

Koselleck as Critical Catastrophist

1. Introduction: Koselleck and “The Age of Catastrophe”

Reinhart Koselleck’s onetime denazification instructor Eric Hobsbawm, later a noted Marxist historian, influentially termed the years 1914-1950 “the age of catastrophe.”¹ Koselleck, born in 1923, was inextricably a product of this age. As he remarked in a 2005 interview on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in May 1945, when he was just 22 years old, “I built up my entire studies through the experience of the war.”² At that time, a characteristically chaotic itinerary took Koselleck from his upbringing in the formerly Prussian city of Görlitz into fighting for the Wehrmacht’s artillery divisions on the Eastern Front from 1941-1942, where he survived by chance after a cannon wheel crushed his foot as the front advanced, saving him from becoming cannon fodder himself, to imprisonment in the former camp Auschwitz, where he was marched on a labor duty as a Soviet prisoner of war, and then onward through central Asia, before finally returning to Germany and taking up studies in Heidelberg.³

Koselleck insisted he was not a victim of the Nazi regime. In his own telling in that 2005 interview, he helped wage its ill-fated war of annihilation to the very end. Yet he recognized the catastrophic course of action the Nazis launched the world into as the key cautionary tale about the

- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage 1994). On Koselleck’s relationship to Hobsbawm, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Repetition and Rupture,” *Aeon* (1 September 2020). URL: <https://aeon.co/essays/reinhart-kosellecks-theory-of-history-for-a-world-in-crisis> (accessed 20 September 2024).
- 2 Reinhart Koselleck, “Ich war weder Opfer noch befreit,” *Berliner Zeitung* (7/8 May 2005). Reprinted in *Geronnene Lava: Texte zu politischem Totenkult und Erinnerung*, ed. by Manfred Hettling, Hubert Locher, and Adriana Markantonatos (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023), pp. 429-437, here pp. 432-433.
- 3 See Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), p. 12. Koselleck discusses this experience himself in “Fiery Streams of Lava, Frozen into Memory: Many Farewells to War: Memories that Are Not Interchangeable,” trans. by Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2020): pp. 1-6, here p. 1.

utopian political ideologies of his generation. Stalingrad and Auschwitz, he wrote, “coalesce” in the sense that they “had their common ground in an ideology of salvation, eagerness to make sacrifices and find victims, and the racist ideology of obliteration, which mutually conditioned and intensified each other in the Nazi worldview.”⁴ Koselleck’s diagnoses about the causes of the catastrophes of his own time were surely very different from – indeed, were quite opposed to – the Marxist Hobsbawm’s diagnoses, but the experience of catastrophe and defeat as a German instilled in him “a minimum of skepticism” toward all such grand historical narratives and ideologies, and especially toward the political violence they could be used to legitimize and even compel.⁵

Koselleck’s engagement with historical memory and the experience of war and death has been the subject of several probing studies. Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay have explored Koselleck’s use of the rich metaphor of “lava memories” as a product of his own experience of war-time violence and trauma; on a fundamental level, Koselleck insisted, the meaning of experience is inescapably individual and resists extrapolation into broader webs of collective memory, national or group signification, and political ideology.⁶ Lisa Regazzoni has suggested that it is not entirely surprising that in the course of his long career Koselleck turned his interest from political ideologies and concepts to monuments and memorials: The two sets of interests are analogous in that both are indexes of structural transformations in historical meaning across generations as well as sources of ideological power, as survivors impose meaning on the deaths of their forebears.⁷ Most recently, Ulrike Jureit has read Koselleck’s many late contributions to the debates around war and Holocaust memorials in Germany as a delayed – and often frustrated – contribution to the *Historikerstreit* of 1986–1987 that engaged many of his colleagues.⁸ Sebastian Huhnholz and Niklas Olsen have also reevaluated Koselleck’s intel-

4 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Meaning and Absurdity of History” [1997], in *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and trans. from German by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 177–196, here p. 178.

5 Margrit Koselleck, “Ich war weder Opfer noch befreit,” p. 432.

6 Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, “Dealing with an Ocean of Meaninglessness: Reinhart Koselleck’s Lava Memories and Conceptual History,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 2 (2020), pp. 7–28.

7 Lisa Regazzoni, “The Impossible Monument of Experience: A Story that Never Ends,” in: *Die Vergangenheit im Begriff. Von der Erfahrung der Geschichte zur Geschichtstheorie bei Reinhart Koselleck*, ed. Christophe Bouton, Jeffrey A. Barash, and Servanne Jollivet (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2021), pp. 100–126.

8 Ulrike Jureit, *Erinnern als Überschrift: Reinhart Kosellecks geschichtspolitische Interventionen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023).

lectual formation as torn between the contrasting philosophical-historical poles of the compromised former Nazi Carl Schmitt and the liberal interpreter of totalitarianism and German-Jewish refugee Hannah Arendt – a tension that, we learn, inspired not a binary loyalty to either figure but out of which arose Koselleck’s own distinctive intellectual iconoclasm as well as his vocal disdain for both parties in the Cold War owing to their ideological arrogance.⁹

The present essay revisits some of the central philosophical, historical, and political implications of Koselleck’s work on crisis and catastrophe for our own rather different moment. In 2022, “permacrisis,” defined as “an extended period of instability and insecurity,” was termed a Word of the Year,¹⁰ as was the related notion of “polycrisis.”¹¹ Amidst the global pandemic of 2020, the influential Gates Foundation wrote that humanity faced “a set of mutually exacerbating catastrophes,”¹² a *Zeitdiagnose* that encompasses not only apparently discrete disastrous events like the pandemic and renewed conflicts straining the global order, but also what I have called the “slow,” less visible and indeed structural catastrophes of climate change, poverty, inequality, racial violence, etc.¹³ In Koselleck’s terms, new technologies like Artificial Intelligence once again seem to be *accelerating* history beyond our ability to steer it, much less halt its erratic course. As Falko Schmieder writes in a piece on the enduring relevance of Koselleck’s “acceleration thesis,” it is remarkable to read Koselleck’s work today and find hardly a mention of capital as the primary engine driving modern history: “Anyone who speaks about the acceleration of history

- 9 Sebastian Huhnholz, *Von Carl Schmitt zu Hannah Arendt? Heidelberger Entstehungsspuren und bundesrepublikanische Liberalisierungsschichten von Reinhart Kosellecks “Kritik und Krise”* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2019) and an insightful review of this work by Niklas Olsen, “On Reinhart Koselleck’s Intellectual Relations to Carl Schmitt,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 16, no. 1 (Summer 2021): pp. 141–146.
- 10 “A Year of ‘Permacrisis,’” *Collins Dictionary Blog* (1 November 2022). <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/a-year-of-permacrisis/> (accessed 20 September 2024).
- 11 Jonathon Derbyshire, “Year in a word: Polycrisis,” *Financial Times* (1 January 2023). The article appeared with the subtitle, “Multiple interlinked global emergencies have been unfolding simultaneously.” <https://www.ft.com/content/f6c4f63c-aa71-46fo-a0a7-c2a4c4a3cofi> (accessed 20 September 2024).
- 12 “2020 Goalkeepers Report: Covid-19, A Global Perspective” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2020). <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2020-report/> (accessed 20 September 2024).
- 13 Jonathon Catlin, “Slow Catastrophe: A Concept for the Anthropocene,” in *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis*, ed. by Jakub Kowalewski (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 51–68.

and the ecological threat to the survival conditions of civilization should therefore not remain silent about capitalism – and should ask about ways in which people can succeed in emancipating themselves from this alien, increasingly destructive historical power.”¹⁴ Interlocking *crises*, conceived, per Koselleck, as periods charged with indecision and uncertainty, seem to threaten again and again to tip into irreversible catastrophes.

