

To Forget It All and Begin Anew: Reconciliation in Occupied Germany, 1944-1954

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The transformation of Germany after the Second World War from Nazism into a prosperous and peaceful state has long exerted a particular fascination upon historians. In the last four decades, legions of scholars have sought to explain the presumably miraculous ‘success story’ of the Federal Republic by a range of factors. Integration into the political, economic, military and cultural structures of the ‘West’, stability through material affluence for broad sections of German society, an extensive welfare state, and the straightjacket of the Cold War form the most familiar components of that story. The political stability of Eastern Germany, in turn, has conventionally been explained with reference to its place within the Soviet bloc and Cold War dynamics.

In his succinct *To Forget it All and Begin Anew: Reconciliation in Occupied Germany, 1944–1954*, Steven M. Schroeder proposes a novel explanatory framework to complement such narratives. He introduces the relatively neglected concept of reconciliation into the historiography of the immediate post-war period, which he defines as ‘the establishment of peaceful – or at least non-hostile – relations between former enemies’ (p. 4). For Schroeder, the transformation of Germany cannot be properly understood if one eschews the multifaceted work of civilians in a plethora of post-war grassroots initiatives, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious associations and other relief organisations operating in all four zones of occupation. These organisations often pursued highly different final objectives, but were

united in their broader goal of improving relations between Germans and their victims or wartime enemies. Schroeder's central argument is that the reconciliatory activities of these largely forgotten grassroots groups 'yielded significant achievements' and successfully established 'varied modi operandi' for reconciliatory work in the subsequent decades (p. 6).

As the seemingly endless adulation of Germany's 'coming to terms with the past' by journalists and politicians shows, Germany has today become a type of international poster child for victim recognition and compensation. Yet those who are familiar with the work of scholars such as Alon Confino, Norbert Frei, Jeffrey Herf, and Robert Moeller on the two Germanies' 'politics of the past', collective memory and the broader social reluctance to recognise German wrongdoing would not instinctively associate the first post-war decade as one in which German society witnessed the beginning of a 'seismic shift towards reconciliation' (p. 3). The question is, therefore, whether exploring the early post-war years through the lens of reconciliation brings to light a significant socio-political dynamic which has hitherto escaped our attention.

Schroeder sets out by separating neatly between two different 'impulses' which in his view generally produce reconciliation: pragmatism and altruism. In most instances, and rather unsurprisingly, reconciliation in Germany did not originate from contrition, but simply resulted from pragmatic, self-serving concerns which stemmed from the attempts of German elites to gain favour from both the Allies and the broader international community. By accepting at least partial responsibility for past crimes, Germans ultimately hoped to regain full sovereignty and international prestige. Schroeder's paradigmatic example here is Hans Asmussen, the head of the Protestant Church Chancellery, who wished that one could 'forget it all and begin anew' (p. 41), but pragmatically recognised that to regain control of domestic affairs, Germans would have to acknowledge at least some sins and adopt a more submissive stance towards the Allies. The second approach, in Schroeder's interpretation, was idealistic in nature and involved a number of committed Germans and foreigners who earnestly wished to build relationships of friendship with their former enemies. Typical of this stance are individuals such as Franz Böhm and Otto Küster, Western Germany's chief representatives at reparation negotiations with Israel, who sacrificed their positions to force the German government to pay out significant compensation for Holocaust victims in 1952. As the examples distributed throughout the book show, however, the two approaches often merged into a potpourri of attitudes, in which real motivations were no longer clearly recognisable, but the final product tended to be favourable to reconciliation.

