

What is *Die Schuldfrage*?

Karl Jaspers' work in light of metaphysical guilt

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Abstract

The following thesis aims to analyze Karl Jaspers' book *Die Schuldfrage*, and to identify the unique nature of this work. The depth of Jaspers' philosophical investigation can only properly be appreciated when placed in its historical context. Nazi control in Germany was extensive and had a profound impact on the private and public sphere of Jaspers, and other Germans. Historical analysis, as well as analysis of Jaspers' personal correspondence and writing, shows us the relationship between Nazi control and the development of guilt. I argue that Jaspers' quick action, *Die Schuldfrage* was written in 1945, was a result of his own experience of guilt. *Die Schuldfrage* is a unique work, as colleagues and fellow Germans were uninterested or unwilling to deal with their guilt so soon after the war. To understand guilt, Jaspers splits guilt into four concepts: criminal; political; moral; metaphysical. The most impactful form of guilt is found in metaphysical guilt; which is a direct consequence of the loss of the common solidarity that makes us human. The loss of human solidarity brings us dangerously close to human meaningless existence, which is why the resolution of the question of guilt was so important to Jaspers.

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Introduction

‘Wo Jaspers hinkommt und spricht, da wird es hell.’

- Hannah Arendt, on Karl Jaspers¹

I grew up in a multinational household with family on either side of the Dutch-German border. My Dutch great-grandparents, who had lived through the war, were initially displeased when my mother intended to marry a German man. The war left traces which extended far beyond the initial postwar years. For Germans born after the war the aftermath of the Nazi regime left a special mark. The children born in the Federal Republic of Germany were not personally involved in Nazi crimes, yet they still lived with the sense that *the Germans* carried a responsibility. These ambiguities impacted me too when I was growing up, which spurred my interest in (collective) guilt. To try to understand collective guilt, I investigated *Die Schuldfrage*, written by Karl Jaspers shortly after the war.

In day to day life we are continually confronted with forms of individual guilt; the convicted robber is guilty of a crime, somebody who lies to a friend is morally guilty. These examinations of personal guilt are perfectly adequate for investigating personal transgressions, but they fall short when nations commit wrongdoings against other nations. In the charred remains of Nazi Germany, Karl Jaspers and other Germans were confronted with posters placed by the Allied victors that read: ‘*These crimes: your fault*’. ‘You are also responsible for these crimes’ read the tagline underneath. For Jaspers this was the cause to investigate *collective guilt*. While the 1946 book *Die Schuldfrage* at first sight might seem like a simple short collection of essays that explore various parts of German guilt post-World War 2 (WW2), it is a fascinating insight into Jaspers’ philosophy applied to a practical situation. Jaspers recognized that the question of guilt was not only about who was responsible for what, and who should have been punished, but rather that

¹ Arendt, Hannah, “Das Wagnis der Öffentlichkeit”, Interview with Günter Graus. October 28, 1964. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCySEHWVuHI>

this guilt of all the Germans would stand at the foundation of German *being* for years to come. This sense of urgency that we find in *Die Schuldfrage* is crucial for understanding why this work is so interesting. Jaspers published his first major philosophical work, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, in 1919. However, his work and correspondence up until *Die Schuldfrage* is largely apolitical and unconcerned with any deeper philosophical meaning of contemporary issues. Therefore, one could argue that *Die Schuldfrage* is a turning point for Jaspers; from *Die Schuldfrage* on, his philosophical work changed fundamentally. To understand why the Nazi era had such a profound impact on Jaspers, we must understand German society under Nazi rule, as well as Jaspers' personal life. Connecting these factors reveals that Jaspers' experiences under the Nazi regime made him personally aware of the consequences of the restriction of human freedom. This results in metaphysical guilt. Metaphysical guilt is revealed in the aftermath of our loss of human solidarity, i.e. when one can only stand by while others are killed. Jaspers experienced metaphysical guilt profoundly and, or so I try to argue, this experience motivated him to write publicly accessible lectures because *all* Germans were confronted with their metaphysical guilt.

In short, I will try to clarify Jaspers' intentions in *Die Schuldfrage* by placing his work in the context of Nazi repression, and relating this to his personal experience. Jaspers is clear in the introduction of *Die Schuldfrage* that his goal is to help the German people resolve their guilt in a constructive manner. However, I think the true scope of this goal is only revealed when we properly understand its context.

1. Germany under Nazi control

‘Aus einer Vorlesungsreihe über die geistige Situation in Deutschland, die im Wintersemester 1945-1946 stattfand, wird hier der Inhalt der Stunden, welche über die Schuldfrage handelten, veröffentlicht.

Mit allen diesen Erörterungen möchte ich als Deutscher unter Deutschen Klarheit und Einmütigkeit fördern, als Mensch unter Menschen teilnehmen an unserem Mühen um Wahrheit. Heidelberg, April 1946’

- Preface to *Die Schuldfrage*²

The English translation of *Die Schuldfrage* is titled *The Question of German Guilt*³. The book does concern itself mostly with German guilt, but the consequences of the concepts of guilt are far reaching. ‘The guilt question is more than a question put to us by others, it is one we put to ourselves. The way we answer it will be decisive for our present approach to the world and ourselves. It is a vital question for the German soul.’ (Ashton 2000, 22) *Die Schuldfrage*, or the question of guilt, is a philosophical problem with which the Germans after the war were confronted. We are not only examining of what the Germans are guilty; by examining the question around guilt, we are examining the state of the German soul itself. It is important to understand the conditions under which guilt arises. As such, the structure of the philosophical problem affects all, and Jaspers’ conclusions on guilt fit into the category of the *question of human guilt*.

For Jaspers, the initial postwar situation was clear: the allied victors were eager to point fingers of judgment while the ordinary German citizens wanted nothing to do with the idea of guilt. This tension is examined in the introduction of *Die Schuldfrage*, and gives us a rough first idea of what Jaspers’ project is. In the next section I shall showcase the destruction of personal freedom in Nazi-Germany

² Jaspers, Karl, *Die Schuldfrage* (Leck: CPI Books GmbH, 2012).

³ Jaspers, Karl, *The Question of German Guilt*, Translated by E.B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000),

through the progression of political, cultural, and legal transgressions that ultimately lead to the conformation of the German people to a criminal regime.

Nazi control

The psychological chokehold in which the Nazi party kept the German people was extensive.⁴ The collective mutism, where public discourse became impossible, occurred early on in the Nazi reign. The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was formed in March 1933 less than two months after Hitler was granted the chancellorship. With subdivisions for film, radio broadcasting, art, rallies and counterpropaganda, the Nazi party crept into every aspect of cultural life, effectively banning non-Nazi cultural production. Parallel to this the Nazi party increased their control over the German legal apparatus, effectively outlawing any dissident from holding a state appointed profession, and criminalizing a multitude of anti-Nazi modes of expression.

For Jaspers talking is akin to thinking, i.e. a conversation is the way to truth; the individual is left with just his opinions, a conversation allows us to gather our thoughts and develop them: ‘an opponent is more important than one who agrees with us. Finding the common in the contradictory is more important than hastily seizing on mutually exclusive points of view and breaking off the conversation as hopeless.’ (Ashton 2000, 6) This is a fundamental part of Jaspers’ philosophy: being is always being-together.⁵ By controlling and limiting conversation, the Nazi-state prevented the process through which, according to Jaspers, people can collectively come to a more refined truth. The Nazi period only allowed for Nazi-thought: ‘Public and general, and thus suggestive and almost a matter of course for a youth that had grown up in it, was only the National-Socialist way of thinking and talking’

⁴ This loss of public life as detrimental to the human condition is explored in many other post-war existential or phenomenologist philosophers: ‘Unity had been easy during the Resistance, because relationships were almost always man-to-man. Over against the German army or the Vichy government, where social generality ruled, as it does in all machines of State, the Resistance offered the rare phenomenon of historical action which remained personal.’ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 151.

⁵ Miteinandersein. ‘We have to get our spiritual bearings in Germany, with one another. We have no common ground yet. We are seeking to get together.’ (Ashton 2000, 5)

(Ashton 2000, 13) Because the interruption of open German communication is so central to the catastrophic consequences in Germany for Jaspers, the following section serves to illustrate the extent of Nazi control. For Jaspers, the destruction of the public sphere was the first step towards the loss of solidarity for all mankind, which in turn is a key part of metaphysical guilt; so, understanding the public sphere allows us to understand metaphysical guilt more clearly later.

Politics

Nazi political repression followed a playbook of shrewd political maneuvering combined with paramilitary strong-arming. The Nazi process of *Gleichschaltung*, where all of Germany was aligned under totalitarian Nazi control, began in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire in 1933. By invoking emergency powers, the Nazi party managed to either outlaw directly or terrorize the opposition left wing.⁶ The Enabling Act, which would give Hitler the legislative power he needed to solidify control, was passed in the Reichstag with 94 votes against versus 441 in favor.⁷ By May 1st, Labor Day, Nazi agents had infiltrated all major German trade unions, which marched in the Nazi organized and Swastika adorned parades.⁸ By May 10th the party funds of the last remaining left wing party, the social democratic SPD, were seized, which effectively made the party in Germany defunct.⁹ On June 23rd the Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick declared the SPD a subversive party and consequently outlawed it. In the following days all remaining political parties voluntarily disbanded and the Reichstag was entirely in Nazi control.

The Nazi political grip was soon extended into social organizations. The new labor organization *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* had a membership of over 10 million people by 1938. Projects like *Kraft durch Freude* made state subsidized, and

⁶ The *Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zum Schutz von Volk und Staat* issued 28th February 1933 practically outlawed the German communist party (KPD) and suspended all legal protection for KPD members, leading to the imprisonment of thousands. Voting sessions in the Reichstag from then one were always accompanied by large crowds of SA *security men*, intended to intimidate the remaining Social Democrats. On March 6th the KPD was outright banned.

