on Their Hands**

The new wave of revelations from Germany's past doesn't just provide additional gruesome details about the generation of perpetrators. In the middle of the flourishing democracy of reunified Germany, people are turning their attention to the roles of those who actively helped the Nazis, or at least looked the other way, when politicians, civil servants and lawyers with blood on their hands claimed important positions once again.

The willingness to let bygones be bygones, either because of a guilty conscience or for the sake of a new beginning, was disastrous. It is this attitude that has prompted historians to accuse the founding generation of having jeopardized the new, hopeful Germany, where human dignity was treated as the most important constitutional value.

Germany in the 1950s was "a precarious nation," a country on the brink, says historian Wildt. Even though the 50s were seen as Germany's "golden years," the period was also haunted by the demons of the past, whose machinations, as we are learning today, could easily have brought Germany to what Wildt calls a tipping point. For many historians and constitutional experts, the fact that this did not happen -- once again -- was a stroke of luck, and a miracle of the Bonn republic.

Biologically speaking, Germany has largely lost its connection to the generation of perpetrators. Even those who sought to cover up the Nazi past are mostly retired nowadays. The opportunity is favorable. Now it is up to the grandchildren to address the miracle, which must seem like a timeless lesson to some, a lesson on the difficulties of building a democracy from the ruins of a brutal dictatorship.

**The Grandchildren Want to Know**

And the grandchildren want to know. A specialized history book like "Das Amt" ("The Department") hasn't had this much success as a bestseller in a long time. The publisher, Blessing Verlag, has already sold more than 75,000 copies of the €34.95 thriller about the Nazi foreign ministry.

In 2005, then Foreign Minister and Green Party member Joschka Fischer deployed a commission of historians to trace the new activities of old Nazis in his ministry back to their roots. In a dispute over obituaries for deceased diplomats, which are customarily couched in reverential terms, it had become apparent that the spirit of yesterday still hovered above the Foreign Ministry, especially when it came to diplomats with a Nazi past.

It was only the work of the historians deployed by Fischer that finally debunked the legend that the diplomats had been part of a secret resistance cell in the Third Reich. The story first emerged in the years after the war when, following the Nuremberg Trials, officials from Hitler's foreign ministry were also put on trial. At the time, Ernst von Weizsäcker, the former secretary of state in Hitler's foreign ministry, defended himself against the accusation that he had been a willing helper to the dictatorship. One of the supporters of his cause was his son Richard, who later became the German president.

This old theory was still quasi-official in 1979, when Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP) was the foreign minister. "The Foreign Ministry put up a fierce and sustained resistance to the plans of the Nazi leaders, and yet was unable to prevent the worst from happening," a brochure titled "Foreign Policy Today" declared.

In truth, it wasn't just a few implanted Nazis who participated in the Holocaust through the so-called *Judenreferat* (Jewish Department). In fact, the entire ministry implemented the political dictates of the rogue regime with the practiced effectiveness of a functioning government agency. The Foreign Ministry was "part of this monstrous dictatorship, and it performed its duties," says Norbert Frei, a historian from the eastern German city of Jena and one of the authors of the study.

**'Maintaining the Continuity of Berlin Tradition'**

After the war, the restoration of former officials to positions in the Foreign Ministry occurred at an astonishing rate. The political division alone soon counted 13 former Nazi Party members among its top officials, while 11 of the 17 senior members of the legal department were former Nazis. "There is no other federal ministry," then SPD parliamentarian Fritz Erler concluded, "that is maintaining the continuity of Berlin tradition in this manner than the Foreign Ministry."

The restoration of the old elites also had consequences for foreign policy, which veteran diplomats still deny to this day. Old Nazis were usually sent to posts in South America and Arab countries, where they shaped the image of the supposedly new republic. The diplomats repeatedly took steps to protect Nazis hiding abroad and accused war criminals from persecution.

