Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)
https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/the-politics-of-victimhood/
04.11.2026

The Politics of Victimhood

Negotiating New Contexts and Contingencies in Post-Fascist (West) Germany

Von: Alexandria N. Ruble

What did it mean to be a victim of fascism, especially for those imprisoned for their political beliefs? Who got to lay claim to this status, and who got to determine it for others? These are the queries that have been driving my archival research at KWI since April. I have been to ten state and municipal archives in North Rhine-Westphalia in pursuit of answers to these questions.

One of the many sources at my disposal are *Fragebögen*, or questionnaires, submitted by victims of fascism as part of their welfare applications in the late 1940s. My ongoing research is revealing that earning the status of a victim of fascism was not an automatic ticket to lifelong compensation and recognition. Rather, it was something that had to be constantly negotiated and reinforced throughout the rapidly shifting contours of post-war West Germany.

To recap: on January 30, 1933, Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg swore in Adolf Hitler as Chancellor.[1] This was a gamble by the conservative elites in power who thought they could control Hitler.[2] Instead, this decision brought the Nazi Party to power and marked Germany's rapid descent into a one-party dictatorship. After the Reichstag fire, the Nazis began to arrest political dissidents. Political crimes under the Nazis varied from treason to mild complaints. The number of arrests grew exponentially over the next twelve years until the Allies liberated the camps and prisons in waves in early 1945.[3]

Once released, former prisoners were assisted in their transition back into society by the Allied military occupation government, local officials, and regional aid organizations. Even before the war ended, the Allies had agreed that victims of fascism deserved compensation, although they had not finalized plans for providing aid.[4] Allied funds were limited. Moreover, they wanted to ensure that their resources were directed at those who needed them most. Allied occupation officials thus had to determine who counted as a victim of fascism. They proclaimed that victims of fascism included Displaced Persons or German nationals who broke racial laws, those who belonged to a religious organization that conflicted with the Nazis, or members of a political party actively opposed to the Nazis. The Allies were cognizant that some people may have been

detained under false pretense; those people could appeal to the military government for recognition. Historian Constantin Goschler estimates that by 1946, somewhere between 250,000 to 300,000 victims of fascism were registered across all four zones.[5]

The administration of aid for victims of fascism varied from locale to locale. Following a British military government order, most towns and cities established a *Kreissonderhilfsausschuss*, or a district special aid committee, to oversee the distribution of resources. The committee, typically comprised of three members (including one former prisoner), assessed applications for recognition and compensation. Once acknowledged, victims of fascism received a special identification card and were supposed to be given priority in terms of rations, employment, and housing. The status of a victim of fascism, however, was not static. Benefits could be rescinded as quickly as they could be rewarded. A person's status as a victim of fascism was more contingent on the contemporary circumstances of western Germany in the 1940s and 1950s than recognition of their past experiences and traumas.

The case of Herr W. exemplifies the point that one's status was constantly renegotiated in the context of postwar Germany. Herr W. was born on March 3, 1914. He married his wife in 1940, and their son was born in 1942.[6] In a brief narrative to his local *Kreissonderhilfsausschuss*, he explained his story. At the start of the Nazi regime, he was arrested and put into a concentration camp for two years because of his political beliefs.[7] He was a teenager at the time. His health suffered so badly from his time in the camp that he was not considered for conscription into the Wehrmacht. After the war, he was employed by the *Märkische Steinkohlegewerkschaft* (formerly known as the Zeche Viktoria) in Lünen, meaning he had a job as a miner in the local coal mining enterprise. His family moved into their flat—part of company housing—in May 1946. He found returning to coal mining work physically strenuous, especially as a shift worker who was only able to do 12-15 shifts a month while trying to support a wife and young child. In October 1946, the *Kreissonderhilfsausschuss* approved a one-time payment in response to a petition.[8] Then, on January 30, 1947, Herr W. was granted a subsidy of 50 DM by the Social Minister of NRW to cover travel costs for a four-week stay at a spa in Bad Driburg. He (or rather, his wife) then submitted an application for additional aid on February 19, 1947, but they were denied.[9]

The *Kreissonderhilfsausschuss* recognized him as a political victim of National Socialism early on, yet he was continuously under scrutiny as he applied for more aid. On numerous occasions, the Lünen city inspector wrote to his employer to request and verify information about the family subsidy and wages that Herr W. received. He continued to apply for increases in 1948–1949. In 1948, he requested additional support. He notably added to the end of his petitions that he was a political victim. He was granted the increase. But then, the welfare committee re-examined the case a few months later. According to the welfare office, he had exceeded the amount of support to which he was entitled, in part because his wages had gone up. They cut off his payments due to a lack of need.[10] Herr W.'s case not only reflected local concerns, but also the larger context of the burgeoning Cold War.

Indeed, the period of 1948–1949, in which the Cold War picked up speed, reshaped the politics of recognition.[11] By the end of 1947, the four Allies had reached a stalemate. In February 1948, the Western Allies excluded the Soviets from the London Six-Power Conference. The Soviets retaliated by withdrawing from the Allied Control Council and beginning constitutional reforms in the Eastern occupation zone of Germany. The United States then introduced the Marshall Plan, currency reform, and constitutional reforms in 1948. The Soviets, afraid of Western currency creeping into their zone, then began the Berlin Blockade. These early Cold War conflicts shaped local efforts to provide aid.

