

Yankee in a New World recently asked on her blog if Germans and Americans have historical guilt in common. I started to answer that no, I don't think we really do, then realized I had so much to say that I needed to write it in a post.

I think, out of countries that have committed atrocities in the fairly recent past (say, the last 300 years), Germany is one of the ones that has owned up to their involvement best. Americans feel bad on some level about the enslavement of Africans, the extermination of most of the Native American population, and the treatment of African-Americans, but that's about where it ends. I don't see American society as a whole really owning any of the other atrocities America has been involved with. I've spoken with many people who have never heard about the treatment of Chinese during western expansion or the internment of the Japanese during WWII. And can many Americans really say that guilt from these acts has shaped who they are?

Things may be changing with the youth now, but my husband is a child of parents who went through WWII. He was born very late to his parents, his much older brothers are my mother's age, and I can honestly say that German historical guilt has shaped him to the core. My father-in-law, Franz, was drafted and sent to fight in the Russian front, where he was captured and held prisoner in Russia. Rainer told me once that when he was a child, his father would watch WWII documentaries, silently, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

My mother-in-law Hildegard's fiance was drafted into the army and died in battle. Rainer has said on a couple occasions that if Nazism and WWII hadn't happened, he would never have been born. I think that weighs on him sometimes.

Rainer's grandfather was a local Nazi party leader for their very small village. Rainer's parents went through the rebuilding of Germany, through times when there wasn't enough to eat, there were no utilities, no comforts. How has this affected my husband? Rainer is the most pacifistic person I have ever met in my life.

My family finds it hard to understand why Oliver will not be allowed to play with guns, or violent video games, or have action figures, or toy soldiers. They joke about how Rainer won't allow Oliver to wear camouflage or military apparel. I used to tell Rainer that he married into the wrong family, my grandfather was a career Marine, a WWII and Korean War veteran. My dad volunteered for the Marine Corp and fought in Vietnam. I've got several active duty and retired military cousins.

But as time went on, and I got to know his parents and his country, and see how WWII affects them still, I start to wonder about how proud we are of our victory in WWII, of how we can't get enough of movies glorifying the war. I've become very aware of how often Germans show up as movie villains, and wonder at how easily Germans accept this.

When I was living in Rostock, I got appendicitis, and ended up in the hospital for a week with an 80-something year old roommate. We had a grand old time and she taught me some Plattdeutsch (including some curse words!), until one day I sat up in bed indian-style. "That's how the American soldiers used to sit," she said to me in German. She told me about how she was a teenage girl during the war, and afterwards, when she and her friends saw soldiers coming, they ran and hid because they were so afraid of being raped. Now I was thinking at the time that she was surely overreacting back then, yes rapes probably happened, but I have since learned that rape of the women was widespread. That fear she had as a teenager was still there on her deeply-lined face, over 60 years later.

So no, I don't think Germans and Americans have historical guilt in common. I don't think Americans actively feel much guilt about what our past countrymen, our ancestors, have done, but I think Germans do. I don't think Americans are educated enough about what Americans have done to feel guilt. The people who do know about American committed atrocities often use the excuse that their ancestors weren't the ones that did it. Are you sure? I thought the same thing, I thought my ancestors were either all more recent immigrants or northerners, but after over two years of genealogical research, I found an ancestor in Virginia who was a slaveowner in the 1700s. And even if our ancestors weren't involved, aren't we all still living off the economic bounty provided by land taken from natives and work provided by slaves? Aren't we still exploiting illegal immigrants for cheap labor?

Before the World Cup in 2006, you never saw German flags flying. Since the World Cup, Germans are finally starting to feel some pride in their nation again. It's not strange to see a German flag flying from a house, or a car window, anymore. And I'm happy about that. I'm glad that Germans can feel good about their country again.

What is your experience? How do you think WWII (and the Cold War) has affected the people of Germany?