In such a context, the “prophylactic apocalypticism” of midcentury thinkers like Günther Anders, who powerfully confronted humanity’s “apocalypse blindness” regarding runaway technologies like nuclear weapons in the Cold War, once again seems timely.¹⁵ The complexity of this conjuncture raises questions about the nature of historical catastrophes and how we collectively respond to them – questions to which, as we will see, Koselleck offered at least some of his own answers. Indeed, despite their many differences, Koselleck shared with figures such as Anders and Theodor W. Adorno a commitment to “thinking against catastrophe” as the most urgent task of the intellectual in their lifetime.¹⁶ In a remarkable intellectual convergence, Koselleck originally intended *Kritik und Krise* to have another title: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, or *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – that is, until he learned of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work by the same title, first written in 1944, then revised and published in Amsterdam in 1947.¹⁷ His dissertation includes a reference to Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, and in a 1973 Preface, he explicitly referred to a “dialectic of enlightenment.”¹⁸ In Koselleck’s personal copy of the book, held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, he tellingly underlined a thesis he shared regarding the origins of modern political violence: “Enlighten-

14 Falko Schmieder, “Beschleunigungsaxiom,” *Komposita* (18 April 2023). <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/14790> (accessed 20 September 2024).

15 For recent explications of Günther Anders’s idea of averting apocalypse, see Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*, trans. by Valentine Pakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise and Mark R. Anspach (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023).

16 Günther Anders, Radio interview with Peter Leusch, “Wider die Katastrophe denken: Günther Anders zum 90. Geburtstag,” Deutschlandrundfunk (1 July 1992). Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach.

17 See Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 88, and Ute Daniel, “Reinhart Koselleck,” in *Klassiker der Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 2, ed. by Lutz Raphael (Munich: Beck, 2006), pp. 166–194, here p. 170. Koselleck’s former research assistant Lucian Hölscher told me he heard this from Koselleck himself.

18 Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. ix–xi, here p. x.

ment is totalitarian.”¹⁹ Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik* could well have borne the subtitle of *Kritik*: “Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society.” Add to the mix the theorist of totalitarianism Hannah Arendt, to whose work Koselleck was deeply indebted, and we find that Koselleck’s thought developed in an intellectual context of “thinking against catastrophe” across political and ideological lines.

In this sense, I want to suggest, Koselleck warrants consideration as at least a “fellow traveler” of the 20th-century intellectuals I call “critical catastrophists” – an intellectual tradition especially strong among German and German-Jewish thinkers that confronts the worst of past, present, and possible future catastrophes in order to attempt to prevent them. This is a somewhat provocative claim, given the generally left-wing intellectual company this places Koselleck among: the Frankfurt School, centrally, but also its successors, including Zygmunt Bauman, Slavoj Žižek, Cornel West, and Nancy Fraser. As I elaborate in a broader project, these thinkers developed a radical view of history attuned to social suffering and the antagonisms of modernity, which could be politicized in order to generate consciousness about the necessity of transforming the status quo.²⁰ For most of these thinkers, their critique was leveled specifically against late capitalist modernity, while Koselleck could seem to offer an even broader critique of political modernity itself. Koselleck’s self-proclaimed “skepticism” as a historian largely prevented him from engaging in such explicitly normative, prescriptive, and political interventions. But, as we will see, this did not inhibit his clear investment in thinking about and against the catastrophes of his lifetime.

Scholars have begun to explore how the concept of *catastrophe* itself began to transform and achieve new significance in the context of a defeated and ruined Germany in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. From antiquity to the early modern period, the concept – emerging from the context of drama – had signified a *dénouement*, a sudden and unexpected turning point or reversal of fortune, which, as Olaf Briese emphasizes, could also be a turn for the better, transforming a narrative into a comedy as well as a tragedy.²¹ An insightful article by

19 See Koselleck’s personal copy of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947), p. 16. Held at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Signature: BRK2.1. No. 201202010.

20 See Jonathon Catlin, *Thinking Against Catastrophe: A Concept in Twentieth-Century German Thought*, dissertation defended at Princeton University, September 2023.

21 Olaf Briese, “Katastrophe: Die Dramen der Natur,” *Tagesspiegel* (7 February 2010). <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/die-dramen-der-natur-7082236.html> (accessed 20 September 2024).

Tom Vandeputte locates the transformation of the concept in the writings of Walter Benjamin as he toured Germany in its *annus horribilis* of 1923, the peak year of Weimar inflation and political instability.²² Benjamin began to develop the idea of catastrophe not as an event but a *process* and state of *ongoingness* that was not “to come” but was already the status quo, not to be situated temporally deferred into some apocalyptic future, but to be recognized in the failings of liberal democracy and capitalism here and now. I characterize Benjamin’s resulting notions of “permanent catastrophe” and “catastrophe in permanence” as striking yet ambiguous *Denkbilder* (thought-images), which his colleague Theodor Adorno later attempted to systematize in his own anti-Hegelian philosophy of history known as negative dialectics.²³

What concerns us here is less the singular brilliance of these particular philosophers and their often esoteric ideas than the general conceptual transformation their writing crystallized in now-iconic formulations like Benjamin’s idea of the Angel of History who sees before him not progress but “one single catastrophe.”²⁴ The concept of *catastrophe* continued to be used to describe “accidental” destructive events like fires, floods, and financial crises, but now also the broader social order in which they repeatedly occurred. Instead of remaining *by definition* unexpected and exceptional, catastrophe began to occupy what Koselleck called the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectations,” becoming the norm. The temporality of *catastrophe* was slowed and stretched, expanding beyond bounded events with a beginning, middle, and an end, and began to infuse the structure of history itself. Catastrophe increasingly became “permanent.”

In his work on 20th-century concepts that exceed the modern temporal frame Koselleck and his colleagues addressed in their *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* lexicon, Anson Rabinbach argued that, instead of the “open-ended horizon of expectation” that defined characteristically modern concepts like *progress*, 20th-century concepts such as *total war*, *totalitarianism*, and *genocide* “bring the catastrophic events of the 20th century into the semantics of historical experience, emphasizing neither futurity

22 Tom Vandeputte, “Continuity as Catastrophe: Origins of a Thesis in Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique* 148, vol. 50, no. 1 (February 2023), pp. 59-82.

23 Jonathon Catlin, “Antisemitism and racism ‘after Auschwitz’: Adorno on the ‘hellish unity’ of ‘permanent catastrophe,’” in *Critical Theory and the Critique of Antisemitism*, ed. by Marcel Stoetzler (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 203-230.

24 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (1940), *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 389-411, here p. 392.

nor acceleration but dystopia and deceleration.”²⁵ In the 20th century, the modern experience Koselleck described of navigating crisis by hastening the coming of progress through utopian social planning was superseded by the post-modern fear of catastrophe and the aim of slowing history down. As the construction of new utopias gave way to attempts to avert dystopia after the “*Urkatastrophe*”²⁶ of the First World War, Rabinbach suggests, *catastrophe* became the *Grundbegriff* or “structural signature” for the 20th century that Koselleck argued *crisis* was for the modern period.²⁷

2. Koselleck and the Concept of *Katastrophe*

The concept of *Katastrophe* was not itself a central category in Koselleck’s analysis of 20th-century history, but only a secondary one that he typically reserved for describing plainly negative historical nadirs like Auschwitz and Stalingrad. Indeed, one can well imagine that Koselleck would have rejected Benjamin and Adorno’s provocative idea of history as permanent catastrophe as speculative moralistic radicalism along the same lines of critique he leveled against the Jacobins and their endless crisis-mongering. One could argue that the concept of *catastrophe* in German discourse was already too freighted by its use in the ideology and polemics of the German far left and right, while liberal uses like Friedrich Meinecke’s *The German Catastrophe* (1946) exemplify how the concept could also enable apologetic narratives depicting the Nazi movement as an external and alien plague, sickness, or poison that descended on the German people from without, minimizing their responsibility for the regime’s crimes and naïvely suggesting that after the war the “good” German culture of Goethe and Beethoven could guide a return to normalcy.²⁸ Despite Koselleck’s

25 Anson Rabinbach, “Rise and Fall of the *Sattelzeit*: The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and the Temporality of Totalitarianism and Genocide,” in *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History*, ed. by Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), pp. 103–121, here p. 104. See also Anson Rabinbach, *Begriffe aus dem Kalten Krieg: Totalitarismus, Antifaschismus, Genozid* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009).

