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“The Second Death”: Günther Anders’ Travels to Postwar Berlin

In February 1959, when the Students’ Committee against Nuclear Armament invited Günther Anders to Berlin, they dedicated a great deal of effort to bringing him to the former capital of the German Reich. Among other correspondence, the letters preceding that visit demonstrate the extent to which Anders thought of himself as the intellectual and philosophical mentor of the anti-nuclear protests that began in 1958. Initially led by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) under the existentialist-sounding title “The Campaign against Atomic Death,” the protests continued outside parliament as well.

In a letter to his former wife Hannah Arendt, with whom he had lived in Berlin between 1929 and 1933, he wrote with both pride and a hint of astonishment about his popularity with the West German public. “As a so-called nuclear moral expert (what things exist!),” he was supposed to “constantly deliver exclamation points. But for God’s sake, only exclamation points.”[1]

Given the political developments of the Cold War, Anders’ preoccupation with a radically reinvented theory of moral action turned into a “nuclear idée fixe” – at least that is how an indignant friend of his from Europe put it, as quoted by Anders in his travel journals from Japan: “As sensational as your address might sound, I feel depressed by it. To me, it is proof that you turned into a ‘particularist,’ that you got carried away by one singular issue, that you made yourself unilateral and now spend your life with one nuclear idée fixe. Hence, you’re missing out.”[2] Anders responded that admittedly, “the question about the sheer ‘if’ (if

1 Letter from Günther Anders to Hannah Arendt, April 2, 1958, in: Hannah Arendt and Günther Anders, *Schreib doch mal* hard facts *über Dich: Briefe 1939 bis 1975*, ed. Kerstin Putz (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2016), 70. For a contextualization of the correspondence, see the editor’s epilogue: “Nachwort. Korrespondenzen. Hannah Arendt und Günther Anders,” 227–254.

2 Günther Anders, *Der Mann auf der Brücke. Tagebücher aus Hiroshima und Nagasaki* (Munich: Beck, 1959), 174.

Note: This chapter has been translated from German by Susan Wille and is based on parts of my book chapter “Von Zeitgenossen und Menschen: Eine negative Anthropologie des technischen Zeitalters,” in Anna Pollmann, *Fragmente aus der Endzeit. Negatives Geschichtsdenken bei Günther Anders* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 43–116. A longer and in some theoretical aspects more elaborate version of this chapter was published in Jan Gerber, Philipp Graf, and Anna Pollmann, eds., *Geschichtsoptimismus und Katastrophenbewusstsein. Der Holocaust in Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 201–224.

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the world would continue)" certainly lacked "any depth," any "historical saturation," and that the "banality of the apocalypse" was indeed indisputable.[3]

Anders' ironic comment on the tedium of the apocalypse seems surprising given the urgency usually oozing from his texts on that very subject. The charged relationship between the apocalyptic and the historical will be the focus of this chapter, since it directs our perspective towards the specificity of historical consciousness after the atomic bomb had been dropped and under the wider conditions of the Cold War, especially its arms race. The catastrophic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated to the world for the first time that not only the technical means to end human history as such existed, but also the willingness to employ them. Anders referred to this event as a "historical suprathreshold."[4] For the first time, the possibility "that everything (not only all future, but with it also all past) was futile and would be lost" was laid bare. His magnum opus, *The Obsolescence of the Human* – which he started to write during his American exile and later finalized with a chapter on the atomic bomb – can be approached in this double point of view. It was published at a particular historical moment – a 1950s West Germany, shaped by both a euphoric social reconstruction *and* nuclear threat – but it also contained traces of his experiences in exile and the process of historical insight he had undergone there.

The imagination of a possible end of mankind also affects the very conditions for thinking about the Holocaust, this article claims. Günther Anders' writings are an extremely interesting case for exploring the relationship and differences of these two events of mass destruction, because they show many ambivalences and boundaries when making analogies. These ambivalences become tentatively visible while Anders is trying to agitate the West German anti-nuclear movement in the late 1950s. Since the time of his invitation by the Students' Committee, he had become an important mentor not only for the protest movement, but also for the journal *Das Argument*, a major platform for the West German unorthodox Marxist left.

The ambivalences in his thinking concerning the Holocaust become even more evident when compared to his political and biographical writing as found in his philosophical diaries *Die Schrift an der Wand* (The Writing on the Wall). Published in 1967, these ended with a travelogue from the Auschwitz extermination camp to his place of birth in the former German, then Polish city of Wrocław (Breslau), where he grew up in a secular German-Jewish milieu. Because there

3 Anders, *Der Mann auf der Brücke*, 175.

4 Günther Anders, *Antiquiertheit Bd. 1: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1987 [1956]), 262. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Susan Wille.

was no continuity-based story of his life to tell, Anders described the notes as "negative diaries." These autobiographical snapshots are many things at once, but not what one would expect from a diary: they comprise a typology of the emigrant, and a topography of flight and return. Places like Paris, Los Angeles, Berlin, Vienna, Auschwitz, and his birth city of Breslau play a central role as "chronotopes"[5] through which a different way of thinking about history can be traced.[6] This article will discuss the relationship between the historical consciousness – namely Holocaust consciousness – and apocalyptic thinking referring to a short time span between Anders' two trips to postwar Berlin from 1952 to 1959. It takes into account not only Günther Anders' work on the atomic bomb, but also the reception of his work in West Germany. The relationship between past, present, and future is presented in completely different terms at each end of this timeframe.

