

Haunting Obituaries: The German Foreign Ministry's Confrontation with Its Nazi Past

Joschka Fischer

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It is a great pleasure to be here and to address an audience in Tel Aviv about *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit*—the study on the German Foreign Ministry and its Nazi past. Thank you very much for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to present this lecture. I must say I am deeply impressed by the size of the audience tonight.

Now, let me begin with the history of the history. I have been praised for my purported responsibility for the emergence of the report, but in fact I was actually not the one who thought of doing it: Since the very beginning of my political consciousness—I belong to the postwar generation, born in 1948—I fought to establish an honest national self-perception rooted in the truth, and I believed that my country had achieved tremendous progress in that direction. After 1945, in the immediate postwar period, the Allies were responsible for Germany's confrontation with its past. The United States pushed to punish war criminals: to search for them, arrest them, and bring them to justice. But with the beginning of the Cold War, what I will call the "Great Denial" began. And then also began my own memories.

I grew up knowing only about German victims. As ethnic Germans, my family had been expelled from Hungary. In the 1950s, what I heard (this was before the TV era) was based on oral history, and mostly favored German victims. This changed at the beginning of the 1960s. Figures such as then-Attorney General of the State of Hessen, Fritz Bauer, played an extremely important role in putting an end to the Great Denial. He was also a key figure in the arrest of one of the architects of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, in Argentina. The Eichmann trial [in Israel] was linked with the beginning of the TV age in Germany. I well remember the pictures and also the substance of the trial, which received news coverage almost every night. But later, in the 1960s, with the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials and the subsequent trials of perpetrators from other death camps, a historical debate in our

parliament ensued. It focused on the legal situation in Germany at that time—that twenty years after the murders, very few perpetrators were being prosecuted.

However, in 1968 Germany began to confront its own past in a very serious way. We cannot forget that at that time, the majority of the West German people still consisted of people who had been around during the Hitler period. Many of them had been supporters of Hitler, some of them perpetrators. At that time, you could find them everywhere: in the juridical system, the police, the medical service, and the various branches of state bureaucracy. It is impossible to understand 1968 in Germany—even the phenomenon of left-wing terrorism and all its criminal consequences—without taking into account this generational confrontation, which was extremely bitter. In fact, if you look at left-wing terrorism in the post-1968 period, for the most part, it actually took place in the former Axis countries—Germany, Italy and Japan. Scholars will, I believe, eventually find some common thread in the generational conflict in those countries.

Germany, however, did change, and in a very tangible way. In 1985, by means of a powerful speech, President Richard von Weizsäcker, a conservative, also brought the majority of the conservative side of our country into a process of introspection. Those Germans also came to understand that the defeat in World War II was not a disaster but rather the beginning of a new democratic and free Germany. In 1995, a decade later, Weizsäcker's successor, President Roman Herzog (also a conservative), and Chancellor Helmut Kohl followed in the same path. So when I entered the Foreign Ministry, I honestly thought that the confrontation with history had already taken place and that German society had reached a new consensus. I could not have imagined that there would be a need to conduct another such historical examination.

The Green Party was a young movement and we did not have very much experience in state administration or in running a country. Of course, I did have some experience, because I had worked on the state level. When I entered the Foreign Ministry, and without discussing it with anybody, I entered into a silent monologue with myself. I decided that I would accept the existing structure at the ministry, because as a Green, and as foreign minister, I thought that it would be too much to try to change the structure of such a prestigious bureaucracy. This was all the more so because of the pressure of external events, seeing as this was at the beginning of the war in Kosovo. In hindsight, I must say that this was a mistake, a miscalculation. I would never have broached these issues. The truth is that I was compelled to do so.

One day, a letter from Chancellor Gerhard Schröder arrived on my desk, informing me that he had received a letter of complaint about my behavior from an elderly

