Germans are still shackled to their past and it greatly influences the way they deal with Europe and the wider world, according to one of the country's foremost writers and thinkers.

Bernhard Schlink, author of The Reader and a series of other works that tackle the guilt of his and other generations about the past, says that German children today still have to deal with the difficult hand history has dealt them. In an interview with the Guardian to start a week-long series looking at Europe's pre-eminent power, the 68-year-old author says he sometimes experiences his own Germanness as a "huge burden" that he has come to accept.

And he adds that the reason the European crisis is so agonising for Germany is that the country has been able to retreat from itself by hurling itself into the European project. An unravelling of the European ideal would deprive the Germans of an "escape from themselves". "I can't say I'm thankful about being German because I sometimes
experience it as a huge burden," Schlink says. "But it is an integral part of me and I
wouldn't want to escape it. I have accepted it." The former judge, whose main home is in
Berlin, cites examples of friends and colleagues who have done much to disguise their
Germanness, to assume other identities in an effort to escape the sometimes
overwhelming historical responsibility.

"I remember one of the nicest things a colleague of mine in the United States said when
he introduced a lecture of mine: that he had never met a German in academia in the
United States who so little tried to hide that he's German," he says "I certainly know
German colleagues in the US who try to be Americans, try to melt into Americanism,
even before they get married and become American citizens. But I've never tried that."

The burden of nationality has very much shaped the way in which Germans view
themselves and their responsibilities within Europe, Schlink says. It is a subject he
covers in depth in a volume of essays, Guilt About the Past, in which he argues: "We
Germans tend to prefer to see ourselves as world citizens of a world society, as free
citizens of a free world, as Atlanticists or Europeans rather than as Germans." The wish,
he says, is symptomatic of another desire, to escape what it means to be German,
including the solidarity, responsibility and guilt attached to that.

Europe, he agrees, as a wider community in which Germany is only one part, is a place
in which Germans have tried to retreat from themselves. "I think that turning to Europe
is an attempt to escape a difficult identity in favour of a more simple one ... This idea
will always fail, because a German who goes to France, England, the United States and
presents him or herself as simply a European, this is not what he is, he is not just a
European, he's a German and those who travel learn that the world is not as
cosmopolitan and international as we'd like it to be."

An innate sense of German fatalism is also playing into the way Germans are reacting to
the current crisis – which after all has yet to directly affect them – as well as a
melancholic streak. "I sense some sort of fear of revenge for the fact that historically
speaking, and in comparison to many parts of the world, we have it good right now,"
Schlink says over the phone from his US home in the Berkshires, Massachusetts. "It's
interesting, my son is 40 years old, a dentist, with a good life, two lovely kids, a lovely
wife and everything's going well for him, but even he said to me: 'Well, don't you think
maybe we've had it too good for too long?' I said to him: 'It's up to us to use this crisis as
a chance.'"

The writer sees the German sense of melancholy and pessimism for which its people are
sometimes ridiculed as national traits that mean that even though most Germans are
enjoying a comfortable standard of living, low unemployment, and a booming export
economy, they are unable to view it without sensing the doom that might be about to
come.

"Germans have a melancholic, a pessimistic streak, which cultural historians trace back
to the thirty years' war [a series of wars between 1618 and 1648 that devastated much of
Europe including large parts of Germany]. There are these beautiful comparisons of
German, English and French soldiers' war songs, and the English and French ones,
they're all about hope and victory, and the German soldiers' songs are all about losing
comrades, or imminent death. This pessimism I think leads people to ask now: 'Have we
had it too good?'

Most of Schlink's literature is tangled up in the German past – from his 1997 bestseller
The Reader, about the affair between a teenager and a woman who is later tried for war
crimes (which was made into an award-winning film with Kate Winslet and Ralph
Fiennes), to a trilogy of detective novels surrounding about a character called Selbs with
a shadowy Nazi past, and the novel Homecoming, whose protagonist goes on the hunt
for a father he never knew.
Even his latest work, Summer Lies, while focusing on modern-day love stories that all have a sad twist to them – although nothing to do with the war – touches on the subject of hidden pasts and the convoluted stories people tell to keep up appearances.

This summer, he postponed work on his latest novel (whose subject is top secret) to concentrate on a script for a film set at the start of the first world war. "I don't know for how many years, but definitely for the foreseeable future Germans will be shackled to their past and that will influence the way they act in Europe," says Schlink. He believes all this makes Germans intensely keen to show solidarity with the rest of Europe.

"But I think what Germans rightly say again and again is that if we are to give up our sovereignty and our prosperity or share our prosperity with others, then [it will be] only in the context of more of a political union."

Growing accusations that the current German government has faced from across Europe, of being a fourth reich or having imperialist tendencies, "is the expression merely of a sentiment of mentality shaped by history ... I think in substance Germany couldn't be further from wanting to dominate Europe," he says.

The calls for Germany to offer more leadership are problematic, he says, not least because that is not the way Europe is constructed. "The very constitutional structure of Europe is such that one country alone cannot lead. What I think this question is really about is the expectation that Germany shares what it has even more generously and in as undemanding a way, as it is right now. And I think it's right that Germany says: 'Yes, we're willing to share but only in a context of a political union where the responsibilities are shared too."

Schlink says he does not feel particular pressure to follow in the postwar tradition of German writers opining on issues of moral responsibility, but rather feels he has a duty as a citizen and a constitutional law professor. "As a citizen and someone who was a judge on the constitutional law court for 18 years, I feel whenever I can raise my voice with the hope of being heard I need to do it, but I wouldn't assign a special wisdom and responsibility to writers."

On that note, he is highly critical of the great doyen of modern German literature, Günter Grass, who has lately drawn criticism for two poems he wrote, one warning against Israeli aggression towards Iran and criticising the fact Germany provides Israel with nuclear submarines, and another criticising Germany's austerity measures against Greece. "I didn't like the poems and the sad thing for me with Grass was the way he made his SS affiliation public: not the affiliation itself, I wouldn't hold that against him – but that he demanded openness from others for such a long time while hiding this," says Schlink, referring to the revelations in 2006 that the Nobel laureate had been drafted into the Waffen SS at the age of 17. "That, in a way, took away some of the moral authority he had and I was so sorry that he'd lost it. These two poems have a shrillness that maybe reflects this loss of moral authority. He senses that maybe he isn't heard the way he used to be, so he becomes louder and shriller in these poems. I just find it sad."

Schlink, whose father was a Lutheran pastor, believes Germans will remain ensnared in their past for some time, though the burden will become weaker from generation to generation. "Already, it makes a difference as to whether it was your father who was in the SS, or your grandfather. Was it a grandfather whom you actually met, maybe loved? Or is it a grandfather who's just a picture on the wall with other family photos? Already, I see that my son has a different relation to the German past than I did. But even my two granddaughters [aged four and eight] will still have to cope with it. When they go abroad and go to Britain and see all these movies that still deal with 'bad Germans' ... and they will have to find a way to cope with it, and to understand that at least what they owe others is a sense of tact.
"They will have to learn where this anger comes from, that it comes from real wounds that still torment people."

_**Bernhard Schlink's latest collection of short stories, Summer Lies, is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson**_