Berlin 1953: A Mirage of the Past

The lecture trip to the Free University of Berlin (Freie Universität Berlin) in spring 1959 was not Anders' first visit to postwar Berlin. Anders' later visit had a clear political mission framed by programmatic declarations and the addressing of a post-apocalyptic political human subject. His first explorations of the destroyed city had been captured in 1953, in a completely different context. It is in the biographical introspection of his journal that we find his first descriptions of the city and its inhabitants. These, titled *Ruinen heute* (Ruins Today), bear witness to his deep bewilderment and historical perspective.

"Über Berlin" (Above Berlin) is the title of one of the journal entries Anders captured in 1953 during his first visit after the war, 20 years after he had fled Berlin on the Berlin–Paris night train. Only two years earlier Anders had returned to the German literary establishment with his controversial Kafka essay, *Kafka Pro und Contra. Die Prozess-Unterlagen* (Kafka, Pro and Contra: The Trial Records).[7]

5 For a strong emphasis on Michail Bachtin's concept of chronotope, see: Ruth Ginsburg, "Ida Fink's Scraps and Traces: Forms of Space and the Chronotope of Trauma Narratives," in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 2 (2006): 205–218.

6 Günther Anders, *Die Schrift an der Wand. Tagebücher 1941–1966* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1967). For his travelogue from Poland, see Irmela von der Lühe, "Besuch im Hades. Günther Anders' Reise nach Auschwitz und Breslau 1966," in *Wrocław – Berlin. Germanistischer Brückenschlag im deutsch-polnischen Dialog, Bd. 4: Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. Bernd Balzer and Marek Halub (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe; Neisse Verlag, 2006), 169–179.

7 Günther Anders, *Kafka. Pro und contra. Die Prozess-Unterlagen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1951).

The subject had accompanied him since the time of his Paris (1933–1936) and American exile (1936–1950). During these years, however, he only had a few opportunities for publication. He wrote reviews for the exiled Institute for Social Research and published some philosophical articles on Heidegger and philosophical anthropology.[8] However, he had to make a living mainly through "odd jobs" on the assembly line and in the film studios of Hollywood. The publication of his Kafka book even preceded his own physical return to Europe in 1952, where he chose to live in Vienna with his Austrian wife, the writer Elisabeth Freundlich.

His arrival by plane to Berlin, as documented in the journal, had hidden the historic city topography that was so familiar to him prior to the war. From the aircraft, the site of the Reichstag building had been obscured by an endless field of "rectangularly arranged ruins."[9] This "indistinctability" not only applied to the heaped-up rubble of the Reichstag building, but also to his perception of the causal connections that had led to this landscape of devastation. His glance onto the ubiquitous ruins mirrored his sense of an omnipresent, permeating guilt, which had become unfathomable in its vastness: "[. . .] the higher the number of its [the guilt's] victims, the higher its chance to hide away. Only the small guilt remains visible [. . .], the vast guilt buries itself under its consequences."[10]

The occasion that led Anders to travel to Berlin for the first time after the war was Fritz Kortner's staging of the play *The Silver Tassie* by Irish dramatist Sean O'Casey in West Berlin's Schiller Theater on June 21, 1953. His wife, Elisabeth Freundlich, had translated the play into German and Anders himself had adapted the "poetically inflated war scenes."[11] The mid-June theater visit had been overshadowed by the strikes and riots of workers in the Soviet occupation zone, which were sparked by the increase in labor standards and, more generally, were directed against the new course taken by the Socialist Unity Party (SED). It had led to violent intervention by the Soviet military, against which the Western allied forces had protested, but not intervened militarily.[12] The day of June 17 – which later had its own life as a "beacon of freedom" in West Germany, symbolizing the

8 See, for example, Günther Anders, "Une interpretation de l'a posteriori," *Recherches philosophiques* 4 (1934/35): 65–80; "On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger's Philosophy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3, no. 3 (1948): 337–371.

9 Anders, "Ruinen heute (1952/53)," in *Die Schrift an der Wand*, 229.

10 Anders, "Ruinen heute (1952/53)," in *Die Schrift an der Wand*, 215.

11 Elisabeth Freundlich, *Die fahrenden Jahre, Erinnerungen* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1992), 137.

12 For the reception of June 17 in East and West Germany, cf. Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 65–85.

wish for German reunification and eventually declared a national holiday – had been accompanied by violent riots, looting, and physical attacks.

From the very beginning, Elisabeth Freundlich described the atmosphere around the staging as aggressive. The theater management had received threatening letters demanding cancellation of the play, which had previously been unknown to German audiences.[13] During the staging of O'Casey's anti-war play, strident protests occurred and revealed antisemitic resentment against the Jewish actor and director Fritz Kortner.[14]

The scandal surrounding *The Silver Tassie* reminded Anders of something that had happened 20 years earlier, when Kortner had stood on the stage of the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin for the last time before emigrating, while the Nazis had tried to chase him out of the building.[15] Regarding the protests of 1953, Anders only stated in a rather general manner that they were an expression of the "'executing' power of mimesis," as the confrontation with war scenes on the stage had more than ever made the reality (of Berlin) visible to the audience, and thus provoked a defensive attitude.[16] And although the notes Anders took in Berlin in 1952/53 barely acknowledge the tense political and social atmosphere surrounding him, they certainly bear traces of overlapping time dimensions. They awoke memories of the 1930s antisemitic scandal at the same place, though political circumstances were rather different.

