

The Guilt of Nations?

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On the Natural History of Destruction, W. G. Sebald, trans. Anthea Bell
(New York: Random House, 2003), 224 pp., \$23.95 cloth.

Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration, Norbert Frei, trans. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 365 pp., \$35 cloth.

Romantics at War: Glory and Guilt in the Age of Terrorism, George P. Fletcher
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 272 pp., \$24.95 cloth.

What responsibility do ordinary people bear for atrocities committed in their names? According to modern democratic sensibilities, responsibility is an individual affair. The idea, as in Exodus (20:5), that the sins of the fathers could be delivered unto the third and fourth generations goes against the grain. It seems to be part of the collectivistic thinking that characterizes modernity off its rails, a pre-modern remain that produces outbursts of racism, nationalism, and genocide. That is not to say that we are not interested in accountability for political crimes. International human rights entrepreneurs have pressed for holding dictators accountable and have supported efforts to obtain reparations and other forms of redress. But we are very careful to avoid charges of “collective guilt,” which often sound more like the problem than the solution. We don’t want to start a culture war or clash of civilizations!

The fount of most contemporary thinking about collective guilt, of course, is the case of Germany in World War II. Indeed, a vibrant discourse about collective guilt—consisting mostly of defenses against it—has been a significant feature of postwar

German identity, and has provided contemporary discussions with a central point of reference as well as a body of terms and concepts. During the war, the anti-Nazi coalition demanded nothing less than “unconditional surrender,” and U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt represented a common sentiment when he denied that one could draw a sharp distinction between the German people and the Nazi regime. At the beginning of the occupation, local military authorities created poster displays out of pictures from concentration camps, and captioned them with statements like “These Atrocities: Your Fault!” (*Diese Schandtaten: Eure Schuld!*). On the one hand, “collective guilt” was not the official policy of the conquerors, and indeed Chief Prosecutor Robert Jackson rejected such notions in his opening statement at the Nuremberg Tribunal:

We would also make clear that we have no purpose to incriminate the whole German people. . . . If the German populace had willingly accepted the Nazi program, no storm troopers would have been needed in the early days of the Party and there would have been no need for concentration camps or the *Gestapo*. . . . The German, no less than the non-

German world, has accounts to settle with these defendants.¹

On the other hand, Nazi propaganda during the war had made the most out of the demand for unconditional surrender, out of Germanophobic public discourse in the United States and Britain, and especially out of the so-called Morgenthau Plan, which called for destruction of all industry in the Ruhr and Saar regions, among other drastic measures, as the only way to prevent a resurgence of German aggression. After the war, Germans thus reacted to any hint of collective guilt imputations—sometimes even imagining them when they did not exist—with vigorous denials.

Illustrative here is the debate over the argument of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who is usually credited with introducing the term “collective guilt” (*Kollektivschuld*) into the German discourse. In February of 1945 Jung gave an interview to a Zurich newspaper in which he stated that “the popular sentimental distinction between Nazis and opponents of the regime” was psychologically illegitimate. In an essay published shortly thereafter meant to clarify his inflammatory statements, Jung argued that all Germans were either actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously, participants in the atrocities, that the “collective guilt” of the Germans was “for psychologists a fact, and it will be one of the most important tasks of therapy to bring the Germans to recognize this guilt.”² As a psychiatrist, Jung believed that “without guilt, unfortunately, there can be no psychic maturation and no widening of the spiritual horizon.”³

Central to Jung’s argument was his distinction between psychological guilt and moral or criminal guilt: “The psychological use of the word ‘guilt’ should not be confused with guilt in the legal or moral sense.” There was a difference, he argued, between

objective and subjective guilt: “Guilt,” he insisted, “can be restricted to the lawbreaker only from the legal, moral, and intellectual point of view, but as a psychic phenomenon it spreads itself over the whole neighborhood. A house, a family, even a village where a murder has been committed,” Jung argued, “feels the psychological guilt and is made to feel it by the outside world.”⁴ His point is to understand the ways in which one can feel badly for an act that one has not in fact committed, both because no one can honestly claim never to have had a bad motive and because one is always stained by the very proximity to its realization. Collective guilt, Jung thus argued, is “a state of magical uncleanness,” but it is also “a very real fact.”⁵