In the 1950s, the German embassy in Buenos Aires unquestioningly issued travel documents to the family of Adolf Eichmann, one of the key organizers of the Holocaust, for a trip to Germany. No one bothered to draw any conclusions about Eichmann's whereabouts.

As SPIEGEL revealed in 1968, the main legal protection office at the Foreign Ministry even developed into a "warning service" for old Nazis. With the help of the Red Cross, the diplomats informed about 800 Germans and Austrians that they should avoid traveling to France, because they had been convicted of war crimes there and could run into "difficulties."

The case of the Finance Ministry, in particular, highlights the dangerous pragmatism adopted by West Germany's founders in their personnel policies. Shortly after the new constitution had come into effect, Konrad Adenauer, postwar West Germany's first chancellor and anything but a Nazi sympathizer, demanded an "end to this sniffing out of Nazis."

"You can't build a Finance Ministry if you don't have at least a few people in senior positions who understand something about earlier history," Adenauer told the parliament, seeking to justify his support of staffing continuity.

**An Abominable Lawyer**

The chancellor, for his part, entrusted himself and his chancellery to Hans Globke, a former official in Hitler's interior ministry and one of the authors of the Nuremberg race laws. The man Adenauer once called "my dear Herr Globke" was the most powerful government official in Germany for a time, even though anyone who wanted to know could easily consult the abominable lawyer's anti-Semitic concoctions. He was responsible for the mandatory assignment of the first names Israel and Sara to Jews in Nazi Germany. The ability to quickly identify someone as a Jew was one of the preconditions of the Holocaust.

Globke was the most capable civil servant that the new country believed it had at its disposal. Part of his competence had to do with the precision with which he once distinguished among different classifications of Jews: "The three-eighths Jew, who has one fully Jewish and one half-Jewish grandparent, is considered a crossbreed with one fully Jewish grandparent, while the five-eighths Jews with two fully Jewish grandparents and one half-Jewish grandparent is considered a crossbreed with two fully Jewish grandparents." With the same Prussian bureaucrat's sense of perfection, Globke also developed Adenauer's center of power, the Federal Chancellery at Schaumburg Palace. Globke was adept at pleasing everyone. During the Nuremberg war crimes trials, he even appeared as both a witness for the defense and a witness for the prosecution.

Only once did the past catch up with Adenauer's senior state secretary. When it was revealed that Globke, as an assistant department head in the Nazi interior ministry, had announced that "the independent state of Luxembourg was dissolved" as a result of the Nazi occupation, Luxembourg demanded that Globke return the Grand Cross of the Order of the Oak Crown, which the small country had conferred on him after the war, in 1957.

This didn't seem to trouble Adenauer, who said: "I don't know of anyone who could replace Globke." The "Globke System," which SPIEGEL ridiculed at the time, wasn't just a system of spinning thread that all came together at the Chancellery. It was also a system that was holding together the young Federal Republic. Globke was a defining force in West Germany. The country needed men like him, people who were flexible and experienced -- and who didn't look back.

Institutions that, unlike the Finance Ministry, were newly established in the spirit and on the foundation of the new constitution, also employed people formerly affiliated with the Nazis. As the new study shows, former SS members with Gestapo experience were employed at the BfV as wiretapping and postal surveillance experts -- initially as free agents, "because, after all, they did have to respect the fact that these people were tainted," then BfV President Hubert Schrübbers once noted. Schrübbers himself was later removed from office over allegations of his own Nazi past. But nothing against Hitler's Gestapo. "These people were experts," a former senior BfV official said in 1965.

There was no looking back when the Globke system dominated the entire security apparatus. Even contemporaries suspected that Nazi-era experts were given jobs in the intelligence services of the new republic and at the Federal Office of Criminal Investigation (BKA).

The British press openly scoffed at the "Gestapo Boys" working for the organization headed by Reinhard Gehlen, the precursor of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND). The networks of old Nazis were also an issue in Bonn. SPD opposition leader Kurt Schumacher took Adenauer to task, claiming that the intelligence service was "infiltrated" with men from the vicious SD -- the intelligence service of the SS.

