

NATIONALISM IN GERMAN REUNIFICATION: GÜNTER GRASS AND A POLITICAL
CRITIQUE OF THE GERMAN NATION-STATE

By

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As fireworks lit up the Berlin sky to signify the reunification of the two German states on October 3, 1990, eventual Nobel laureate author Günter Grass voiced his disgust towards this event.¹ What Grass's response illustrates is a deep seeded angst to the redevelopment of a German nation-state. Specifically, his reaction expressed the feelings of a select few on the left of the political spectrum who detested the processes in which the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) reunified.² The primary reason that Grass, and others, communicated their dissent against the recreation of a German nation-state was because of the legacy that the German past carried after World War II and the Nazi atrocities. Moreover, their fear of a resurgence of extreme German nationalism came from Grass's insistence that the legacy of the Nazi past, as articulated by the German term of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, supersede any movement toward the establishment of a unified Germany.³

¹ During Germany's reunification night, Grass held a speech to some members of Germany's left, entitled "A Steal called the GDR," which is analyzed below. Grass, "Ein Schnäppchen Namens DDR," in *Ein Schnäppchen Namens DDR: Letzte Reden vom Glockengeläut* (Frankfurt: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990): 39-60.

² This paper is part of a larger analysis where I analyze four prominent detractors of reunification from the FRG.

³ A literal translation of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is confronting or mastering one's burden of the past. Moreover, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* identifies the process in which FRG's society has confronted their malefic past, specifically Nazi Germany's role in starting World War II and the Holocaust. In addition, it also represents the burden in which this coping of Germany's past has had in the conceptualization of German nationalism.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung translates as a struggle to deal with, or come to terms with, the past in a general sense. Moreover, this term has come to be associated specifically with the German attempt to understand how and why such terrible crimes came to fruition during the Nazi era and whether or not “ordinary Germans” should carry guilt as well. This holds true even if they were only guilty of standing by and doing nothing while crimes were committed. In addition, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* also represents the concept of the burden to cope with Germany’s past and its impact that this burden has had on the conceptualization of nationalism and the representation of a German nation-state.⁴

In essence, some Germans in the FRG rejected romantic notions of nationalism because of their sense of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* they carried following the Nazi time in power. Specifically, to use Günter Grass as an example, I argue that this relationship to Germany’s past determined these opinions against German reunification. Born in the German city of Danzig, now Gdansk, Poland, in 1927 Grass deals extensively with Germany’s historical burden in his speeches and literary works. Grass’s political ideology reflects his preoccupation with the legacy of the Nazi past. His speeches and *feuilletons* from the 1960’s through the reunification process that took place in 1989 and 1990 illustrate how Grass, as well as other prominent members in society, from the political left in the FRG, conceptualized the German nation within the context of a unified state. Specific examples

⁴ Scholarship that illustrated the influence that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has had within the context of German reunification; see: Andreas Huyssen, “After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals,” *New German Critique* 52, special issue on German Unification (Winter, 1991): 109-143; Huyssen, “The Inevitability of Nation: German Intellectuals after Unification,” *October* 61, The Identity in Question (Summer, 1992): 65-73; Robert G. Moeller, “Sinking Ships, the Lost Heimat and Broken Taboos: Günter Grass and the politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany,” *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 2 (May, 2003): 147-181; Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Laura Sager, “German Unification: Concepts of Identity in Poetry from the East and West,” *The German Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 273-288; Ralf Schnell, “German Debates: Heinrich Böll and the GDR,” trans. by Janelle Blankenship, *New German Critique* 88, Contemporary German Literature (Winter, 2003): 55-69.

from Grass's writings and speeches illustrate how Grass' preoccupation with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* shaped his conceptualization of the German nation and led to his views relating to German reunification.