26 Stefan Willer notes that the 1980s saw the popularity of *Urkatastrophe*, originary catastrophe, to refer to the First World War in German. See Stefan Willer, “Katastrophen: Natur – Kultur – Geschichte: Ein Forschungsbericht,” *H-Soz-Kult* (13 September 2018): <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/2018-09-001>.

27 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” [1982], trans. by Melvin Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006), pp. 357–400, here p. 374.

28 See Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1946). On Meinecke’s problematic and apologetic meta-

preference for other conceptual framings, I want to suggest that his thought nevertheless illuminates and exemplifies the broader conceptual architecture of “the age of catastrophe.”

If there is a single takeaway from Koselleck’s reflections on the significance of catastrophes such as Auschwitz and Stalingrad, it is a thoroughgoing skeptical attitude about their allegedly self-evident meanings, an insistence on separating “primary experiences” of victims from what he called “later condensation processes” around which events are *attributed* meaning.²⁹ Koselleck would have agreed strongly with Max Frisch’s quip, “Only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; nature recognizes no catastrophes.”³⁰ Suffering and destruction are meaningless without interpretation; only through the process of their interpretation and historicization is the undigested raw material of these bad things (I call them mere *disasters*) transformed into symbolically significant *catastrophes*.

One of Koselleck’s most radical conclusions regarding the modern concept of History (with a capital H) is that, since the beginning of modernity in the 18th century, “all historical representations have become contingent upon the conscious selection that authors make – and have to make – because they are always moving within preestablished social, religious, and political bounds.” As a result, “it has become acceptable that different representations of the same events could be equally true.”³¹ For modern historical thinkers, “the truth of history did not remain the same once and for all,” as they recognized that “history unveils itself in the truth of its day.” This leads Koselleck to conclude:

Since then, the reception history of past events has belonged to the stock of events themselves. For many things are only recognizable ex post facto, after they have exerted the requisite influence, which can

phors, see Reinbert Krol, *Germany’s Conscience: Friedrich Meinecke: Champion of German Historicism* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021), p. 239, and Nicolas Berg, *The Holocaust and the West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*, ed. and trans. from German by Joel Golb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), p. 29.

29 Koselleck, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung” (1998/1999) in *Geronnene Lava*, pp. 370–387.

30 “Katastrophen kennt allein der Mensch, sofern er sie überlebt; die Natur kennt keine Katastrophen.” From Max Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 103.

31 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity” [1987], *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 154–169, here p. 167.

only be perceived in its “true,” significance by posterity. [...] It is a question of the conscious achievement and processing of experiences by a small group of literary figures, authors, critics, and *philosophes* [...]”³²

Catastrophes, in this sense, could be said not to have been fully realized until an event or process has been consciously experienced, crystallized in collective memory, and discursively invested with significance. This is not to open the door to total relativistic constructivism – the charge often leveled against Koselleck’s sympathetic American interlocutor Hayden White – but rather to insist, with Koselleck’s teacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, that the practice of history is a never-ending project of interpretation.³³ Koselleck’s resulting thesis on the intrinsic *plurality* of history (really always histories) holds that no one has the final word when it comes to such interpretations, and that to claim such authority is to stoop to the level of ideology.

A central example for Koselleck’s theory of plural historical perspectives is also one that got him into some trouble: the case of Auschwitz. In an until recently unpublished text dating to around 2001, Koselleck reflected that, already in 1959, the first time he revisited the memorial site at Auschwitz after his own experience there after the war, “Auschwitz itself had fundamentally changed [...] Auschwitz is no longer Auschwitz. It has with its name transformed into a symbol [...]” – first for Polish Catholics, then for communist victims of fascism, then for Jews and Israelis.³⁴ Koselleck’s historicizing and questioning of hegemonic German approaches to the Holocaust centered on what he called a “hierarchy of victims” with Jews at the top, which may seem to place him on essentially the conservative side of the Historikerstreit. Jureit is right to explain some

32 Koselleck, “The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity.”

33 See the controversy surrounding White’s theory of historical constructivism and Holocaust studies in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* ed. by Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). White positively reviewed the English translation of Koselleck’s *Futures Past* in the flagship American historical journal, *The American Historical Review* 92, vol. 5 (December 1987), pp. 1175-1176. Yet, as White emphasized in his writings on Koselleck, a methodological shortcoming of conceptual history is that it still places the burden of explanation entirely on the the historian’s contemporary language, even as its goal remained the destabilization of presentist understandings of concepts whose meaning have changed over time. See White’s Foreword to Koselleck’s *The Practice of Conceptual History*, pp. ix-xiv.

34 Koselleck, “Primärererfahrungen und sekundäre Erinnerungen,” in *Geronnene Lava*, pp. 335-345, here pp. 338-339.

of Koselleck's polemical and sarcastic remarks about historical memory – like writing that with the Berlin Memorial, “the Jews got their so-called football field”³⁵ – as a result of “accumulating anger” from his own “marginal” and ignored position in public discussions of memory, a lack of recognition of his expertise as a scholar of history and memory.³⁶ Across several scholarly articles and public-oriented newspaper op-eds, Koselleck made his position on official German Holocaust memory clear: He objected to the “hierarchy of victims” established by the proposed Berlin Memorial dedicated exclusively to Europe’s murdered Jews. The lack of a singular memorial for all victims would necessitate further memorials to other groups. Yet the more than three million Soviet prisoners of war murdered by the Nazis have still not been memorialized – and given the war in Ukraine this is unlikely to happen any time soon.³⁷ “Mourning is not divisible,” he argued in a 1998 article in *Die Zeit*, especially not along the pseudoscientific categories employed by the SS.³⁸ In Germany alone, he said, “we are politically responsible, and for that reason we must also remember and memorialize the actions and the perpetrators and not solely the victims.” He thus criticized the idea of a singularly “anti-antisemitic monument” in favor of one that recognized all groups killed by the Nazis, including the mentally ill and disabled, so-called asocials, Polish civilians, and Soviet prisoners of war, for “the technology of extermination and the ideology behind it – to exclude groups based on racial zoological definitions in order to destroy them – has remained the same [*die gleiche*].”³⁹

Koselleck was – to put it somewhat provocatively – a vocal critic of what has since been called “The German Catechism,” the *Bundesrepublik’s* official approach to Holocaust memory, though certainly not from the left.⁴⁰ If there is one idea that carries through from Koselleck’s writings on the memory of catastrophe to German memory debates of recent

35 Koselleck, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung,” p. 384. As the editorial note explains, the noted Israeli Marx scholar Schlomo Avineri resigned from the Editorial Board of *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* in protest against the journal’s publishing this text, less for its content than for its “obscene” language (370).