Today, experts estimate that about one in 10 of Gehlen's employees came from the empire of SS chief Heinrich Himmler, bringing the total to a few hundred men. They do not include those who may have been involved in murder campaigns while wearing the gray uniform of the Nazi armed forces, the Wehrmacht, or as Nazi officials.

The situation was even worse at the BKA. At times, former members of the SS's *Totenkopf* division held more than two-thirds of all senior positions. When the agency began looking into the past of its employees in 1960, about 100 officials, or a quarter of the entire workforce, were investigated.

The payrolls of the BKA, BND and BfV include men like former SS Oberführer Wilhelm Krichbaum, who, as head of the *Geheime Feldpolizei* (Secret Military Police), tortured and killed tens of thousands of "suspected partisans" on the Eastern Front. Krichbaum joined the Gehlen Organization in 1948 and was soon put in charge of its district office in the Bavarian town of Bad Reichenhall.

**'Staunchly True to His World View'**

Theo Saevecke embarked on a career in law enforcement at the BKA. He had joined the Nazi Party in 1929, when it was still very small, and eventually reached the rank of *Hauptsturmführer* in the SS. While with the SS, Saevecke organized forced labor operations involving Tunisian Jews and ran the Milan office of the security police, where he was responsible for hundreds of executions.

After the war, the senior official openly described himself as a "former old National Socialist." He remained staunchly true to his worldview. As a CIA contact noted, Saevecke would "literally stop at nothing to suppress the communist movement, against which he has felt an elementary hatred since the 1920s." While with the BKA, Saevecke was in charge of the police effort surrounding the 1962 SPIEGEL scandal, before going into retirement.

Because it was to be expected that the expertise of former Nazis would be in demand once again, the Allies had initially obtained an express power of veto from the BfV. The Berlin Document Center routinely investigated job applicants -- albeit not with sufficient thoroughness -- for evidence of former Nazi Party and SS membership. BND founder Gehlen also shunned the men from Himmler's organization at first.

Until the fall of the Third Reich, Gehlen, a general in the German army during World War II, had maintained a department at Wehrmacht headquarters that wrote analyses about the Red Army. In 1946, the Americans recruited him to continue his old activities, but this time for the US Army. Washington also feared that secret agents with a Nazi past could be blackmailed by the Soviets or the intelligence agencies of other countries.

**'If He Can Help Us, We'll Use Him'**

But the Americans did not insist that Gehlen provide them with access to the personnel files of his employees. When a critical member of the US Congress questioned then President Harry S. Truman about cooperation with Gehlen, Truman grumbled: "This guy Gehlen, I don't care if he screws flies. If he can help us, we'll use him."

A panel of historians has also now been appointed to investigate the question of why the BND recruited former Nazi thugs. Why did the agency use someone like Konrad Fiebig, a former member of an SS paramilitary death squad known as an *Einsatzgruppe* who was later charged with the murders of 11,000 Jews in Belarus, as a courier? And what exactly did his superiors know about the crimes?

Of course, former Nazis helped each other out. For example, one former SS member said that Krichbaum expressly asked him to "report former SD people who no longer have a profession, because they could become active again."

An especially large number of tainted agents were associated with an organization known as *Dienststelle 114*, with offices in the back courtyard of a building on Gerwigstrasse in the southwestern city of Karlsruhe. Officially, the office housed a company called Zimmerle & Co., a maker of roller shutters. The original purpose of the organization was to find out, on behalf of the Americans, what Moscow's agents were up to in the American occupation zone. But conservative nationalist Gehlen used the counterespionage mission to develop a system of informants against pacifists and communists. The word was soon out among former Nazis that there was good money to be made in Gehlen's organization.