⁷ Edinger, Lewis J, "German Social Democracy and Hitler's "National Revolution" of 1933: A Study in Democratic Leadership," *World Politics*, Vol. 5, No.3 (April 1953): 348.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

controlled, holidays and leisure possible for members. Membership of the *Hitlerjugend* for schoolboys became practically mandatory by 1936 and officially mandatory by 1939.¹⁰ Membership of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* was equally mandatory for German girls. These measures made the *Hitlerjugend* the largest youth organization in the world. For adults it would become practically impossible to continue in prominent employment without being a party member. Famously Oskar Schindler was able to save his Jewish employees from deportation only because he was a party member who kept close contacts with high ranking Nazi officials and SS-members. In the section on Jaspers' life under Nazi rule I will show that his reluctant stance towards Nazism, and his marriage to a Jewish woman, made any academic work impossible for him. His pro-Hitler colleagues were of course elevated to higher positions.

Film

State funded films promoted the might of the German people, as in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935), or promoted anti-Semitism as in *Der ewige Jude* (1940) and *Jud Süß* (1940).¹¹ These films were not solely made as propaganda material, many of them were a commercial success and were viewed in cinemas by German citizens as entertainment. Nazi filmmakers produced drama-films, features, documentaries and newsreels, with a clear goal and aesthetic: they 'imbued the everyday with a constant of drama and excitement, organizing work and leisure time, occupy physical and psychic space, and thus militating against alternative experience and independent thought.'¹² Films could follow a historical motif, showing the struggle of the Freikorps in street fights with communists during the Weimar era. Other films would show the value of the healthy Aryan family.

¹⁰ The 1936 law left some ambiguity for exemptions if the parents objected. The 1939 amendment made sure that objecting parents would be investigated and punished.

Gesetz über die Hitlerjugend 1 December 1936 and the amendment *Zweite Durchführungsverordnung zum Gesetz über die Hitler-jugend*. 25 March 1939.

¹¹ As many as 1094 German films were released from 1933 to 1945 and although the propaganda value of these films varied, the influence of Goebbels' Ministry for Propaganda is found in every feature.

Rentschler, Eric, *Ministry of Illusion*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

Comedies were meant as a way for the German worker to get some rest before the next day of hard work.¹³ No opportunity in media was wasted by Nazi propagandists. This turned film into an integrated area of political life. The Nazis recognized that endless political propaganda would miss its mark. Even the most devoted populace will lose interest if there was no entertainment value to the films: ‘Entertainment, spectacle and diversion lent themselves remarkably to instrumental endeavors,’¹⁴ as the grandiose fantasy on the screen kept the audience captive and coming back for more. These mass-produced films caused the strange all-encompassing presence of a (subtle) Nazi message in all available entertainment. These films were intended to unify the Aryan Germans, as well as simultaneously separating them from any members of society the party deemed undesirable. ‘Nazi cinema exploited the limitations of human imagination, seeking to obliterate first-person consciousness and to replace it with a universal third person.’¹⁵ Nazi mass culture offered a view of hope and beauty, which served as Goebbels’ tools for pushing the German people on, even when the cracks of the Nazi machine started to show.¹⁶ As a recurring motif in every area of life under Nazism, we see very little space for dissenting opinion in the universal third person created by Nazi films.

Radio

At the behest of Goebbels, the *Volksempfänger* radio was developed. This cheap radio was intended to bring Nazi propaganda into every home.¹⁷ Already in September 1933 listening to foreign communist broadcasts was outlawed, in September 1939 listening to any foreign service and spreading its message could

¹³ Kater, Michiel, *Culture in Nazi Germany*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 63.

¹⁴ Rentschler, Eric, *Ministry of Illusion*, 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁷ As Albert Speer remarked during his final statement at the Nuremberg Trials: ‘Through technical devices such as radio and loudspeaker 80 million people were deprived of independent thought. It was thereby possible to subject them to the will of one man. The telephone, teletype, and radio made it possible, for instance, for orders from the highest sources to be transmitted directly to the lowest-ranking units, where, because of the high authority, they were carried out without criticism.’ Pg. 404 <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/08-31-46.asp>

be punished by death.¹⁸ Hundreds of people were arrested every month for listening to foreign radio services, leading to several hundred convictions every year. Even before the Nazi era the nature of radio programs had been a contested area. In the Weimar-era many radio stations followed a policy of cultural enrichment, *Volk und Heimat*, believing that the cultural education of the German people was a primary goal. *Volk* expressed the idea of unifying the relatively young German nation, trying to alleviate the pressure of the German divisions in the Weimar Republic.¹⁹ This was combined with love for the local *Heimat*, home(land), which was meant to flesh out the new position of Germany in Europe following the redrawn Versailles treaty borders. In these, often local, programs, stations would emphasize and promote the culture and custom of local areas. This was already used to some effect to tighten German control over border regions. There, promoting the idea of a long controlled German *Heimat* was meant to reinforce the *Germanness* of the areas that were lost after WW1.²⁰ The radio-culture of *Volk* and *Heimat* was a very suitable culture for the Nazis to enter. After 1933 the programming shifted towards political speeches and Nazi programs, reporting live from sporting events or party meetings, but also a renewed interest in *Volk*. These *Volk* programs were not direct Nazi propaganda, but rather promoted the greatness of the German people, and a distance from others, like the Jews. These programs were infused with entertainment and (German) music to make the shows more attractive to listeners. To listen to any dissenting opinion was either practically or legally impossible, further alienating Germans from any public discourse.

¹⁸ *Verordnung über außerordentliche Rundfunkmaßnahmen* §2. ‘Wer Nachrichten ausländischer Sender, die geeignet sind, die Widerstandskraft des deutschen Volkes zu gefährden, vorsätzlich verbreitet, wird mit Zuchthaus, in besonders schweren Fällen mit dem Tode bestraft,’ https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Verordnung_über_außerordentliche_Rundfunkmaßnahmen

¹⁹ ‘Furthermore, the idea of *Volk* community was supposed to be a means of solving cultural problems. Culture was in a “severe crisis, [...] the spiritual and social developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the World War and the revolution, have filled the so-called German culture with so many tensions and contradictions . . . that one can no longer talk of a united form.’

Von Saldern, Adelheid, “Volk and Heimat Culture in Radio Broadcasting,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol 76, No. 2, (2004): 331.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

Art and literature

Nazi control over art was equally strong. Any communist or Jewish art was immediately discredited, along with modern art. In 1937 the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, Great German Art Exhibition, was opened, which was intended to showcase the greatness and purity of German art. Parallel to the German exhibition, the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, degenerate art, was opened. This exhibition showed art that was seen as bad and against German values.²¹ Here we recognize the importance of culture as a political product again. “As the “standard bearer of national culture,” as Goebbels called it, art could assume many forms and cast the artist in various roles, and it served several purposes for the state.”²² These political purposes could range from impressing racial norms on the German people, to manipulating foreign governments and later to impress citizens in occupied territories.²³ German literature during this time generally followed a unified framework: “Two features of this work, which characterized the authors as fascistic, were the glorification of war in the interest of a patriotic (read: chauvinistic) German cause, and the construction of chain-of-command situations in which an authoritarian leadership personality was at the top.”²⁴

Law

In March 1933 the first *Sondergerichte*, special courts, were established. These courts were initially set up to prosecute alleged communist or foreign agitators.²⁵ In 1933 these courts only prosecuted physical crimes, where the alleged criminal

²¹ According to Segal’s research, there were barely any communist or Jewish artists in Germany during the Weimar era and later at all. These categories were set up as blanket anti-German art. Segal, Joes, “National and Degenerate Art in The Third Reich” *Art and Politics*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

²² Kater, Michiel, *Culture in Nazi Germany*, 63.

²³ Ibid., 63.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.

²⁵ Section two of the *Verordnung der Reichsregierung über die Bildung von Sondergerichten* specifies that the special courts concerned themselves specifically with the crimes dictated in the following decrees: *Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zum Schutz von Volk und Staat*. (28-02-1933) <http://www.documentarchiv.de/ns/rtbrand.html> and *Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zur Abwehr heimtückischer Angriffe gegen die Regierung der nationalen Erhebung*. (21-03-1933) <http://www.documentarchiv.de/ns/gg-ang-nat-reg.html>

committed an act of violence or was in the possession of a foreign uniform. In a 1934 extension of jurisdiction public rousing and impersonating a party member were criminalized.²⁶ In 1934 the *Volksgeschichtshof*, People's Court, was also established. This court concerned itself primarily with the prosecution of traitors to the Nazi state.²⁷ In June 1935 the judicial reach of the Nazi party became almost absolute with the enactment of the amendment to the Criminal Code²⁸ which criminalized any act if it went against *gesundes Volksempfinden*, healthy popular understanding of the people.²⁹ This effectively criminalized any act that the Nazis deemed destructive or subversive. The first concentration camp for political prisoners, Dachau, was already established in 1933. Combined with the ruthlessness of the SA, and later the Gestapo, dissenting political opinion became dangerous and created a nervous paranoia. One German man dreamt that a Gestapo officer searched his home: "He opened the oven door and it began to talk in a harsh and penetrating voice. It repeated every joke we had told and every word we had said against the government."³⁰

²⁶ *Gesetz gegen heimtückische Angriffe auf Staat und Partei und zum Schutz der Parteiuniformen*. (20-12-1934) <http://www.documentarchiv.de/ns/heimtuecke.ht>

²⁷ Among the roughly 5000 people condemned to death by the *Volksgeschichtshof* were, now, famous cases like political activists Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans, and anti-Hitler conspirator Graf von Stauffenberg.

