

Chapter 2

Reconciliation as a Historical Process

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ABSTRACT

This chapter understands reconciliation as an historical process, inseparably connected to communication processes, processes of remembrance, and the transformation processes of individual and collective memories. The author aims to link the issues of reconciliation and remembrance, and uses the historical example of the Germans coming to terms with their past (“Vergangenheitsbewältigung”) after 1945 to categorize a specific reconciliation process into different contextual levels and thereby answer the question, whether or not the German reconciliation process has been successfully completed. This chapter also aims to seek possible fields of comparison with other reconciliation processes that have taken place in different time and spatial settings. Such a “comparison of differences and variables within the context of reconciliation processes” will be elaborated through an abstraction of structural components, using the example of Germany after the Second World War.

Those who cannot remember their past are condemned to relive it. – G. Santayana in: Jan Assmann, Kultur und Gedächtnis

INTRODUCTION

When the German chancellor, Willy Brandt, knelt down in front of the memorial for the exterminated Jews in Warsaw during a visit to Poland on 7th December 1970, the following photograph appeared in the press throughout Germany the next day¹ (Figure 1).

That same day, Brandt had signed the “Warsaw treaty” as part of a series of the so-called “Eastern treaties” with former war enemies Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, as well as with the Eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR), where the Federal Republic of Germany officially accepted the loss of its former Eastern territories for the first time and thus paved the way toward a new policy of détente in the middle of the Cold War. Brandt’s genuflection manifested a demonstration of official German readiness for reconciliation and was highly contested within the German population. Only a few days later, the

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Figure 1.



German weekly magazine “Der Spiegel” launched a public opinion poll into the deeply divided and polarized German public, which aimed at a representative investigation of West German public opinion. (Der Spiegel, 1970, p. 27) 84% of the interviewees stated, that they had already seen the photograph, of which 41% expressed their view that Brandt’s genuflection was an appropriate action, whereas 48% viewed it as exaggerated. If we break this poll down into age groups, we find interesting results: within the age group of 30 to 59, a majority of 54% rated Brandt’s action as exaggerated. This is precisely the generation of 1910 to 1940 that had made up the backbone of the war-supporting German population during the Nazi regime, or had been born during the peak of Nazi power.

What makes this photograph more interesting though, are the facts behind the image.

In this picture, we see a German radical socialist kneeling down in front of a Jewish memorial in a communist state, apparently begging for forgiveness for the atrocities of a regime that he himself had fought against as a member of the German clandestine resistance against the Nazi

dictatorship. What is even more interesting is that his action is still subject to controversial dispute some 4 decades after the event, to such an extent that the consequences of a humanitarian catastrophe that had occurred roughly 40 years before Brandt’s genuflection are still being debated. The discussion in 2005-2007 was mainly about whether Brandt acted spontaneously or whether his action was calculated, (Wolffsohn & Brechenmacher, 2005) and to what extent it is to be interpreted as a political symbol (Schneider, 2006).

But the most interesting are the following statements of members of the “fourth and fifth generation” when they were confronted with the photograph:

Oh, this is one of the former GDR guys, isn’t he?
(female, born in 1989)

This is the father of the famous German actor Matthias Brandt. (female, born in 1982)

This is Willy Brandt, he was a member of the Social Democrats, we had this in school. (male, born in 1998) (Quehl, 2014)

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