

Günter Grass and the Waffen SS

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4 May 2012

Following the publication of his poem “What Must Be Said”, which warned against an Israeli war against Iran, one of the main slanders leveled against prominent German author Günter Grass was anti-Semitism. Some commentators, such as Josef Joffe, the editor of Die Zeit, went so far as to suggest that Grass’ brief involvement with the Nazi Waffen SS as a 17-year-old in the final days of the Second World War was decisive in this respect. In answer to such attacks on Grass, we are reprinting an article written at the time the German author publicly addressed his wartime experiences.

Once again, the philistines vituperate.

The confession by Germany’s most celebrated author, Günter Grass, that he served in a division of the Waffen SS as a 17-year-old at the end of war, and not, as previously claimed, in an anti-aircraft unit, has unleashed a torrent of grotesque accusations. They range from the assertion that the writer has lost any claim to moral credibility to the demand that he return his Nobel Prize for literature.

The 79-year-old Grass spoke for the first time publicly about his membership in the Waffen SS in an interview last week in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In his new autobiography *Peeling the Onion* he deals with the episode in detail, and discusses the pain of recalling it and the shame he feels when dealing with his remembrance.

Grass’s critics did not wait to read the book. The words “Waffen SS” were sufficient to propel them into action.

The conservative historian Michael Wolffsohn claimed that Grass’s membership in the Waffen SS had “completely damaged” his life’s work. On the television program “Aspekte,” Wolffsohn said, “What remains are fine words without value. The marvelous words of this great poet are a mere charade. Nothing more.”

The literary critic Hellmuth Karasek accused Grass of “duplicity” and “dreadful hypocrisy,” declaring that “this is like someone who preaches one thing and then does completely the opposite.”

The *Financial Times Deutschland* stated that the “political-moral authority” of the writer had been ruined “by his belated recollection.” The newspaper declared that at the very least Grass should have spoken out on the occasion of the controversial May 1985 visit by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and US President Ronald Reagan to the military cemetery in Bitburg, where members of the SS are buried—a complaint that has been echoed by some conservative politicians.

The *taz* newspaper, which has close links to the Green Party, published an interview with the political scientist Claus Leggewie, who even compared the case of Grass to that of SS Captain Hans Schneider. Schneider had hushed up his identity after the war and made a career as a Germanist under the name Hans Schwerte before his real identity was revealed in the 1990s. Leggewie accused Grass of “profound moral depravity.”

In Poland, where the national conservative PiS government led by the Kaczynski twins has reveled in anti-German rhetoric in order to obscure its own bankruptcy, the demand has been raised that Grass relinquish his honorary citizenship of Gdansk (the city of his birth) as well as his Nobel Prize. Grass has long been active in encouraging better German-Polish relations.

At the same time, there are many intellectuals, cultural figures and politicians who have refused to be intimidated by the campaign against Grass and have defended him—including the historian Hans Mommsen, the literature expert Walter Jens, the actor Mario Adorf, the Social Democratic politician Egon Bahr, and the television moderator Ulrich Wickert.

The attacks on Grass are both demagogic and malicious. They bear no relation to the facts and are clearly politically and ideologically motivated.

In his early novels, Grass confronted the complacent and conservative society of postwar Germany, which employed high-ranking Nazis in leading state posts, with a frank picture of the Third Reich. His novels do not depict the Germans indiscriminately as perpetrators. Instead, he probes and very skillfully portrays the petty-bourgeois milieu in which fascism could ferment and develop.

He describes the character weaknesses and petty meanness which led people without convictions to end up collaborating with the Nazis. He reports on the way people sought to look the other way and deceive themselves about what was really going on. He depicts the hardened political criminals, as well as those who suffered and put up resistance.

His central theme, however, is his own generation, which grew up and was educated under the Third Reich. He describes the contradictions and moral dilemmas of this generation, and its difficulties in coming to grips with the past.

There were those who never forgave Grass for what he wrote, and he made life-long enemies. It is no coincidence that the most virulent attacks on Grass now come from right-wing and conservative circles. All those whose complacency and self-righteousness was shaken by Grass are now howling triumphantly.

Finally, the chorus brays, the world-famous writer has been toppled from his pedestal. He had no right to criticize us and depict our deficiencies.

Amongst these right-wing voices are many former lefts, who have lost their political bearings following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the seven years of the previous Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government.

It was certainly a mistake for Grass to remain silent for so long about this episode of his biography, but it is a mistake that should be viewed in its proper proportions, and one that is psychologically and historically understandable.

When he received his call-up for military service as a 17-year-old in

a work camp, he was still practically a child, lacking the knowledge and capacity to grasp the criminal character of the organization he was joining. Hitler had assumed power in Germany when Grass was seven years old, and shortly afterwards the Nazis took power in the free city of Danzig, as Gdansk was called at the time.

Grass grew up under the influence of the pervasive and virtually unopposed Nazi propaganda. It was difficult to develop a critical attitude under such circumstances. Like many young people of his age, he believed in the “final victory” up until the end of the war. He has never sought to conceal this.