²⁸ 'Bestraft wird, wer eine Tat begeht, die das Gesetz für strafbar erklärt oder die nach dem Grundgedanken eines Strafgesetzes und nach gesundem Volksempfinden Bestrafung verdient. Findet auf die Tat kein bestimmtes Strafgesetz unmittelbar Anwendung, so wird die Tat nach dem Gesetz bestraft, dessen Grundgedanke auf sie am besten zutrifft.' §2 *Gesetz zur Änderung des Strafgesetzbuchs* (28-06-1934)

[https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Gesetz_zur_Änderung_des_Strafgesetzbuchs_\(1935\)](https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Gesetz_zur_Änderung_des_Strafgesetzbuchs_(1935))

²⁹ In occupied territories during the war these legal principals were exported. The initial laws of an occupied country were generally upheld, albeit heavily amended. Article 1 of the Dutch Criminal Code expressed the principal of *nulla poena sine lege*. This was later amended by decree (62/1943) to include that acts against the rational understanding of the people were nevertheless illegal.

³⁰ Beradt, Charlotte, *The Third Reich of Dreams*. Translated by A. Gottwald. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books. 1968), 45-46

2. Jaspers analysis of Nazi control

In the previous section I gave an overview of the invasive reach of the Nazi party into private life. In this section I shall outline Jaspers' own analysis of why Germany fell to Nazi control. Jaspers starts this analysis in the introduction of *Die Schuldfrage*, but chapter two in part B '*Möglichkeiten der Entschuldigung*' goes into depth regarding the question how the political and social entity that is *Germany*, is responsible for WW2. In this chapter Jaspers explores factors surrounding WW2 that may, or may not, alleviate or influence German guilt. By paying close attention to this, I think, Jaspers clarifies the *Germanness* of WW2 guilt, and in turn also shows the universality of guilt. Furthermore, it shows that Jaspers work on German guilt was unusual for the time, as his work was, according to Jaspers himself, not well received by his colleagues nor the public. This raises the question as to why Jaspers was so motivated to work on the question of guilt, which we will answer later.

The German situation in 1945 according to Jaspers

Jaspers' introduction to *Die Schuldfrage* sketches the German people in 1945 as left without community, beaten and scattered after twelve years of Nazi rule. The pervasiveness of National Socialism in society created a vacuum of public discourse. All areas of life were influenced by the Nazi party: 'Public and general, and thus suggestive and almost a matter of course for a youth that had grown up in it, was only the National-Socialist way of thinking and talking.' (Ashton 2000, 13) For twelve years Germans opposed to the Nazis had almost no way of expressing their dissent. After the war it was difficult for them to speak out again, having been mute for so long. On the other hand, Nazi supporters were left in a reality that did not support their dreams anymore. 'All of us [Germans] have somehow lost the ground under our feet; only a transcendently founded religious or philosophical faith can maintain itself through all these disasters.' (Ashton 2000, 15) The war laid bare the extreme divisions in German society, not only those differences with regard to the end of the war and the Nazi state, but also usual differences like

religious and political attitudes. Jaspers understands the German people as a uniquely divided people. The Nazi regime did not only cause social division, the war also caused great physical and mental trauma. Friends and relatives had been killed; homes were destroyed. People were displaced from their homes, or freed from German concentration camps. Soldiers had been confronted with outlandish horror on the battlefield and many were processed in prisoner of war camps, some returning only years later from the Soviet Union.

For Jaspers, the German situation was not an accident; there are several factors that made Germany uniquely suitable for the atrocities committed by the Nazi state. Jaspers argues that this suitability derives mainly from geographical and historical reasons. It is important to discuss these factors in *Die Schuldfrage* as a proactive measure. If guilt is easily nullified, waved away or reduced to practical absurdity, there is no chance of resolution at all. Oppositely, when all Germans are accused of being guilty for all crimes committed by the Nazis, any real conversation about guilt becomes impossible. The reasons that Jaspers mentions do not excuse any acts and do not alleviate any guilt, but they do show the complexity of the guilt question. For Jaspers' readers this is an important sketching of context as to why the question of guilt is not so easily answered, and why it is necessary to spend as much time on it as Jaspers has. Most importantly, by outlining how *not* to resolve German guilt, Jaspers opens the discussion for how he thinks German guilt can be resolved.

Jaspers knows that people are happy to take responsibility for present actions, if only to lift the suspicion that an act is performed entirely arbitrarily. (Ashton 2000, 79) However, when confronted with failure in the past, people downplay their personal involvement, citing the inescapable constraints of reality that caused their actions.³¹ This downplaying of responsibility occurred on a national scale in Hitler's Germany: 'if Germany won the war the victory and the

³¹ Jaspers describes a phenomenon which in social psychology would be called fundamental attribution error (FAE), coined by Lee Ross in 1977. FAE describes that we attribute another person's mistake to who they are, and our own mistakes to inescapable situational demands. Thus, when another person is late for work, they are lazy. When I am late for work, there was traffic and my car wouldn't start.

credit would be the Party's - while if Germany lost, the losers and the guilty would be the German people.' (Ashton 2000, 79) Hitler is alleged to have claimed: 'Wenn der Krieg verloren geht, wird auch das Volk verloren sein. [...] Denn das Volk hätte sich als das schwächere erwiesen.'³² Jaspers rejects this absolution from guilt, as well as absolution on geographical or historical grounds.

Jaspers' outline of geographical causes

Jaspers' analysis of geographical causes opens historically. He writes that the central European location with open borders on all sides was a crucial factor in the development of the German states.³³ Hostile nations in all directions made a strong military state necessary: 'Periods of weakness have made it a prey to aggression from the West, East and North, finally even from the South (Turks).' (Ashton 2000, 80) Furthermore, German territory was always fleeting and undefined; reaching wherever princes of the Holy Roman Empire conquered or lost territory. This is unusual compared to other nations. For the English there was a much more refined sense of what England is: English soil ends at the coastline, and anything beyond is not England. Political power shifted inside Germany constantly with duchies or territories rising and falling in prominence, and any political failure was immediately capitalized on by domestic or foreign enemies. 'England could afford to pay for its magnificent domestic evolution in decades of impotence in foreign politics and military weakness.' (Ashton 2000, 80) This everlasting shifting in political strength also favored unusually powerful statesmen, where the future of Germany rested entirely on their shoulders. We see this in Bismarck, who virtually single handedly established the German Empire with great success, but also Kaiser Wilhelm II, or Hitler, with disastrous consequences for Germany. (Ashton 2000, 81) However, though geographical factors may have contributed to the foundation of a strongly militaristic Prussia, and possibly the Nazi state, Jaspers warns us that

³² Haffner, Sebastian, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* (Frankfurt Am Main: Kindler Verlag, 1978). Quoting Albert Speer.

³³ In this chapter Jaspers does not describe Germany in the context of the modern nation state. Rather, the country of Germany contains many states: 'A country such as Germany, uncemented by natural frontiers, was forced to develop military states to keep its nationhood alive at all. This function was long performed by Austria, later by Prussia.' (Ashton 2000, 80)

we cannot shift responsibility for WW2 to this geographical cause. Even if Germany's location made a certain political tendency inescapable, the direction of development of the military apparatus is not caused by any geographical factor. 'If geographical conditions leave a margin of freedom, the decisive factor beyond guilt and responsibility is generally said to be the "natural" national character. This, however, is a refuge of ignorance and an instrument of false evaluations' (Ashton 2000, 82)

Jaspers' outline of historical causes

Another way to absolve responsibility is by externalizing all causes for past actions to a sense of historical necessity. This is a complicated process where the final excuse often looks like a simple 'but you made us do it and we couldn't have done it if you hadn't made us.' Jaspers warns that the next step after feigned absolution is often an outwardly directed accusation of others. 'Whoever has not yet found himself guilty in spontaneous self-analysis will tend to accuse his accusers. For instance, he may ask whether they are better than the ones they censure, or whether they do not share the guilt of events,' (Ashton 2000, 84) Outward accusations are especially troublesome because they hide and prevent any self-analysis, which, as we will see later, is crucial for true absolution.

For Jaspers, the steps for this historical misdirection are clear: Any guilt can be shifted towards the actions, or inactions, of the Allied powers after their victory in WW1. The Germans were defeated, with the English, French and Americans on the victorious side. This created a relationship that carried a certain responsibility for the victors.

'The victor cannot be entitled simply to withdraw to his own narrower sphere, there to be left alone and merely watch what happens elsewhere in the world. If an event threatens dire consequences, he has the power to prevent it. To have this power and fail to use it is political guilt.' (Ashton 2000, 85)

Jaspers does not mean here that the treaty of Versailles was too strong, or humiliating, or any other often repeated Nazi propaganda.³⁴ Rather, he condemns the retreat of the victors into non-action when the world required steering. Jaspers points to the uncontested Japanese occupation of Manchuria, or the inability to contain Mussolini's aggression in Ethiopia. Even allowing Hitler to take power and abolish any possibility of democratic process in Germany is a failure in foreign policy. It is important to note: 'that no one knows what further consequences different decisions might have had.' (Ashton 2000, 86) So, the English are not guilty of German atrocities, but it is possible to identify situations where better choices could have been made. 'If they, by their conduct, made events possible, this is political guilt. But in discussing it we must never for a moment forget that this guilt is on another level than the crimes of Hitler.' (Ashton 2000, 85) Furthermore, Jaspers, and other non-Nazis, were aware that they were politically liable for the situation they were in, yet they 'were hopeful that a European order would not permit such crimes on the part of a state.' (Ashton 2000, 87) 'Rightly or wrongly, once the gates had shut on our German prison we were hoping for European solidarity.' (Ashton 2000, 86) However, surrounding European nations recognized and appeased the new Nazi regime: Treaties were signed and diplomatic missions were set up, making the non-Nazi Germans feel even more powerless.