woman. The chancellor was interested in hearing my explanation. I read the letter and I was ashamed. The lady, Frau Marga Henseler, a former member of the German Foreign Service, had written to me but her letter had been answered in a bureaucratic way and had not been brought to my attention. But Marga Henseler persisted, so she wrote a letter to the chancellor and, via the chancellor, it finally reached me. She complained that a former member of the diplomatic service, who had recently died, was the subject of a glowing obituary (the text of which followed the official formula recalling his service to the Federal Republic). The diplomat in question was a certain Herr Franz Nüsslein. For twelve years, during the Franco period in the 1960s, he was the general consul of the Federal Republic of Germany in Barcelona. This in itself was very unusual, because normally diplomats serve for three to five years in one position and then they come home or get switched to another post. Marga Henseler knew Nüsslein personally. He was a protégé of Reinhard Heydrich and was very active in the German administration in occupied Prague during the war. He was also the one who had to decide about pardons if the death penalty was given by the courts. Nüsslein was on Washington's list of Nazi war criminals and was arrested in the American occupied zone. He was extradited to Czechoslovakia, tried, and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. In the mid-1950s, he was released without pardon. He then joined the Foreign Service. Marga Henseler wrote that she was very disappointed by the appearance of the obituary, and that she never thought that Joschka Fischer would allow such a thing.

I was really ashamed. I said, "This cannot happen again." So we went into the personnel files. What we saw made us realize that we could not accept a continuation of the existing state of affairs. These obituaries were published in a small internal bulletin, which was not intended for the broader public. It is important that the Foreign Service has such a publication, in which you can read about promotions, but also about the veteran "has-beens" who have died. What I still do not understand is why it was so important for certain individuals to make sure their obituary or that of their colleagues appeared in this small internal magazine when they were very well aware of their own Nazi past. I never denied the possibility that someone who was part of the Nazi machine as a young man could change. Many of them did change later on. But why was it so important to have this obituary? I will return to this later on.

So, the state secretary, my chief of staff, and I sat down together and we came to the conclusion that we could not do the job of historians on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, I decided that there would be no more obituaries for former members of the Nazi Party or members of the SS or SD. I thought this was an appropriate decision.

The first person who died after we instituted the new policy was a very senior former diplomat. His name was Franz Krapf. A few weeks later, one of the ministry "has-beens" called up and asked, "Where is the obituary for Franz Krapf?" He was told, "There will be no obituary for Franz Krapf," because not only did Krapf belong to the Nazi party but he was also a member of the SS and the security service of the *Reichssicherheitshaupta*. This was definitely a non-starter for an obituary. Nothing happened until a few weeks or months later, when a serious political problem emerged: the so-called "Visa Affair." Visas were issued by our embassy in Kiev to persons who should not have received them. The opposition attacked me. I would have done the same thing had I been in the opposition. I am certainly not complaining about that. Suddenly, however, a show of solidarity for Frank Krapf popped up in a very prestigious conservative daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. A huge advertisement was published in which all the famous veterans of West German diplomacy signed an obituary in memory of Krapf. I think it is not fantasy to connect the sudden solidarity with Franz Krapf with an opportunity to attack Fischer—and maybe even get him out of office. But the attempt failed.

The advertisement created a huge debate, even a revolt, in the Foreign Ministry. And then I said, "All right, do you want to discover the truth? I do, too." I really did not and could not believe that this issue was still in dispute in Germany in 2004. It turns out that I was naïve; I thought we had moved forward in a very positive way. But I had to confess to myself that I had made a mistake. So I was left to correct the mistake. I wanted to know the truth about what had happened in the German Foreign Ministry during the Nazi period since 1933, and what happened afterwards. So I decided to convene an independent commission of the best historians I could find. I wanted the commission to take a pluralistic, scientific approach, and, in order not to be one-sided, to be comprised of members not only from Germany, but also from America and Israel. And I would like to thank this opportunity to thank Moshe Zimmerman for his brilliant engagement in this commission.

So I must reject all the compliments regarding what I did. I reiterate that I was naïve, I made a mistake, and I had to correct it. If anyone deserves praise, it is Marga Henseler, now ninety-two years old and living in Bonn.

I think the report that emerged provides us with important insights. I will not now go into the details of the reaction in Germany. Suffice it to say that it was a huge success. The result was a 900-page book. I like voluminous books, and I read it and was deeply impressed. But the book was also commercially successful. Tens of thousands of copies were sold in Germany. The publishing house was overwhelmed; it thought that selling 5,000 copies would be good and that 10,000 would be a huge success. People were interested. And the book precipitated a

huge debate in Germany, especially among the younger generation, which had never heard these facts. Young Germans were shocked. I think the main elements were that, first of all, the *Auswärtiges Amt* [the Foreign Ministry] was an integral part of the murderous machine of the Holocaust. It had contributed to it in some of the occupied states, such as France and especially Greece. Some of you might remember that up until 1943, Thessaloniki was called “the Jerusalem of the Balkans.” The Foreign Ministry and its representatives in the consulate-general were the driving force behind the organization of the Holocaust there. I personally was not aware of the extent of the Foreign Ministry’s close ties to the SS.

