



German History in Documents and Images

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Why Don't Our Parents Tell the Truth? (August 1959)

This article, which was published in the teen magazine *Twen* in 1959, foreshadows the youth's revolt against the old elites and the generational conflict of the 1960s. It also serves as a reminder that the "generation of perpetrators" in Germany not only bore the burden of guilt towards the victims of racial persecution and war, but also towards future generations.

Why Don't Our Parents Tell the Truth?

Our Parents Weren't Always Good Democrats. Their Political Past Remains in the Dark.

Heads shake reproachfully. The topic of conversation: the youth of today! After all, back in the day, people still had ideals! The youth of today have none! They live their own lives selfishly. To be sure, they are often misguided, frequently debauched, and almost always difficult. With these sorts of judgments, the elders smugly ascend the podium of the youth-and-virtue judge and build themselves up with the flattering notion that they themselves were free of today's excesses. When I was twelve years old, grown-ups taught me to march in a column of youths and sing a song with the lines: "Beat the Jews, line the bigwigs up against the wall!" The people to whom we sang this, twice a week in the streets of our city, obviously thought nothing of it. And thus neither did we.

And right after I had just had my First Holy Communion, my fellow students and I were lined up in a long row at school in order to hold a "march." There were a lot of people in the streets, and I saw how one old man was dragged down a long staircase by his hair, how a woman was kicked in the torso by booted feet until she stopped screaming, how bloodied people, often families who were clinging to each other in horror, had to climb into trucks and were driven away. And everywhere lots of people were standing around watching. Some also turned around quickly and walked away, as many today turn their backs on a traffic accident so they won't be summoned as a witness. But still: millions were watching. They stood along the streets that were thundering with the marching steps of the brown columns and raised their right arm to eye level. The German Greeting, as it was called back then. No one really knew what was German about it. A few years later, millions of German men raised both arms, this time over their heads: it was the end. The same people who back then [in the 1930s] cheered the puffed-up, medal-jingling, brown-shirted lads and their bigwigs, whose world collapsed into smoldering rubble a few years later, are now complaining about [today's] youth because they supposedly have no ideals.

These people assert that they “knew nothing about it” back then and demand respect for parents and elders from [today’s] youth – and even get it.

But the point is not that young people, who were fortunate enough to escape the Third Reich without damage to their character and a broken backbone, want to play the accuser. Still, there is one thing that they should clearly demand: their right to the truth. Those who are now in their thirties, and that includes me, still have their own experiences. Most of them were even roped in as unknowing helpers and young leaders of injustice, meanness, and incitement. Does anyone believe that these memories are easy to reconcile with the picture that the generation of back then is offering us today?

The younger ones among us, those now in their twenties, have no personal recollections of the Third Reich. But no matter how many people in this country strive to conceal the events of the past, to hang oil paintings in gilded frames over blood stains on the wall – parts of the truth are known to all young people. And those who never once experienced the sinister perfidy of that state and the fear of all, how much more questioningly and disbelievingly they look at their elders and parents, who were around back then and are silent now.

There are parents who worry about how little contact they have with their children. But there is hardly a set of parents who would think to ask themselves whether this silent concealment might actually be responsible for this. The silent concealment of the truth.

Source: Bernhard Schweif, “Warum sagen unsere Eltern nicht die Wahrheit?” [“Why Don’t our Parents Tell the Truth?”], *Twen*, no. 2 (August 1959), p. 51.

Translated by Thomas Dunlap