36 Jureit, *Erinnern als Überschrift*, 17-18.

37 Koselleck, “Forms and Traditions of Negative Memory,” in *Sediments of Time*, pp. 238-249.

38 Koselleck, “Die falsche Ungeduld: Wer darf vergessen werden? Das Holocaust-Mahnmal hierarchisiert die Opfer” (1998), in *Geronnene Lava*, pp. 316-324.

39 Koselleck, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung,” pp. 386, 385.

40 A. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (23 May 2021). <https://geschichtedergewegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

years, it is that catastrophes, especially as he understood them as absurd *aporias* of meaning, do not offer canned, unchanging “lessons” for the present or future. In recent years, the confused and often brutal enforcement of certain dogmatic elements of official German Holocaust memory centered on anti-antisemitism have revealed a situation of what Susan Neiman calls a “historical reckoning gone haywire,” as “Racism toward other groups can be covered up by denouncing antisemitism and swearing support for any Israeli government.”⁴¹ Across the spectrum of German politics, one observes renewed animus toward allegedly antisemitic groups of nonwhite Germans and immigrants, onto whom, Esra Özyürek has argued, German guilt has been subcontracted or offloaded.⁴² While Dirk Moses’s critique of a rigid German “catechism” may well have been overstated, he is not wrong to identify the increasingly evident provinciality of German Holocaust memory in the global postcolonial age of what Michael Rothberg has called “multidirectional memory,” in which there is no shortage of racialized groups besides Jews – including within Germany itself – whose oppression and even genocide warrants recognition.⁴³ The failure of this memory regime, as Rothberg writes, “clarifies the need to link memory” *not* to any particular historical content, whose significance, as Koselleck showed time and again, will always shift, but rather “to solidarity and historical responsibility: that is, to the ethical and political commitments that subtend public forms of remembrance.”⁴⁴ This is the spirit of *universal* Holocaust memory with which a large number of Jewish intellectuals in Germany have recently criticized their government’s weaponization of charges of antisemitism to support plans to deport more migrants. Rather, they insist, “‘Never again’ means

41 Susan Neiman, “Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire,” *New York Review of Books* (23 October 2023). <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/10/19/historical-reckoning-gone-haywire-germany-susan-neiman/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

42 Esra Özyürek, *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

43 See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also my interview, “A New German Historians’ Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg,” *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog* (February 2022). <https://jhiblog.org/2022/02/02/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-i/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

44 Michael Rothberg, “Comparing Comparisons: From the ‘Historikerstreit’ to the Mbembe Affair,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (23 September 2020): <https://geschichtegegenwart.ch/comparing-comparisons-from-the-historikerstreit-to-the-mbembe-affair/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

‘never again for everyone.’”⁴⁵ It is doubtful that Koselleck would have endorsed any particular side in the present “Historikerstreit 2.0.” Indeed, his belated contributions to the first debate defy easy categorization. His own understanding of catastrophic histories, discussed in the next section, suggests a much humbler approach that resists easy ideological mobilization.

3. Catastrophe as Absurdity

In a 1997 essay, Koselleck reflected on the difficulty of making sense of the age of catastrophe from its documentary traces, taking as an example a few thousand undelivered letters written by German soldiers dying at Stalingrad that “sought in vain to find meaning in the catastrophe.”⁴⁶ While Nazi minister Joseph Goebbels intended to present them as heroic propaganda, in Koselleck’s view, this project was doomed from the start, for the letters’ “abundance of interpretations” range from “absolute desperation to sarcastic commentaries and ironic observations” and are dominated by a sense of “abandonment and helplessness.” “Today,” he wrote, “we are inclined to interpret these events in terms of meaninglessness or even as total absurdity.” Eyewitnesses also failed to invest these events with meaning: “the reality of the battle would not allow for it.” According to what Jan Eike Dunkhase termed Koselleck’s “historical existentialism,” “attributions of meaning” (*Sinnstiftungen*) imposed on such inherently absurd histories for ideological purposes are often resisted by the facts.⁴⁷ Outside the sphere of redemptive Nazi ideologies of annihilation, both events are “meaningless, or rather, absurd.”⁴⁸

In a late interview, Koselleck reflected on the limitations of historical reflection on the catastrophes his generation bore witness to, especially on “*the catastrophe*” of the Shoah. Unlike between the French and the Germans, he said, there is no “common ground” between the Germans and the Jews that “allows you to deal with the past in equal terms,” because

45 Open letter, “Ablenkung von der größten Gefahr,” *Taz* (26 August 2024). <https://taz.de/Dokumentation-Protestbrief/16032239/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

46 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Meaning and Absurdity of History” [1997], in *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and translated from German by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 177–196, here p. 178.

47 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Meaning and Absurdity of History,” p. 182. See also Jan Eike Dunkhase, *Absurde Geschichte. Reinhart Kosellecks historischer Existentialismus* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsches Literaturarchiv, 2015).

48 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Meaning and Absurdity of History,” p. 181.

“the annihilation was so overwhelming.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in his later years Koselleck became an active voice in German memory culture and proposed several mnemonic guidelines. Through his contributions to debates about the creation of a federal German Holocaust memorial in Berlin, Koselleck said he had “tried – but failed” to also advocate for commemorating other victim groups including Poles and Soviet Prisoners of war. However, claims about “the singularity of the extermination of the Jews” led to intractable disagreements; on such “a delicate subject,” he said, the “prejudice” of those still living “will inevitably contaminate memories.” As renewed memory debates continue to demonstrate, what Koselleck called history’s inherent “multiplicity of meanings” (*Vielsinnigkeit*) can leave individual memories tangled in knots and working-through blocked by identitarian resistances.⁵⁰

Koselleck dismissed Halbwachs’s notion of “collective memory,” instead employing the metaphor of historical experience as “congealed lava” filling up the individual and hardening: “I cannot transfer my experiences [...] I can only communicate them.”⁵¹ He developed this insight into a maxim: “One has the right to their own memory – I will not allow it to be collectivized.” Notably, the “day of liberation” in 1945 proclaimed by President Richard von Weizsäcker in 1985 was for Koselleck “the beginning of slavery” as a Soviet prisoner of war held at Auschwitz and various Gulags. Koselleck wrote as one of the vanquished, yet he said the “deliverance” Weizsäcker implied was misleading, “as if we had all been victims,” when in fact, “we Germans were also perpetrators in a very clear sense [...] to say I am a victim would be a lie to me.”

It was on account of such mnemonic imprecisions that Koselleck was an outspoken critic of Käthe Kollwitz’s *Pietà* being dedicated as Berlin’s Neue Wache memorial in 1993.⁵² The passive voice of its inscription, “to the victims of war and dictatorship,” suggested that Germans were only victims, while the statue itself imposed a redemptive Christian meaning on the Jewish Shoah.⁵³

49 Reinhart Koselleck, Javier Fernández Sebastián, and Juan Francisco Fuentes, “Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 2, no. 1 (2006), pp. 99-127, here p. 114.

50 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Meaning and Absurdity of History,” p. 194.

51 Reinhart Koselleck, “Ich war weder Opfer noch befreit,” in *Geronmene Lava*, pp. 429-436. For analysis of this metaphor, see Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, “Dealing with an Ocean of Meaninglessness: Reinhart Koselleck’s Lava Memories and Conceptual History,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 2 (2020), pp. 7-28.