Grass was neither directly or indirectly involved in any of the crimes of the Waffen SS, and none of his current critics accuse him of such. After training, he was active in the war for just a few weeks. He was wounded and ended up a prisoner of the American army before he could fire a shot. At the time he was still less than 18.

In his autobiography, Grass writes about his comprehension of the Waffen SS at the time: “Was I shocked by what was unmistakable in the recruitment office, that which still shocks me now, after 60 years, the double S, at the moment of writing it down?” In his recollections, he replies that there is nothing “which could be interpreted as a sign of shock or even disgust. Rather, I would have seen the Waffen SS as an elite unit, which was deployed when the breach of a front had to be secured, when encirclement, such as the one at Demjansk, had to be broken, or Charkow had to be re-conquered. I was not repulsed by the double rune on the uniform collar.”

The renowned historian Hans Mommsen vouches for the plausibility of this explanation. The principle of voluntary admission to the Waffen SS had been waived in 1943, and a large proportion of those eligible for military service had been called up for the Waffen SS without any formality. Writing in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Mommsen states: “Therefore, the public agitation over the membership of Günter Grass in the elite troop of the Nazi regime, which was in the process of dissolution, is inappropriate.”

Nor could one demand of Grass, Mommsen continues, that “he could have arrived at an understanding of the criminal character of the SS and the Nazi regime in 1944. In the few weeks of his military deployment, which ended with his injury, he did not witness the crimes committed by units of the Waffen SS against the civilian population, prisoners of war and foreign forced laborers.”

Grass’s membership in the Waffen SS remains an episode in his youth, for which he can hardly be reproached. It bears no comparison, for example, with the case of the conductor Herbert von Karajan, who in 1933, at the age of 25, joined the National Socialists twice (he joined both the German and the Austrian parties)—a move which was extremely profitable for his career. Not to speak of someone like the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, who made propaganda films for the Nazi regime. She denied any responsibility up until her death three years ago, and is still celebrated as a major artist.

Amongst those who claim that Grass’s moral authority has been “severely damaged” is the historian and journalist Joachim Fest. In the “historians’ controversy” in the middle of the 1980s, Fest supported Ernst Nolte’s efforts to legitimize the Nazi regime as an appropriate reaction to Bolshevism.

Grass, in contrast, has devoted the major part of his literary work and political life to settling accounts with the Nazi regime. The dilemma of the generation which grew up and was implicated in the Nazi regime without being able to recognize or understand its criminal character, and the difficulties they had in tackling the issue, the shame they felt about talking about what went on—these are the themes which

reoccur throughout his work.

There is a certain tragic irony in the fact that Grass himself felt this shame so strongly that he was not able to admit his membership in the Waffen SS for 60 years. (Grass’s involvement in the Waffen SS was not as secret as it is presented now. His discharge papers from American imprisonment, which clearly note his membership in the Waffen SS, have been accessible to the public for decades, but nobody bothered to check them. According to a German television report, the French newspaper *Figaro* reported on his membership in the Waffen SS some years ago, but at that time there was no response in Germany to the revelation.)

Grass openly addresses the question in *Peeling the Onion*. “Enough excuses,” he writes about his membership in the Waffen SS. “And nevertheless, for decades I have refused to admit to myself the word and the double letter. That which I had accepted on the basis of the stupid pride of my young years I sought to conceal after the war due to my growing shame. But the burden remained, and nobody could lift it.

“During my training as tank gunner, which I endured the autumn and winter-long, there was no word of the war crimes which later came to light, but claims of ignorance cannot conceal my insight of being involved in a system which had planned, organized and carried out the destruction of millions of people. Even if I am absolved of active responsibility, there are still up to today the threadbare remnants of what is all too easily called shared responsibility. And it is certain that this must be lived with for my remaining years.”

Does this confession destroy Grass’s moral authority or his life’s work? Can the writer be denounced because he is personally affected by the contradictions with which he has dealt in his work? The answer is obviously no.

Many opponents of Grass try to use his biographical confession to rehabilitate the Adenauer era, German society under its first, conservative, postwar chancellor. With the argument “even Grass has a shady past” they seek to sanitize the smooth transition of high-ranking representatives of the Nazi regime and its entire legal apparatus into the Federal Republic.

As if the involvement of the immature Grass in the military apparatus of National Socialism could be compared to the successful postwar careers of figures like Hans Globke, who helped draw up the Nuremberg race laws, the Nazi navy judge Hans Filbinger, the secret service boss Reinhard Gehlen, and many more!

The political intent of Grass’s critics is even clearer in the case of those who combine their attacks on Grass with a defense of US-Israeli aggression in the Middle East. This utterly vulgar line of argument is employed by Henryk M. Broder, writing in *Spiegel*. He declares that Grass is “finished” and prophesies that people “from now on will regard him as a caricature of his former self and assign him a place in the hall of shame.” Broder is especially angry about the fact that Grass supported and defended the Nobel Prize speech by the British dramatist Harold Pinter, who severely criticized US policy.

With much noise the political right wing brandishes the club of abstract morality against Grass—in order to suppress the lessons of the past and to justify new wars and abominations.



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