The ex-Nazis were no longer committing murders at the BND. However, experts suspect that the former SS officials, who had once held the ranks of *Sturmbannführer, Obersturmführer* and *Oberführer*, introduced the crusader mentality into the BND that gave the agency the reputation of being a stronghold of people living in the past. Anyone who occasionally traveled to East Germany, made left-leaning political statements or even struck a neighbor with connections to the BND as suspicious ran the risk of being placed under surveillance, having his mail opened or his telephone conversations wiretapped by the BND.

**'Willing Servants of the Regime'**

Even top politicians were placed under surveillance, including the later head of the SPD parliamentary group, Herbert Wehner ("an extremely dangerous enemy of the state") and the later President Gustav Heinemann, who was observed after being classified as a suspicious "element."

Hardly anyone in law enforcement was not tainted with a Nazi past. Most, says current BKA President Jörg Ziercke, were "supporters and willing servants of the regime."

This tradition continued on the inside of the agency, even if the personnel at the BKA adjusted to the new conditions. The officers devoted special attention to people known as "country travellers," who were still referred to as "gypsies" during the Third Reich.

A 1967 manual reads: "The penchant for an unattached vagrant lifestyle and a pronounced aversion to work are among the special attributes of a gypsy." As much as a decade after the end of the war, the BKA included the prisoner number tattooed on the arm of a presumed delinquent in its search profile.

Dieter Schenk, the former head of the criminal division at the BKA, is sharply critical of the agency, saying that for years it was dominated by "toadyism, wagon wall behavior and an authoritarian style of leadership." These are the secondary bad habits of a bureaucracy that has something to hide, and in which yesterday's and today's officials cannot look each other directly in the eye.

No ministry in West Germany was spared the army of surviving accomplices, helpers and accessories. "This continued activity of the old National Socialists is a fundamental affliction of the inner constitution of the Federal Republic," Karl Jaspers, the philosopher of West Germany's formative years, said in 1966.

When the old affliction was no longer painful, parts of the government that were seemingly above suspicion began recalling their own problems. In 2007, the Federal Ministry of Transportation issued a thin report on its own past. It turned out that thousands of outwardly virtuous railroad workers were willing accessories to the genocide of the Jews.

**Responsible for the Nazis' Starvation Policy**

Meanwhile, a historian had compiled a list of 62 people with Nazi pasts for a study on the precursor agency to the Federal Consumer Protection Ministry. During World War II, employees of the Reich Agriculture Ministry were responsible for the Nazis' starvation policy in eastern Poland, Lithuania and Belarus.

In 2009, then Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) established a seven-member panel of historians whose results were to be released to the public. Their job was to examine "how the Reich Finance Ministry contributed to the plundering of the Jews and the financing of the arms buildup and the war." The Federal Ministry of the Economy commissioned a similar study in the following year.

It has already been revealed that half of all state secretaries, section heads and subsection heads in the 1950s were former members of the Nazi Party.

According to research by Norbert Frei, a historian in the eastern city of Jena, about a third of the people working in the federal government's ministerial bureaucracy in 1953 had been fired by the Allies directly after the war. They were considered no longer usable at the time. The fact that most of them returned, and that some even went to court to get their old jobs back, is tantamount to a coup d'état.

The former Nazis who had been deprived of their power took advantage of a provision of the new constitution to secure power, influence and a good pension until the end of their lives. During the debate over the constitution in the Parliamentary Council, the public servant lobby was the only group in society that managed to file legal and financial claims for compensation. This isn't exactly surprising, given that public servants held the majority of votes within the council.

In this manner, German civil servants had managed to quickly and painlessly sweep aside their pasts. The German judges didn't even need a new law to help them along.

**The Judiciary That Sentenced 50,000 People to Death**

The self-righteousness of the German postwar judiciary stands in sharp contrast to the calamity that the profession inflicted on Germany. Indeed, its crimes are at the very top of the list of disgraceful deeds. Between 1933 and 1945, German judges, both civilian and military, handed down an estimated 50,000 death sentences, most of which were carried out. "The dagger of the assassin was concealed beneath the robe of the jurist," said Telford Taylor, the US chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials.