In Grass's 1970 speech, "Germany: Two States—One Nation?" he clearly expressed apprehension concerning a politically united Germany while simultaneously advocating for a culturally unified nation. Grass makes it clear that the FRG and the GDR must avoid political singularity, but should jointly pursue goals such as peace and aide to the Third World.⁵ Grass positioned this relationship as an "accord" rather than a union.⁶ In this way, the two German states could better reconcile the German identity's legacy to promote further positivistic ideals based on European Enlightenment philosophies.⁷ For Grass, this idealized relationship between the two states would enable Germans to enjoy a shared culture and to pursue worthwhile aims while avoiding the dangers associated with a reunified and resurgent German nation. Grass's 1970 speech reveals the deep seeded angst he felt toward traditional German nationalism and the idea of a politically unified German nation-state.

The most interesting aspect of this speech and of Grass's views is his clear articulation that the two German states must remain politically separate entities, but share a cultural identity that truly represents the collective identity of all Germans (Grass's

⁵ Günter Grass, "Germany—Two States, One Nation?" in *Two States—One Nation?* trans. Krishna Winston with A. S. Winsinger (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1990): 51-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52, 61.

Kulturnation).⁸ Grass stressed that confronting Germany's past was a necessary step in creating a new and collective German identity. Grass argued that, "if this new nation wants to have a clear understanding of itself, it must carry the bankruptcy of the old nation [before 1945] on both [states'] shoulders."⁹ This passage illustrates the two primary aspects of Grass's conception of a German identity that would become pervasive in the modern German nation, that of cultural singularity and Germany's collective burden concerning its war guilt.

Just prior to the revolutionary movements that led to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the GDR, Grass published a short article from the Munich based *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, entitled "Shame and Disgrace." As the provocative title suggests, Grass wanted to push Germany's war guilt and the legacy of its domestic and foreign policies during World War II to the forefront of German society.¹⁰ Published to "commemorate" the fiftieth anniversary of Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, Grass was adamant in maintaining the presence of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in contemporary German society. His attitude towards Poland is one specific example of how Grass's insistence on confronting the Nazi past influenced his political positions and views on foreign policy. Grass said that Germany must sympathize with Poland's position and support them because Poland's occupation by the Soviet Union and current political situation were a result of Germany's

⁸ For Grass, his articulations about a German "*Kulturnation*" illustrate the connectedness Germans have had throughout the last millennia. Grass positioned his argument on the fact that "Germany" was a cultural conglomeration of as many as hundreds of individual states that had no political unity. Not until 1871, with Otto von Bismarck's unification of Germany, under Prussian dominance, is where the first formation of a German nation-state comes to life. In the context of this paper, it is important to understand that Grass wanted to evoke the pre-unification context to Germany's *Kulturnation* and to keep political division of the two German states.

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ Grass, "Scham und Schande," zum 50. Jahrestag des Kriegsausbruchs, in in *Deutscher Lastenausgleich: Wider das dumpfe Einheitsgebot Reden und Gespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Sammlung Luchterhand, 1990): 27-32.

policies during World War II. According to Grass, “Poland needs help, our help, as we will always be in Poland’s debt.”¹¹

Grass’s political views were influenced by his insistence that Germany atone for its past. Consequently, for Grass, the idea that Germany could reunify and form a nation-state that stressed a unique German identity was fundamentally absurd. Furthermore, the way in which Grass conceptualized German national identity and unity illustrated his belief that political unity and cultural continuity were separate issues. As he argues in “Shame and Disgrace,” the presence of Germany’s past must be reconciled before any move toward reunification of the two German states.¹² Germans must continue to acknowledge and atone for the past because if the presence of a genuine *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is absent, then the foundations of a new German national identity are established on false terms and on potentially dangerous grounds.

Essentially, Grass developed a duality in the way he conceptualized the German nation. As “Shame and Disgrace” illustrates, Grass envisioned a clear cultural commonality between the two German states. At the same time, he was absolutely convinced that Germany, as a whole, must remain politically divided. Grass clearly thought that Germany’s collective burden concerning war guilt and the shared history of the two German states would enable them to forge a collective cultural identity, but make it dangerous to attempt to create a political union and form a new German nation.