Herr W. had gained recognition early on, which had given him some access to rehabilitation and family support. Not all victims of fascism had the same experience. Frau S. (born in 1894) is one example.[12] Her husband (born in 1882) died of a stroke in 1936, at the age of fifty-four, as a result of his detention. There is currently no more information available about where or for how long he was incarcerated. These details, however, did not initially affect his widow's successful claim, filed on February 11, 1948. The *Kreissonderhilfsausschuss* verified a year later, on March 24, 1949, that she was the widow/dependent of a recognized political victim.

As Frau S. was filing her claim, occupied Germany was heading down the path towards semi-permanent division. In 1948, the Western and Soviet occupation zones began pursuing separate constitutional reforms. In May 1949, the Western zones approved a provisional constitution, establishing the Federal Republic of Germany.[13] Now, rather than remaining local, the doling out of indemnification shifted to centralized state offices. Changing priorities and federal restructuring following German division trickled down to victims like Frau S. On December 10, 1949, *Amt für Wiedergutmachung* officials confirmed that while she previously earned 89 DM a month, the payment deadline had expired. They told her that if she could prove that her husband's death was related to persecution, then the supplement could be extended. They then asked the Lünen city administration to verify that his death was really caused by his detainment, or if it was merely correlation. The Lünen city administration confirmed on two occasions that his death was related to his persecution, meaning that she could continue to receive compensation for her loss.[14] While she was ultimately successful in retaining her payments, her case demonstrates the lengths that authorities would go to verify whether a dependent of a victim really needed or deserved financial support.

As these two cases have shown, the status of victim did not automatically grant recipients benefits in perpetuity. These cases highlight the contingency of victim status. Formal recognition was not a long-term ticket to benefits, and this status could be reassessed at any time. Herr W., for example, was young (early thirties), employable, and seemed to be making sufficient wages from the coal mine. In fact, his wages had increased. In Frau S.'s case, she was interrogated about details concerning her husband's death that no one could possibly know. In other cases, victims of fascism later had their recognition and pensions revoked when they were arrested for illegal political activity during the height of the Cold War. Adenauer's government passed a decree in 1950 that prohibited government employees from being members of communist or communist-adjacent organizations; throughout the 1950s, individual states in the FRG charged

leftists with “state endangerment” and high treason, leading in some cases to the loss of benefits or even prison time.The status of victims always rested upon the social, political, and economic currents of West Germany, not merely their past experiences under the Nazis.

Victims of fascism were not entirely powerless, however. They began to rebuild their lives. They continued to commemorate those who were murdered. They fought for recognition and restitution by filing Wiedergutmachung claims in the 1950s. They created advocacy organizations. As decades passed, local historical commissions and major political parties sought to preserve and share their stories. To be a victim of fascism did not mean they had to play the victim in their post-fascist lives.

References

1. “Hindenburg ernennt Hitler zum Reichskanzler,” in *BPB: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, last modified January 26, 2018, https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/263635/hindenburg-ernennt-hitler-zum-reichskanzler/.
2. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 2004), 316.
3. There is not currently a good estimate for the total number of political prisoners between 1933 and 1945. Nikolaus Wachsmann indicates there were over 107,000 inmates by June 1935. Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler’s Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (Yale University Press, 2004), 2. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300228298. This provides some sense of how rampant incarceration was prior to the Nuremberg Laws. This website from Birkbeck University of London suggests 250,000 prisoners were liberated from concentration camps, but does not provide a precise breakdown of prisoners by category: https://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/themes/liberation.html. Getting a complete picture of who counted as a political prisoner after the defeat of the Nazis is difficult because many of them were in and out of prison or camps and did not remain there indefinitely. As such, they were not included in the 250,000 who were liberated in 1945 but may have identified as political victims of fascism after 1945.
4. Major studies on the politics of restitution (*Wiedergutmachung*) include Norbert Frei, *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung: Geschichte, Erfahrung und Wirkung in Deutschland und Israel* (Wallstein, 2009); Ludolf Herbst and Constantin Goschler, *Wiedergutmachung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (de Gruyter, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783486704075; Constantin Goschler, *Schuld und Schulden. Die Politik der Wiedergutmachung für NS-Verfolgte seit 1945* (Wallstein, 2005).
5. Goschler, *Schuld und Schulden*, 65.
6. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), 984.
7. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), 984.
8. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), 984.
9. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), 984.
10. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), 984.
11. Rolf Steininger, *Der Kalte Krieg* (Fischer, 2006).
12. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), Nr. 995.
13. Manfred Görtemaker, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: von der Gründung bis zur Gegenwart* (Beck, 1999).
14. Stadtarchiv Lünen, Verwaltungsarchiv (1945-1997), Nr. 995.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Ruble, Alexandria N.: The Politics of Victimhood. Negotiating New Contexts and Contingencies in Post-Fascist (West) Germany, in: KWI-BLOG, [https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/the-politics-of-victimhood/], 04.11.2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20261104-0830