

Zachary Gallant
Katharina F. Gallant

WESTEND



NAZIS ALL THE WAY DOWN

The Myth of the
Moral Modern Germany

W E S T E N D

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Zachary Gallant holds an M.A. in International Politics from the University of London's Goldsmiths College and a Fulbright Scholarship in post-conflict redevelopment in the former Yugoslavia. He has been running antidiscrimination and climate justice projects throughout Germany since 2015, funded by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and by the European Union. He is a former board member of the American Jewish Congress (MD Chapter) and has taught at universities across Europe on identity, ethnicity, migration, economic injustice, and concepts of Jewishness.

Dr. Katharina F. Gallant is a senior researcher at the Center for Development Research at the University of Bonn. Her research as an ethnologist and psychologist covers interculturality and interethnic conflict, from the treatment of Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe to the roles of the indigenous and African American minorities in North and Latin America. She has lectured at universities in Germany and Austria on interethnic conflict, interculturality, peaceful coexistence, postmodern society, and development cooperation. She served as a member of the Unkel City Council from 2019 until 2021.

This book started as a simple investigation, but morphed into an ethical examination of Germany as a whole through honest but difficult conversations between Zachary and Katharina, and with numerous ethicists, economists, historians, and humanitarians. In addition to Middle Eastern rabbis, Zachary traces his Jewish roots to shtetls that were wiped out during the Nazi occupation of eastern Europe, as well as to Jews who fled to the United States before the Nazis took power. Katharina can trace her roots both to co-conspirators in the 1944 plot against Hitler, and to generals in the Wehrmacht who led their platoons at exactly those places where Zachary's ancestors once lived. Jewish perspectives in the book are Zachary's, as Katharina does not presume to have a voice there, but these specifically Jewish issues have all been discussed with rabbis and other Jewish humanitarians to ensure that they represent a broader Jewish perspective. This book is a loving, peaceful cooperation between these two histories in the hopes of finding a strategy toward a true reconciliation at a higher level. We hope that this end product can be seen as a first step towards a »dialogue in difference« between Jews and Germans, and a first step toward truly overcoming Germany's overwhelming Nazi legacy.

Dedication

The tapestry of Jewish life and peoplehood is rich,
it's not just rabbis, doctors, lawyers and bankers,
and it's not just tragic heroes and righteous victims.

This book is dedicated not simply to the survivors,
but to the unstoppable. The Nazi Hunters,
the rebels like Albert Einstein, Dr. Ruth, Marcel Reich-Ranicki,
Helga Newmark, Henry Morgentaler, Hannah Arendt,
John Slade, Simone Veil, and even Henry Kissinger, Paul Gelb,
Max Eisenhardt, and Abba Kovner, and so many others
who refused to let the Nazis win and refused to be defined
by their victim status.

Contents

Introduction: Turtles and Nazis	13
Section I: The Roots of Modern Germany	17
Everyday Germans	17
Snowflakes and Avalanches	19
“If You Want to Read the Future, You Have to Leaf Through the Past”	22
Henkel’s Persilschein	29
Henkel – A Family in Unkel and Their Profits from the Nazi Era	36
What Was Denazification, Really?	40
Were There Any Willing Nazis at All?	44
The Real McCloy: The Role of the US and UK in Non-Denazification	51
Eastern Denazification	57
Reparations – Individual or Structural?	62
Villains and Heroes	72
Section II: “Memorial Theater”	79
Never Forget	79
<i>Aufarbeitung</i> Without the Jews	82
The International Significance of German <i>Aufarbeitung</i>	95
What Makes a Jew a Jew?	102
Societies That Have Begun to Hear Non-Dominant Voices	111
<i>Nestbeschmutzer</i>	114

Section III: All the Way Down	117
Municipal Complicity	118
Brown Foundations	122
Political Influence	132
The New German Nationalism	136
“Who Controls the Past, Controls the Future. Who Controls the Present, Controls the Past”: The Nazi History of Modern German Publishers	138
The Reichsbahn Today	146
Coming Home	148
Counterargument – Underneath the Turtles?	153
Artists	153
Music	154
Philosophy and Academia	156
Churches	158
Science	158
Sustainability	161
Hitler as the Only Turtle?	165
Section IV: Conclusion	167
How Much Are We Really Talking Here?	167
Reform as a Moral, not Legal, Obligation	171
Denazification 2.0 – Germany Saves the World	176
Acknowledgments	187
Notes	191
Bibliography	209

Introduction: Turtles and Nazis

The title of this book, *Nazis All the Way Down*, is a provocative proclamation, so we will start by saying that we have a great deal of love and respect for German colleagues, German family members, German friends, and indeed much of German society, and are not accusing any individual German of Nazism.* When, shortly before this book went to print, a storm damaged our house, the first person who came out to help us, as the storm had barely passed, was our 70-year-old German neighbor in his wooden workmen's shoes, helping us sort through splintered wood and repair what was salvageable. It didn't matter to him where we came from, it didn't matter the color of our skin, hair or eyes: He saw a neighbor in need, and he saw it as his duty to help. Time and again, we have seen our German friends and neighbors put themselves out there for others, German and non-German alike. We're not talking about the individuals when we talk about Nazis today. It's the difference between "Nazis everywhere!", which would be calling individual Germans Nazis, and "Nazis all the way down," which is institutional, systemic.