Two months after Grass published “Shame and Disgrace” he made a speech, in December 1989, to the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) delegation of the FRG.

¹¹ Ibid., 31. Polen braucht Hilfe, unsere Hilfe, denn noch immer sind wir in Polens Schuld.

¹² Ibid., 27-28.

In this speech, Grass outlined his views on how the FRG should proceed on the issue of German reunification. The possibility that the two German states could reunite and form a single German nation had emerged as soon as the Soviet Union made it clear they would no longer use force to keep the East German Government in power. Grass's speech, "Sharing the Burden," emphasized that the two German states and any potential unified nation had a responsibility to continue and develop the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.¹³ Specifically, Grass pointed out the necessity for the GDR citizenry to have a fundamental confrontation of the Nazi past in order to allow a "correct" kind of reunification.¹⁴

Grass contended that all Germans, specifically the GDR, needed to confront the legacy of the Nazi era and the Second World War. Moreover, this stress on the past placed severely restricted parameters on the ways in which Germany's reunification process could occur and influence how a unified German nation-state would emerge after forty years of division. Grass posited that German reunification is only acceptable if Germany was a part of a united Europe that included a more in-depth form of European integration, whereby a political confederation operated on the continent. Alternatively, if Germany unified in such a way where political autonomy existed within both German states, they would have to form one economic and cultural unit to preserve both cultural unity and political distinctiveness.

According to Grass, "their history [the history of the GDR] underlies the hollowness [of the] unity proposition. Nothing would be gained except for the frightening power of

¹³ Grass, "Lastenausgleich," in *Deutscher Lastenausgleich: Wider das dumpfe Einheitsgebot Reden und Gespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Sammlung Luchterhand, 1990): 7-12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

wealth, puffed up from the desire for more and more power.”¹⁵ Germany’s history influenced how Grass conceptualized the German nation and reunification. On the one hand, Grass genuinely feared that political reunification might lead to a nationalistic German state that would become a threat to its neighbors. On the other hand, Grass insisted that all Germans had a shared past and that the two German states should draw closer together and form one cultural entity. Consequently, Grass was not opposed to German reunification in and of itself. Grass argued that reunification according to very specific guiding principles would be acceptable. Even so, he was adamantly opposed to the immediate reunification of the German states by a process that essentially absorbed East Germany into West Germany. This, he feared, would result in a political system whereby a single political entity represented all Germans in the new nation. As the reunification process evolved, the lack of any *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within the policy decisions and popular discourses that led to the FRG’s absorption of the GDR further disillusioned Grass.

Grass’s speech during the GDR’s final night illustrates his ambivalence toward German unity. His landmark speech, “A ‘Steal’ Called the GDR,” summarized his clear arguments against the capitalistic (in his opinion, colonial even) takeover of the GDR.¹⁶ With the process of reunifying Germany over, politically speaking, a disgruntled Grass illustrated the inequality of the process, saying, “On October 2nd, the ringing of bells announced the passing of a substitute for joy, unless television, that inventor of a new reality,

¹⁵ Ibid., 11. Ihre Geschichte unterläge dem dumpfen Einheitsgebot. Nichts wäre gewonnen außer beängstigenden Machtfülle, gebläht vom Gelüst nach mehr und mehr Macht.

¹⁶ Grass, “Ein Schnäppchen Namens DDR,” in *Ein Schnäppchen Namens DDR: Letzte Reden vom Glockengeläut* (Frankfurt: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1990): 39-60.

succeeded in presenting a deceptive jubilation. Thus, history is made.”¹⁷ Immediately, Grass’s disappointment with the lack of any confrontation of national identity within the process becomes clear. This reaction to the popularity of the reunification process, as displayed through the television, became an “inventor of a new reality” (*Erfinder neuer Wirklichkeit*) articulates Grass’s contention that the re-creation of a German nation-state wholly missed his desire to confront Germany’s historical burden in a collective manner.