Anders also described a visit to an exhibition entitled "Modern Art," as well as its visitors, in a similarly abstract manner. The resurrection of the term "modern" seemed to him almost "eerie." Its "now paradoxical historical optimism" made it "horribly obsolete," he wrote, and to him the term, as a piece of vocabulary, could only emit "the idiosyncratic odor" of yellowed futures and faded hopes.[17]

It was no longer possible for Anders to recognize the dialectics of destruction and liberation rooted in modernity, since its destructive side had culminated in the extermination of human beings: "[. . .] the disintegration machine continued

13 Elisabeth Freundlich, "Kortners bitterer Pokal," *Frankfurter Hefte* 8 (1953): 638–641, here 638.

14 Freundlich, "Kortners bitterer Pokal," 638. This anxious perception of the events surrounding June 17 and the parallel memory of the Nazi takeover was not an isolated case. For instance, the memories of Eugen Gollomb, Auschwitz survivor and later chairman of the Jewish community in Leipzig, as well as those of Alexander Abusch, are compiled in Karin Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt. Die Geschichte der jüdischen Kommunisten in der DDR* (Berlin: Böhlau, 1999), 396–407.

15 I thank Stefan Hofmann for drawing my attention to the turmoil in the context of the 1932 staging. Cf. Richard D. Critchfield, *From Shakespeare to Fritsch: The Provocative Fritz Kortner* (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2008), 65–66.

16 Anders, *Ruinen heute*, 234–235.

17 Anders, *Ruinen heute*, 241.

its work: Now, it is every single person that's disintegrated, each individual is chopped down into 'dividuals.' [. . .] As they stood in front of the artworks, they were fragments before fragments; torsos enjoying torsos. In fact, they themselves belonged in the paintings, as shards amongst the depicted shards."[18]

Soon after, he again reflected on how the premises of modern aesthetics had turned into reality. For Anders, surrealist artwork had fulfilled the reversal of the thing and the human.[19] Both problems – the very unmetaphorical objectification of the human and its simultaneous destruction as a subject – were at the core of Anders' work after his remigration in 1952. They also laid bare the ruins of his own thinking, which was brought about by the biographical disruption of his own emigration and the historical caesurae of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. All of these historical and biographical breaks made obsolete not only the epistemological and philosophical traditions Anders had belonged to – Marxism, existential ontology, philosophical anthropology, and phenomenology – but also the means of representation. Anders tried to shed new light on present singular phenomena and this change of perspective necessarily questioned traditional forms of philosophical classification. Yet, even though Anders still addressed *the human* rhetorically, he no longer addressed it as an entity in the present, but as a temporally decentered, *obsolete* (German: *antiquiert*) *human.*

1956: The Obsolescence of the Human

Only a few years after surveying Berlin's ruins, in 1956 Anders published four essays he had begun to write during his American exile under the title *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (The Obsolescence of the Human: The Soul in the Age of the Second Industrial Revolution).[20] With this work, Anders was one of the first intellectuals to present a comprehensive philosophical analysis of the atomic bomb. The iconic title did not yet annunciate an ontological break though. In fact, its subtitle, "The Soul in the Age of the Second Industrial Revolution," had the tone of an even

18 Anders, *Ruinen heute*, 243.

19 Günther Anders, "Die Antiquiertheit der Phantasie," in *Antiquiertheit*. vol. 2, 330–333; first published as "Die Krise der Phantasie, Zwei Philosophische Dialoge," in *Die Sammlung März* 10 (1955), 122–134.

20 The book is currently being translated into English by Christopher John Muller and will pe published as "The Obsolescence of the Human." Two chapters were translated for the American journal *Dissent*: Gunther Anders, "Reflections of the H Bomb," *Dissent* (Spring 1956) and "The World as Phantom and Matrix" (Winter 1956).

more general cultural criticism and zeitgeist critique, which made the book one of the many pessimistic analyses of the technological age to be published after the Second World War.

Yet, it was only when he finished his essay on the atomic bomb that Anders felt compelled to compile and publish these technology-critical essays as a collection. The book begins with a journal entry from his Californian exile in 1942. While visiting the technology museum, one of his friends had "hidden his hands behind his back while spectating at the apparatuses that worked with such accuracy and refinement."[21] Based on this observation, Anders developed the idea of the "Promethean shame." He transfers the anthropological phenomenon of a failed self-identification from the interpersonal sphere to the relationship between man and the world of objects. The concept of a Fordist assembly line production was central to describing his own feeling of shame from his own working experience during his American exile. In the act of failure before the machine, the worker is thrown back "onto himself, the old residue," confronted with a state of being "worldless, inept, and 'discarded,'" and "not knowing what to do with himself."[22] Central to the dynamics of capitalist production – understood as the generation of ever newer products and needs – is a "morphologically constant" body; a "dead weight amongst the rising apparatuses."[23] Anders observes this tension in several cultural and social phenomena of his time. He finds examples in the violent extension of human limits not only in the industrial sphere, but also in the National Socialist camp system.

Stretching the representational method of illustrating this shift of boundaries between man and thing or technology – and by that depicting the Marxian terms "reification" and "alienation" in their literal sense – was more than a formal method for Anders. It corresponded to the central (philosophical) premise of his work, as Anders himself, not very humbly, described it: "a critique of human limits."[24] In his *The Obsolescence of the Human,* he responded to those limits by calling for an "extension of the limits of philosophy." Accordingly, he points out that

> those who reject the singular as an epistemological subject of philosophizing, because it is contingent and empirical, sabotage their own philosophizing. They are like the simpleton who bricked the entrance to his newly built house from the outside because it was "something ambiguous," as he wrote on the cornerstone. [. . .] He froze to death on the threshold.[25]

21 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 23.
22 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 94.
23 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 33.
24 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 18.
25 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 12.