For Jung’s German interlocutors, however, such subtle distinctions were not relevant. What they heard was “You are guilty.” This was a particular affront to those who called themselves “inner emigrants”—those literary and political figures who had remained in Germany but not supported the regime—for whom collective guilt appeared a much more serious charge than individual guilt, since they could not be accused of the latter. The most significant response to Jung was by Erich Kaestner, a renowned children’s book author who was working for the U.S. Army’s German newspaper, *Die Neue Zeitung*. For Kaestner, Jung’s attack was yet one more blow to the inner emigrants, who had “for twelve long years resisted the greatest malice,” and had

¹ Quoted in Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 168.

² Carl G. Jung, “After the Catastrophe,” in *Essays on Contemporary Events: The Psychology of Nazism*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 72.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

now dared “to count on a bit of consolation and help, encouragement and sympathy.”⁶ For Kaestner, any imputation of guilt beyond the criminal risked placing him in community with the Nazis when he and others had already paid a tremendous price to maintain that distinction; thus both an accusation that he shares in this objectively or a diagnosis that he must *feel* guilty for having been present at the scene of the crime is unacceptable to him. For Kaestner, it sounded as if Jung “had swallowed the trumpet of final judgment.”⁷

IF THERE IS SOMETHING to Jung’s claims that collective guilt is a very real state of magical uncleanliness, however, one should expect collective guilt to have had profound effects on German culture, and can interpret Kaestner as manifesting the symptoms of repression. Indeed, exactly such a claim is central to a 1997 lecture by the novelist and critic W. G. Sebald, “Air War and Literature,” which Sebald delivered in Zurich shortly before his death in an auto accident. The lecture appears as the anchor piece along with essays on the writers Alfred Andersch, Jean Amery, and Peter Weiss in English in a book titled *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Sebald’s topic is the putative German repression of the past in the 1950s, and in many ways his account is redolent not only of Jung but of Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich’s landmark 1967 book, *The Inability to Mourn*. The Mitscherlichs had argued that Germans suffered from what they termed a “successful defense against melancholia.” Melancholia would have resulted from normal mourning of their lost leader, who embodied, according to the Mitscherlichs, a “collective ego-ideal” and “narcissistic object.” But acknowledging that Hitler was a lost source of positive feelings, the Mitscherlichs argued, would have compromised Ger-

mans’ “intense defense against guilt, shame, and anxiety, a defense which was achieved by the withdrawal of previously powerful libidinal cathexes.” Instead of confronting their past, Germans thus “de-realized” it and threw themselves into reconstruction, as if erasing the physical remains of the destruction that they brought on themselves could alleviate their guilt for having done so. According to the Mitscherlichs, moreover, this led to “a striking emotional rigidity” when Germans were confronted with the suffering they had caused for others. All these are aftereffects of unacknowledged collective guilt.⁸

Where the Mitscherlichs began with repressed love for the führer, Sebald begins with what he claims is the repressed memory of the air war against German cities. “[T]he sense of unparalleled national humiliation arising from the destruction of the German cities and the horrors of the bombing nights,” Sebald claims, “never really found verbal expression . . . those directly affected by the experience neither shared it with each other nor passed it on to the next generation.”⁹ Sebald grew up, he writes, with the sense that something was being kept from him. Responsibility for this silence Sebald lays at the feet of Germany’s writers, who, he argues, are duty-bound “to keep the nation’s collective memory alive.” Instead, he charges, “if those born after the war were to rely solely on the testimony of writers, they would scarcely be able to form

⁶ Erich Kaestner, “Splitter und Balken,” in *Splitter und Balken: Publizistik* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), p. 520.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

⁸ Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975 [1967]), pp. 23–24, 28.