52 Reinhart Koselleck, “Forms and Traditions of Negative Memory” [2002], in *Sediments of Time*, pp. 238-249.

53 Reinhart Koselleck, “Die falsche Ungeduld.”

Koselleck's thesis of the inherent opacity, if not absurdity, of catastrophic histories took on concrete form in his analysis of postmodern monuments, especially to the Holocaust. Contemporary abstract monuments represent the "aporia" of what Koselleck called "negative memory," which came after redemptive modern memory regimes premised on heroic national sacrifice. "After the Second World War," he said, "it became apparent that catastrophe can never be remembered enough and never conclusively," thus compelling a turn to "negative monuments and process monuments."⁵⁴ He saw these as "attempts to show that the question of meaning has itself become meaningless," and as recognizing "the impossibility of generating meaning through memorialization itself."⁵⁵ Faced with such catastrophic histories, "monuments of the absurd," like the dozens he photographed in his numerous excursions across European memorial sites, may offer "a small margin of escape" through artistic representations.⁵⁶

The late Koselleck's quasi-postmodern view of catastrophe as absurdity and as defying historical representation offers a characteristically nuanced position emerging from his late work on iconology and memorials. But to again pick up the thread of Rabinbach's bold suggestion, what about the fate of the concept of *catastrophe* itself? While Koselleck himself did not systematically analyze or develop this concept, what methodological insights from his *Begriffsgeschichte* might help unearth the conceptual architecture of the present we take for granted? What role might such an examination have in fulfilling Jan-Werner Müller's call for "a critical conceptual history of the present"?⁵⁷

54 Reinhart Koselleck, "Denkmäler sind Stolpersteine," Interview with Doja Hacker and Johannes Saltzwedel, *Der Spiegel* (2 February 1997). This text is reproduced in *Geronmene Lava*, pp. 293-300.

55 Reinhart Koselleck, "Forms and Traditions of Negative Memory," p. 248. Also see Ella Myer, "Reinhart Koselleck on Modernity, Memorials, and the Meaninglessness of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog* (25 November 2019). URL: <https://jhiblog.org/2019/11/25/reinhart-koselleck-on-modernity-memorials-the-meaninglessness-of-history/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

56 Reinhart Koselleck, "Einleitung," in *Der politische Totenkult. Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne*, ed. by Koselleck and Michael Jeismann (Munich: Fink, 1994), pp. 9-20, here p. 20. Cited in Regazzoni, p. 124.

57 Jan-Werner Müller, "On Conceptual History," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. by Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 74-93, here p. 87, and Müller, "European Intellectual History as Contemporary History," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 (2011), pp. 574-590.

4. From "Permanent Crisis" to "Permanent Catastrophe": Two Concepts in Koselleck's Time

Two now-standard *Begriffsgeschichten* of *Katastrophe* – an extensive article by Olaf Briese and Timo Günther published in the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* in 2009 and an incisive literature review and research report by Stefan Willer in 2018 – stress the seeming absurdity of the notion of history as an “ongoing” or “permanent” catastrophe. These two texts share not only uncharitable readings of Adorno and Benjamin regarding the notion of *permanent catastrophe*; they also argue, relatedly, that, through “inflationary” overuse in the course of the 20th century, the concept of *catastrophe* has become worn out and semantically exhausted, to the extent that it lacks the semantic stability required for a genuine *Begriffsgeschichte*.

Willer argues that in the course of the 20th century, *Katastrophe* underwent a “fundamental trend” toward “conceptual *de-differentiation*,” becoming increasingly interchangeable with related terms, including “crisis,” “revolution,” “trauma,” “disaster,” “apocalypse,” “destruction,” etc.⁵⁸ The “inflationary use” of the concept, he writes, citing Briese and Günther, led to its increasingly “indistinct semantics,” such that “*catastrophe* can mean anything, and everything can be called a catastrophe.”⁵⁹ As the disaster researcher Wolf Dombrowsky warned already in 1989, the problem is that “nothing is catastrophic when everything is called catastrophe.”⁶⁰ In contemporary discourse, Briese and Günther write, “catastrophes, as permanent catastrophes, are multiplied and hypertrophied almost infinitely.”⁶¹

The principal trouble with these analyses is that they lack an analysis of power and positionality. Nitzan Lebovic and Andreas Killen have rightly argued that *catastrophe* is an “operative concept” that connects the past, the present, and the future in powerful, associative structures of memory, experience, and expectation.⁶² As subsequent studies have shown,

58 Stefan Willer, “Katastrophen: Natur – Kultur – Geschichte: Ein Forschungsbericht,” *H-Soz-Kult* (13 September 2018), p. 8. <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/2018-09-001>.

59 Leon Hempel, Marie Bartels and Thomas Markwart (eds.), “Einleitung: Ein Streit über die Katastrophe,” *Aufbruch ins Unversicherbare. Zum Katastrophendiskurs der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), p. 7. Cited in Willer, p. 8.

60 Wolf Dombrowsky, *Katastrophe und Katastrophenschutz: Eine soziologische Analyse* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 1989), p. 47. Cited in Willer, p. 8.

61 Olaf Briese and Timo Günther, “Katastrophe: Terminologische Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft,” *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 51 (2009): pp. 155-195, here p. 191.

62 *Catastrophes: A History and Theory of an Operative Concept*, ed. by Nitzan Lebovic and Andreas Killen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 5, p. 8.

conceptual framings of *crisis* and *catastrophe* open up certain horizons for political imagination and agency, while foreclosing others.⁶³ The nascent field of Critical Disaster Studies thus conceives disaster as “suffering out of place” and stresses the socially constructed nature of the designation *disaster* and the politically contested nature of whose suffering is considered “normal” rather than unacceptable and worthy of intervention.⁶⁴ Dara Strolovitch provocatively defines *crisis* as “when bad things happen to privileged people” and interrogates why some suffering is treated as a “crisis” worthy of immediate state intervention while other suffering is ignored as “noncrisis,” by which she means “a range of naturalized, non-spectacular, but enduring conditions such as long-term unemployment, poverty, homelessness, mass incarceration, and racialized and gendered wage disparities.”⁶⁵ Strolovitch cites a reflection by Saidiya Hartman written during the pandemic: “Many of us live the uneventful catastrophe, the everyday state of emergency, the social distribution of death that targets the ones deemed fungible, disposable, remaindered, and surplus.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo distinguishes between capital-C Catastrophe, which refers to highly visible and spectacular events like terrorist attacks, and lowercase-c catastrophe for “structural, long-term, dreary catastrophes, say, colonialism, capitalism, and global warming.”⁶⁷ “While Catastrophes are Events, catastrophes are non-events.”⁶⁸ Bringing to light deep inequalities in power and recognition reveals the politics at play in determining whose suffering – both past and present – is deemed worthy of the designation “catastrophe.”

In many respects, the present “inflationary” discursive context of *crisis* and *catastrophe*, “polycrisis” and “mutually exacerbating catastrophes,” parallels the postwar context of the discursive proliferation of these terms in which Koselleck wrote his dissertation (1954) and first book (1959),

63 See Janet L. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 10.

64 Jacob A. C. Remes and Andy Horowitz (eds.), *Critical Disaster Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), p. 1.

65 Dara Z. Strolovitch, *When Bad Things Happen to Privileged People: Race, Gender, and What Makes a Crisis in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 16. Also see my review of this book in *Journal of Disaster Studies* 1, no. 2 (2024), pp. 308-310.

66 Saidiya Hartman, “The Death Toll,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (14 April 2020), cited in Strolovitch, pp. 342-3.

67 Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, “Antinomies of Violence and Catastrophe: Structures, Orders, and Agents,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 2 (2012), pp. 211-221, here p. 213.

68 Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, “How Not to Learn From Catastrophe: Habermas, Critical Theory and the ‘Catastrophization’ of Political Life,” *Political Theory* 41, no. 5 (2013): pp. 738-765, here p. 746.