This new orientation, in Anders' case, also meant developing a disrespectful relationship with tradition. His work does echo the influences of some of his teachers, like Husserl and Heidegger, though he thoroughly opposes the Hegelian systematic thinking that denies "the prole"[26] access, and also rejects a "pseudo-concrete" turn toward the existing, as in Martin Heidegger's epochal work, *Being and Time* (1927).

Anders' technique of alienation also has to be considered in connection with Marx's fetishism of commodities. According to Marx, the mystery of the produced and consumable commodity lies in the fact – as spelled out in his famous formula – that "the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour."[27] While for Marx the commodity obscures the social relation mediated by abstract labor and exchange, Anders uses the technique of inversion to present the notion of things as actors but clearly ignores all levels of social mediation.[28] Analogous to this inversion, he describes "the obfuscation of labour and activity."[29] Due to increasing industrialization and mechanization, human activity has been degraded to a mere "co-laboration," or machine support. Here too, it is noteworthy that Anders' remarks do not use Marx's explanations of abstract work.

The dropping of the atomic bomb – human agency reduced to the push of a button – claiming tens of thousands of lives and leaving behind many heavily contaminated survivors, provided a glimpse into the possibility of nothingness; a vast emptiness, an attainable end of the world and humankind. With that, the gap between creation and imagination had been expanded immeasurably: a man-made "event that, although empirical, withdrew itself from the grasp of the imagination."[30] Following the "non-synchronicity" of man as described by Anders, the bomb seemed to mark the end point of human development. It had suspended the means-ends principle of creation, since even the smallest possible impact of the atomic bomb would still be greater than "all military or political ends defined by man, no matter their grandness." With the creation of the atomic bomb,

26 Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 12–13.

27 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 35: Marx, Capital, Vol. 1: Production of Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1996), 83. In the original: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Das Kapital Bd. I, Erster Abschnitt, MEW Band 23* ([East] Berlin: 1968), 86.

28 To this end, as to Anders' handling of literary inversion figures, cf. Magret Lohmann, *Philosophieren in der Endzeit. Zur Gegenwartsanalyse von Günther Anders* (Munich: W. Fink, 1996), 109–113.

29 Gabriele Althaus, *Leben zwischen Sein und Nichts. Drei Studien zu Günther Anders* (Berlin: Metropol, 1989), 120.

30 Althaus, *Leben zwischen Sein und Nichts*, 120.

human beings had turned into "masters of the apocalypse."[31] The "Promethean gap" gave way to the transgression of the historical itself.

Yet, the Promethean gap also helped to frame two past events that were inherently "erratic:" Auschwitz and Hiroshima. While in exile in America, Anders had heard the radio report about the dropping of the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. He later recalled that his thinking and imagination had gone on strike in the face of the "monstrosity of the events."[32] He had found similar words in a journal entry already in 1944:

> Since our perception is incapable of grasping the contemporary world, since it is too shortsighted to see the enormous, or rather, the monstrous proportions of the havoc we ourselves can wreak, since it disguises the monstrous as unmonstrous, it becomes merely a variety of fantasy, as contradictory as it may sound. [. . .] We should at least be able to grasp the enormity of what we can produce and set in motion. [. . .] Yet, I am not willing to sacrifice any vision of the enormity of what havoc we can wreak: that is, the vision of the enormity of our misdeeds. Of the seven thousand.[33]

The figure of 7,000 people murdered, given by Anders, was later found to severely underestimate the magnitude of the Holocaust. His journal entries from the 1940s foreshadowed his central motive, but remained unpublished until 1979, thus his struggle concerning a proper representation of the Holocaust was first reflected on only in the chapter "Reflections on the H-Bomb."

The epistemological challenge Auschwitz and Hiroshima posed for Anders as single events seemed bigger than an understanding and interpretation as an outcome of the same structures of modern society: "Those who are astonished by these [atrocities] as erratic chapters of our epoch, refuse themselves an understanding thereof, since those atrocities in isolation cannot bear any reality, at least not an understandable one."[34] Both events could only be explained through their "kindred connection": the "type of activity" that had led to their realization.[35] In that regard, they occurred to him as "twin events."[36] Anders then explains, in a passage several pages long, the organizational structure of mass killing in the National Socialist extermination camps. As a consequence of "medi-

31 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 239.

32 Interview mit Mathias Greffrath, "Wenn ich verzweifelt bin, was geht's mich an?", in *Günther Anders antwortet. Interviews und Erklärungen*, ed. Elke Schubert (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 1987), 19–53, see 42.

33 Günther Anders, "Rückblendungen 1944–1948," in *Besuch im Hades. Auschwitz und Breslau 1966. Nach "Holocaust" 1979* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993), 39–40.

34 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 288.

35 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 288.

36 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 346, Annotation 255.

ated" production, based on a division of labor and comprised of a sequence of individual processes "devoid of any telos," workers had turned into murderers.

Marx found that the dialectic of labor lies in its quality of simultaneous appropriation and alienation of the world. On the one hand, it was a necessary mediation between man and nature, and – in its unalienated, creative form – a driving force of human emancipation. In its abstract, capitalist form, however, labor increasingly divides man from the world. In opposition to Marx, though, Anders further argues that the increasing alienation of man, not only from nature and the world but also from the products of labor, ultimately results in the exact opposite of the predicted process of emancipation: the very unmediated destruction of individual human beings in the industrially organized work process of the National Socialist extermination camps.[37] The smallest possible work step, the button-pushing, had demonstrated one thing during the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: not only the possibility of killing individual human beings, but also that of an end to humankind.