Roughly 80 percent of the judges and prosecutors who had served Hitler's regime of terror until May 8 were soon dispensing justice once again -- but this time in the young Federal Republic. "Perhaps there is truly evidence," wrote Nazi expert Jörg Friedrich, "that a constitutional state can stand on a judicial mass grave."

In the misery of the postwar era, lawyers were urgently needed. Although the crime rate skyrocketed in the era of black markets and refugees, there was a shortage of judges to hear cases. To make up for the deficiencies, the occupiers of the western zones appointed judges who had retired before 1933, or they hired lawyers untainted with Nazi connections. Starting in October 1945, the British practiced the so-called "piggyback procedure" in the recently established judicial administration: For each judge without a Nazi past, one judge with former Nazi connections could be appointed. But, by the summer of 1946, even this restriction had been dropped.

Now the halls of justice were even staffed with judges who had once served on the Nazis' People's Court (*Volksgerichtshof*), which was set up in 1934 to handle "political offenses" and became notorious for the frequency, arbitrariness and severity of its punishments. Nevertheless, the civilian courts handling the de-Nazification process merely classified them as "hangers-on." In 1953, at least 72 percent of judges on the Federal Supreme Court, Germany's highest court for criminal and civil law, had former Nazi connections. The number increased to 79 percent by 1956 and, in the criminal division, it was at 80 percent by 1962.

**Suppressing Opposition to the Regime**

It wasn't until after 1964, when Nazi-affiliated judges still made up 70 percent of the court, that one could begin "to observe a decline," says Hubert Rottleuthner, a sociologist of law. He also points out that this statistic does not include the judges and prosecutors who worked exclusively in the military justice system. Their trail of blood is significantly wider than that of even the "special courts" (*Sondergerichte*), established to suppress opposition to the regime, and the People's Court.

Between 1939 and 1945, wartime judges sentenced an estimated 30,000 soldiers to death, often for minor offences and, as some said, "as a deterrent." Up to 90 percent of these sentences were carried out by firing squads or executioners.

Despite their horrific pasts, the expertise of these judges was soon in demand at the Federal Ministry of Justice (BMJ). The specialists at the new ministry secretly worked on relevant regulations aimed at establishing new versions of the notorious wartime courts. For example, a special criminal court for the new armed forces, the Bundeswehr, included emergency rules that would have largely deprived German citizens in uniform of their rights.

Among the promoters of a new system of military justice were Josef Schafheutle, who went from working in the Reich Justice Ministry to being head of the BMJ's criminal law division, and his department head, Eduard Dreher. During the war, Dreher had served as the senior public prosecutor at the special court (*Sondergericht*) in Innsbruck, Austria. In one case, he called for the death penalty "although even the special court supported a reprieve," according to journalist Ernst Klee.

**The Death Penalty?**

To have the secretly written "preliminary" consultant drafts reviewed by outside experts, the Bonn ministry installed a "Military Criminal Law Commission," whose members -- including a former air force judge and a former army senior field judge -- repeatedly cited the extremely harsh provisions of the war era during their discussions behind closed doors. And at least three commission members favored reintroducing the long-abolished death penalty.

Another member explained when the "ultimate penalty" was necessary in his opinion, namely when the "capacity of the military" was in jeopardy and, with it, the "security of the nation" and the "maintenance of discipline."

A number of soldiers had been executed during the war for the "violation of discipline." Now the ugly word was back in use in the postwar justice ministry. Although nothing ever came of the law, the malignant spirit of its authors did not disappear as quickly. To this day, every German attorney and judge is familiar with the experienced Nazi jurist Dreher, who also wrote the leading opinion on the German Criminal Code.

The jurists acquitted themselves because they were able to argue on their own behalf. With the exception of two chairman of a military court martial, whose actions could no longer be treated as the actions of judges, not a single judge in the Federal Republic has ever been convicted of perversion of justice.