Jaspers reiterates:

- (1) 'Any guilt which can be placed on the others, and which they place on themselves, is never that of the crimes of Hitler's Germany. They merely let things drift at the time, took half-measures and erred in their political judgment.
- (2) The purpose of our discussion, even when we talk of a guilt of the others, *is to penetrate the meaning of our own.*
- (3) In general, it may be correct that "the others are not better than we." But at this moment it is misapplied. For in these past twelve years the others, taken

³⁴ Criticizing the Treaty of Versailles for being too harsh on Germany is not Nazi propaganda. However, blaming all Germany's trouble and woes on the Allied nations often is.

for all in all, were indeed better than we. A general truth must not serve to level out the particular, present truth of our own guilt.’ (Ashton 2000, 90)
[Emphasis mine]

Beyond German guilt

These previous considerations of others’ guilt were not described to distance guilt from Germany. To the contrary, it was used to show that German guilt is the Germans’ guilt, but that this guilt is not uniquely German. Rather, this German situation shows a situation for all mankind. If the German people were fundamentally different and evil, then there would be no necessity for any future fear; after all, the Nazis were already defeated. All that would be required is a strict reeducation of the remaining German people and all evil would be resolved. However, the victors are ultimately not *better* than the Germans, they are entirely the same: both being human beings.³⁵ Thus: ‘we are oppressed by one nightmarish idea: if a dictatorship in Hitler’s style should ever rise in America, all hope would be lost for ages.’ (Ashton 2000, 93) From this we can conclude that we are talking about the guilt of the German people, however, this guilt is unique to the German people. This possibility of guilt is a fundamental facet of humanity.

‘In tracing our own guilt back to its source we come upon the human essence- which in its German form has fallen into a peculiar, terrible incurring of guilt but exists as a possibility in man as such.’ (Ashton 2000, 94)

The guilt is such a fundamental interruption in existence that a return to normality is impossible until this guilt is resolved. Jaspers’ investigation is an investigation into what is left of the German people: ‘We want to know where we stand. We seek to answer the question, what has led to our situation, then to see what we are and

³⁵ ‘We are no inferior race. Everywhere people have similar qualities. Everywhere there are violent, criminal, vitally capable minorities apt to seize the reins if occasion offers, and to proceed with brutality.’ (Ashton 2000, 93)

should be - what is really German - and finally to ask what we can still want.’ (Ashton 2000, 17)³⁶ Here we recognize Jaspers’ *why* again; the need to think and lecture about the crisis of German consciousness to help in its resolve. There is also a certain caution to be read in Jaspers’ *Die Schuldfrage* introduction. A caution that the vacuum of moral consciousness after the war could lead to political potential that could prove destructive again. In the conclusion of the book, Jaspers identifies that the only possibility for political liberty lies in a shared understanding in society, and the resolution of German guilt is a crucial part of the process.³⁷ The first step to this shared understanding is communication, which is why Jaspers reiterates the necessity of dialog so often.

Jaspers and public perception after the war

‘Im Jahre 1946 veröffentlichte ich meine "Schuldfrage". [...] Bei uns erfuhr die Schrift -- deren Absatz gering war -- Ablehnung (auch bei meinen Heidelberger Kollegen), manchmal Schmähungen. Nur hier und da kam ein zustimmender Brief, der manchmal mit dem Satz endete, hier am Ort aber sei ich der einzige, der so denke. Die materielle Not war damals drückend. Ich begriff, daß in dieser Lage solche Erörterungen noch nicht interessieren konnten. Aber es blieb so auch später, und bis heute ist diese Schrift nur sehr wenig zur Kenntnis genommen worden.

Von den Nazi-Massenmorden an Juden wollte man nichts wissen oder interessierte sich nicht dafür. Was da grundsätzlich mit uns Deutschen durch

³⁶ This passage was not present in the original German, and was added later in the English translation. Ashton added six pages from other Jaspers lectures to the introduction. Page 1-5 and page 17-19 respectively.

³⁷ ‘Political liberty begins with the majority of individuals in a people feeling jointly liable for the politics of their community. It begins when the individual not merely covets and chides, when he demands of himself, rather, to see reality and not to act upon the faith-misplaced in politics-in an earthly paradise failing of realization only because of the others’ stupidity and ill will. It begins when he knows, rather, that politics looks in the concrete world for the negotiable path of each day, guided by the ideal of human existence as liberty. In short: without purification of the soul there is no political liberty.’ (Ashton 2000, 115)

uns geschehen war, kam nicht zum Bewußtsein. Man nahm nicht Abstand von dem totalen Verbrecherstaat, zu dem wir geworden waren.’³⁸

These quotes show Jaspers’ personal feelings in the aftermath of the war. Jaspers’ ready acceptance of guilt, and his quick start on working on its resolution was unusual and he was right to feel disheartened by the lackluster response of other Germans of their responsibility in the wake of WW2. A set of surveys conducted in the American occupied zone by The Office of Military Government, United States (OMGUS) confirm this. One survey found that a slight majority of Germans in May 1945 still considered Nazism ‘A good idea badly carried out.’³⁹ In contrast, a survey that graded the acceptance of collective guilt found that only a small majority accepted shared responsibility for Nazi crimes. However, one third of those surveyed accepted no responsibility whatsoever.⁴⁰ Another survey found that 61% of those surveyed were either racists, anti-Semites or intense anti-Semites.⁴¹ Even though these numbers don’t show a clear total rejection of the old fascist order, they do serve to illustrate the structural divides in post-war Germany. Today the question of German guilt and the rejection of Nazism as a political movement is rather obvious. However, immediately post-war the ‘question of German guilt’ was not a question eagerly asked by the German population. It is very interesting that Jaspers was unusual in his proactive stance to German guilt, which begs the question why he thought it was so important. In the next section I will show Jaspers’ personal relationship with the question of guilt, which, I think, compelled him to write *Die Schuldfrage*.

³⁸ Jaspers, Karl, “Erfahrung des Ausgestossenseins.” *Der Spiegel*, October 2, 1967. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46289913.html>

³⁹ Merritt, Anna. Merritt, Richard, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Surveys*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970,) 171-172.
http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4094

⁴⁰ Ibid., 149 http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4085

⁴¹ Ibid., 146-48. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4083

3. Jaspers as a philosopher

3.1. Jaspers' life

In this section I will use Jaspers' personal writings and biographical work to construct a timeline of his development as a philosopher and a political thinker. This is important because in his personal writings I found an interesting discrepancy: Jaspers was largely indifferent to the German Empire, the First World War (WW1), and the subsequent political turmoil of the Weimar republic. However, during the Nazi regime and certainly after WW2. Jaspers became much more politically outspoken. I would argue that Jaspers was mostly apolitical until 1933. He would occasionally remark on political developments, although these commentaries were often inconsequential in nature, of a descriptive sort. However, Jaspers' tone and intentions changed after Hitler's ascent to power in 1933. Jaspers' experience in Nazi Germany forced a new view on life because the totalitarian nature of the regime did not limit itself to political issues, but extended all the way into his personal life. This is important because I argue that Jaspers wrote *Die Schuldfrage*.

Personal development

Reading through the letters that Jaspers wrote in the early twentieth century, I not only noticed a distinct absence of interest in anything political, but also an aversion to anything societal.⁴² He actively rejected joining any political movement and furthermore he often distanced himself from any form of social community.⁴³ He declined invitations to student fraternities, and wrote critically about the noise and chaos they created.⁴⁴ Alongside this he denounced the relatively tame nationalistic fervor of early 20th century pro-German demonstrations, which he felt were too chaotic. This distaste of political action in his personal life also led to a

⁴² In German the word *gesellschaftlich* is both used for private social situations as well as public societal situations. Jaspers was negative towards either.

⁴³ I have not found how Jaspers mends his antisocial behavior with his later philosophical fondness of *miteinander sein*. Further research into this apparent disconnect could be very interesting.

⁴⁴ Jaspers, Karl. Bauer, KH, *Briefwechsel 1945-1968*. (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1983), 3.

distance from German political development as a whole. Therefore, he felt that he had no part in the course of history that would lead to WW1, feeling that Germany had gone in a direction that he had no influence over.⁴⁵ Additionally, Jaspers grew up in a household indifferent to the military. In other families Prussian militarism elevated the perceived glory and authority of a military career. However, Jaspers' father had in his youth rejected an offer to remain in the military professionally, after his conscription, on moral grounds.⁴⁶ Jaspers was taught that an honest civilian profession and the pursuit of happiness made for a good life. Furthermore, because of poor health he was never conscripted into the German army, which allowed him to pursue his education relatively undisturbed.⁴⁷ Even though he did express disdain towards the horrors of the prolonged war in the trenches in WW1, he was untouched by the military and subsequent political reality that took shape during this time.⁴⁸ None of his personal letters during or after WW1 mentioned any great concern for the political or moral circumstances involved in a victorious or defeated Great War Germany. Instead, these letters concerned philosophical issues, published books or the death of Max Weber.⁴⁹

The influence of Nazism on Jaspers' private and public life

One could deduce that the relative isolation from military, political and societal matters allowed Jaspers to live through these times intellectually unharmed, since his own *being*, as an apolitical doctor in Heidelberg, was never attacked. This is very interesting because post-WW2 Jaspers is almost exclusively a political thinker, and at the very least consistently societally concerned. To understand Jaspers'

⁴⁵ 'Als Student spürte ich keinerlei Mitverantwortung für den Gang der Dinge.' Ibid., 3

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁷ From excerpts of Jaspers' diary, we learn that he has been plagued by tiredness and lethargy all his life:

'15 Februar 1917 [...] weil ich körperlich unfähig für ihn bin. Ich müßte einen Beruf haben, bei dem ich ruhig im Zimmer mit Büchern und Papier arbeiten könnte. [...] 18 Februar 1918 [...] Abends sehr müde (Mittagsschlaf 2 Stunden), Gliederweh, Kopfschmerz. Konnte nicht einschlafen [...] 9 Uhr ins Bett'

Jaspers, Karl, *Leben als Grenzsituation: Eine Biographie in Briefen*. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 46-47

⁴⁸ *Briefwechsel*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Leben als Grenzsituation*, 64-89

transformation, I argue that there are two primary differences between these two periods. Firstly, during the Nazi era the academic world, in which Jaspers could enjoy his relative isolation, was no longer independent from the political world. In April 1933 the Civil Service Law was passed, effectively outlawing any public position of employment from being held by persons of non-Aryan descent. This included teachers, professors or other government positions, and later lawyers, doctors, and notaries.⁵⁰ In August 1934 all remaining civil servants were required to swear a personal oath to Hitler.⁵¹ Estimates suggest that roughly a quarter of university professors were dismissed during the early years of the Nazi regime. Naturally, this also meant that the majority of university staff simply conformed to the new norm and tacitly pledged loyalty to the new state.⁵² It is unclear whether Jaspers signed the oath in 1934, but Jaspers was considered by the American occupiers after the war to be one of the few Heidelberg professors entirely free from Nazi relations.⁵³

This encroachment of Nazism in Jaspers' academic life coincided with a similar situation in his personal life. Jaspers' longtime friend and colleague Martin Heidegger joined the Nazi-party in May 1933 and shortly after broke contact with Jaspers during the remainder of Hitler's time in power.⁵⁴ Their conflict arguably originated from the fact that Jaspers' wife Gertrud was Jewish, and that Jaspers was increasingly critical of Heidegger's more nationalistic and anti-Semitic ideas. Jaspers' marriage was not only met with disapproval by his friend, it also warranted

⁵⁰ *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*. 7 April 1933.