Moreover, the rationale to his political arguments fell in line with his desire to keep a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* present in the process. In this sense, his adherence to a “German Confederation” clearly exemplified the culturally united, politically divided necessity to his conception of a German nation. According to Grass, the creation of a German Federation of States would have been “a more thoughtful and cautious way” to achieve German Unity and it would have been a way that “our neighbors could tolerate” without having to worry about a resurgent Germany resulting in a disaster.¹⁸ Grass continues to indicate that such predictions led to his reputation as a pessimist as well as an unpatriotic compatriot.¹⁹ The inclusion of Germany’s neighbors further illustrates the claims that Grass made to place a confrontation to the past for all Germans to reconcile their relationship within Europe.

Grass continued his distrust in his assertion that reunification’s speed was a misappropriation of Germany’s burden. As Grass surmised, Germany “rushed in headless

¹⁷ Ibid., 39. Zum 2. Oktober wurde Glockengeläut angesagt als Ersatz für Freude, die Verganzen ist; es sei denn, dem Fernsehen, als Erfinder neuer Wirklichkeit, gelingen einige Jubeleinblendungen. So wird Geschichte gemacht.

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43. ‘Bund deutscher Länder’ hätte verwandeln können, und als ich zusätzlich meinte, es werde ein solch nachdenklicher, deshalb behutsamer und landsamer Weg zur Einheit uns Deutschen und unseren Nachbarn erträglicher sein als der sich anbahnende Schweinsgalopp samt voraussehbarer Flurschäden, wurde ich zum Schwarzseher, Miesmacher ernannt und unter der Rubrik ‘Vaterlandslose Geselle’ abgebucht, wenn nicht vorgemerkt.

hurry, appropriately thoughtless and solely confident” toward a unification in which the larger part of Germany (the former FRG) dictated the pace and structure of the unification.²⁰ The residents of the smaller part of Germany (the former GDR), who “were just glad to be free from state patronage” and government control, did not realize that they would now be controlled by the profit orientated capitalists prevalent in the former Federal Republic.²¹ These colonial masters were only willing and ready to invest in the GDR because they could do so at bargain prices.²²

Grass continued his dissent against the process of reunification precisely because of the lack of an honest *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within the surrounding discourse. As Grass stated:

The new injustice, which is based on the old one, hits a population to which continuous injustice, after twelve years of National Socialist domination, was done during [the next] forty-five years. These sixteen million East Germans are representative of the burdens with which Germany was saddled as a result of the war it began and lost. Weakened from the beginning by the dismantling [of factories and other structures] and by the billions in reparations that were demanded, they also never had free elections; however, freedom was given to the West Germans by the victors and they were also entitled to help from the Marshall Plan.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 44-45.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 44-45. Indem sich die Deutschen in kopfloser Eile, entsprechend gedankenlos und einzig dem Fetisch Währung vertrauend, inzwischen bar jeder Freude vereinigen, wobei der größere Teil Deutschlands Tempo und Gangart bestimmt, erfährt der kleinere Teil, dessen Bewohner soeben noch froh waren sich endlich frei von staatlicher Bevormundung begreifen zu dürfen, nun das Diktat profitorientierter Kolonialherren, die hier zugreifen dort abwarten und erst dann zu investieren bereit sind, wenn ihnen die Konkursmasse DDR zum Schleuderpreis zugefallen sein wird; möglichst frei von Altlasten.

²³ Ibid., 45. Das neue Unrecht, das auf altem fußt, trifft eine Bevölkerung, die dem anhaltenden Unrecht nach zwölf Jahren nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft weitere fünfundvierzig Jahre lang untertan war. Diese Siebsehn Millionen Ostdeutschen sind es gewesen, denen stellvertretend die Hauptlast des von allen Deutschen begonnenen und verlorenen Kriegs aufgebürdet wurde. Geschwächt von Anbeginn durch Demontage und Reparationsleistungen in Milliardenhöhe, hatten sie nie freie Wahl; den Westdeutschen hingegen wurde von den Siegern Freiheit geschenkt und Marshallplanhilfe zugestanden.