Critique and Crisis.⁶⁹ Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Koselleck's former teacher in Heidelberg, had given an influential radio address in 1956 entitled "*Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*," which was published as a pamphlet in 1957 and then as a book in 1958.⁷⁰ "So far," he said, "despite catastrophes," such as the World Wars and their technologies of destruction, "there has not been total annihilation."⁷¹ But he posited a new existential condition: "The situation caused by the atom bomb: It cannot be reversed that humanity has reached the point of being able to destroy itself."⁷² "Therefore," he said, "we stand before the calamity of the atom bomb differently than as before earlier catastrophes."⁷³ Such a situation of threatening "total catastrophe" (*totale Katastrophe*) or "final catastrophe" (*Endkatastrophe*),⁷⁴ Jaspers argued, called for a new kind of responsibility. Unlike "mythical conceptions [that] envision acts of God," he wrote, "today [...] there is no question of a cosmic catastrophe [*kosmische Katastrophe*] that sweeps over people, but rather of what people themselves realize through technical means."⁷⁵ What prevailed in this situation was a state of popular willful ignorance and uncertainty: "One would prefer not to know anything about the nuclear danger. One defends against it: no politics and no planning can be carried out under the threat of total catastrophe."⁷⁶ He goes on to compare those who wish to ignore and remain silent about this "real possibility" to ostriches sticking their heads in the sand, which is both irrational and ignorant:

69 Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg/Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1959). The dissertation, completed in 1953 and successfully submitted to the University of Heidelberg in 1954, bore a slightly different title: *Kritik und Krise: Eine Untersuchung der politischen Funktion des dualistischen Weltbildes im 18. Jahrhundert*.

70 See the radio lecture, Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Ein Radiovortrag* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1957), which was then later published as a full book, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewusstsein in unserer Zeit* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1958), the latter of which appeared in English as *The Future of Mankind*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

71 Karl Jaspers, *Die Zukunft des Menschen* (1958; Munich: Piper Verlag, 1960), p. 353.

72 Karl Jaspers, *Die Zukunft des Menschen*, 418. This fear was evidently shared well beyond the context of Germany – the central would-be theatre for a Cold War showdown – as it was reviewed by eminent American intellectuals Reinhold Niebuhr and Judith N. Shklar when it appeared in English in 1961. See Judith N. Shklar, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September 1961): pp. 437-439 and Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Topic is the Bomb," *New York Times* (29 January 1961): pp. 98, 118.

73 Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, p. 319.

74 Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, p. 489.

75 Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, p. 235.

76 Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, p. 24.

The fact that such a catastrophe [*Katastrophe*] is constantly before our eyes as a possibility, yes, as a probability, is today a tremendous chance for self-reflection in general and at the same time the only chance for political renewal and thus for warding off the catastrophe [*die Abwehr der Katastrophe*]. What is at stake here should penetrate into the everyday life of all people as a call to reflection. Here lies the horizon of real events, in which we must place ourselves. We must not just suffer what is to come. Not wanting to know is itself the disaster [*Unheil*].

Here one sees continuities with Jaspers's influential 1946 plea for Germans to accept historical responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism.⁷⁷ While, in the nuclear case, “we would like to think: this catastrophe is impossible,”⁷⁸ only recognizing it as a “real possibility” and taking responsibility for it would enable the possibility of genuine political renewal.

Koselleck begins the introduction to his 1954/1959 *Critique and Crisis* on a similar note of existential concern amidst “the crisis-consciousness of the 1950s.”⁷⁹ Indeed, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann describes Koselleck as a lifelong catastrophist who sought to translate his own personal experiences and perceptions of “catastrophically accelerating time” as a soldier in the Wehrmacht and then as a Soviet prisoner of war who was marched to Auschwitz into a theory of modern history and the absurdity of 20th-century mass violence.⁸⁰ At that juncture in the Cold War, Koselleck wrote, European history had broadened into world history and “allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis,” which through a nuclear arms and space race in turn threatened to “blow up mankind as well in a self-initiated process of self-destruction.”⁸¹ As he elaborates in the 1988 preface to the English edition, in writing his dissertation he

77 Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946), discussed in Rabinbach, “Karl Jaspers’ *Die Schuldfrage*: A Reconsideration,” in *Heidelberg 1945*, ed. by Jürgen Hess, Hartmut Lehmann, and Volker Sellin, *Transatlantische Historische Studien* 5 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996), pp. 149-158, and Peter E. Gordon, “Interpretations of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals on Nazism, Genocide, and Mass Destruction” in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Vol. 3, ed. by Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 630-653.

78 Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, p. 465.

79 Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), p. 46.

80 See Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Der Riss in der Zeit: Kosellecks ungeschriebene Historik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023), p. 9, see also p. 15, 18, 19.

81 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 5. While I quote from the book, these phrases also occur in very similar form in the dissertation. I am grateful to Georg Simmerl for a copy of the latter.

turned back to sources from the Enlightenment to uncover the “origins” of recent political developments, spanning from the genocidal utopian project of Nazi social planning to the role claimed by both the U. S. and the Soviet Union as the sole true inheritor of the Enlightenment with an exclusive moral and political monopoly on the future course of world history: the work “represented an attempt to examine the historical preconditions of German National Socialism, whose loss of reality and Utopian self-exaltation had resulted in hitherto unprecedented crimes.”⁸² As he added in a 2004 interview, looking back, “his main motive from the very beginning was to track down the utopia that brought about the catastrophe of the Third Reich.”⁸³

It is interesting to note in this respect that although Koselleck attended Jaspers’s lectures in Heidelberg, his biographer Niklas Olsen writes that he found the older philosopher “as a person” to be “morally stiff, too self-confident, and vain,” while he found his thought to be “too aloof and in a certain sense also dangerous, as he viewed Jasper’s philosophy as impregnated with historical-philosophical traits” of precisely the kind Koselleck condemned in moralistic Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau.⁸⁴ Following the antiliberal critiques of his mentor Carl Schmitt, in a 1986 lecture on Jaspers Koselleck said that his thought was naïvely encumbered with “the classical tradition of liberal historical philosophy, which sees freedom as a future goal that can be achieved through practical reason.”⁸⁵ It would not be too crude to summarize *Critique and Crisis* as a Hobbes- and Schmitt-inspired polemic against how – owing to such optimistic philosophies of history – morality had come to obscure the harsh demands of *Realpolitik* and utopian and speculative prognostication about the future had obfuscated the present, making the “moral man” of the Enlightenment “a stranger to reality.”⁸⁶ This revolutionary thought also had a distorting or “concealing” effect, hiding its own radical tendencies: “The political prognosis of revolution and its historico-philosophical concealment are two aspects of a single phenomenon: crisis.”⁸⁷ For Koselleck,

82 Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* [1959] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 1.

83 Koselleck and Carsten Dutt, *Erfahrene Geschichte: Zwei Gespräche* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013), p. 32. Cited in Jureit, *Erinnern als Überschrift*, p. 11.

84 Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural*, p. 28.

85 Reinhart Koselleck, “Jaspers, die Geschichte, und das Überpolitische,” in *Karl Jaspers: Philosoph, Arzt, politischer Denker. Symposium zum 100. Geburtstag in Basel und Heidelberg*, ed. by Jeanne Hersch (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1986), p. 298. Cited in Olsen, *History in the Plural*, p. 28.

86 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. 11.

