Günter Grass and the Waffen SS

By Peter Schwarz
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Once again, the philistines vituperate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he received his call-up for military service as a 17-year-old in a work camp, he was still practically a child, lacking the knowledge and capacity to grasp the criminal character of the organization he was joining. Hitler had assumed power in Germany when Grass was seven years old, and shortly afterwards the Nazis took power in the free city of Danzig, as Gdansk was called at the time.

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

Grass was neither directly or indirectly involved in any of the
Grass openly addresses the question in *Peeling the Onion.* “Enough excuses,” he writes about his membership in the Waffen SS. “And nevertheless, for decades I have refused to admit to myself the word and the double letter. That which I had accepted on the basis of the stupid pride of my young years I sought to conceal after the war due to my growing shame. But the burden remained, and nobody could lift it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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