Grass's specific concern with German identity was interrelated to the xenophobia and violence directed to minorities by Germans with a reemphasis to their identity. Because of Germany's past, he believed that this would "reawaken" this tenet in the Germans' identity and that the eastern citizens, because they had not confronted their past, would engage in violence against minorities, especially to Poles.²⁴ In this respect, Grass's argument surmised that because the reunification process did not hinge on an honest *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, unified Germany would not function peacefully in Europe or within the international community.

The logic to Grass' argument constitutes an imagined connection for both East and West Germans to confront their shared past. He contends that the former citizens of the GDR and the FRG, along with their own burden under Soviet rule, must confront the "primary burden" (*Hauptlast*) of the Nazi's time in power and collective war guilt. This illustrates his cultural reliance that a united German community can exist. Benedict Anderson's conceptualization of how nations are formed, and more importantly, "imagined," facilitates Grass's requirement that a common German culture must confront its historical burden.²⁵ With reunification, Grass believed that the only way for German unity to be viable, all Germans must share in their adherence toward a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Moreover, Grass' reliance on the shared historical memory of the two states exhibits a connection to Eric Hobsbawm's theories of nationalism. Specifically, Hobsbawm argued that with the formation of a nation, a shared historical experience, usually manufactured, is a

²⁴ Ibid., 45-46.

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1992).

foundational element.²⁶ In this context, Grass's "imagined" nation also relied on creating a shared historical experience around his belief that the two German states were, culturally, already a united "nation."

These writings and speeches by Grass illustrate his views on German nationalism and the formation of a unified German nation. Grass, as well as other individuals on the left, vigorously opposed reunification, whereas most of the population in both the east and west of Germany viewed reunification as natural and inevitable. It was not just the legacy of the Nazi past itself, but also his determination that all Germans confront this past in a meaningful way, that made Grass oppose immediate reunification and ultimately led to his political marginalization as reunification proceeded at an accelerated pace. However, despite his marginalization, Grass is of particular significance, having won the Pulitzer Prize in Literature, "whose frolicsome black fables portray the forgotten face of history,"²⁷ specifically the rise of Nazism and the war experience. In his 2006 autobiography, Grass revealed that he had been drafted, not into the regular Wehrmacht in 1944 as was generally believed, but into the Waffen SS.²⁸ This revelation, as well as Grass's statements about the personal guilt and shame he continued to feel, led some to question the motives behind his insistence on a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.²⁹ This controversy continues, but it should not obscure the crucial role that Grass played in keeping Nazi atrocities at the forefront of

²⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12-13.

²⁷ "The Nobel Prize of Literature 1999," nobelprize.org, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1999/, (accessed on 28 April, 2011).

²⁸ Günter Grass, *Peeling the Onion: a Memoir*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, 2007), 117.

²⁹ Alan Riding, "Novelist Is Bedeviled by SS Past," *The New York Times*, 17 August 2006, E1.

German discussions and consciousness. Moreover, several individuals who were not a part of the Nazi system share Grass' views.

Finally, though Grass predicted the reemergence of an aggressive form of nationalism, this was a small minority reaction; a militaristic German nation did not occur because of political reunification. However, other difficulties did occur because of the way in which reunification was achieved. If the two German nations paid greater attention to the concerns of Grass and other individuals who wanted a more gradual approach to reunification, perhaps fewer political, economic, and social problems would have accompanied the recreation of a German nation-state. It was not until a decade after reunification that Wessies (former citizens of West Germany) and Ossies (former citizens of East Germany) set aside their mutual distrust and bitterness over the problems caused by reunification, focused on their shared experiences, and moves toward the kind of cultural unity that Grass had advocated.