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150 years on, Germany's past shows fragility of freedom

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One hundred and fifty years ago this week, on January 18, 1871, the German empire was proclaimed in Versailles' Hall of Mirrors, which the troops of the German states had just captured in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.

The choice of January 18 for the proclamation that marked Germany's birth as a unified nation was not accidental: it was the anniversary of the coronation in 1701 of the first king of Prussia.

And the symbolism of holding the ceremony in the Palace of Versailles was every bit as deliberate: Louis XIV, who built the palace, was reviled in the German states for having consolidated France's grasp on Alsace and laid the bases for its annexation of Lorraine.

With securing those territories one of Germany's key demands, the venue served to humiliate the French, whose army had suffered a series of disastrous defeats.

In many ways, the war of 1870-71 more closely resembled those of the 18th century than the titanic struggles of the 20th. Triggered by an obscure dispute over the succession to the Spanish throne, the combatants' aims were limited and — compared to the “total wars” of later years — so, too, were civilian casualties.

The conflict was intensely modern, however, in being the first war that was seen on both sides

as pitting enemy peoples, rather than feuding sovereigns, against each other; and Russia's tsar, Alexander II, showed unusual insight when he warned William I, the Prussian king, that if his newly powerful army forced France to concede long-held territory, it would engender "a hatred between peoples that will have no end and know no borders", with "catastrophic consequences not just for France and Germany, but for all of Europe".

By the ceremony's 75th anniversary, on January 18, 1946, the tsar's warning had proven grimly prophetic. Only a few months earlier, on May 7, 1945, Germany had surrendered unconditionally, ending a devastating war that caused at least 70 million deaths. At the country's Stunde Null, or zero hour, as those days were soon termed, Germany was morally and physically bankrupt, its cities ruined, its name forever stained by the crimes it had committed, most horrifically the genocide of Europe's Jews.

"Germany," British historian AJP Taylor asserted in a book published that year, is "an alien body in the structure of European civilisation", which "contains everything except moderation" and is capable of "everything except normality".

Taylor's views were, for once, uncontroversial. Confronting what Hannah Arendt described as "the abyss that opened up before us", three of Germany's finest thinkers — Thomas Mann, Karl Jaspers and Friedrich Meinecke — who had refused to collaborate with the Nazis, agreed. Arguing that Germany had descended into an "absolute evil" that "men can neither punish nor forgive", they each urged their compatriots to reflect on how the country had become a "pariah nation".

With Germans scrambling to survive, the call for national self-reflection went largely unheeded in the immediate post-war years. The crime against the Jews, which was at that call's heart, was almost never mentioned, and if it was, only euphemistically.

It is true that the taboo against any descriptive phrase was broken by Theodor Heuss (the Federal Republic's first president) in December 1949, when he said that "it makes no sense to talk around these things: the horrible injustice done to the Jewish people must be spoken about openly".

And it is also true that the Republic's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, ignoring virulent opposition both within his own party and in public opinion, insisted in 1951 that *Wiedergutmachung* — making amends — was the only path to “overcoming the unimaginable bitterness which the crime against the Jews has called forth in the world and among all those of goodwill”.

But although the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* — frankly addressing the past — began to enter widespread use, it took another decade before a new generation of German historians, dismissing the claim that the Nazi era was an aberration, started on the task of scouring the archives for the fatal flaws that had destroyed the Weimar Republic, the tectonic faults that guided Bismarck's empire to World War I and the original sin of 1848 that ended in the Prussian-led unification process.

Now we know much more — yet, as the years pass, we also remember much less. Time is a mighty sculptor, but it erases as surely as it carves. And the extraordinary success of the Federal Republic, which, amid enviable prosperity and stability, has peacefully outlived every German regime since Napoleon dispatched the decrepit Holy Roman Empire in 1806, further dispels the memories, and the lessons with them.

It is, for example, easy to forget that Germany's academics did not merely adjust to Nazism; they embraced it. No doubt, some did so out of fear, while others simply took the promotion possibilities the Jews' dismissal offered, quickly learned to “talk Nazi” and avoided asking too many questions.

Yet as Steven Remy showed in his superb study of the university of Heidelberg, and Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach confirmed in their research on scholarship in Nazi Germany, the vast majority were enthused by the opportunity to participate in creating a healthier, eugenically purer and fitter “new man”.

With more than half the participants in the Wannsee Conference that decided on the Final Solution having doctorates, the learned elite felt that, thanks to the Nazis' aim of “scientifically” reshaping society, they were at last being taken seriously.

Little wonder Arendt concluded that totalitarianism relied as heavily on intellectuals' inherently despotic desire to be "philosopher kings" as on demagogic appeals to "the masses". And little wonder she also noted that many of the Germans who, despite everything, retained the spark of humanity were scarcely educated but understood the difference between right and wrong — and had the immeasurable courage needed to act upon it.

In Australia, we rightly pride ourself on our longstanding freedoms and on our equally longstanding hostility to the siren call of would-be tyrants.

As Brian Penton put it in his unjustly neglected book *Advance Australia — Where?*, which was written as Australian troops braved the Kokoda Track, while "most of the witch-doctors of the contemporary scene", from Hitler to Mussolini, "had sent apostles to Australia, their converts, massed together, could not have raised one respectable Heil". But Penton went on to insistently remind his readers of Goethe's dictum that "Man must win his liberty every day afresh".

This Australia Day, as we look back on the century and a half that separates us from that ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors, Goethe's words deserve to resonate in every home.