⁹ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), p. viii.

any idea of the extent, nature, and consequences of the catastrophe inflicted on Germany by the air raids.”¹⁰

Sebald is particularly concerned with the writers of the “inner emigration,” for whom he has little sympathy, though more because of their failings after 1945 than before. One of the central claims made on behalf of the inner emigrants was that they had stayed in Germany out of a felt duty to bear witness to the suffering under the Nazi regime. But where was the evidence of that witnessing? “What little has been recorded in literature, in terms of both quantity and quality,” Sebald writes, “stands in no relation to the extreme experiences of the time.”¹¹ The reason for this is that these writers, in Sebald’s view, were more concerned with reworking their own self-images and legacies than with confronting difficult reality: “The works produced by German authors after the war are often marked by a half-consciousness or false consciousness designed to consolidate the extremely precarious position of those writers in a society that was morally almost entirely discredited.” As a result, he laments, “No one has written the great German epic of the wartime and postwar periods.”¹²

This argument, Sebald claims, was designed to invite critics to provide literary counterexamples he had overlooked. But no one, Sebald claims in his afterword, succeeded in doing so. However, this defense plays down the wider range of his indictment, for Sebald does not limit his charge to the writers, though their failure to meet what he sees as a special responsibility irks him particularly much. Indeed, quite along the lines of Jung and the Mitscherlichs, Sebald diagnoses a more general syndrome of which the writers are only an especially lamentable example. He describes a peculiar obliviousness of ordinary people to the destruction around them as they went about

rebuilding their lives. “The destruction,” he writes, “on a scale without historical precedent, [thus] entered the annals of the nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country.”¹³ His claims are thus much wider in reference than to literature. And here he sounds very much like the Mitscherlichs: “The new Federal German society,” he argues, “relegated the experiences of its own prehistory to the back of its mind and developed an almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression, one which allowed it to recognize the fact of its own rise from total degradation while disengaging from its stock of emotions.”¹⁴

There are, however, some important differences between Sebald’s account and that of *The Inability to Mourn*. Indeed, Sebald challenges important myths of the ’68er generation, for whom the Mitscherlichs’ charges against the Federal Republic’s founders were so important. In his essay on Alfred Andersch, for instance, Sebald discovers a continuity not between Nazis and the older generation, but between Nazis and the younger generation. Andersch’s occupation-era journal, *Der Ruf*, heralded itself as the voice of the younger generation, denying for them complicity in the crimes for which they had paid the price on the front. Nevertheless, Sebald charges, “The articles written by [co-editor Hans Werner] Richter and

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 97, 69.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹² Ibid., pp. ix, viii.

¹³ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

Andersch derive their inspiration almost without exception from the period before 1945 . . . *Der Ruf* is a positive glossary and index of fascist language.”¹⁵ This is a significant challenge, since so much of the writing inspiring the New Left in the 1960s was a product of the literary salon known as *Gruppe 47* that formed in the wake of *Der Ruf*'s prohibition by the American Military Government. In his essay on the survivor Jean Amery, moreover, Sebald seconds Amery's disdain for “the alacrity with which the literature [of the sixties] was now reclaiming ‘Auschwitz’ as its own territory.” Amery rightly saw, according to Sebald, that this “was no less repellent than its previous refusal to broach that monstrous subject at all.”¹⁶

In contrast to the Mitscherlichs, Sebald is thus very much a man of his times, free of the older orthodoxies of the West German memory wars. For decades, the politics of memory in West Germany was divided between those who feared “too much” memory and those, like Jung and the Mitscherlichs, who believed Germans needed to work through their (collective) guilt if they were to overcome the symptoms of repression. Sebald does indeed pose a strong ethical and political-cultural imperative to remember, but his lecture was controversial because the lost memory it laments is that of *German* suffering, which heretofore has been the rallying cry of the extreme right. In this regard, Sebald is only one example of a surprising recent interest in the memory of German suffering from the left (including a new novel by Günter Grass and a best-selling book on the firebombing of Dresden by a scholar—Jörg Friedrich—known largely for his indictment of what he called a “cold amnesty” for Nazi war criminals in the 1950s¹⁷).