<http://www.documentarchiv.de/ns/beamtenenges.html>

⁵¹ 'Der Diensteid der öffentlichen Beamten lautet: "Ich schwöre: Ich werde dem Führer des Deutschen Reiches und Volkes Adolf Hitler treu und gehorsam sein, die Gesetze beachten und meine Amtspflichten gewissenhaft erfüllen, so wahr mir Gott helfe."

Gesetz über die Vereidigung der Beamten und der Soldaten der Wehrmacht. 20 August 1934. <http://www.verfassungen.de/de33-45/vereidigung34.htm>

⁵² Shirer, William, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 223.

⁵³ *Leben als Grenzsituation*, 177

⁵⁴ 'Over dinner, Jaspers thought to confront Heidegger with pointed questions about his recent allegiance to the Nazi party. When asked about the Nazis' propaganda concerning the "elders of Zion", Heidegger responded that: "there really is a dangerous international fraternity of Jews." [...] This would be their last meeting.'

Wallace, Nathan, *History and Politics in the Thought of Karl Jaspers*. (New York: The Graduate Center, City University of New York 2017), 36.

state attention, as their marriage was marked as being racially tainted (*jüdische Versippung*). Because of this, Jaspers was forced into early retirement in 1937 and was later banned from any publishing.⁵⁵ Being forced into retirement was extraordinarily difficult for Jaspers and it marked a new phase of survival under the Nazi regime. He retreated inwards to avoid physical harm, which could come in the form of imprisonment or deportation.⁵⁶ Concurrently, he developed a new philosophical understanding that the rule of law could be taken away at any time:

‘Der 28. Juni 1937 bedeutet somit einen Wendepunkt hin zum politischen Jaspers, der bis zuletzt wachsam sein wird, inwieweit rechtliche Verordnungen des Staates geschaffen werden, um Freiheit zu rauben. D.h. mit Kant gesprochen, Maßnahmen ergriffen werden, die Vernunft im staatlich sanktionierten Regelwerk auf ihren »privaten Gebrauch« einzuschränken, wo sie doch öffentlich, d. h. vor dem Forum der ganzen Welt, vernehmbar sein sollte.’⁵⁷

The implications of the restriction of reason from public use to private use are important. Where Jaspers wrote about the importance of open conversation in society, he follows the spirit of Kant’s public use of reason. The public use of reason lets us deliberate and question the state of things; e.g. the private citizen cannot deny paying taxes, but with public reason he can question, as a scholar, the justness of tax laws. Free persons must be able to make public use of their reason at all times. Kant argues that a restriction of public reason goes against the innate freedom of humanity itself. Any restriction of thought prevents the future development of thought, which is philosophically inconsistent according to Kant:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁶ *Innere Emigration* was a phrase coined by Frank Thiess after the war. It signifies the retreat into private life of (non-Nazi) artists and writers during the Nazi period.

⁵⁷ *Leben als Grenzsituation*. Commentary by Mathias Bormuth on Jaspers. 137.

‘One age cannot bind itself and conspire to put the following one into such a condition that it would be impossible for it to enlarge its cognitions [...] and to purify them of errors, and generally to make further progress in enlightenment. This would be a crime against human nature, whose original vocation lies precisely in such progress; and succeeding generations are therefore perfectly authorized to reject such decisions as unauthorized’⁵⁸

Jaspers’ publication ban prohibited him from participating in public reason. Earlier in this essay I asked why Jaspers was so eager to return to the public debate after WW2, as opposed to the uneventful passing of WW1. Now the invasive reach of the restriction of Jaspers’ *being* becomes apparent, and perhaps the eagerness to return to ‘normal’ is clearer. The restriction was not only on Jaspers’ publishing, but could be considered a restriction of his human nature.

The continued forced reduction of Jaspers’ academic and personal life would eventually lead to a life that was, at that time, ever relative to the prospect of suicide. That is to say, Jaspers and his wife had discussed that suicide would be a preferable option to deportation, and deportation was an ongoing possibility. The mutual commitment of the couple to each other in this period is to be admired. Even though Jaspers had multiple opportunities to leave the country under academic pretense, he remained in Germany because Gertrud would not be allowed to leave. Alongside this, they, and the other 35,000 mixed marriage couples⁵⁹ in Germany, were under pressure from the state to get divorced.⁶⁰ From Jaspers’ diary entries we can follow a remarkable private philosophical discussion on the question of suicide

⁵⁸ Kant, Immanuel, “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” *Practical Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20.

⁵⁹ Kaplan, Marion, *Between Dignity and Despair*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 76.

⁶⁰ In September 1935 a law prohibiting non-Aryans from marrying Aryan Germans was passed. However, this law only prohibited new marriages, existing marriages remained legal. A law detailing grounds for divorce was passed in July 1938, allowing (under paragraph 37) any Aryan to faultlessly annul a marriage to a non-Aryan.

Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre. 15 September 1935.
<http://www.verfassungen.de/de33-45/blutschutz35.html>

Gesetz zur Vereinheitlichung des Rechts der Eheschließung und der Ehescheidung im Lande Österreich und im übrigen Reichsgebiet. 6 July 1938.
https://www.jku.at/fileadmin/gruppen/142/Ehegesetz_1938.pdf

in a hopeless situation. Jaspers describes the increased pressure from his wife on him to allow her to commit suicide, so he could be safe and flee to Switzerland.⁶¹ Naturally he rejected her suggestions. Not only because he loved her, but also because his own being would be worthless if he let her die. In their being together, they formed the only protective bond they both had left in an oppressive regime. ‘Will die Staatsmacht mein Leben, muß sie auch Gertrud leben lassen. Die Schuld für die Vernichtung des einen ist immer die Schuld für die Vernichtung von uns beiden.’⁶² This devotion to each other also hints at the understanding of guilt for Jaspers. In protecting each other’s lives, they also protect the dignity of all mankind. Or, as he writes in his diary on the 2. May 1942: ‘loyalty is either absolute or nothing at all.’⁶³

3.2. Jaspers after the war

Jaspers survival and post-war philosophical development

Karl and Gertrud Jaspers narrowly escaped dreaded deportation. Heidelberg was liberated on the 30th of March 1945, and their deportation had been scheduled for 14th April 1945.⁶⁴ Jaspers experienced this unlikely survival twofold: on one hand he was relieved and grateful for having survived the Nazi regime. He writes on 30th March 1945: ‘Ein Augenblick ohne Worte. Es ist wie ein Wunder, dass wir noch leben.’⁶⁵ On the next day he reiterates the opposition between the oppressed feeling, akin to being imprisoned, of the Nazi regime, and the relief of liberation: ‘Es ist wie im Märchen, wenn man zwischen diesen Mauern, in denen wir 12 Jahre so Entsetzliches erlebten, diese Anschläge liest.’⁶⁶ However, with the celebration of being free also came the guilt of being alive. Jaspers was never pro-Hitler, but

⁶¹ ‘Gertrud kommt immer wieder auf den Gedanken: Sie allein wolle sterben, sie wolle nicht zugleich mich vernichten [...] Sie möchte die Erlaubnis von mir, allein die Welt verlassen zu dürfen.’ *Leben als Grenzsituation*. 156.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶³ This passage reveals more of Jaspers’ Kantian heritage. *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁴ Bormuth, Matthias, *Jahrbuch der Karl Jaspers-Gesellschaft*, volume 1 2014. 37.

⁶⁵ *Leben als Grenzsituation*, 175.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

he never actively participated in anti-Hitlerism either. Rather, as by his own description, he chose to live:

‘Einige meiner Freunde und Kollegen, meine warmherzigsten und engsten Begleiter waren zufällig Juden. Und sie gerieten mit dem Regime in Konflikt. Sie wurden geschlagen, gefoltert und getötet. Sie mussten wie gejagte Tiere fliehen, und sie starben. Wie konnte ich da danebenstehen und zuschauen? Wie konnte ich dasitzen, lesen und nichts tun? Ich konnte nichts ändern, aber ich hätte auf die Straße laufen und schreien können! [...] *Ich zog es vor zu leben, und auch darin liegt eine Schuld!* Eine andere Art von Schuld natürlich, aber gleichwohl eine tiefreichende schreckliche Sünde. Die Erbsünde? Vielleicht. Die Sünde leben zu wollen, sich nicht törichterweise oder aus edlen Motiven für eine Idee oder eine Sache zu opfern. *Aber die Schuld ist eine Schuld vor Gott.*‘⁶⁷ [Emphasis mine]

He expressed this sentiment in the summer of 1945. The seed of thought that would go on to become the lectures that formed *Die Schuldfrage* was already present.⁶⁸ The impossible dichotomy between dying needlessly in protest and reluctantly living on would form the basis of the complexity of guilt described in *Die Schuldfrage*. Note again the contrast between having survived WW2 compared to