87 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. 137.

this illicit substitution of morality for politics created deficits of political realism that carried into his own time: “The crisis caused by morality’s proceeding against history will be a permanent crisis as long as history is alienated in terms of its philosophy.”⁸⁸

It might be going too far to say that every age has its crisis; but it is nonetheless true that few times in 20th-century European history were without concrete and specific threats that were experienced and socially, politically, and historically processed through discourses of *crisis*. Koselleck was explicit that his interest in the origins of crisis discourse in the leadup to the French Revolution was prompted by a new objective global crisis that required recasting the broader arc of modern political ideologies in a new light: the *existential* crisis raised by the technological possibility of the self-annihilation of humankind during the Cold War (as theorized by figures including Jaspers and Günther Anders⁸⁹) was understandably coupled with discursive proliferation of the notion of *crisis*, which prompted him to try to understand the various contested meanings of this concept, and especially to highlight the latent and persistent theological, messianic, and philosophical-historical residues that clung to it and made it a politicized *Schlagwort* and *Kampfbegriff* rather than a self-evident observation about reality.

Critique and Crisis unmasks the hypocrisy of *crisis* discourse in Enlightenment thought. In ways emblematic of Koselleck’s stated goals for the broader *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, his own entry on “crisis” sought to diffuse the self-evident political claims of such conceptual deployments by historicizing fundamental concepts and examining their use and abuse in the modern era – especially the way they remained tethered to utopian and ideological philosophies of history, which justified terror in the name of inevitable historical progress declared by 20th-century totalitarian movements of both the political left and right. Hence, Koselleck wrote that, “to a considerable extent, the lexicon is oriented to the present.”⁹⁰

The basic critique of Briese, Günther, and Willer we have seen regarding the discursive proliferation and alleged semantic exhaustion of *Katas-*

88 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. 12.

89 While married to Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders (then Günther Stern) actually lived in Heidelberg with Jaspers, who was Arendt’s dissertation adviser. The first volume of Anders’s book on the existential nuclear threat appeared the same year as Jaspers’s *Die Atombombe*. See *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, vol. 1 (Munich: Beck, 1956).

90 Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction (*Einleitung*) to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” in *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1, trans. by Michaela Richter (Summer 2011), pp. 1-37, here p. 8.

trophe parallels Koselleck's own claim, in his entry on *crisis* in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, published in the third volume in 1982, about the proliferation of this concept following its emergence as a collective singular and "the supreme concept of modernity" during the *Sattelzeit*.⁹¹ Koselleck writes that as *crisis* lost its either-or character and took on its role as an indicator of new progressive philosophies of history, it acquired an essential ambivalence that gave it more multifaceted meanings:

[C]risis can be conceptualized as both structurally recurring and utterly unique. The very ambiguity of crisis turns the word into a basic concept [... T]he concept incorporates (in different degrees) all the various functions the term had come to perform: as historical assessment and judgment, as medical diagnosis, and as theological entreaty. It is precisely the exciting possibility of combining so many functions that defines the term as concept: it takes hold of old experiences and transforms them metaphorically in ways that create altogether new expectations. Hence, from the 1770s on, "crisis" becomes a structural signature of modernity.⁹²

For Koselleck, what makes *crisis* a fundamental concept in the modern period is precisely its semantic ambiguity and polysemy across several fields of social and political experience: It came to refer to both acute periods of political instability, revolution, or decision and the structure of modern history itself, through the permanent possibility of civil war due to the moralization of modern politics. Later on in this article, Koselleck elaborates that *crisis* becomes both a diagnostic concept of politicians and intellectuals and a general "indicator" of the historical experience of change and acceleration: "Once ›crisis‹ had become a commonly employed expression, its use became an indicator of both the intensity of a crisis and the perception of it as such."⁹³ A few years later, returning to the conceptual history of *crisis*, Koselleck argued that the fact that the term's contemporary "inflationary usage covers almost all aspects of life"⁹⁴ may

91 Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis" [1982], trans. by Melvin Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): pp. 357-400, here p. 376.

92 Koselleck, "Crisis," p. 374.

93 Koselleck, "Crisis," p. 383.

94 See also Reinhart Koselleck, "Some questions regarding the Conceptual History of 'Crisis,'" in Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 236-247, here p. 236. For the German version see "Einige Fragen an die Begriffsgeschichte von 'Krise,'" in *Über die Krise: Castelgandolfo Gespräche 1985*, ed. by Krzysztof Michalski (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), pp. 64-76.

dilute the acute potency it once invoked, but that at the same time this discursive flourishing “*may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot as yet be fully gauged.*”⁹⁵

In both texts, Koselleck maintains that the proliferation of fundamental concepts such as *crisis* can serve as an indicator of historical experiences and moods generated by acute political situations, but also adds that *consciousness of living in a crisis is a characteristically modern historical experience in its own right. Crisis is both an “indicator” of primary historical events and an indication of the secondary “perception” of those crises in historical subjectivity.* He goes on:

Because of its metaphorical flexibility, the concept gains in importance; it enters into everyday language; it becomes a central catchword (*Schlagwort*). In our century [the twentieth], there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices.⁹⁶

Rather than narrowing the semantic range of *crisis* by positing its original meanings as the only true ones and restricting the term’s “authentic” uses, Koselleck embraces its semantic ambivalence, its “metaphorical flexibility,” and rich meanings across many social, political, theological, and scientific domains. He even goes so far as to reflect that “the concept remains as multilayered and ambiguous as the emotions attached to it.” Concepts cannot be shorn of the “emotional,” metaphorical, and experiential commitments, meanings, affects, and moods invested in them by historical actors; maintaining their semantic richness and tethering them to social history depends upon taking their popular use seriously, even when it may seem inflationary or ideological to some scholars in retrospect.

This relates to a general argument about concepts as agents in historical experience and subjectivity that serve as much more than post-hoc labels for objective historical realities: “Beyond any one particular usage [...] concepts also contain multiple possibilities for recycling themselves, as well as the power to create new experiences.”⁹⁷ In other words, Koselleck claims, a concept *is* the sum of its manifold and often contradictory deployments and meanings; the concept of *crisis* thereby exists well in excess of Koselleck’s modest attempts to capture certain influential moments in its use, from ancient Greek medicine and law, to the Christian apoca-

95 Koselleck, “Crisis,” p. 399, my emphasis.

96 Koselleck, “Crisis,” p. 358.

97 Koselleck, “Introduction (*Einleitung*) to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” p. 31.

lyptic discourses of the medieval and early modern period, to the economic crisis theory of Karl Marx. The discursive proliferation of the concept itself, Koselleck claims, enables certain *new* experiences in modernity that could not have been deduced from the term's past semantics.

At the same time, however, Koselleck noted that precisely the “open-ended” and “ambiguous” meanings of certain abstract collective singulars, such as *liberty*, made them ripe for cooptation by various political ideologies toward contradictory and sometimes violent ends, as in the bloody Terror of the French Revolution.⁹⁸ Thus he ultimately maintained the modest hope that advancing the “historical clarification” of fundamental modern concepts still widely used today “may lead to a more enlightened political discourse.”⁹⁹ By enhancing “semantic control” over our use of language, he argued, “the extent to which undesirable or arbitrary contemporary meanings have been imposed upon earlier meanings of words may now be determined.” Conceptual history's difficult task of establishing that “undesirability” and “arbitrariness” inevitably requires normative judgment and historical-political contestation.

5. *Catastrophe* Today: Conceptual Devastation or Semantic Renewal?

Susan Neiman argues that the revelations of mass death at Hiroshima and Auschwitz in 1945 ended the era of philosophical modernity that began with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and inaugurated a “postmodern” era that corresponds to Koselleck's claim about the meaninglessness of history after the mass death of the First World War and the industrialized genocide of the Second. In Neiman's words, “Auschwitz was *conceptually* devastating”; it defied existing moral, legal, philosophical, and historical frameworks and demanded a reworking of thought itself.¹⁰⁰ Catastrophes, then, are not simply events that cause death and destruction (like accidents, disasters, or calamities), but events or processes of “overturning” or “a subversion of the order or system of things.”¹⁰¹ Both in “natural” catastrophes like Lisbon (a “natural evil”) and what Adorno called the “natural catastrophe of society” of Auschwitz (a “moral evil”), the

98 Koselleck, “Introduction,” p. 13.

99 Koselleck, “Introduction,” p. 16.

100 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 251–252. My emphasis.