The report demonstrated that the *Endlösung* [final solution] was not kept secret from the Foreign Ministry. Just the opposite was true. This was proven by the travel expense report, which figured in the “Wilhelmstrasse process.” The head of the Jewish desk, the so-called *Judenreferat*, Franz Rademacher, had to file a travel expense report and to state the reason for his travel. The reason given was “killing Jews.” This was an obviously accepted reason to travel.

When many of these cases are put together, you get a complete picture. This was not only collaboration; the ministry was part of that murderous machine, and in fact, it was involved in Nazi policies regarding Jews right from the beginning of the Third Reich. It is a very sad picture of the surrender of these so-called conservative elites to the Nazis and Hitler at the beginning of the 1930s. But the story continued even after the war. I think the postwar history is also very depressing. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer said, “If you do not have clean water, you have to use dirty water.” But allow me to be very direct: This water was very foul indeed. The big question for historians will be whether it was possible to do things in a different way. At the end of the day, in terms of democracy, the Federal Republic has been a great democratic success story; we should not forget that.

What happened after the war was that — and here I think is an important difference between the Foreign Ministry and the other ministries — the Foreign Ministry successfully managed to rearrange the facts and to paint a different and false self-portrait. When the Foreign Ministry was reactivated in the early 1950s, there was a need for new biographies, so they created new ones. You could see that when you delved into the files. A clear distinction was made: Hitler was bad; the SS was bad; the leading Nazis, the major war criminals were all bad; the *Judenreferat* in the *Auswärtiges Amt* was bad; but all the others, well, under very complicated conditions, tried their very best to stay “clean.” This narrative has now finally been deconstructed. And this is the reason for some of the reactions in Germany.

The commission discovered that during the Nazi period, there were actually fewer Nazis employed in the Foreign Ministry than there were during the 1950s. For

me, as someone who grew up in the '50s, that is not really shocking, because I remember very well the reality at that time; it was the reality of postwar Germany. And allow me an additional observation: There were also a lot of Nazis in the former GDR, though they were generally lower-ranking ones. The higher-level individuals tried to escape to the West. But at the rank-and-file level (I will not name names), there were some very famous names. I was astonished when I read this, but East Germany was hardly immune to this phenomenon and we should not forget that.

One of the elements that played an important role in creating this false historical picture was the notion of resistance. If so many Germans had resisted Hitler and his murderous henchmen, perhaps democracy would have had a chance in Germany. But, in fact, this was just a part of the rearrangement of biographies. And here, too, you could find shocking revelations. For example, the juridical desk in the Foreign Ministry, which had to deal with aiding Germans in foreign prisons, was in fact a desk used to warn war criminals in West Germany not to travel to France, Belgium, Italy, or wherever they might be arrested, indicted, and convicted.

The historical commission's report describes the reality in the postwar period. We should not forget that this reality was part of a battle about the identity of the German people after World War II and it took place after the horrible crime of destroying German and European Jewry. This struggle for identity did not start in 1968. In fact, it started much earlier and was key to the self-perception of democratic Germany. Almost every ten years we witnessed attempts at a so-called *schlussstrich* [drawing a line] past the Holocaust, but all these attempts failed. I think the importance is not that these attempts were made, but that all of them failed. You cannot deny the very fact of the Shoah, of Auschwitz, and of the moral and historical (or also personal at that time) responsibility of some Germans, and the moral and historical responsibility of the whole German people. It was about us, and will continue to be about us. To understand that is very important. This created bitterness but it also led to the progress that was made. Nowadays, democratic Germany is firmly based on the rule of law. The first articles of our constitution, which deal with the basic principles of the rule of law and of personal integrity, cannot be changed even by a majority. Germany is a strong democracy with a very strong civil society. My country eventually had the strength to face its own past—a terrible past. This has given us the strength to stand firm in future battles and to face future challenges.

I end here with the firm conviction that facing the truth does not weaken a nation; it strengthens it. This is our experience. And I thank the independent commission that contributed so much to the success of the German democracy and its future.