While the development of the atomic bomb in the 1940s had still been part of the "dimension of history" since the preliminary research had been driven by the hope to "achieve historical future goals," this historical dimension had "co-exploded" alongside the nuclear warheads "on the day of the first explosion."[38] Given this background, the mass extermination in the German camps occurred to him as a mere "pre-history" of an apocalyptic scenario, a final catastrophic event, but one that was at least still part of history.

Here, Anders writes, the universal statement "All men are mortal" has lost its former ubiquitous meaning. If it would have been "inscribed above the entrance gates of the liquidation installations, it would have aroused jeers." Once the camps were put into operation, it should have been transformed into the more accurate proposition: "All men are exterminable." But even with this proposition, the shock of the modern philosophical understanding of death and killing had not even reached its endpoint. Anders clarifies this by demonstrating a small linguistic shift:

> However, many things changed in the last decade, the bomb under whose threat we live has ensured that [the truth] still lives in this proposition to this day. And if anything changed, it is only that the implication has become even more evil, for what is exterminable today is *humankind as a whole*, and not "merely all men." [emphasis in original][39]

37 For a more detailed account of the connection between Marx's abstract work and how Anders related to it, see Reimann, *Verweigerte Versöhnung*, 99–107.

38 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 263.

39 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 243.

In this context, Anders also spoke of a "second death," which did not refer to human individuals, however, but rather to the question of the possibility of historical transmission in the face of the nuclear situation: "How would that, which has been, differ from that which has never been, when there is (going to be) nobody who could remember that which has been?"[40] Not only does the notion of the final eradication of humankind move into the realm of the imaginable, the final death also puts history – as a mobile medium of memory and transmissibility – to an end.[41]

Anders' fable "Die beweinte Zukunft" (The Mourned Future) can also be seen in this context. It is an adaptation of the Noah story from the Book of Genesis, written in 1961 and first published three years later in the collection *Gegen den Tod. Stimmen deutscher Schriftsteller gegen die Atombombe* (Against Death: Voices of German Writers against the Atomic Bomb), edited by the left-wing writer and publisher Bernward Vesper and his partner Gudrun Ensslin, a later member of the Red Army Faction.[42] Anders' impressive opening in the volume focuses on Noah, who unsuccessfully tries to convince his fellow citizens of the necessity to build an ark. Contrary to divine law, he steps onto the street in a mourning robe as "the bereaved of the dead of tomorrow," hoping to address "those weaknesses and vices of his fellow citizens, their curiosity, their schadenfreude and their superstition."[43] The evocation of the Holocaust here is primarily created through references to the Kaddish, the Jewish sanctification or mourning prayer. The Kaddish for the future dead, as anticipated by Anders, has to be understood as one that catches up at the same time, as a Kaddish for all those who have already died, anonymously and without a prayer in their honor. For that very anthology, and in the same line of thinking about universal human death, the writer and Holocaust survivor Nelly Sachs gave permission to reprint a poem from her poetry cycle, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (In the Houses of Death), written in 1944 in face of the Holocaust.

40 Anders, *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 245.

41 Hans Ebeling, "Die Willkür des Todes und der Widerstand der Vernunft. Historische und interkulturelle Differenzen," in *Tod und Sterben*, ed. Rolf Winau and Hans Peter Rosemeier (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984), 51–73; Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper, eds., *Gegen den Tod. Stimmen deutscher Schriftsteller gegen die Atombombe* (Stuttgart: Studio Neue Literatur Gudrun Ensslin, 1964), 15–25; Helga Raulff, *Strahlungen, Atom und Literatur* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2008), 33.

42 Gudrun Ensslin (1940–1977), founder and member of the far-left terrorist group Red Army Fraction, and her partner, the writer and publisher Bernward Vesper (1938–1971).

43 Anders, "Die beweinte Zukunft" (1961), in Ensslin and Vesper, *Gegen den Tod*, 17–18.

West Berlin 1959: In the Shadow of the Apocalypse

When Günther Anders visited Berlin in February 1959, for the second time since his return to Europe, he no longer regarded the city as the landscapes of ruins and rubble whose epistemological meaning he had tried to capture six years earlier from the aerial view of the plane. Now he entered a city that was, beside Cuba, the Cold War's most important location. The Berlin question had become a central point of conflict for the two superpowers, caused by the repeated attempt of the Soviet Union – which was strengthening its domestic and foreign policy under Khrushchev – to incorporate West Berlin into the GDR. Soon after, the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, declared that he would even accept nuclear war in order to preserve the status quo of the city – as a guarantee of freedom for the inhabitants of West Berlin, the presence of Western troops, and their secure access.[44]

In his short text "Berlin," issued after the Berlin Wall was built in the summer of 1961, the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot described the city as an "insane political abstraction" that was "something dramatically concrete at the same time."[45] The coexistence of concretion and abstraction, which Blanchot mentioned, was also reflected in the discussion of a necessary political practice in the "nuclear situation."