Since they emerged from the Third Reich with a high social prestige and the general support of the Western Allies, the Churches had a natural advantage in shaping public discourse on social and political questions. Both the Protestant and Catholic Church leadership showed, however, little propensity towards engaging with the victims of Nazism. Instead, their public discourses centred on exempting Christians from the crimes committed by a presumably alien Nazi regime, negated the existence of collective guilt, and emphasised instead German suffering and victimhood during the Third Reich. Their manifold attempts at highlighting the misdeeds committed by other nations during the war, their often harsh condemnations of the policies of the occupiers, and their almost exclusive focus on facing up to past sins through conventional Christian practices of personal expiation did little to advance a reconciliatory dialogue. These attitudes have been extensively described by previous research, but Schroeder successfully shows how Church affiliated relief organisations, such as the *Protestant Relief Work (Hilfswerk der EKD)* and the *Catholic Church Aid Society (Kirchliche Hilfsstelle)* were instrumental in forging such a public discourse. While supplying the population with food, housing and clothing, they simultaneously advanced a narrative about the immediate past and present which exacerbated a sense of victimhood among the German population. Schroeder argues, nonetheless, that at tactical junctures, religious relief organisations were ready to concede German misdeeds in the past, either to appease the Allies to achieve a specific aim or, most often, to claim the moral high ground when trying to accuse them of present injustices, such as when arguing the case against the expulsions and the loss of territory in the East. Somewhat paradoxically, in Schroeder's interpretation such early self-interested recognitions of guilt, however partial and vague, laid the ground for reconciliatory work in the subsequent years because they represented at least a first acknowledgment of responsibility.

A multitude of civilian associations took up the task of reconciling Germans and their former wartime

enemies and laboured towards forging new relationships of international cooperation. In many respects, their work can be interpreted as a form of 'grassroots diplomacy' (p. 98) exercised at a time when an official foreign policy was banned. As Schroeder convincingly shows, the most successful of these organisations were those which developed 'a more overt political agenda that meshed with the dominant ideology of their zone' (p. 98). In the Western Zones, associations with a religious profile were the rule, though their social reach was highly limited. Organisations such as the *International Fellowship of Reconciliation* (IFOR) and the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) appealed to a minority of engaged Christian pacifists across different countries, but had little impact beyond. More successful was the work of the *Pax Christi Movement*, which brought together French and German Catholic clergy. In their gatherings, Catholics could rally around the mission of a Christian reconstruction of Europe and the joint fight against Communism, while French dignitaries such as Bishop Théas of Montauban were ready to focus on shared interests and gloss over the past. The most successful among these associations with a Christian profile was *Moral Re-Armament*, an organisation founded in 1937 by the Lutheran and fiercely anti-Communist American priest Frank Buchman. After the war, MRA quickly took up its work in Germany and laboured against the rise of Communism while advocating Christian Democracy as the only salvation for post-war Europe. By taking an openly political approach and engaging in extreme propaganda campaigns, MRA reached far beyond the more spiritual aspirations of the remaining associations. At its 1948 conference at Caux in Switzerland, leading Christian Democratic European political figures attended, including on the German side Konrad Adenauer and several *Ministerpräsidenten*. Buchman and his MRA colleagues supposedly even brokered the first encounter between Adenauer and Robert Schuman in 1950, thereby setting the scene for Franco-German cooperation in the years to come.

Schroeder argues that the Western Allies were instrumental in the rise of MRA, coinciding with a shift in American foreign policy with the beginning of the Cold War. While this might well be true, he has little substantial evidence to support this claim and beyond some generalisations, we learn only little about the extent of and the motivations behind the occupiers' support for institutions such as MRA. Since Schroeder argues that the most successful organisations were those which 'aligned their goals and work with the priorities of the respective zonal occupiers' (p. 125), it would have been illuminating to learn what these priorities in the sphere of reconciliation actually were. Schroeder generally tends to credit the Western Allies and their Religious Affairs Branches for supporting reconciliation work, but from the evidence he presents it remains unclear whether this help was mostly rhetorical and symbolic or involved significant material and institutional help too. There is also an unfortunate tendency throughout the book to postulate a dichotomy between the Western Allies as a unified body and the Soviet Union. This is also reflected in the fact that when writing about the policies of the Western Allies, Schroeder takes the United States position as shorthand for all occupying powers. If anything, however, most of the specialised research on the British and French zones of occupation published in the last two decades has demonstrated time and again that each occupier pursued an independent set of policies in their respective zones and that their methods of rule varied greatly. In general, therefore, what is missing from Schroeder's analysis is a discussion of how the manifold associations fitted into the plans of larger political and religious institutions. Apart from their place within the strategies of military governments, there remains the question of whether, for example, the CDU and the Churches took any form of direct influence upon these groupings. In brief, we still do not know how 'grassroots' these organisations really were.