⁶⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁶⁸ See the following passages from letters written in 1945. The first passage was written to Hannah Arendt, the second to K.H. Bauer: ‘Ich lese Englisch mit einiger Mühe, muß manchmal ins Lexikon sehen. Sprechen kann ich keinen Satz. Aber ich lese gern. Von Ihnen haben mich besonders entzückt die Aufsätze über das Deutsche Problem (in der »Partisan Review«) und über die Deutsche Schuld. Es war mir, als ob ich die Luft atme, nach der ich mich sehne: Unbefangenheit und Gerechtigkeit und die verborgene, sich selbst fast nicht Sprache gestattende Liebe. Nur so kann man von solchen Dingen reden. Als wir im Sommer von Lasky die »Partisan Review« geborgt bekamen, waren wir begeistert: als ob die Welt wieder aufgehe, in der man miteinander reden und diskutieren kann, - und gar nicht die Auffassungsschemata, die in den amerikanischen Zeitungen ermüden. Ein Artikel von Dwight Macdonald gefiel mir besonders, auch über die Schuldfrage.’ *Leben als Grenzsituation*, 186

‘Zur Zeit beschäftige ich mich mit der Schuldfrage und der Vergegenwärtigung unseres noch möglichen deutschen Selbstbewusstseins. Ihr Vorschlag einer öffentlichen Erklärung der Universität erscheint mir sehr erwägenswert. Durch sie würde unser Dasein fühlbar. Eine eindrucksvolle Entwicklung unserer Aufgaben müsste die Notwendigkeit unserer Universität für breitere Kreise überzeugend machen.’ *Briefwechsel*, 22

WW1, when there was no ‘*miracle of survival*’ or relief of being freed from imprisonment. Naturally, there was no way for Jaspers to develop the understanding of guilt before.

Furthermore, if we compare the rather dry philosophical work Jaspers published before 1933, like *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919) and the three volume *Philosophie* (1932), to the work published after 1945, we notice a stark contrast. Strong public engagement started with *Die Schuldfrage* (1946) with more works containing a public character following suit, like: *Der philosophische Glaube. Fünf Vorlesungen* (1948), *Einführung in die Philosophie. Zwölf Radiovorträge* (1950), *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (1957), *Kleine Schule des Philosophischen Denkens* (1964) and *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik? Tatsachen, Gefahren, Chancen* (1966). This understanding of Jaspers’ development as a philosopher is crucial for the understanding of *Die Schuldfrage*, and I argue, for the understanding of German guilt as a whole. This leads to interesting questions that are difficult to answer, yet worth thinking about. Such as: Did Jaspers gain a fundamental new understanding of a philosophical concept, in this case guilt, because he lived through the war? With our understanding of Jaspers’ personal situation, it will be easier for us to make sense of the choices that Jaspers made in his investigation of guilt. Before we turn to *Die Schuldfrage*, I will shed some light on Jaspers’ post-war experience in the next section.

3.3. Jaspers’ emigration from Germany

The university of Basel had already tried to invite Jaspers in 1941, but his emigration visa was denied by the Nazi state. A renewed invitation in 1947 was accepted and Jaspers and his wife moved to Basel.⁶⁹ Initially they lived in Basel as German émigrés, but Jaspers would later receive Swiss citizenship. In an article published eight months after his death, he reflects on his emigration and

⁶⁹ Jaspers, Karl, “Erfahrung des Ausgestossenseins.” *Der Spiegel*, October 2, 1967. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46289913.html>
‘Der Ruf nach Basel kam im Dezember 1947. Für meine Frau und mich war die Freude groß. Dieser Ruf war nach 12 Jahren die Bestätigung, daß ich in der Welt nicht nichts sei. Dazu stand etwas wie ein Paradies gesicherten Lebens in einer freien Welt uns vor Augen.’

disillusionment with the reconstruction of the German state. Even though he writes that he cannot give one definite reason for leaving Germany, he tells a descriptive tale. The despair of living in Heidelberg in Nazi-Germany, as we saw earlier, left a profound impact. He describes how during the war, his friend Gustav Radbruch advised him to reserve two plots in the non-denominational graveyard *Bergfriedhof*. Jaspers' request was denied, as the mayor decreed that his wife could only be buried in a common Jewish plot. He describes:

‘Da ist etwas gerissen, was nicht wieder heil gemacht werden kann. Die Erfahrung des Ausgestoßenseins vom eigenen Volk durch einen Staat, der ein Verbrecherstaat war, ändert die Beziehung zu diesem Volk. Was die Deutschen, zu denen wir selber gehören, für uns sind, das hat mit Staat und Ort und Grab nichts mehr zu tun.’ (Der Spiegel)

The Allied occupation and the defeat of Nazi thought gave Jaspers' hope for a renewed and moral Germany. Hitler's defeat was not only seen as a destruction of evil, but a liberation from the constraints that were preventing a fair and just society. With these constraints removed, the remaining *good*, i.e. non-Nazi Germans could rebuild a just society.⁷⁰ However, this hope never crystalized into reality. In 1948 a new Federal Republic of Germany was founded and any chance of a new democracy was lost. Jaspers calls the foundation of this new republic a simple return to pre-Nazi republicanism without taking heed of the internal failures it carried.⁷¹

Furthermore, Jaspers experienced resistance when he tried to return to his normal academic life. The state government in Karlsruhe interfered with the radio

⁷⁰ Ibid. ‘Die Umkehr innerhalb der geistigen und politischen Welt durch uns selbst, nicht durch Direktiven der Militärregierung, war unsere gemeinsame Hoffnung. [...] Alle fühlten wir: nun liegt es an uns.’

⁷¹ Ibid. ‘Es bedürfe nur der Wiederherstellung des alten, wie es vor der Nazizeit war, nur unter den Bedingungen der Massengesellschaft.’

Jaspers' political ideas and his criticism of the Federal Republic of Germany would make interesting further research. For further insight I refer to Karl Jaspers, *Antwort Zur Kritik meiner Schrift Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik* (München: Piper Verlag 1967)

lectures that Jaspers intended to give, and the nomination of his research assistant was frustrated. Also, the total disregard of any responsibility for Nazi crimes by surviving Nazis caused a great amount of friction between Jaspers and his fellow Germans. Jaspers strongly felt that his wife and he were German citizens, and that the oppression in the Nazi era was an oppression of Germans, by Germans. The denial of personal responsibility leads to the denial of reflection, which prohibits any form of reconciliation.

‘Sie wollten leben, aber sich nicht besinnen, sich nicht ändern, sich nicht für den Gang der Dinge, und was wir darin tun könnten, interessieren. Alle Nazis schoben die Schuld auf Hitler: "Wir sind mißbraucht worden." Es gab selten eine Würde, aber hier und da geheime Wut und Bosheit. Das wurde mit den Jahren schlimmer.’ (Der Spiegel)

Summarized the reasons to leave Germany after the war are clear. As he notes:

‘Was uns forttrieb, war klar: Das Ausbleiben der Konsequenzen des Massenmordes an Juden -- der radikale Abstand vom totalen Verbrecherstaat - - meine Isolierung in den Universitätsbestrebungen -- die Feindseligkeit der Regierung -- eine Überbeanspruchung durch vergebliche Bemühungen -- eine Minderung der Kraft meines philosophischen Arbeitens.’ (Der Spiegel)

I think this sketches a fascinating development in Jaspers life, from a non-political citizen to an oppressed minority, to a hopeful public thinker who in the end became a stranger to the country he once belonged to. *Die Schuldfrage* is a vital crossroad for Jaspers where he tries to engage in a social debate but his, I think, philosophically sound and meaningful approach is rejected by a people too poor and hungry, and perhaps ashamed of their involvement, to accept it.

4. How to investigate German guilt

Jaspers distinguishes four concepts of guilt; criminal, political, moral and metaphysical. According to Jaspers, the reason for this differentiation is threefold. Firstly, it clarifies the meaning of the charges. This makes it possible to speak of guilt in Germany in a more nuanced form; so, Jaspers argues that all Germans are politically liable for the actions of their state, but not all Germans are criminally guilty for crimes committed in the name of the state. A blanket accusation of total guilt for all Germans, for all crimes, would obviously go beyond a reasonable investigation. This is related to the second reason for differentiation. A blanket accusation of all Germans would not only make criminally not-guilty persons guilty; it would also devalue the guilt of those who committed crimes. ‘This differentiation of concepts of guilt is to preserve us from the superficiality of talk about guilt that flattens everything out on a single plane.’ (Ashton 2000, 27) Lastly, the concepts show us the inner relations of guilt and the occurrences that arise in one area and move into another, e.g. how criminal or political guilt arises from the situation of moral guilt. (Ashton 2000, 28)

Jaspers explains why the question of German guilt is so prominent after WW2, as opposed to previous conflicts.⁷² War-guilt has historical roots and was clearer and more prominent in past conflicts; the Napoleonic wars or the Austro-Prussian war were defined by political ambitions and outcomes. Personal or moral responsibility was largely irrelevant in the aftermath of these conflicts. In contemporary thinking the importance of political guilt has diminished and guilt has become more complex; ‘After World War I, the Treaty of Versailles decided the war-guilt question, against Germany. Historians of all countries have since discarded the theory that only one side was guilty. At that time, as Lloyd George put it, all sides had ‘skidded’ into the war.’ (Ashton 2000, 41) The political patchwork of alliances and the complex unfolding of the war makes it impossible to reach consensus on who was politically guilty of causing the war. However, there

⁷² This is the reason Jaspers gives in *Die Schuldfrage*. The purpose of this thesis is of course to show that the real reason for the prominence of the question of guilt is more complex and personal.

is no such ambiguity in the aftermath of WW2, as the aggressive warmongering of Hitler-Germany leaves no doubt about who started the conflict. The Allied posters in the German streets in 1945 were an indication of the more complex matter of guilt. According to Jaspers, because political guilt was unmistakably German, the posters indicate a matter beyond political guilt: ‘Today, however, “You are the guilty” means much more than war guilt.’ (Ashton 2000, 42) *You are the guilty* can be read in all four concepts of Jaspers guilt. “You are guilty for the acts of your regime” is a matter of political guilt. “You are guilty for supporting this regime” is moral guilt. “You took part in the crimes and are guilty” is criminal guilt. Lastly “You are guilty because you stood idly by” is metaphysical guilt. The ambiguity of the accusation of guilt triggered the necessity of closer analysis.