The politically concrete reality, the division of the former German Reich and the dwindling chance for an imminent reunification in the process of integration with the West, led to an abstract threat that crystallized in the fear of a nuclear war on German territory. Günther Anders became an intellectual mentor for the emerging anti-nuclear movement among students in postwar Berlin. The Students' Committee against Nuclear Armament, which had hosted Anders in the late 1950s, had been formed in the context of a campaign titled "Kampf dem Atomtod" (Fight the Nuclear Death), the first post-World War II protest movement in the Federal Republic. First initiated before the Bundestag election of 1957, a total of one and a half million German citizens protested for months against the plans of the Adenauer government to arm the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) with nuclear weapons under the control of the United States.[46]

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44 Bernd Stöver, *Der Kalte Krieg 1947–1991. Geschichte eines radikalen Zeitalters* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007), 132–135.

45 Maurice Blanchot, "Berlin," in *Modern Language Notes* 109, no. 3 (1994): 345–355.

46 Cf. *"Kampf dem Atomtod!" Die Protestbewegung 1957/58 in zeithistorischer und gegenwärtiger Perspektive*, ed. Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (München: Dölling und Galitz, 2009).

The political and public debate surrounding the integration of West Germany into NATO's nuclear policy under conditions of the Cold War acquired its own specific character, given that the question of how to deal with the National Socialist past remained a pressing issue. During the protests, a connection was drawn not only to the traumas of two world wars and the Allied bombing campaign, but also to the lack of resistance against the Nazis, highlighted especially by the Christian and unionist opponents of rearmament.[47]

The Social Democrats dropped their support for the campaign with the adoption of the Godesberg Program in 1959. This included not only the reorientation of the party but an acceptance of NATO's deterrence doctrine – and thus also the arming of the Bundeswehr.[48] What remained was an extra-parliamentary protest movement, which from 1960 onwards found an important organizational platform in the so-called Easter Marches. In contrast to its predecessor Fight the Nuclear Death, this equally existential name expressed a hope of redemption.[49]

While Anders' efforts to initiate a branch of the Committee against Nuclear Armament in Vienna – where he had lived since his return to Europe in 1950 – failed, he became a virtual icon of the movement in West Berlin.[50] With hindsight, the Marxist philosopher and then student Wolfgang Fritz Haug described Anders' seminar as well as his *The Obsolescence of the Human* as the founding moments of the leftist journal *Das Argument*, of which he himself became editor. "On the basis of a strictly conducted ontological analysis of time," the first *Das Argument*

47 Susanna Schrafstetter, "The Long Shadow of the Past: History, Memory and the Debate over West Germany's Nuclear Status," in *History and Memory* 16, no. 1 (2004): 118–145, here 120; Schrafstetter, "Auschwitz and the Nuclear *Sonderweg*: Nuclear Weapons and the Shadow of the Nazi Past," in *Coping with the Nazi Past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict 1955–1975*, ed. Philipp Gassert and Alan E. Steinweis (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 309–325.

48 Holger Nehring, "National Internationalist British and West German Protests against Nuclear Weapons, the Politics of Transnational Communications and the Social History of the Cold War, 1957–1964," *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (2005): 564.

49 On the opposing names of the campaigns, cf. Holger Nehring, "Angst, Gewalterfahrung und das Ende des Pazifismus. Die britischen und westdeutschen Proteste gegen Atomwaffen, 1957–1964," in *Angst im Kalten Krieg*, ed. Bernd Greiner, Christian Th. Müller, and Dierk Walter (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2009), 436–464, here 439.

50 Elisabeth Röhrlich, "'To Make the End Time Endless'. Günther Anders' Fight against Nuclear Weapons," in *The Life and Work of Günther Anders: Émigré, Iconoclast, Philosopher, Man of Letters*, ed. Günter Bischof, Jason Dawsey, and Bernhard Fetz (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2014), 45–58, here 47. On the position of Günther Anders in the political context of the Cold War, see Christian Dries, "'Zeitbomben mit unfestgelegtem Explosionstermin'. Günther Anders und der Kalte Krieg," in *Den Kalten Krieg denken: Beiträge zur sozialen Ideengeschichte*, ed. Patrick Bernhard and Holger Nehring (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2014), 63–89.

leaflet stated, Anders had formulated a "new moral code" for "our existence under the threat of the bomb,"[51] which came to be reflected in many of the journal's articles from then on.

In the first years, Anders was probably the most published author in the magazine. At the Free University of Berlin, he gave a lecture on the topic "Responsibility Today," for which he had already given an English version at the Peace March in Kyoto. For the introduction to his speech for a German audience, he had chosen quite an abstract discussion of moral conduct:

> The moral commandment is not already fulfilled by the fact that we withdraw at the moment we recognize the irresponsibility of a deed. Such refusal [. . .] is only the first step, only the beginning of the necessary moral action. By no means must we believe that we have already achieved our goal by keeping our own hands clean [. . .]. The refusal to participate in murder never replaces the abolition of murder [. . .].[52]

In the following, he defines the task of contemporary moral responsibility as a "corrective to the division of labour." He calls for intervention precisely because the division of labor does not follow moral principles, but undermines them. In order to explain how the limitation of conscience to only certain fields of work leads to "mere conscientiousness," Anders only briefly refers to the much more obvious background of experience of his German audience: the National Socialist extermination of the Jews.

The casualness of his remarks on the Holocaust may be astonishing not only because in *The Obsolescence of the Human* the National Socialist perpetration plays such a central role in developing his concept of the Promethean gap. It is quite surprising he makes no mention of the Ulm *Einsatzgruppen* trial, which took place less than a year earlier in April 1958. Here the judicial plea for the recognition of fragmented responsibilities had led to a reduced sentence for the defendants who had murdered more than 5,000 Jewish men, women, and children in the East Prussian-Lithuanian border region alone.[53] Thus, the perpetrators were not sentenced to life imprisonment due to their high degree of personal initiative, as demanded by the public prosecutor's office during the trial, but only as an "accessory to murder."[54]

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51 Anders, Antiquiertheit, vol. 1, 235.