Perhaps the most intricate sphere of reconciliation was that which involved relations between Jews and German gentiles. However difficult, some modest initial steps towards reconciliation did take place during the occupation period. Schroeder curiously does not engage here with the pioneering work of Atina Grossmann, who has written a highly stimulating study about the complicated relations between Jews, Germans and Allies in occupied Germany.⁽¹⁾ In Schroeder's view, the treatment of Jews and reconciliatory attempts differed markedly between the Western Zones and the Eastern Zone. As is well known, in the Soviet Zone, where active anti-Fascism was the prime entry ticket into the community of victims, the authorities refused to grant Jews recognition as a persecuted minority and return their property. The most influential victim association in the East, *Victims of Fascism*, re-established in 1947 as the *Association of Victims of Nazism* (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* - VVN), categorised Jews as 'second-class'

victims (p. 74), while the few who laboured within the VVN and SED for a restitution law which included Jews were marginalised. Schroeder argues that anti-Semitism among the Stalinist leadership was a main factor in preventing restitution and connects this to the series of purges of Jewish SED members which occurred between 1952 and 1956, though it would have been useful to be presented with more evidence of anti-Semitism in connection with the negation of victim status from within the Eastern German leadership for this thesis to be convincing.

In the Western Zones, Schroeder believes that all occupying powers supported Jewish-Gentile reconciliation in principle and exercised significant pressure upon German bodies to compensate victims of Nazism, but that the Americans were the most active in helping Jews. As Schroeder has neither examined the records of the American Military Government, nor those of the French and British occupiers, this claim remains somewhat speculative. What is clear is that, after the Western powers had introduced in their respective zones property restitution legislation, the German government began to pay out restitution to Jews from September 1949 onwards.

Such material help was preceded by a few attempts at Christian-Jewish reconciliation. On the whole, however, both the Protestant and Catholic clergy ignored Jewish victims and tried to avoid making statements about them. Protestant institutions often sent out a message of dialogue towards Jews, but at the same time reaffirmed their overall aim of proselytising them, which they discursively liked to present as a way of eradicating anti-Semitism in Germany. Already in 1945, they re-established a plethora of associations for their missionary work, which targeted Jews in such places as DP camps. The Catholic Church, in turn, tended to be even less prepared to discuss the persecution of Jews and only a small number of Catholic individuals were keen on working towards reconciliation. The situation started to change by mid-1948, though, when the American Military Government ordered and then materially assisted the establishment of Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, thirteen of which were founded between 1948 and 1953. Pursuing the goal of eradicating anti-Semitism from Germany not through conversion, but through education, these societies provided a forum for Jews and progressive Catholics as well as Protestants to interact with each other and, in Schroeder's interpretation, successfully launch 'Christian-Jewish reconciliatory work into the public sphere' (p. 92). Whether their public presence was really very significant might be questioned, but what Schroeder does effectively demonstrate here is that whatever limited reconciliation took place was almost never the product of institutional initiatives coming from the Church hierarchies, but rather the result of the work of a small number of engaged individuals operating on the fringe of German society.

Schroeder is to be congratulated for bringing to our attention the actual existence and work of an undefeatable array of post-war NGOs and civilian relief initiatives, most of which have been hitherto ignored by historians. Organisations such as MRA provide a fascinating window into the associational and truly transnational structures which accompanied the rise of Christian Democracy in the post-war era. Schroeder's research also provides a forceful reminder that the occupation period cannot be merely treated as a transitional period leading up to the Cold War, but that the socio-political dynamics put in place during this time need to be taken seriously. Given the vast scope of the project and the sizeable number of international archives which Schroeder has examined, it is perhaps understandable that several parts of this short book provide no more than selective glimpses into the activities of these post-war institutions. At times, however, one cannot help but feel simply swamped by the large amount of very brief descriptions about these organisations, which contain basic factual information, but often lack analytical depth. The genuine contribution of this book to the existing body of research, namely its pioneering analysis of the NGOs, gets also lost at times by dwelling too much on too many themes which have already been dealt with extensively in the literature.