101 Definition 3.a for “catastrophe” in the Oxford English Dictionary (accessed 20 September 2024).

trauma of history overwhelms taken-for-granted powers of experience, language, and thought.¹⁰² As Koselleck said in a 1988 lecture,

there are events for which words fail us, that leave us speechless, and to which we can (perhaps) only respond with silence. We only need to recall the speechlessness of the Germans when they were confronted with their catastrophe, which drew innumerable people and peoples into it. To this day, every attempt to find a language adequate to mass extermination seems to fail.¹⁰³

Following Neiman, we might say that catastrophe occurs when concepts themselves fail. What, then, about the allegedly worn out concept of *catastrophe* itself?

The “century of the catastrophes,” in which Koselleck lived, he once reflected, was also the century of “technical-industrial expansion,” of “mass murder and exile escalated into the millions,” and of acceleration not toward progress but toward Auschwitz.¹⁰⁴ Similarly in 1965, Adorno said that, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and in light of the “impending catastrophes” of the Cold War, he could continue to conceive of “progress” only in its most minimal form as “the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe.”¹⁰⁵ Adorno famously took up the role of public intellectual in the Bundesrepublik, delivering countless public lectures in which he did not hesitate to take stances on political questions of the day.¹⁰⁶ As a historian, Koselleck was far more circumspect in speaking about the present, much less the future. While already at the opening of *Critique and Crisis*, he wrote that the whole world had drifted “into a state of permanent crisis,” as accelerating technology threatened to “blow up mankind as well in a self-initiated process of self-destruction,”¹⁰⁷ he

102 Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, translated from German by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 105.

103 Reinhart Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events” [1988/89], in *Sediments of Time*, pp. 137-157, here pp. 140-141.

104 Reinhart Koselleck, “Beyond the Deadly Line: The Age of Totality” [1999], in *Sediments of Time*, pp. 225-237, here p. 227.

105 Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. from German by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 143.

106 See Michael Schwarz, “‘Er redet leicht, schreibt schwer’: Theodor W. Adorno am Mikrofon.” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 8 (2011), pp. 286-294, and Noah Benezra Strote, “Living with Liberal Democracy,” in *Lions and Lambs: Conflict in Weimar and the Creation of Post-Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 243-267.

107 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. 5.

also held it a fallacy to believe that this political crisis could be anticipated, steered, or – “as catastrophe” – prevented. Yet Koselleck was ambivalent on this point: While he did not consider it his role as an intellectual to attempt to steer the course of history, he nonetheless later wrote that if it is true that “from the industrial system founded on scientific-technical principles comes the infinitely increasing potential for destruction, by virtue of which mankind may annihilate itself at any moment,” then it follows that “anticipating catastrophe is a duty of politics, of the politics of the future.”¹⁰⁸

As we continue to blindly accelerate forward into the era of climate change and confront new forms of “catastrophe without event,”¹⁰⁹ Koselleck’s reflections on the absurdity of catastrophic history also serve as a history of the present, charting a dark course through the modern era that led us here. Perhaps more importantly, the concept of *catastrophe* might itself still serve an active historical-political function: In between progressive *crisis optimism*, which frames the climate emergency as an opportunity for social transformation, and *apocalypse pessimism* verging on climate fatalism, which frames it as unavoidable or as an apolitical cycle of violence, I have argued for conceiving global warming as a single, ongoing *slow catastrophe* rooted in the extractivist and productivist social order of late capitalist society.¹¹⁰ Apocalyptic narratives can support such a conception if they politicize climate catastrophe and render it contingent and potentially avoidable – as the end of *this* social world but also as the potential beginning of another decarbonized and more just one. A conception of *slow catastrophe* might hold both the danger and the opportunity of the climate emergency in view, conceptualizing it as both fast *and* slow, continuous *and* discontinuous, structural *and* eventual, thus envisioning more affected stakeholders, more rallying points for transformative action. The recent inventive term “apocalyptic optimism”¹¹¹ in climate discourse reminds us that normative and political-conceptual preferences are always provisional; new concepts replenish the terrain of semantic contestation, continually reshaping the horizon of political possibilities

108 Reinhart Koselleck, “Wie neu ist die Neuzeit?” in *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 225-239, here pp. 229-230.

109 Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*, trans. by Valentine Pakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Also see my review, Jonathon Catlin, “Catastrophe Now,” *History and Theory* 60, no. 3 (2021), pp. 573-584.

110 Jonathon Catlin, “Slow Catastrophe: A Concept for the Anthropocene,” pp. 51-68.

111 Dana R. Fisher, *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

and making certain futures and solutions more or less imaginable and therefore possible and worth pursuing.

Koselleck is, of course, famous as a critic of the modern philosophy of progress: “The progress of modernity, despite its universal claim, reflects only a partial, self-consistent experience and, instead, masks or obscures other modes of experience,” such as repetitions, declines, and ruptures.¹¹² In light of the “absurd” and “meaningless” catastrophes of his own lifetime, Koselleck held a decidedly “skeptical”¹¹³ attitude toward one of the concept of progress’s most consistent features, which was to suggest “that the future should be a horizon of planning,”¹¹⁴ and often violently so. While Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann’s intellectual biography of Koselleck convincingly presents the recurring challenges of interpreting catastrophic historical experiences as a spur inspiring Koselleck’s theory of history, it would be misleading to conclude that Koselleck saw any necessity in those catastrophes, however essential to modernity they may have seemed to others like Adorno and Horkheimer.

In his decidedly skeptical approach to catastrophe, Koselleck came remarkably close to another figure we can only mention briefly here: Hannah Arendt, whom Koselleck claimed to have met in Heidelberg in 1956. Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (published in English in 1951 and in German in 1955) had a great impact on Koselleck, and his personal copy, held in Marbach, is well-worn and thoroughly underlined. In *Origins*, Arendt famously criticized all ideological “keys to history” from the National Socialist “discovery” of race to the Bolshevik recourse to dialectics.¹¹⁵ In the second section, “Imperialism,” Arendt writes that in the 1920s, particularly in Germany and France, the Enlightenment ethos of progress transformed decisively beyond the expansionist ethos of 19th-century imperialism: “nihilism [...] replaced the superstition of progress with the equally vulgar superstition of doom, and preached automatic annihilation with the same enthusiasm that the fanatics of automatic progress had preached the irresistibility of economic laws.”¹¹⁶ In a remarkably similar passage in *Critique and Crisis* written a few years later, Koselleck wrote that, likewise for 18th-century revolutionaries, “progres-

112 Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline’: An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts” [1980], trans. by Todd Presner, in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford LA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 218-235, here p. 235.

113 “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline,’” p. 220.

114 Reinhart Koselleck, “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History,” trans. by Adelheis Baker, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, pp. 115-130, here p. 120.

115 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 9.

116 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 144.

sive certainty of victory and eschatological visions of Doomsday did not cancel each other out,” but were rather perpetually – and ominously – “projected into the future.”¹¹⁷ While Arendt’s political theory charted a course beyond catastrophe through the notion of *natality*, democratic political renewal through generational rebirth, Koselleck offers us no such promise for sustaining a horizon of anti-catastrophic politics. Yet his equally searing criticism of both the twinned ideological modern concepts of *progress* and *crisis* shows that he was prepared, with Arendt, to reject both “reckless optimism and reckless despair,” and to recognize “that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal.”¹¹⁸

117 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. 182.

118 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. vii.