How legitimate is this new interest in German suffering, previously associated with nationalist revanchism and discreditable positions? The answer depends on the purpose. The Mitscherlichs too believed it was necessary for Germans to acknowledge their sense of loss that went with Hitler's death; without this acknowledgment, unworked-through guilt would continue to produce resistance and narcissism. At times, this is Sebald's point as well, and it seems right to recognize the very real traumas many ordinary Germans suffered. Did girls in Berlin get what they deserved when they were repeatedly raped by Soviet “shock” troops? Do the fears and injuries of German children under aerial bombardment not count because their parents liked Hitler? Insofar as Sebald's argument reminds us that human suffering is never, in the last instance, entirely political and that there is a difference between the necessity and the justice of war, the ethical imperative is clear and sobering.

But there are also passages in Sebald not entirely reconcilable with the overwhelming insistence in the U.S. critical response to his essay that he does not succumb to historical relativism, denying important distinctions between how we evaluate the suffering of the Germans and the suffering they inflicted. Sebald refers to the bombing of the German cities as “destruction . . . on a scale without historical precedent.”¹⁸ He equates the “right to silence” claimed by Germans in regard to their own traumas and “that of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁷ Günter Grass, *Crabwalk*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Harcourt, 2002); and Jörg Friedrich, *Die kalte Amnestie: NS-Täter in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1984).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

survivors of Hiroshima.”¹⁹ On the one hand, he states clearly that “The majority of Germans today know, or so at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived” and that “scarcely anyone can now doubt that Air Marshall Goering would have wiped out London if his technical resources had allowed him to do so” (though this seemingly contradicts his diagnosis of repressions and taboos that prevent people from realistically appreciating this).²⁰ On the other hand, he refers to “the devastation wrought by Germany’s wartime enemies,” and, writing of his adopted homeland in England, he refers to “the more than seventy airfields from which the *war of annihilation* was waged against Germany” (emphasis added).²¹ He characterizes the mania for reconstruction as “tantamount to a *second liquidation* in successive phases of the nation’s own past history” (emphasis added to indicate the use of the term “liquidation,” often associated with the extermination of the Jews).²² He also somehow seems to lament that “the question of whether and how . . . [the firebombing of Dresden and other such acts] could be strategically or morally justified was never the subject of open debate in Germany after 1945,” though he understands why this would have been inappropriate.²³ He also argues that the lack of portrayals of the air war was “the tacit imposition of a taboo.”²⁴

Finally, I was unsettled by the following formulation: “Our vague feelings of shared guilt prevented anyone . . . from being permitted to remind us of such humiliating images as the incident in the *Altmarkt* in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 1945 by an SS detachment which had gained its experience at Treblinka,”²⁵ which does not quite equate the German victims in Dresden with the Jewish

victims of the Holocaust, but does juxtapose them. How well does such a formulation stand up to the charge of historical relativism? Given Sebald’s massive talents as a writer, I could not help but feel he was being at least somewhat disingenuous when he claimed he was surprised by the controversy surrounding his lecture; in such sentences as that just quoted he is indeed playing with fire. Nevertheless, at his best, Sebald poses a powerful antidote to the self-righteousness of the ’68ers, but in such a way that we are left with alternatives other than a positive reassessment of the 1950s, as has been the strategy of neoconservatives. This is the sense in which Sebald’s book is post-historical: there is nothing *neo* about it.

IN ANOTHER SENSE, however, Sebald’s lecture is very much within the orthodoxy of what I call the “memory of memory” in Germany, the recursive commentary not only on the past but on the way the past has been remembered: Sebald’s argument, like most German “memory of memory,” is anecdotal and polemical. Another way of breaking out of this tradition has been to require more of such arguments, or at least to provide a more rigorous empirical foundation for them. This kind of approach is often called the “history of memory,” and it has been a growth industry of late, particularly in Germany. One of the most important examples

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 7, 69.