Given Schroeder's somewhat ambiguous definition of reconciliation as the building of peaceful relations between former enemies, it is rather surprising that the most obvious sphere in which a reconciliatory process might have been observed, namely in the relationships between ordinary Germans and members of the occupying powers located on German territory, should have been entirely neglected. As for example Petra Goedde has argued in an influential study, which is oddly not mentioned, the quotidian contacts

between Germans and American soldiers (in particular the forming of sexual relationships) crucially affected American foreign policy and enabled a political rapprochement between the countries even before the Cold War got underway.⁽²⁾ We still know only very little about whether such instances of personal reconciliation existed to the same extent in the other zones of occupation, and even less about their respective impact upon the policies of the occupying powers. Clearly this book could not do everything, but why reconciliatory practices undertaken by relatively small groups should be treated as more relevant than such wider societal processes is unclear. There also seems to be a preferential focus upon religious organisations throughout the book. This might be just a reflection of the fact that religion was indeed so tremendously powerful in the immediate post-war era, but it would have been necessary to contextualise such a finding and explain why, for example, Social Democrats in the Western Zones should have had no, or only very weak, affiliated NGOs involved in reconciliation.

There is also the broader question about the merits of 'reconciliation' as an analytical concept for historians. Etymologically, the term itself is deeply rooted in Christian discourse and encapsulates a strong normative connotation which it cannot easily shed. There are two problems with this. First, the term, if not explicitly limited to the amelioration of relations between states, implies a very personal process of change which escapes any attempt at quantification. Second, it is taken for granted that reconciliation is something necessary for a given society to become peaceful or achieve stability. Schroeder consequently believes that reconciliatory achievements can be simply measured by looking at the extent to which peaceful relations between Germany and its former enemies actually developed (p. 4). In addition, while he acknowledges that the groups he examines only maintained a minority position within German society, he argues that they made a 'striking contribution to the history of modern Germany' (p. 164). Yet if one takes the case of post-war Western Europe, it seems to me that much of the research to come out since Alan Milward's path-breaking *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* (another omission in the book) has emphasised that European integration had little to do with the high ideals of committed individuals, and less with 'justice', 'apologies', and 'forgiveness' (p. 9), but rather with the pragmatic convergence of national self-interest.⁽³⁾ The thesis that the stabilisation of Germany necessitated a process of reconciliation which established 'the foundation of European diplomacy and cooperation' (p. 12) is therefore unpersuasive. Integration and stabilisation rapidly took place *despite* the fact that there was no broader reconciliation between European societies.

Perhaps a solution would lie in approaching reconciliation not as a reality which can be measured, but as a discourse with a specific trajectory. Rather than determining whether an individual was truly sincere or merely self-interested when engaging in reconciliatory acts, attitudes which in any case are difficult to determine with any certainty through an examination of the leading actors' ego-documents, it might be more fruitful to analyse and explain the ups and downs of a trope. The question of who dominates a discursive field for what reasons would then move centre stage. In this context, it would have been important to learn which specific words and metaphors Europeans actually used when they talked about reconciliation. There surely are other legitimate approaches, but unfortunately and in contrast to what he claims in the introduction, Schroeder never truly incorporates into his research the existing 'theories of reconciliation' (p. 9) which would be of interest to historians unfamiliar with the respective social science literature. Perhaps as a result of this theoretical dearth, there is a certain ambiguity about terminology throughout the book, with 'reconciliation' being often synonymous with material reparations, restitutions and atonement for Nazi crimes. On these last themes, there already exists though a substantial body of literature, which is not engaged with sufficiently here, and it is not always clear in how far this book departs from what we already know about the German politics of the past.

Despite these shortcomings, Schroeder's research successfully introduces into the historiography the work of a number of hitherto neglected post-war institutions based on thorough archival digging, which in itself is an important contribution to the social, political and intellectual history of the period. Historians of post-war Europe might, however, seek to integrate these organisations into the broader transnational history of political and social movements, rather than approach them through the lens of reconciliation.

Notes

1. A. Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations: 1945–1949* (New Haven, CT, 2003).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* (2nd ed., London, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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