| | Responsibility From without | Responsibility From within |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Affects Individual | Criminal | Moral |
| Affects Collective | Political | Metaphysical |

Table 1. Concepts of guilt and their source

Criminal guilt

Criminal guilt occurs when a crime is committed, and a crime is committed when objectively verifiable actions break the preexisting law. The corresponding authority is the court (Ashton 2000, 25) The Nuremberg trials worked along the principals as Jaspers envisioned them. The Germans as a whole were not on trial, criminally accused Germans were. ““We want to make it clear,” Jackson said in his fundamental address, “that we do not intend to accuse the whole German people.”” (Ashton, 2000, 46) Furthermore, the accused were explicitly charged with crimes

breaking internationally recognized conventions.⁷³ The consequence for criminal guilt is punishment. (Jaspers Pg. 23) The only person who can be accused of criminal guilt is the criminal, and Jaspers asserts that there is no collective guilt involved here at all. Even though there were organizations which were deemed criminal as a whole, like the SS, Jaspers warns against mistaking the common guilt of its members for collective guilt. ‘To pronounce a group criminally, morally or metaphysically guilty is an error akin to the laziness and arrogance of average, uncritical thinking.’ (Ashton 2000, 36) However, by joining a criminal organization each member becomes personally criminally guilty, membership being the crime. ‘There are assemblages of gangsters and conspirators which may be branded criminal. In their entirety, and in this case mere membership is punishable.’ (Ashton 2000, 34) As such, the postwar trials in West-Germany found 2890 suspects guilty, many of them being charged with *membership of a criminal organization*.⁷⁴ Compared to the estimated 800,000 members of the SS, no collective criminalization occurred.

In criminal and political guilt, justice is a rehabilitative process. A criminal can feel themselves being returned to civilian society because they served their time in prison. Punishment is always inflicted from the outside, and only on an individual. The nature of punishment is such that it only requires a judge’s judgement that the criminal committed the crime out of free will. (Ashton 2000, 30) The adherence to a common code of conduct, with agreements, laws, courts and judges, is called *Right*⁷⁵. Note that the concept of *right* does not apply to moral or

⁷³ Chapter 3 in Taylor’s *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* goes into detail on Justice Jackson’s commitment to a fair and by-the-book trial.

‘There should be no drumhead court-martial, no Moscow-type show trial, no foregone conclusions; there should be no trials at all unless prosecutors and judges alike were agreed that defendants should be acquitted if the law and facts did not support their conviction.’

Taylor, Telford, “Justice Jackson takes over”, *Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1993), 45

⁷⁴ Pendas, Devin, “Seeking Justice, Finding Law: Nazi Trials in Postwar Europe.” *The Journal of Modern History* Vol 81, no. 2 (June 2009): 347–368.

⁷⁵ In German *Recht*. So, we are dealing only with the greater philosophical concept. Jaspers derives his concept of right from Hegel. ‘Right is the sublime idea of men who derive their existence from an origin which is secured by force alone, but not determined by force. Wherever men become aware of their humanity and recognize man as man, they grasp human rights and base themselves on a natural law to which both victor and vanquished may appeal.’ (Ashton 2000, 31)

metaphysical guilt, because these are types of guilt that arise from inner judgment only. Because criminal guilt can be absolved by following right⁷⁶, it is not of great importance to Jaspers' philosophical investigation here; i.e. criminal guilt in post-war Germany is not inherently different compared to any other situation, if a fair trial could be held.⁷⁷ There is no collective guilt involved in criminal guilt: 'It is nonsensical, however, to charge a whole people with a crime. The criminal is always only an individual.' (Ashton 2000, 34) To understand the implications of collective guilt, we must look at political guilt.

Political guilt

Political guilt is the guilt you carry for being part of a state, i.e. every person is responsible for the way they are governed. Jaspers treats political guilt strictly in the context of members belonging to a defined political state. As such, Germans are politically guilty because they lived under the German state. In the scope of *Die Schuldfrage* it is unclear how political guilt functions in revolutions, civil war or asymmetric warfare.⁷⁸

Political guilt is always judged by the victor and leads to *liability*. That means that reparations or restrictions of political power can be demanded. (Jaspers Pg. 23) This liability extends to all citizens, as those living in Germany continued to be German citizens, and as such carried the weight of the political ramifications. Post-war Germany was governed by an allied military government, its territory was annexed and people displaced, and the country was politically divided for over forty years; these are all forms of political consequences that the victors pressed upon the collective German people. Punishment for political guilt is always inflicted from the outside. *Political liability* is the only form of guilt discussed here that is cast

⁷⁶ That is, by following the judicial process of sentencing before a judge and subsequent punishment.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to consider whether Jaspers would consider the crimes of the accused at the Nuremberg Trials as equal to any other murder. In *Die Schuldfrage* he does not go into depth on the nature of the committed crimes, except for that they are defined by the law.

⁷⁸ Consider the Colombian conflict. Are members of FARC criminally guilty for being members of a criminal organization, or are they politically liable. Perhaps this question hinges on the problem of what a state is. For Jaspers the assessment of political guilt of Germans for actions after 1933 is more complex too. The Germans were certainly politically guilty for letting the Nazis rise to power, but in a dictatorship, citizens become like prisoners. (Ashton 2000, 76)

directly upon the collective from the outside. This is only possible because being a member of a political unity is enough to be politically liable accountable for its actions. Jaspers likens the dynamic between victors and vanquished to Hegel where the *knecht*, the vanquished, must choose between destruction and enslavement and so the severity and scope of political liability is determined by the victors.

Citizens of a state are collectively liable for the actions of the state, but they cannot be collectively punished for these actions. Collective liability is resolved through the restriction of political liberty as described earlier; 'It clearly makes sense to hold all citizens of a country liable for the results of actions taken by their state. Here a group is affected, but the liability is definite and limited' (Ashton 2000, 33) Allowing Hitler and the Nazi-party to rise and take control is a political failure of Germany and in turn Germany is required to make political restitution.

'We are politically responsible for our regime, for the acts of the regime, for the start of the war in this world-historical situation, and for the kind of leaders we allowed to rise among us, for that we answer to the victors, with our labor and with our working faculties, and must make such amends as are exacted from the vanquished.' (Ashton 2000, 72)

However, political liability does not spill over into other types of guilt. Jaspers makes it very clear that being a member of a political unity is not enough to be morally responsible, or criminally punishable, for actions of others. By examining moral guilt and understanding its demarcation, it will be easier for us to recognize and categorize political guilt.

'Germany under the Nazi regime was a prison. The guilt of getting into it is political guilt. Once the gates were shut, however, a prison break from within was no longer possible. Any discussion of what responsibility and guilt of the imprisoned remained and arose thereafter must consider the question what they could do at all. To hold the inmates of a prison

collectively responsible for outrages committed by the prison staff is clearly unjust.' (Ashton 2000, 76)

Moral guilt

For each act you commit, you carry *personal* moral responsibility. Jaspers reiterates that *each* act carries this responsibility. This is analogous to a crime one is forced to commit; a forced crime is not entirely guiltless either. For moral guilt the corresponding authority is your own conscience or the communication with friends and loved ones. To rehabilitate moral guilt, one requires inner *penance and renewal*. (Ashton 2000, 30) Any rehabilitation will lead to insight and a greater understanding of the right thing to do. It is important to note that this is an individual process as Jaspers opposes any form of collective moral guilt. By accusing a group of moral guilt, the accuser deindividualizes the accused to the extent that made the accused's political crimes possible in the first place. The crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis were, according to Jaspers, only possible because of the strict deindividualization of opposing groups, which results in dehumanization. This de-individualization is at the basis of centuries of inter-group strife, and according to Jaspers, the categorization of humans and as a consequence categorically assigning responsibility is always unjust. As such, there is no collective moral guilt in any case, and thus any moral responsibility in post-war Germany is the personal responsibility of those involved. Jaspers insistence on the individual nature of moral guilt makes it, conceptually, similar to criminal guilt. The analogous nature of committing a crime to a moral crime, i.e. the act of the individual is central to the subsequent guilt. Political, and metaphysical guilt, are in a different category because merely *being* German during the Nazi period was enough to be guilty.

'From within, the guilty hears himself charged with moral failure and metaphysical weakness- and, if these led to political and criminal acts or omissions, with those as well. Morally man can condemn only himself, not another- or, if another then only in the solidarity of charitable struggle. No

one can morally judge another. It is only where the other seems to me like myself that the closeness reigns which in free communication can make a common cause of what finally each does in solitude.’ (Ashton 2000, 33)

Interestingly, Jaspers argues that the moral *status* of a society, i.e. the collective sum of all moral acts, is indicative of the future political character of society. So even though there is no collective component to moral guilt, the sum of all individual immoral acts creates an atmosphere in which collective guilt can arise:

‘Moral failings cause the conditions out of which both crime and political guilt arise. The commission of countless little *acts* of negligence, of convenient adaptation, of cheap vindication, and the imperceptible promotion of wrong; the participation in the creation of a public atmosphere that spreads confusion and thus makes evil possible - all that has consequences that partly condition the political guilt involved in the situation and the events.’ (Ashton 2000, 28)

The relationship to Nazi Germany is clear. In a repressive society the individual citizen is alienated from politics. When open transgressions occur, non-affected citizens stand by and go back to work. Even though they might condemn rounding up Jews, they cannot act against it, because repression is a political matter which is only a concern for those involved in politics: ‘He has an easy conscience in obeying and an easy conscience about his non participation in the decisions and acts of those in power.’ (Ashton 2000, 29) When the repression is lifted, either through foreign intervention or revolution, confrontation with moral guilt will occur. It is important to note that moral guilt is created when you fail to do the right thing, while you still could. The situation is different when a situation occurs where you must stand idly by while inhumane transgressions occur, knowing that you are powerless to change anything. This leads to metaphysical guilt.

