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The Undead Past
How Nations Confront the Evils of History

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Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor
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THE UNDEAD PAST

How do nations handle the sins of the fathers and mothers? Take genocide, or slavery, or political mass murder. After such knowledge, what forgiveness—and what way forward?

The Germans have a word for it, of course: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or "coming to terms with the past." But the concept is applicable far beyond the Nazis—as Americans belatedly recognized when Robert E. Lee shot to the front of the culture wars last August after the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia.

To put the debates over memorializing the Confederacy in context, this issue's lead package explores how various countries have handled similar problems. There have been all too many crimes in all too many places, but six cases stand out—two of genocide, two of political mass murder, and two of enduring racial oppression. Individually, the articles here delve into how each country has processed its tragic past. Together, they reveal interesting patterns and lessons.

To kick things off, Annette Gordon-Reed considers the United States' troubled racial history, from the founding to the present. Slavery may be gone, she points out, but its underlying ideology lives on.

Then, Richard Evans traces Germany's evolving attitudes toward the Nazi era, from initial postwar sympathy to mature critical engagement—with the contemporary resurgence of right-wing populist nationalism as an unfortunate coda to a generally heartening story.

Nikita Petrov and Orville Schell look at Russia's and China's problematic responses to Stalinism and Maoism, respectively. Petrov finds an official soft-pedaling of the Soviet regime's horrors, combined with a patriotic celebration of Russia's authoritarian past. Schell finds something even worse—an airbrushing of Mao's horrors out of the historical picture by later Chinese Communist leaders.

Sisonke Msimang casts a cool eye on South Africa's truth-and-reconciliation process, arguing that although it provided a useful public forum for victims to find answers and perpetrators to seek forgiveness, it failed to dismantle the enduring structural racial and economic inequalities of apartheid.

And Phil Clark, finally, assesses Rwanda's ongoing recovery from genocide—a success story in many respects, such as the creative legal processing of perpetrators and impressive official education programs, but playing out under the Kagame regime's authoritarianism.

Worst practices are easy to identify: denying what actually happened. Best practices are more scattered, but one country leads the field. Germany's crimes rank with the worst in history. But at least, over time, the right lessons were indeed learned, and responsible engagement with the past has become a new national tradition. (One example is the *Stolpersteine* plaques—two of which are pictured on the cover, remembering Martin and Sophie Happ, who were murdered at Auschwitz in 1943.)

Perhaps facing a problem so directly and brutally that you coin an actual word for it is a smart idea after all.

—Gideon Rose, Editor

THE UNDEAD PAST

America's Original Sin

Slavery and the Legacy of White Supremacy

Annette Gordon-Reed

The documents most closely associated with the creation of the United States—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—present a problem with which Americans have been contending from the country's beginning: how to reconcile the values espoused in those texts with the United States' original sin of slavery, the flaw that marred the country's creation, warped its prospects, and eventually plunged it into civil war. The Declaration of Independence had a specific purpose: to cut the ties between the American colonies and Great Britain and establish a new country that would take its place among the nations of the world. But thanks to the vaulting language of its famous preamble, the document instantly came to mean more than that. Its confident statement that "all men are created equal," with "unalienable Rights" to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," put notions of freedom and equality at the heart of the American experiment. Yet it was written by a slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, and released into 13 colonies that all, to one degree or another, allowed slavery.

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The Constitution, which united the colonies turned states, was no less tainted. It came into existence only after a heated argument over—and fateful compromise on—the institution of slavery. Members of the revolutionary generation often cast that institution as a necessary evil that would eventually die of its own accord, and they made their peace with it to hold together the new nation. The document they fought over and signed in 1787, revered almost as a sacred text by many Americans, directly protected slavery. It gave slave owners the right to capture fugitive slaves who crossed state lines, counted each enslaved person as three-fifths of a free person for the purpose of apportioning members of the House of Representatives, and prohibited the abolition of the slave trade before 1808.

As citizens of a young country, Americans have a close enough connection to the founding generation that they look to the founders as objects of praise. There might well have been no United States without George Washington, behind whom 13 fractious colonies united. Jefferson's language in the Declaration of Independence has been taken up by every marginalized group seeking an equal place in American society. It has influenced people searching for freedom in other parts of the world, as well.

Yet the founders are increasingly objects of condemnation, too. Both Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. They, along with James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson, the other three slave-owning presidents of the early republic, shaped the first decades of the United States. Any desire to celebrate the

From Nazism to Never Again

How Germany Came to Terms With Its Past

Richard J. Evans

Defeated regimes are not only swiftly removed from power but often immediately erased from memory as well. When Adolf Hitler's "thousand-year German Reich" came crashing down in 1945 with the Allied victory in World War II, reminders of the 12 years of its actual existence were hastily scrubbed away as Germans scrambled to adjust to life after Nazism. Stone swastikas were chiseled off the façades of buildings, Nazi insignia were taken down from flagpoles, and, in towns and cities across Germany, streets and squares named after Hitler reverted to their previous designations.

Meanwhile, millions of former Nazis hid or burned their uniforms, and in the final days of the war, the Gestapo set fire to incriminating records all over the country. Many of the most fanatical Nazis did not survive: they either perished in the final conflagration or killed themselves, along with Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, and many others, in one of the greatest waves of mass suicide in history, unable to imagine anything beyond the all-encompassing world of the Third Reich, the only thing that gave their lives purpose and meaning.

In stark contrast to the countries that the Nazis had conquered during the war, Germany saw no resistance to the Allied occupation. As wartime gravestones eloquently testified, many Germans had fought and died "for Führer and Fatherland." But with the führer gone and the fatherland under enemy occupation, there seemed no point in fighting on. German cities had been reduced to rubble, and millions of Germans had died; as a result, everyone could see what Nazism had ultimately led to. The Allied occupation was vigilant and comprehensive, and it quickly suppressed even the slightest act of resistance. The Allies put in place an elaborate program of "denazification," war crimes trials, and "reeducation" measures that targeted not only former Nazi activists and fellow travelers but also the militaristic beliefs and values that the Allies believed had allowed the Hitler regime to gain support and come to power in the first place. In 1947, to symbolize this forced reinvention of German political culture, the Allied Control Council, which governed Germany at the time, formally abolished the state of Prussia, which "from early days has been a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany," the council claimed.

Germans by and large wanted to focus on the gigantic task of rebuilding and reconstruction and to forget the Nazi past and the crimes in which, to a greater or lesser extent, the vast majority of them had been involved. The year 1945, many of them declared, was "zero hour"—time for a fresh start. However, politicians and intellectuals also reached back to older values in their quest to construct a new Germany.

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