In the new Germany, victims in the administration, the courts and parliament often encountered judges, bureaucrats and doctors who had once served in Hitler's Third Reich.

For example, someone who had walked into the Department of Reparations in the villa once owned by the industrialist Rudolf ten Hompel -- the headquarters of the *Ordnungspolizei* (the regular police force of Nazi Germany) in the western city of Münster -- in the winter of 1953/54 would have stood a good chance of running into a former Nazi there. Three of the seven employees were former party members.

**Abandoning the Cleansing Plan**

Werner Villinger, a doctor who was involved in the mass murder of the disabled prior to 1945, served on the Reparations Committee of the Bundestag, a position in which he was partly responsible for a decision to deny compensation to roughly 400,000 people who had been forcibly sterilized in the Nazi period. One of his fellow committee members was Hans Nachtsheim, who should have been serving a prison sentence instead of in the parliament. According to the research of journalist Ernst Klee, Nachtsheim conducted medical experiments with epileptic children in 1943.

The murderers of yesterday were afforded public support. Even church leaders put in a good word for Nazis who had been convicted by the Allied courts as principal perpetrators. For example, Protestant Bishop Otto Dibelius and World Council of Churches President Martin Niemöller, a victim of Nazi persecution himself, asked the Allies for "mercy for those who, branded with the stigma of war crime, are being held in captivity."

The religious leaders interceded on behalf of men like Martin Sandberger, who was held at the Landsberg Prison in Bavaria until 1958. As the leader of Special Commando 1a, Sandberger had made Estonia "free of Jews" and had admitted to the killings of "about 350" communists. But even the prominent SPD politician Carlo Schmid spoke out on behalf of his former legal intern at the University of Tübingen: "Without the onset of National Socialism, Sandberger would have become a reputable, hard-working and ambitious public servant."

The distinction between perpetrators and victims disappeared in a haze of pity and sympathy.

When, in January 1951, there was a rumor in Bonn that the Americans were planning to execute Nazi mass murderers who were imprisoned in Landsberg and had already been sentenced to death, Landsberg Mayor Ludwig Thoma had no trouble convincing members of the Bundestag and the state parliament to attend a protest event "against barbarity."

**Not Prepared to Accept a Fourth Reich**

The historian Jens-Christian Wagner has reconstructed the event. A Landsberg electrical business provided a vehicle equipped with loudspeakers free of charge, and the local radio station called upon residents to participate in the protest event. One in three residents showed up. When several hundred Holocaust survivors tried to interrupt the rally, the mob shouted: "Jews out!"

But the Allies were not to be swayed, and a few months later the sentences against some of the prisoners were carried out. One of the men executed was Otto Ohlendorf, commander of *Einsatzgruppe D*, which had murdered tens of thousands of children, women and men.

Until 1951, the Western Allies executed close to 500 Nazi war criminals, including politicians (like former Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop), military officers (like Wilhelm Keitel, the head of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht) and SS officials (like police chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner). The fact that major figures from the Third Reich were hanged over a period of several years brought it home to the Germans that the Allies were not prepared to accept a Fourth Reich.

The Nazi Party was banned, other right-wing extremist parties were not allowed in the first place, and Nazis were denied the right to vote. "Just imagine that the occupying power were no longer here," Thomas Dehler, the then chairman of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in the Parliamentary Council, told his colleagues. "What would this democracy look like, and how wretched and weak would it be!"

When the British wiretapped a group of former Nazis surrounding Werner Naumann, the former deputy of Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, they gained the impression that the ex-Nazis were infiltrating the FDP in North Rhine-Westphalia. On the night of Jan. 14, 1953, British military police officers surrounded the houses in the western and northern cities of Solingen, Düsseldorf and Hamburg where the Nazi conspirators were staying and arrested them. The next morning, the occupying power informed an astonished public that the Nazis had been pursuing "plans to regain power in West Germany."