Metaphysical guilt

In the summer of 1945, we find Jaspers' earliest mention of a different type of guilt. 'Ich zog es vor zu leben, und auch darin liegt eine Schuld! Eine andere Art von Schuld natürlich, aber gleichwohl eine tiefreichende schreckliche Sünde.'⁷⁹ This mysterious metaphysical guilt seems to be connected to the experience of great tragedy like Jaspers experienced under Nazi rule. Understanding metaphysical guilt will show whether the relationship between metaphysical and political guilt functions analogously to the relationship between moral and criminal guilt.

'If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt. As human beings, unless good fortune spares us such situations, we come to a point where we must choose: either to risk our lives unconditionally, without chance of success and therefore to no purpose- or to prefer staying alive, because success is impossible. That somewhere among men the unconditioned prevails - the capacity to live only together or not at all, if crimes are committed against the one or the other, or if physical living requirements have to be shared - therein consists the substance of their being. But that this does not extend to the solidarity of all men, nor to that of fellow-citizens or even of smaller groups, but remains confined to the closest human ties - therein lies this guilt of us all.' (Ashton 2000, 26)

There are situations where intervention is entirely useless, when deciding to stay alive is the option most would choose.⁸⁰ Jaspers refers to this in his diary where he

⁷⁹ *Leben Als Grenzsituation*, 177.

⁸⁰ Survivor guilt. This can manifest itself in guilt about not having done enough for others, having done bad things to survive, or about having survived at all. Psychological research into *KZ-syndrom*, or concentration camp syndrome was extensive after the war. William G. Niederland, in *Folgen der Verfolgung: Das Überlebenden-Syndrom, Seelenmord*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1980, identified six causes for developing survivor guilt where number four, *verunsicherung aller*

wrote that many of his colleagues and friends were Jewish, yet he found no way to help them. The mysterious nature of metaphysical guilt stems from the fact that direct confrontation with metaphysical guilt is relatively rare in peacetime post-war society. However, in Nazi-Germany citizens were frequently confronted with unjust tragedies. Intervening during the eviction of a Jewish family by an SS squad would often lead to the hero being deported to a concentration camp as well, and so most people stood aside and never intervened. Metaphysical guilt is uncovered when one realizes that he stood by for strangers, but would intervene for people dearer to him; there are some people for whom anybody would run into a futile situation to try and save them, like family or very close friends. However, this heroism 'does not extend to the solidarity of all men [...] but remains confined to the closest human ties- therein lies this guilt of us all.' (Ashton 2000, 26) Thus: one is guilty of being alive while others die. Intriguingly, metaphysical guilt is not something we become guilty of, there is no equivalent like being criminally guilty for committing a crime to committing a metaphysical crime. Rather, Jaspers argues that metaphysical guilt is inherent to being human, it is the natural consequence of the realization that human solidarity is not absolute and unconditional.

Metaphysical guilt is so impressive and comprehensive that it transforms a person's being. Jaspers calls this a '*transformation of human self-consciousness before God.*' (Ashton 2000, 30) What happened when foreigners and Jews were assaulted in the streets in 1933? The population stood by and decided to keep living.⁸¹ The ones who kept their heads down and lived their lives as usual, even while aware of the atrocities, tacitly consenting to the crimes the state committed

mitmenschlichen Bezüge und Kontakte, fits very well with Jaspers postulation about communication as a metaphysical necessity. Zdzislaw Ryn argues that KZ-syndrom is not only a psychological trauma, but a psychological and physical disease that contributes to the death of former prisoners, and even extends to their children.

Ryn, Zdzislaw, "Between life and death: Experiences of concentration camp musselmen during the holocaust." *Genetic, Social & General Psychology Monographs*. Feb 1990, Vol. 116 Issue 1, 7-13.

⁸¹ Of course, there was opposition in the Nazi era. Jaspers recognizes this too: 'Thousands in Germany sought, or at least found death in battling the regime, most of them anonymously. We survivors did not seek it.' (Ashton 2000, 66) Those who dared to resist died in the anonymous heroism that Jaspers described earlier in the text. 'In every month of 1944 the number of political arrests exceeded 4,000. The fact that there were concentration camps until the very end proves that there was opposition in the country.' (Ashton 2000, 77)

face moral guilt. 'But the ones who in utter impotence, outraged and despairing, were unable to prevent the crimes took another step in their metamorphosis by a growing consciousness of metaphysical guilt.' (Ashton 2000, 67) Thus, awareness of metaphysical guilt is a process of growth and greater understanding. A crucial consequence of Jaspers' line of thought could be that there is no reconciliation of metaphysical guilt in the traditional sense. Any of the other types of guilt can be, through tricks and semantics, reduced to insignificance. Criminal guilt only befalls those who have committed crimes; judges in court will take care of those, it does not concern regular citizens. Political liability is only a temporary material hardship, your core humanity is not affected by this; for some time, political life will be restricted by the victors, but eventually one can move past this. Moral guilt can be set aside by saying that Nazi rule was a weird time for all involved and the people must now move on to a morally acceptable future. However, the only way to escape metaphysical guilt is to deny outright that the concept exists, and this would be denying the underlying solidarity of all humanity. (Ashton 2000, 68) In turn, metaphysical guilt is directly linked to being human. Thus, this postwar metaphysical guilt is not a new guilt that formed during the war, the war revealed it. Germans who stood by while Jews were deported experienced this breach of human life, but one can imagine that soldiers liberating the concentration and destruction camps also experienced the same. They also experienced the inability to prevent the crimes that were committed.

Metaphysical guilt is intrinsic because it does not cease.⁸² Criminal guilt can be atoned for through punishment, political guilt is alleviated by political restrictions and treaties. Yet guilt from within weighs on the individual for the rest of their lives. That is why Jaspers thinks the question of German guilt is such an important question to ask. If metaphysical guilt is not accepted and internalized, the rejection of human metaphysics will blind them to the true depth of being. 'we subside into the average triviality of indifferent, mere living.' (Ashton 2000, 111)

⁸² This is the case for moral guilt too, but as described earlier, penance and inner reconciliation can set the individual on a course where future moral transgressions might be avoided. This process is different from metaphysical guilt.

The German people as a whole must feel a shared co-responsibility, not in a legal or political sense, but in the common understanding that something drastic and disastrous occurred.

‘By our feeling of collective guilt we feel the entire task of renewing human existence from its origin- the task which is given to all men on earth but which appears more urgently, more perceptibly, as decisively as all existence, when its own guilt brings a people face to face with nothingness. As a philosopher I now seem to have strayed completely into the realm of feeling and to have abandoned conception. Indeed language fails at this point, and only negatively we may recall that all our distinctions - notwithstanding the fact that we hold them to be true and are by no means rescinding them -must not become resting places. We must not use them to let matters drop and free ourselves from the pressure under which we continue on our path, and which is to ripen what we hold most precious, the eternal essence of our soul.’ (Ashton 2000, 75)

Jaspers alludes to the German soul again; a German soul that is now aware of a deeper layer because it has felt that metaphysical guilt so prominently. There is no way back to the status quo ante bellum, one cannot forget the metaphysical guilt once experienced. The new task, to prevent slipping into a humanly meaningless existence, is gaining consciousness of guilt. ‘Clarification of guilt is at the same time clarification of our new life and its possibilities, from it spring seriousness and resolution.’ (Ashton 2000, 113) Consciousness, and in turn acceptance, of exactly what one is guilty of brings awareness of freedom, for Jaspers this is in relation to God. Purification of metaphysical guilt is not an act after the fact, rather it is an intrinsic aspect of metaphysical guilt itself. The attempt to purify metaphysical guilt is the closest thing in human life to finding ourselves and freedom. ‘These are the reasons why purification alone can free us so as to be ready for whatever comes. For only the pure soul can truthfully live in this tension: to know about the possible ruin and still remain tirelessly active for all that is possible in the world.’ (Ashton

2000, 116) The question of collective German guilt is perhaps better defined as a question of guilt that all Germans carry. They are not collectively guilty, but all who survived the war are confronted with their individual metaphysical guilt. German collective guilt is an individual guilt that all experienced because they had to live through the war: 'That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt.' (Ashton 2000, 26)

Conclusion

Nazi totalitarianism and the corresponding restriction of public reason goes entirely against the spirit of human nature according to Jaspers' philosophy. The inability to communicate publicly halts progress towards truth and forms the potential for the tragedies that occurred in the name of the Nazi regime. The fact that Jaspers wrote *Die Schuldfrage*, and spent a considerable amount of time on the question of guilt, indicates his personal involvement. Jaspers was never concerned with any political or public debate during or after WW1. By relating the extent of Nazi control to Jaspers experience in his private correspondence or writing, we find a considerable connection. Jaspers was impacted both publicly, by being banned from publishing, as well as privately, through restrictions and repression because of his marriage to a Jewish woman and his general antipathy of Nazism.

Jaspers' analysis of the question of German guilt is a result of his experiences. Directly after the fall of Nazi Germany, Jaspers mentions his own guilt of having survived, while some friends and colleagues did not. This guilt is expanded into the concept of metaphysical guilt. Initially metaphysical guilt seems vague, an unusual guilt before God. However, by considering it in the context of Jaspers' existential philosophy it is clear that metaphysical guilt is a direct consequence of the loss of the common solidarity that makes us human. The loss of human solidarity brings us dangerously close to meaningless existence, which is why the resolution of the question of guilt was so important to Jaspers.

Jaspers is transparent in his intentions. He tells us his goal in the first paragraph of *Die Schuldfrage*: 'Wir müssen uns in Deutschland miteinander geistig zurechtfinden. Wir haben noch nicht den gemeinsamen Boden. Wir suchen zusammenzukommen.' (Jaspers 2012, 8) The scope of this project becomes meaningful when we consider it in the context of what Jaspers experienced during the Nazi period, and connect it to his philosophy.

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