²² Ibid., p. 7.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 34. How “tacit” the imposition was, however, is not entirely clear. Alexander Mitscherlich himself is a good example. In 1947, when Mitscherlich published a study of Nazi doctors, he was condemned by colleagues—not themselves tainted with Nazi pasts—as one who was sullyng his own nest (*Nestbeschmutzer*).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

is Norbert Frei's recently translated book on the Federal Republic's *Vergangenheitspolitik* in the 1950s (the term—untranslatable—is rendered in English as “policy for the past”).²⁶ Frei's apparent spur to write was an earlier book by the neoconservative historian Manfred Kittel called *The Legend of the Second Guilt*.²⁷ This reference was, in turn, to a bestseller by the journalist Ralph Giordano, who argued that Germany's failure to confront adequately the memory of the Holocaust constituted a “second guilt”—the Talmudic notion that failure to expiate a crime is the equivalent of committing a second crime.²⁸ Kittel claims that the “second guilt” is a myth, supporting his argument by adducing every example of discourse about the Nazi past in the 1950s he could find in order to refute the claim that there had been a “silence” about the past in that period. Technically, Kittel is correct, there was no silence. The discourse about the Nazi past was positively enormous in the first decade of the Federal Republic. Frei's frustration with Kittel, however, is that merely adducing examples of discourse about the Nazi past is not enough to refute the critical impulse behind the charge of silence. Just as silence can speak volumes, speaking volumes can also be a silence of sorts.

In many ways, Frei puts an end to the polemical debate over the putative silences in the official political rhetoric of the 1950s by examining in exceptional detail exactly who said what, when, where, and why. Frei divides his analysis into three sections. First, he examines West German legislative measures aimed at reversing Allied occupation policies concerning the residues of National Socialism. These included amnesty laws in 1949 and 1954, ending (indeed reversing) denazification programs, and, perhaps most important, rehabilitating Nazi-era civil servants. Second, Frei documents West Ger-

man efforts to alleviate the challenges posed by war criminals. And third, Frei presents a series of case studies to show how the Adenauer government accomplished these profound reversals of punitive occupation-era policies without stepping over an ill-defined line into a right-wing revanchism that would have been unacceptable to the vigilant occupation authorities; indeed, Frei chooses his case studies well to demonstrate the effort that went into defining and negotiating that line.

Perhaps Frei's most interesting claim in the present context is that the reason West Germany's new leaders were so concentrated on overcoming punitive policies was not that Germany was not collectively guilty, but precisely that it was: “It would not appear far-fetched here to discern . . . an indirect admission—confirmed, as it were, through contradiction—of the entire society's entanglement in the Nazi enterprise. Much speaks for understanding that virtually unfettered will to amnesty,” Frei concludes, “as an unconscious acknowledgement of the often-cited charge of ‘collective guilt.’”²⁹ In other words, Frei seems to be implying that early leaders of the Federal Republic

²⁶ Other examples of this new empirical history of German memory include excellent books such as: Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933–2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte: Die Nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des Deutschen Bundestages* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999).

²⁷ Manfred Kittel, *Die Legende von der “Zweiten Schuld”: Vergangenheitsbewältigung in der Ära Adenauer* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1993).

²⁸ Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld oder von der Last ein Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Knauer, 1987).

²⁹ Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 305–306.

believed—if they couldn't quite admit it to themselves—that everyone was guilty and thus that no one should be held accountable. The problem, however, is that this claim was always hidden behind vehement rejection of the very principle of collective guilt, which, following Frei, might have served a positive function: "Already in 1945, the thesis had encountered a high degree of psychic rejection, and a correspondingly vehement rejection; it had never been formulated by the Allies in the manner it was being complained about. But from the beginning, it served the Germans as welcome reason for feeling unjustly treated."³⁰ Yet another example of "de-realization." Because Germans could not accept the collective guilt argument with all it entailed for their national identity, they substituted an even less plausible collective innocence. The consequences, Frei implies, resonated throughout the history of the Federal Republic, and continue to do so today.

IN SOME CONTRAST to Sebald and Frei, George Fletcher takes the German case as merely a particularly powerful example of the dilemmas of collective guilt, a problem that he points out is ancient indeed. Fletcher begins his philosophical essay by challenging the standard argument that "collective guilt" is an illiberal concept, one that takes part in the same kind of logic the Nazis used against the Jews. (In fact, a common trope in the post-war German discourse was that Germans were the new "pariah people" and were thus suffering the same kind of fate as the Jews. The repugnant character of this defense is obvious.) Nevertheless, Fletcher seems to agree with the argument that "collective guilt" is an illiberal concept, except that he draws a different implication than postwar Germans: there must be something wrong not with collective guilt, but with liberalism.