**'No Nazi Renaissance'**

In retrospect, the threat was probably not as great as the British portrayed it, and the case against Naumann and his associates was dropped. But the episode illustrates how seriously the occupiers took the situation. And everyone understood the message, says Berlin historian Michael Wildt, namely that "there would no Nazi Renaissance."

But even the Allies were unable to thoroughly cleanse Nazi-contaminated Germany. The plan to "de-Nazify" the conquered country, the Allies' aim of "removing National Socialists from offices and positions of responsibility," failed as a result of delays stemming from the resistance of those affected by this policy. In the US zone alone, some 13.4 million people over the age of 18 had to complete a questionnaire with 131 questions, and a total of 3.7 million cases were reviewed in all of the Western zones combined. But the lion's share of the investigations ended without indictments. Only 25,000 Germans from an army of millions of yesterday's collaborators were sentenced by the so-called *Spruchkammer* (the civilian courts handling denazification). They were fined or banned from their professions, but they were rarely sent to prison.

In the end the Americans, as ardent as they had been as first, abandoned their ambitious cleansing plan. The Germans -- all Germans -- were needed as the Cold War intensified. "If the nominal party members had not been given back their civil rights and the possibility of leading a normal life," the US military governor Lucius D. Clay concluded at the time, "a serious source of political unrest would have developed sooner or later."

The victors' assumptions proved to be correct. "The almost complete social reintegration of the former leading National Socialists was morally questionable, and in some cases scandalous; from a functional standpoint, however, it proved to be highly effective," writes historian Edgar Wolfrum. "Integration into the new democratic nation, as well as personal successes and new careers, offered the guarantee that the democracy would not be immediately questioned or challenged."

**Opposed to All Concepts of Morality**

But what price did the nation of the constitution have to pay for this small compromise with the past? "The fact that, in light of the millions of victims of Nazi policy, the majority of perpetrators in West Germany were to get off virtually scot-free was a process so fundamentally opposed to all concepts of morality that it could not possibly have remained without consequences for this society," writes Freiburg historian Ulrich Herbert.

On Nov. 7, 1968, a woman climbed onto the podium at the CDU party convention in Berlin, pushed her way to Chairman and Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, slapped him and shouted "Nazi, Nazi." Beate Klarsfeld was sentenced to a one-year prison term that very same day -- proof of how quickly German judges could react when determined to bring about justice.

The anti-Fascist activist, honored in many places (just not in Germany) with medals and awards for her worldwide pursuit of Nazi criminals who had gone into hiding, made a splash with her highly telegenic slap. It went down in German history as an event just as momentous as the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949: a turning point in the way Germans dealt with the past. It was only the 1968 generation, the generation of Joschka Fischer, who would later become foreign minister, that revolted against the comforting sleep of the republic, the depraved system of chumminess, opportunism and cover-up.

It was a rebellion. The demand to know the whole truth went down in the history of the Federal Republic as a "moral act," says the constitutional lawyer and author Bernhard Schlink, whose novel "The Reader," about a young man born after the war falling in love with a former concentration camp guard, became a global success.

But the days of slaps and revelations are gone. Poet-lawyer Schlink believes that the hour of truth, which is now being celebrated with panels of historians and addresses by cabinet ministers, has the bitter aftertaste of self-righteousness. "This approach to dealing with the past no longer costs us anything," says Schlink. He calls it "part of a new culture of denunciation."

Historian Wildt is no less critical about the new rush to expose old Nazis. He sees the thirst for the truth about one's own history as a form of obsessive political self-purification: "They want to clean themselves. Then they'll have put it behind them."

A "relaxed civil society," says Wildt, would handle the past differently. It would not involve procurement offices and vetted panels with strictly limited access to records, but an opening of the files based on the model of the agency that manages the Stasi records. "All government agencies should place their old files into the archive, so that every citizen can see for himself."

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*