52 Günther Anders, "Über Verantwortung heute" (1959), in *Endzeit und Zeitenende. Gedanken über die atomare Situation* (München: C.H. Beck, 1972), 24–54.

53 Sabrina Müller, "Zum Drehbuch einer Ausstellung. Der Ulmer Einsatzgruppenprozess von 1958," in *Vom Recht zur Geschichte. Akten aus NS-Prozessen als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Jürgen Finger, Sven Keller, and Andreas Wirsching (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 205–218, 212.

54 See, for example, Patrick Tobin, "No Time for 'Old Fighters'. Postwar West Germany and the Origins of the 1958 Ulm Einsatzkommando Trial," *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 684–710.

While *The Obsolescence of the Human* can be interpreted as an approach to a radically changed theory of moral action under the influence of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this complexity has been abandoned in favor of a more simplistic theses. Anders finally left an aesthetic-political manifesto to the student protestors in Berlin with his "Theses on the Nuclear Situation." The exaggerated assertions, Anders said in a dialectical visualization of his rhetoric, were "written down so that they would not come true."[55] As "inverted utopists," people were from now on confronted with the task of no longer merely "imagining the non-existence of something particular within a world frame that was substituted as being and continuing," but also Anders made formulations using philosophical vocabulary that was clearly influenced by Heidegger's existential ontology, "with the task of imagining this framework, that is, the world itself, at least our human world, as non-existent." This "total abstraction"[56] should be approached with imagination and the "courage to fear." In Anders' abstract aesthetics of danger, fantasy and fear have the function of a corrective to perception.[57] In a (kind of) reversion of this abstraction, the degradation of human action to mere work or – in extreme cases – to button-pushing must also be made "perceptible."

Nevertheless, in his theses Anders still refers twice to "particular" incidents within the National Socialist persecution and extermination policy, each of which he assigns a different connection to the nuclear threat. The threat of nuclear war, as he formulates it at one point, transforms the earth "into a concentration camp without the option to escape." The fact that Anders here speaks of concentration camps and not of extermination camps might have been a conscious distinction in so far as he sees the analogy between nuclear war and camps not in the threat and reality of extermination, but in the "extreme deprivation of liberty" that he sees realized in the overarching danger of nuclear war.[58] At the end of his manifesto, however, a strange ambivalence emerges.

55 Günther Anders, "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter" (1959), in *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, 93–105, 104.

56 Anders, "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter," 104.

57 Anders, "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter," 97. Particularly interesting is the contrasting assessment of the imagination and fear given by Herbert Marcuse. His work "Eros and Civilization" (1957) culminates in a vision of the "freedom to live a life without fear." Cf. Tim B. Müller, "'Ohne Angst leben.' Vom Geheimdienst zur Gegenkultur – Intellektuelle Gegenentwürfe zum Kalten Krieg," in *Angst im Kalten Krieg*, 397–435, here 398. For Marcuse, knowledge is only possible through the imagination; philosophy connects with the real history of mankind only through the imagination. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophie und kritische Theorie," in Herbert Marcuse, *Schriften. Vol. 3: Aufsätze aus der Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung 1934–1941* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 227–249, here 244.

58 Based on this quote, Christian Dries recently positioned Günther Anders next to Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas. He sees him as a contributor to a theory of modernity for which the topos of the camp is central. Cf. Dries, *Die Welt als Vernichtungslager. Eine kritische Theorie der*

Anders had previously referred to the idea that, in modern "annihilism," an abolition of hostility takes place, since "the scene of the crime and the place of suffering are torn apart, i.e., suffering does not happen at the scene of the act."[59] In the testimonies of the Hiroshima victims, he had noticed that the perpetrators were hardly mentioned, and if it happened at all, they were referred to almost without hatred. Yet, according to Anders, the foreign policy involvement in a cold, "hate-free" war had to go hand in hand with a distorted image of the enemy in the domestic political sphere:

> In order to feed it, identifiable and visible objects of hatred will be focused on, or invented: "Jews" of all kinds [. . .] But this hatred will not be able to enter into any connection with the actual war events at all: the schizophrenia of the situation will thus also show itself in the fact that hatred and violence can target quite different objects.[60]

With this paragraph, Anders also ultimately relativized the analogy of the earth as an "escapeless concentration camp." He briefly turned his gaze away from the overarching abstraction of the nuclear-equipped world and highlighted the ideological constitution of a political collective and the accompanying "particular" threat of annihilation.

The second issue of *Das Argument* dedicated to the nuclear threat was published in February of 1961, at a time when the Berlin crisis and the fear of a nuclear strike were still smoldering – a situation that was only defused with the construction of the Wall in August. For this issue, Anders had contributed a short text under the title "Die Komplizen" (The Accomplices). These ontological considerations were accompanied by a concrete political intervention: an open letter to then-chancellor Konrad Adenauer addressing the "German question" associated with the global rearmament, supported by the editorial staff and signed by renowned intellectuals such as Max Born, Helmut Gollwitzer, Eugen Kogon, and Martin Niemöller.