Fletcher's first principle is that liberalism is mistaken when it asserts the primal independence of individual action. In contrast, Fletcher argues, Romanticism "challenges the degree to which individuals act in ways that are totally independent of the collectives and nations in which their personalities are rooted."³¹ After all, only collectivities, not individuals, make war or perpetrate genocide. Fletcher's syllogism is thus as follows: "Romantics bridge the self and the nation, the nation acts in history, achieving greatness and committing crimes, and for its glory as well as its crimes, the nation must receive a share of both the credit and the blame."³² He does, however, respect the liberal fear that collective guilt can be associated with collective punishment or guilt by association, as when an occupying army might punish civilians for the acts of partisan fighters. Fletcher is no less horrified than liberals by such possibilities. But, in the book's most innovative move, he claims that collective guilt "carries a humanistic message."³³ This is because Fletcher sees collective guilt not primarily as a way of justifying increased punishment for populations, but as a way of reducing the scapegoating he charges is at the heart of war crimes trials. He argues persuasively that when we try leaders or other individuals for what are at least in part collective crimes, we misrecognize the nature of the crimes and our own collective complicity in them.

Fletcher recognizes the dangers of Romanticism here. Indeed, he identifies two temptations, what he calls "too little guilt" and "too much guilt." The first derives from

³⁰Ibid., p. 306.

³¹George P. Fletcher, *Romantics at War: Glory and Guilt in the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 39.

³²Ibid., p. 139.

³³Ibid., p. 178.

the Romantics' admiration of authenticity: If motive is important to a crime, then how can we hold fanatics criminally responsible? After all, the September 11, 2001, hijackers believed that what they were doing was in God's name and that they were performing a sublime act of self-sacrifice. Why does this not excuse them, as a Romantic theory of authenticity might imply? The second danger derives from the Romantic notion that communities are organic entities in time. If so, why does the acknowledgment of collective guilt not become hereditary guilt, in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children? Each of these temptations, Fletcher acknowledges, can produce barbarous results.

Fletcher's solution is what he calls "distributed guilt," based on the model of tort law, in which liability can be allocated on the basis of relative fault. It also has roots in the theory of homicide, in which contributory or mitigating factors determine the specific extent of the charge. In the context of crimes like genocide, which cannot sensibly be described as the mere sum of individual actions, a theory of distributed guilt makes the actual perpetrators less guilty than they are currently held in international law, and bystanders more so. As Fletcher argues, "This is an appealing, humanistic way to think about collective guilt, and it would have the virtue of broadening the inquiry in a criminal trial to include some of the tasks now filled by the truth commissions that have sprung up in transitional societies from South Africa to El Salvador. If this humanistic way of thinking about guilt could

carry the day," he concludes, "we might see some grounds for vindicating a Romantic attitude toward nations as actors in history."³⁴

WE HAVE, IT SEEMS, come full circle to Jung's sense that collective guilt spreads itself out over a whole neighborhood. There is something intuitively appealing about this position, which prevents us from venting our primal desire for someone to blame for our sins by reminding us of the ways in which everyone in a society—regime and people—is to some extent responsible for what is done in its name. And surely if there is an argument for collective guilt in an authoritarian society, it is even stronger in a democratic one, in which we require, at least in principle, that the political leadership express the "will of the people." The bottom line is that political life has become so complex that it is even harder than ever before to draw the lines between right and wrong, innocence and guilt. We are all guilty. The challenge is to maintain the productive impulse in this acknowledgment rather than to let ourselves slip into the conclusion that because we are all guilty, we need not worry about it too much. This is the advantage of a psychological rather than legal understanding of collective guilt: it encourages us to confront rather than avoid it, but provides a way to do so that does not damn the guilty party forever. Precisely this is what many Germans did not understand about Jung's charge.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 158–59.