Stephen Hawking, one of the greatest thinkers of our times, relates in his 1988 work *A Brief History of Time* the story of an astronomer giving a lecture:

"At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: 'What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really

* Simultaneously, we do not deny Nazi tendencies in German society which manifest, for instance, in the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) which won 10 percent of the 2021 national vote despite being classified by German intelligence services as a right-wing extremist party. This, however, is beside the point of the turtles.

a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.’ The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, ‘What is the tortoise standing on?’ ‘You’re very clever, young man, very clever,’ said the old lady. ‘But *it’s turtles all the way down!*’”¹

U. S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia cited a similar story in an opinion on a legal case, though in his version the Earth is supported on the back of a tiger, and the tiger in turn is standing on the back of an elephant, and the elephant is standing on a turtle, or indeed, infinite turtles.²

The point of the turtles is this: There is the world we see, the Earth. Under the world we see, there is the world that we know supports the world we see: our institutions; in Scalia’s version: the tiger. Under that is the world we believe we understand; a world we cannot actually see but that we know is there, supporting the institutions that keep our world standing. This underlying world is Scalia’s elephant. And under all that are the turtles, the recursive basis of society, under which nothing else exists.

So, what do turtles have to do with Nazis? Over the past half-century, Germany has gained a global reputation for dealing honestly with the crimes of the Nazi era. This process, generally known as *Aufarbeitung*, is, on its surface, the systematic working through of history, the admission of individual and systemic guilt for the genocide against the Jews as well as against other individuals (e. g., political enemies) and groups (e. g., Roma and Sinti) whom the Nazi regime sought to eliminate for various reasons. It is the national apology: not just a one-off, not just lip service, but perpetual and eternal. You mean it, and you keep meaning it, forever. Your national actions are, if not governed by, at least ever mindful of your national guilt, pursuing an agenda of “Never again” committing the same crime against any group. Additionally, you take special care to protect from further harm, in any form, the specific group(s) your nation has previously victimized.

This process, admittedly focused on Jews, has been the social centerpiece of modern Germany; a multi-decade-effort following the ostensible Denazification of Germany at the founding period of the

Federal Republic of Germany, the post-Nazi West German state.* It involved public discussion of the role of everyday Germans, as well as non-Nazi-affiliated institutions such as churches and even literary and academic figures, in the rise of the Nazi regime leading to the Holocaust, or *Shoah*.** It turned into, through the next generation known as the 68ers, a full political and social review of national privilege and of personal, familial, and national narratives.

Aufarbeitung continues today, with, among other things, brass cobblestones (*Stolpersteine*) laid in front of the houses where victims of the Shoah lived, upon which are inscribed their names, year of birth, and year and location of death. By 2023, there should be some 100,000 of these stones throughout Europe, the vast majority in Germany.³ This is in addition to the construction of massive Shoah memorials in many cities, over 300 memorials across the country, and the Shoah and the horrors of Nazism being taught in-depth in schools. The theme first enters the mainstream curriculum of German schools in ninth grade (15 to 16 years old) in history, politics, religion/ethics, and even literature classes.⁴ Classes are moreover encouraged to visit former concentration camps to get an up-close understanding of the subject.⁵ However, there is also a movement in favor of teaching about the Shoah as early as fourth grade (ten years old).⁶

Unlike Poland, Croatia, Romania, or even France or the Netherlands, Germany has critically reflected on its Nazi past and created a

* Denazification was also sought in the Russian sector and subsequently in the German Democratic Republic (commonly referred to as East Germany). However, given the communist ambitions of the respective governments as well as the international context of the Cold War, the social fabric was re-knit in a different way. We elaborate on this in the chapter “Eastern Denazification”.

** A part of *Aufarbeitung* is recognizing the power of words to empower or disempower. The word ‘Holocaust’ signifies a completely burnt sacrificial offering and is viewed by numerous Jewish authorities and historians as inappropriate, first because the destruction of the Jews was not complete, many did indeed survive, and second because the role of the Jews was not of a ritual sacrifice but the victims of a brutal mass murder. The Hebrew word ‘Shoah’, meaning ‘catastrophe’, is generally accepted as the preferred term to discuss the European annihilation of six million Jews led by Hitler’s Germany. For this book, and for German *Aufarbeitung* in general, the specifically Jewish focus of the word ‘Shoah’ fits better and will be used instead of Holocaust.