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EuMePo Scholars from Canada and European countries explore how the 20th century's past is (re)interpreted, commemorated, and narrativized in contemporary political life.

The German Case

## Germany: Mastering the past and reinventing national identity

*by Oliver Schmidtke*

Jean Monnet Network : **European Memory Politics**

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# Germany: Mastering the past and reinventing national identity

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The legacy of the Third Reich and the Holocaust has become a foundational element of Germany's political identity after 1945 (Olick and Levy 1997). While during the immediate post-war period the myth of 'zero hour' provided a convenient narrative for the collective amnesia regarding the crimes of Hitler's regime, the task of commemorating and 'mastering the past' became a defining task of post-war generations. The German Democratic Republic claimed to be the quintessential anti-fascist state and, under the ideological guidance of the Communist regime, repudiated any collective responsibility for the horrors of the Third Reich. In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), a process of addressing the country's post-1945 became an increasingly urgent (and painful) task in particular for younger Germans questioning what their parent generation did during the Third Reich. The insight into and moral-political responsibility resulting from the Hitler dictatorship and the Holocaust have gradually become the foundation on which a stable liberal-democratic republic in West Germany has been built. The commitment to 'never again' has been and remains at the heart of the young German democracy.

Manifestly, the question of what the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust actually means for contemporary German society has been politically contested throughout the history of both German states and then the united Germany after 1990. There were critical attempts to challenge and reinterpret what the anti-fascist commitment entails for contemporary generations. For instance, in the late 1980s a group of conservative historians in the FRG questioned the historic singularity of the Holocaust, thus suggesting that Germans would not need to accept a special burden of guilt (Stackelberg 1993). With much media attention at the time, the West German public debated whether the memory of the Nazi era should be 'normalized' (as one among many expressions of dictatorship and genocide in modern history) or if this memory should remain the central ethical compass and political responsibility for contemporary and future Germans as well. The left responded to these attempts of reconsidering the legacy of the Third Reich and the Holocaust with accusing the conservative historians of promoting 'apologetic tendencies in German history writing' (Habermas 2018). The 'historians' dispute' of the 1980s was an early indication that the commemoration of the Third Reich and the Holocaust is continuously transformed and challenged in particular now with the gradual fading of the lived memory of these years (Levy and Sznajder 2006).

Three major debates about the proper way to commemorate the challenging 20th Century past and how best to interpret its meaning for contemporary society shape present-day Germany:

- 1) With the rise of the populist right in German politics, the issue of the country's modern past has taken centre stage (again). Most recently, the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) – and in particular its nationalist, nativist wing – has made the historic narration of what defines the country's identity a cornerstone of its political campaigns. Radicalizing the claims made by the conservative historians in the 1980s, the AfD openly challenges the foundational elements of the FRG's mode of commemorating its 20<sup>th</sup> Century past by using a nationalist key. Alexander Gauland, co-leader of the AfD, stated in 2018: "Hitler and the Nazis are just bird shit in more than 1,000 years of successful German history."<sup>1</sup> At its core, the populist-nationalist aspiration of the AfD portrays the dominant memory culture as degrading for the nation and constitutive of the despised emancipatory-leftist project. Reinterpreting Germany's 20<sup>th</sup> Century history is central to the AfD's nationalist appeal and its challenge to the political status quo.
- 2) Regularly in explicit opposition to attempts of reinterpreting history in a nationalist lens is the attempt to link the commemoration of the past to an emerging European memory culture (Pakier and Stråth 2012; Wüstenberg 2016). Germany has become a country profoundly shaped by the process of European integration. The very sense of what constitutes a political community and how it should be governed is intimately linked to the post-war project of building a form of European unity and community at the supranational level. This development has repercussions on the narratives that commemorate the country's collective identity, Germany's past and its future (Diner 2003). The nascent and increasingly significant European memory culture has established norms and expectations that are challenged by nationalist sentiments and political projects – at times vigorously.
- 3) A third contested issue in how German society remembers the country's 20<sup>th</sup> Century past is the memory of the GDR. The collapse of the Communist regime in Eastern Germany is now over thirty years ago; yet the systematic attempt to write the GDR's history is still in its nascent stage. Beyond the task of addressing how best to deal with the GDR's totalitarian legacy the public debate centres on what role the memory of the Communist state should take in defining the collective and political identity of contemporary Germany (Forest, Johnson and Till 2004). In public debate, the Cold-War rhetoric still shapes the memory of the GDR and the way in which its legacy is debated politically today. For instance, the political parties on the left are divided through the way in which the party 'The Left' is still widely perceived to be shaped by the traditions of the authoritarian Communist GDR.

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1 Gauland continued: "Yes, we accept our responsibility for the 12 years ... [but] we have a glorious history – and that, dear friends, lasted longer than the damn 12 years." See: <https://www.dw.com/en/afds-gauland-plays-down-nazi-era-as-a-bird-shit-in-german-history/a-44055213>

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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