The young Marxist scholar Thomas Metscher contributed an unusually long and abstract-philosophical article on the nuclear question to this issue, which in large part paraphrased the *Obsolescence of the Human* and Anders' critique of Jaspers, and translated the matter into an existential-philosophical argument. Due to its linguistic intensity, the article almost reads like a strategy for rhetorical

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Moderne im Anschluss an Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt und Hans Jonas (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), esp. 323–354.

59 Anders, "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter," 104.

60 Anders, "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter," 104.

overpowering. Using the analogy the author produced, it read in capital letters, or rather exclaimed, that life could only be defined from the negative, "with the formula coined in a concentration camp (which Anders points to) as NOT-HAVING-BEEN-MURDERED-YET."[61]

In subsequent paragraphs, Metscher made an inflated use of the word "annihilation." He employed such formulations as: man has become the "*object of annihilation*"; man has defined themself as "*annihilability*" with the production of the bomb; "our existence means *nothing* to annihilation"; and, we are "*those to annihilate*."[62] Yet, nowhere does he refer to the annihilation of the European Jews. In the last part of the article, Metscher finally tries to point to the possibility of civil protest against the bomb: "The proof of existence in the nuclear situation can only be in protesting against the bomb." Only then could man return to their purpose as "subjectivity." Four decades later, a retrospective assessment by Wolfgang Fritz Haug confirms the impression of a primarily existentialist-political self-image, which at the beginning of the 1960s was fueled by reading Anders' work:

> To understand Anders, who was a student of Husserl and Heidegger, one must engage in philosophical thinking. It aims at ruthless statements, without diplomacy and compromise, which are alien to everyday understanding. This also applies to the ontological statement that, through nuclear destructive power, humankind, with its history and habitat, has become annihilable and thus exists from now on in the "not yet" of annihilation. This is at the core of the critical concept of existential philosophy: the atomic situation.[63]

Anders' critique of technology became existential during the nuclear armament race of the Cold War, but although he was a left-leaning intellectual, he did not restrict his critique to one side. For him, it was a universal problem that was as bad in the hands of Western liberal democracies as in those of the Soviet regime, an ontological threat that was irreversible.

A few years later, it was Anders whose glosses were to turn the name of one extermination camp into the focus title of *Das Argument*'s February 1967 issue: "Auschwitz and Vietnam and No End." Up to this point, this subject had remained rather marginal in the journal. Positioning the two emblematic places on the cover had emphasized the "analytical character" of Anders' texts and thus contributed to the latter's great success, editor Wolfgang Fritz Haug wrote. Anders had analyzed

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61 Thomas Metscher, "Notizen für eine Ontologie der atomaren Situation" (1961), in Wolfgang Fritz Haug, ed., Argument reprint 18–21, Berlin, 1975, 34.

62 Metscher, "Notizen für eine Ontologie der atomaren Situation," 38–39 [emphases in original].

63 "'Was die Vorstellbarkeit übertrifft, darf nicht hergestellt werden'. Interview with Wolfgang Fritz Haug, in: *Phase 2* 41 (2011), https://www.phase-zwei.org/hefte/artikel/was-die-vorstellbarkeit-uebertrifft-darf-nicht-hergestellt-werden-132, accessed March 11, 2024.

the Vietnam War under the same premise as Auschwitz and Hiroshima before, as a result of the relationship between man and technology. He interpreted the massacres of the Vietnamese civilian population, such as the massacre of My Lai, as the American soldiers' transformation into machines. Anders also tried to reinterpret the concept of genocide in the context of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, a civil society tribunal initiated by Bertrand Russell to condemn the American atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. The decisive criterion for Anders was not only the lack of differentiation between the military and civilian population, but rather the fact that the annihilation of the civilian population became the focal point of war actions, and that even special weapons were used for this purpose. Non-combatants were declared as military and "destructible" objects, and became objectifiable and liquidable in large numbers through the technically perfected war equipment.[64] To this extent, Vietnam had historical predecessors, according to Anders, and thus he proposed the site of the Auschwitz extermination camp as the venue for the Vietnam Tribunal.

In this peak phase of his political commitment to the West German left, Anders finally published his diaries as *Die Schrift an der Wand*. His concluding chapter, "Visit to Hades," documents his trip to Poland in 1966, which took him first to the former extermination camp of Auschwitz (Oświęcim) and then to his birthplace of Wrocław. The extermination camp itself and the events there had been largely omitted from Anders' notes. Only with the spatial distance and in juxtaposition to (the failure of) Jewish emancipation, for which Wrocław stands, is Auschwitz as a place given meaning. While in the diaries, Auschwitz still stands for the disruption of the concept of historical continuity, it becomes a cypher for the continuity of human atrocities one year later and a backdrop with the potential for political activism. In West Germany's public perception, Auschwitz was willfully perceived as only one event in a series of "events of the same order."[65] Anders encouraged this tendency with his own political engagement. His journals, on the other hand, since they document the futility of a historiographical assigning of meaning, came out "too late for a strong primary breakthrough effect, too early for a mere historical interest," as a reviewer in the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* stated.[66]

64 Günther Anders, *Visit Beautiful Vietnam. ABC der Aggressionen heute* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1968), 64.

65 Anders described them as "same order of events." Cf. Literary Archive at the Austrian National Library, Günther Anders Collection, 237/B1506, Letter of Günther Anders to Bertrand Russell, March 8, 1967.

66 Joachim Günther and Günther Anders, "Die Schrift an der Wand" (review), *Neue Deutsche Hefte* 14, no. 5 (1968): 220–225, here 221.